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Archbishop Stefan Hesse of Hamburg, who is the special representative for refugee issues for

Archbishop Stefan Hesse of Hamburg, who is the special representative for refugee issues for the German Bishops' Conference, looks through the U.S-Mexico border fence Aug. 25, 2026, after returning from Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, to El Paso, Texas. (OSV News/Courtesy German Bishops Conference//Daniela Elpers)

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Touring the U.S.-Mexico border between Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, and El Paso, Texas, Archbishop Stefan Hesse of Hamburg said the towering fortifications and razor wire dividing the two border communities evoked a painful memory in his own country’s history: the Berlin Wall.

"In a way, the inhumanity and massiveness of these border fortifications reminded me of the Berlin Wall, which divided the German capital for nearly 30 years and caused great suffering for the people living there," Hesse told OSV News in an Aug. 31 interview.

"I found the border situation to be disturbing," added the archbishop, who serves as chairman of the German bishops’ conference's migration commission. "Two cities

that had essentially grown together into one — and whose populations remain connected in many ways -- are now hermetically separated by a border wall and razor wire."

Hesse embarked on an Aug. 20-27 "solidarity trip" to assess the humanitarian reality along key migration routes, the German bishops' conference said in a statement published Aug. 20.

Also serving as the conference's special envoy for refugee issues, the archbishop has embarked on similar trips in past years, including Ukraine, Kenya and Egypt. During his visit, Hesse met migrants, volunteers, aid agency representatives, civil and church leaders, including Bishop Mark Seitz of El Paso, immediate past chairman of the U.S. bishops' Committee on Migration.

Seitz and Dylan Corbett, executive director of the Hope Border Institute, a migrant advocacy agency based in El Paso, hosted the archbishop's delegation.

Recalling his visit to Mexico, Hesse told OSV News that, due to restrictive U.S. policies, the country that was once "a country of origin and transit" has now become "a destination country for migrants" and is also facing additional challenges from deportations "out of the U.S."

The German prelate said he was struck by two distinct encounters, one "with an elderly gentleman from Cuba whom I met at the church-run Albergue Belén ("Bethlehem Shelter") in Tapachula."

"He lived and worked in the U.S. for 46 years, was well integrated, and has now been deported to southern Mexico — to a region he doesn't know and where he has little prospect of a dignified life in his old age. His fate is like that of a tree that has been uprooted," he said.

The second was with a young man from Ciudad Juárez who, at a young age, was involved in organized crime and had also worked as a "smuggler" who guided people along the treacherous border.

"The young man told me with remarkable openness how, with the help of his faith, he finally managed to escape the clutches of organized crime. Now he is involved in a project that helps young migrants find their way in Mexico," the archbishop said.

Hesse told OSV News that amid the suffering of those along the border, he had heard and witnessed that "without the church's services, the situation would be much worse."

"Approximately 80% of the shelters are run by the church. There, refugees and migrants not only receive a roof over their heads but are also treated with dignity as human beings," he said.

One such example, he noted, was the CAFEMIN shelter run by the Sisters of St. Joseph in Mexico City, who "truly brings Pope Francis’s four verbs to life: welcoming, protecting, promoting and integrating migrants."

However, the archbishop also noticed that there is a "wide gulf" between Christian shelters that are "centered on the dignity of every single person" and detention centers "where migrants are primarily viewed as a threat."

"Certainly, it is the state’s responsibility to regulate migration. But during my trip to Mexico and the U.S., I also witnessed what happens when migration is treated exclusively as a security issue: A fundamental sense of humanity ends up being lost," he told OSV News.

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In Ciudad Juárez, Hesse was joined by Seitz in a visit to a migrant youth center. The delegation also visited faith-based migrant shelters and shared meals with migrants, many of them stranded in the city as a result of U.S. border restrictions.

The group also met with representatives from Jesuit Refugee Service-Mexico and Derechos Humanos Integrales en Acción, two organizations working with migrants on the ground and supported by the Hope Border Institute's Border Refugee Assistance Fund.

In El Paso, Hesse visited Mount Cristo Rey, a sacred pilgrimage site at the border in Sunland Park, New Mexico. The site is in the Diocese of Las Cruces but sits right at the edge of the El Paso Diocese.

The Hope Border Institute briefed the German delegation on the legal battle now facing the mountain. The Trump administration wants to seize 14 acres that include

the pilgrimage site to build a section of the border wall. Several church entities have filed a court challenge to the Trump administration's claim it can use eminent domain to seize private property for public use.

Hesse also met with leaders and guests at Annunciation House, an El Paso migrant shelter, and with staff from Estrella del Paso, El Paso's local Catholic legal service provider for immigrants and refugees. The delegation additionally observed immigration court proceedings.

"We were honored to welcome Archbishop Hesse to El Paso and Ciudad Juárez to share the work of welcome in our borderlands community," Corbett said in a Sept. 8 statement sent to OSV News. "The example of people of many faith traditions here at the border to accompany those in need demonstrates what is possible at borders and local communities around the world."

In his interview with OSV News, Hesse expressed his gratitude to Seitz for welcoming him to the Diocese of El Paso and noted the diocese's support for migrant initiatives in Mexico.

However, he said, what stood out was "the spiritual dimension," where people on either side of the border "see themselves as one large Catholic community on both banks of the Rio Grande."

"When Bishop Seitz and I celebrated a beautiful Mass in Ciudad Juárez with Mexicans, Americans and migrants, the bishop summed it up perfectly: In the church, there are no borders. That is how Catholicism is brought to life," he told OSV News.

Drawing a parallel between the migration crisis in the U.S. and growing tensions in Europe, especially in the Spanish enclave of Ceuta and in countries along the Mediterranean sea routes, Hesse expressed concern that, in most circumstances, "the rule of law and the respect for human rights are declining."

"As soon as wealthy countries focus primarily on deterrence and externalization, they fail to live up to their humanitarian responsibilities and risk losing sight of human dignity," the archbishop said.

Ensuring safe pathways for people seeking protection, while dedicating "sufficient resources for development cooperation," he said, would help reduce risks for those

fleeing their homeland and address "the root causes of forced migration."

"Surely people in the industrialized nations of North America and Europe have their own set of worries," Hesse told OSV News. "However, it is important to keep reminding ourselves of the situation in other regions of the world."

"If we, as Americans and Europeans, reflect on such examples of charity and allow ourselves to be moved by them, we can succeed in overcoming our tendency to indifference and self-centeredness," he said.

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This story has been updated with additional details.

This story appears in the **Immigration and the Church** feature series. View the full series.