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A border immersion reflection

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Immigration and the Church

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Families Divided by Our Border: A Reflection on my Border Immersion Pilgrimage Experience

"A Life Without Borders" ? making a connection between the theme of Old St. Pat's current program year and my recent Immersion Pilgrimage Trip to the Arizona Mexico border is obvious. Our group of young adults from various parishes throughout Chicago saw a glimpse of many different aspects of an undocumented immigrants' journey through our southern border. For those that make it across, their new life of promise can be grueling; most migrants leave loved ones behind: mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, wives, and children. Undoubtedly, it is the children who are always affected the most.

My most indelible memory of our trip was visiting a Jesuit shelter (the Kino Border Initiative) in Nogales, Mexico that provides short term shelter for those just bussed from US custody back to Mexico. We helped serve a warm meal and had the chance hear the stories from those recently deported. As the shelter doors opened up, my eyes were immediately drawn to an adorable bright eyed 7 year-old girl in a Barbie-pink winter coat. Her innocent joy stood in stark contrast to other migrants whose dreams were recently shattered. She was with her sisters (13 and 11) and her comely, exhausted mother named Nieves. They had arrived the night before after being processed through the courts.

As it turns out, Nieves' group had been abandoned in the desert by their guides (known as "coyotes") before being picked up by Border Patrol agents. As I used my modest Spanish to overhear Nieves tearfully tell her tale, I had to try my hardest to keep my own eyes dry. She had left her abusive husband a few years earlier and tried to make it alone with the support of her family in her home state in southern

Mexico. Upon realizing that she couldn't provide enough for her girls, she came alone to the US to work. After saving enough money, she went back for her girls only to be stranded in the desert -unable to return to her modest new life in Philadelphia.

The impression of Nieves' story is lasting because it highlights the decisions and sacrifices that a migrant makes in the larger journey towards a new and better life. Success in 'el Norte' can be a small consolation for the alienation from those left behind. Loneliness, unending parental worries, and feelings of abandonment are just a few of the issues created by the separation of families. For Nieves, being without her kids was too unbearable. She had to try to bring them.

Weeks after returning, I am still processing my experience. I have spent time reading of other's journeys and learning more about our laws; I have also spent countless moments thinking of solutions in my head. I know that literally deconstructing the physical boundaries between our country and our neighbors is neither realistic nor practical. Regardless, thinking of our current policies in terms of 'A Life Without Borders,' it seems that we have an obligation to address the policy shortcomings that are tearing families apart. Those who are driven into the shadows of society are forced to choose: an indefinite family separation or sending 7 year olds to walk through the desert with only a hope and prayer. The border as we know it has created a second class society without the rights that we enjoy without thinking twice.

Upon being asked 'will she try to cross again?' Nieves hesitated momentarily but answered 'No, I'm going to stay in Mexico and try to start a new life?.'

Interestingly, she just couldn't go back to her hometown. I still wonder if this decision was made out of fear of her ex-husband, out of shame in pulling her daughters out of the life that they knew, or for a truly better opportunity somewhere else. Is this a good ending? I am really not sure. At least, Nieves and her girls are together.

Lee is a second generation Korean American who grew up in the Chicago area.

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