

Play shows Christ's continuing crucifixion

Vicki Kline | Apr. 11, 2011



Sara Lisa, playing the character of Barbara Padilla, venerates the cross at the end of Most Holy Trinity Parish's performance of "The Line in the Sand."

TUCSON, ARIZ. -- At Most Holy Trinity Parish, the contemporary Good Friday service is more than a tradition: It's a ministry. For pastor Salvatorian Fr. Bill Rimmel, "The Line in the Sand," a play unveiled on Good Friday 2008, is a depiction of "Christ continuing to be crucified in all his people today."

"The Line in the Sand" chronicles the experiences of ordinary people wrapped up in a complex and difficult situation. A migrant mother, a Border Patrol agent, a medical examiner, an activist, a consulate intern, a rancher, detained immigrants, a searching father, a Catholic Relief Services interviewer, and a local resident, the characters in "The Line in the Sand" point to the intersection of diverse people over a common issue.



The Catholic Relief Services Drama Project went to the U.S.-Mexico

border in 2005 to interview people affected by migration and to develop a way to share their stories. They focused on the stories of those directly involved and created for the stage a script of monologues from their experiences.

In 2007, Fr. Joe Rodrigues, vocations director for the Salvatorians in the United States, adapted Catholic Relief Services' original script to accommodate more actors. The revisions better fit Most Holy Trinity's needs and opened the door for the parish to embrace this new form of ministry. The actors, all members and staff of the parish, are not professionals. Deacon Ken Moreland says, "If your heart's in it, and you trust it to the Holy Spirit, you can make it a very powerful experience ... because it's the real words, played by real people."



In the opening scene of the play, Lucretia, a migrant mother of three from

Mexico, embarks on a journey to the United States. She explains along the way that she is going in order to keep her family together -- her husband went two years before to work and support them. As her journey continues, she grows weaker. In the final moments of the scene, Lucretia cries out, "Ay?dame, Dios?" ("Help me, God?") before perishing in the darkness. It is true story: Lucretia's father came to the U.S. from Mexico to search for her body in the desert. He found her, along with the remains of three other people.

Lupita Parra says that the experience of playing Lucretia "has been very spiritual." Parra explains that she prays to and for Lucretia before every performance: "Your death may not have gone in vain ... Let me put myself in your situation ... Let it be a ministry, so [Lucretia] can come to life."

Sara Lisa, the parish secretary, plays the role of Barbara, an area resident who has discovered the immigration issue for the first time. Lisa says she has been as transformed by the experience as her character was.

"We're all converted a little bit," she explains, as her character's awareness of immigration realities deepens in the play.

Lisa's character had previously not known that immigration involved women and children. As part of an immersion program, Barbara comes face-to-face with women and children in a Mexican shelter for migrants. She begins to find ways to spread the word about the issue and contribute to solutions. Lisa sees herself in her character, who says, "I know it's not going to solve everything, but it's something I can do."



For the group who brings these characters to life, "The Line in the Sand" has become a powerful outreach tool.

Rommel explained, "We try to do whatever we can to keep raising awareness and educating."

The issues that inspired the play's creation continue today. On March 19, a group of Samaritans, a humanitarian organization working to end death and suffering in the desert, encountered the skeleton of a person believed to be a migrant. Since October, the remains of 59 people have been found in the southern Arizona desert.

To Parra, the ability to play the role of one of these human beings is a gift that has taught her humility, understanding and empathy. Parra says, "I'm honored to be able to play this role ... not only to represent Lucretia, but a lot of other people, too."

For Most Holy Trinity, "The Line in the Sand" is an offering of prayer. When presented on Good Friday, the play follows the service of prayers and reading of the Passion.

The journeys of the characters, connected through the story of Lucretia, mirror the mystery of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. As the play begins, each character comes forward carrying a cross; Lucretia awaits

them, waiting to be resurrected through their experiences. The character of Lucrezia watches her father carrying the cross toward her.



Following the play, each member of the cast venerates the large cross formed out of a Saguaro cactus. On Good Friday, the rest of the congregation is also invited to come forward to venerate the cross.

"The treatment of migrants is only one of the ways that people are still being crucified in this world," Moreland said. "They are forced to do things that are dangerous, sapping of will and spirit, and not receiving support from anyone."

The cast says that reactions to the performance have been positive. After each performance, they offer a "talkback" in which people are given an opportunity to process their feelings and reactions. At one of these discussions, a priest in the audience shared that he had originally come to the country through the Arizona border. When he saw the character playing the Border Patrol agent, he was taken immediately back to the agents who confronted him on his own journey. He told the cast, "This helps me more with my healing."

Meredith Clack, who works in child ministry at Most Holy Trinity, has been an audience member for the performance. She feels that "The Line in the Sand" brought about in her a "change of heart, a truly powerful experience. I knew that immigration issues have been a challenge. ... Knowing people who are immigrants, I know that it is still a struggle, regardless of legal status, economic status. ... It is always a sacrifice."

Rommel hopes that the play continues to foster a change in those who experience it. "The Line in the Sand" is an invitation: "We do want to change people's hearts, opening people to the immigrant in ways they haven't been in the past," Rommel said.

In addition to Good Friday services, the cast at Most Holy Trinity have performed the play for numerous other local congregations. They also presented it at the Southwest Liturgical Conference in Tucson in January 2008, and at *NCR's* Celebration Publications conference, "A Light to the Nations," held in San Antonio in January of this year.

[Vicki Kline, a Catholic Worker and professional social worker, is currently exploring the intersection between vocation and career in the borderlands. She can be reached at victoria.kline@hotmail.com.]

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For more information on "The Line in the Sand," see Most Holy Trinity Parish's Web site at www.mhtparish.org.

For more stories about the immigration issue, news and analysis, visit the blog on *NCR's* Web site: NCRonline.org/immigration.

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