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US bishops to celebrate Mass on US-Mexico border

by Dennis Coday

Immigration and the Church

"The U.S.-Mexico border is our Lampedusa. Migrants in this hemisphere try to reach it, but often die in the attempt," says the chairman of the U.S. bishops' Committee on Migration.

The chairman, Seattle Auxiliary Bishop Eusebio Elizondo, is inviting U.S. cardinals and other bishops to the border town of Nogales, Ariz., March 30-April 1 to tour the U.S.-Mexico border and celebrate Mass on behalf of the close to 6,000 migrants who have died in the U.S. desert since 1998.

The Mass will be celebrated at 9 a.m. followed by a press conference at 10:30 a.m., April 1.

Cardinal Seán O'Malley of Boston will attend along with the bishops on the migration committee and several border bishops, according to a press release from the U.S. bishops' communication office. Bishop Gerald Kicanas of Tucson, Arizona, will host the delegation.

The first trip Pope Francis made outside of Rome was to the Italian island of Lampedusa after seeing newspaper headlines describing the drowning of immigrants at sea. Lampedusa is only about 70 miles from Tunisia and often is the first port of entry for migrants trying to reach Europe from Africa. The United Nations estimates that more than 20,000 migrants trying to reach Europe have drowned in the Mediterranean in the past 25 years.

Francis recalled his trip to Lampedusa in a Jan. 13 address to the Vatican diplomatic corps, expressing sympathy with those who, "in the hope of a better life, have undertaken perilous journeys which not infrequently end in tragedy." His reflection was focused on migrants from Africa and the Middle East who seek refuge in Europe but he added, "I think in particular of the many migrants from Latin America bound for the United States."

The U.S. bishops trip to the border in Nogales is meant to follow the example of Francis' trip to Lampedusa, according to the press release. "The purpose of the trip is to highlight the human suffering caused by a broken immigration system, an aspect of the national immigration debate which is often ignored," the release said.

"What we fail to remember in this debate is the human aspect of immigration ? that immigration is primarily about human beings, not economic or social issues," said Elizondo. "Those who have died ? and those deported each day ? have the same value and innate God-given dignity as all persons, yet we ignore their suffering and their deaths."

"We exhibit our own indifference when we minimize or ignore this suffering and death, as if these people are not worth our attention. It degrades us as a nation," he said.

"Hopefully by highlighting the harsh impact the system has on our fellow human beings, our elected officials will be moved to reform it," Elizondo said.

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