

## On the Mexico border: Teen volunteers and young adults at a Respite Center

# A life-changing experience

Susanne Janssen

*The diocese of Corpus Christi in Texas (USA), is located two and a half hours by car from the U.S. border with Mexico. In that context, focolarine and focolarini, engaged in university and parish pastoral care, seek to offer young people experiences that help them grow in their awareness of the situations and needs of migrants.*

When you travel south to Texas, the landscape changes. Lush meadows and rolling hills give way to evergreens, Live Oaks, Mesquite trees, and sprawling cacti. Many town and street names harken back to a time when Texas was first a Spanish colony and later, a part of Mexico.

Today, 38.6% of all Texans are Hispanic, making it the state's largest ethnic group. In South Texas, that percentage rises to 83.8%. Many residents are descendants of parents who crossed the border, and many still have family in Mexico. As they build their lives in the U.S., they take great pride in their heritage and work to preserve traditions.

Yet, even among those who came to this country undocumented, accepting migrants is not always a given. Phrases like "Those were different times" or "Now, the boat is full" often mask a deeper fear of economic insecurity. Many are small business owners or self-employed, and in a climate of rising costs and stagnant wages, the prospect of competition for work can be unsettling.

Catholics often find themselves torn between the dominant cultural attitudes and the call from Pope Francis to welcome migrants and care for those in need. While prayer devotion, popular piety, and a commitment to protecting life from conception to natural death are priorities in many South Texas parishes, the imperative to "welcome the stranger" sometimes takes a back seat.

### **Catholic Social Teaching in Action**

What can be done to raise awareness of the suffering faced by migrants and refugees? In Corpus Christi, the Focolare Movement is helping to answer this question through educational and service opportunities. Active in both Holy Family Parish and the Newman Center at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi (TAMUCC), the Focolare offers young people an opportunity to learn about Catholic Social Teaching (CST) alongside putting into practice Jesus' New Commandment through service at the Respite Center in McAllen, where migrants are received after crossing the border.

Fr. Darryl D'Souza, pastor of Holy Family, explains to both teens and young adults how God calls us to engage actively in the world. "In the name of justice, Christians must speak

out and act against social, economic, and political actions or structures that go against the Gospel message,” he said. Quoting a 2023 declaration from the U.S. and Mexican Bishops, Fr. D’Souza emphasized that “the right to life and the conditions worthy of life—when threatened by poverty, injustice, religious intolerance, armed conflict, and other root causes—give rise to the right to migrate.” He added that while borders are necessary to uphold state sovereignty, “once families come in need of an opportunity to survive and thrive, it is our moral obligation to help.”

Chiara Catipon, who works at the Newman Center, recalls the impact that CST had on students: “For many, this was the first time they heard this message. They understood that human dignity was being trampled on by our narratives, indifference, and political systems.”

### **First-Hand Experiences**

A group of 40 students from Corpus Christi, along with students from two other Newman Centers, volunteered for a day at the Respite Center, which is operated by Catholic Charities. The experience proved to be life changing. Many students encountered first-hand the personal stories and immense suffering of the families they met—families who had endured months of walking, faced violence, and navigated countless uncertainties to reach the border.

“One mother walked for weeks with her two small children after her husband was killed by a gang. I asked myself, what would I have done?” shared one student. Another added, “My father would do anything to give me and my brother opportunities in life. These families are doing just the same.” For many, the experience was an eye-opener. One student, seeing a woman with tattered shoes, removed her own brand-new sneakers and gave them to her, limping back to the car with old slippers but a heart full of newfound joy. “Before coming here, I only heard certain stories about these people,” one student said, “but being here with them changed my perspective.”

The teens of Holy Family Parish who are preparing for Confirmation also volunteer annually at the border. Serving meals, distributing clothes and supplies, and playing with the children have all made a significant impact. One girl reflected, “I realized how often I complain when I don’t get what I want... but I have everything I need, while these families have nothing.”

The students found that their simple acts of kindness made a real difference. “Playing with the children brought smiles to their scared faces,” said one teen. “Giving them coloring books and crayons let them be children again.” Others, who spoke Spanish, helped search for supplies and listened to the families’ stories. One student observed, “In the end, they are just like us. They come from a different country, speak a different language, but we are all the same.” Many expressed the desire to return and serve again.

### **A Voice for the Vulnerable**

Sr. Norma Pimentel, Executive Director of Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley, was named to Time Magazine’s list of the 100 most influential people in 2020 and praised by

Pope Francis for her work with migrants. Reflecting on her decade of humanitarian work in McAllen, she says, “If we have a mother here who is suffering, and we can help her feel a little better—whether by offering her a shower, providing clean clothing, or giving something as simple as a glass of water—honestly, we both are blessed. They are blessed by receiving open arms, and we are blessed by God in that encounter.”

For Sr. Norma, human dignity is paramount. “The way we treat one another is what truly matters,” she shared with the youth of the parish. “We must show love to our families, our neighbors, and even strangers entering our country. Let us encourage each other to do our best to do good.”

### **A Call to Action**

These powerful experiences align with the teachings of the late U.S. Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, who compared Catholic Social Teaching to a “seamless garment.” This consistent ethic of life calls not only for opposition to abortion but also for support of anti-poverty programs, immigrant rights, and care for the elderly.

It is perfectly aligned with Pope Francis’ emphasis on integral human development—forming the head, hands and heart of young people by serving Jesus in our brothers and sisters. The teens and young adults who volunteered came to understand that the migrants they met were not so different from themselves. They discovered that God calls us to love each neighbor, as Jesus described in the Gospel by saying, “You did it to me” (Mt 25:40).