



Bishop Seitz: Look at the border through the eyes of migrants

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April 15, 2024

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There are figures in life to whom it is given to stand “betwixt and between.” They are neither here nor there but are able to stand astride multiple realities—be they cultures, nationalities or historical periods—whether by force of personality, birth at a particular juncture in time or a unique personal vocation.

These pivotal figures often have the ability to see multiple sides of an issue and thus can transcend the blinders that can constrain our imaginations to possibilities yet unrealized. With their vision, they propel us forward culturally, historically and even religiously. In the Jesuit tradition, St. Ignatius Loyola is certainly one of them, and Pope Francis another.

One of these transitional figures I would like to briefly consider here is the Dominican priest and bishop Bartolomé de las Casas. Born in Seville, Spain, at the very end of the 15th century, he arrived in the New World as a young man to participate in the economic and imperial project that was the Spanish *conquista*. From that moment onward, his entire life would be caught up in the moral and ethical dilemmas of the Spanish conquest. Young though he was when he arrived on the island of Hispaniola, he would have been a slave owner and would have participated in expeditions against the Indigenous Caribbean populations.

But he soon returned to Europe to study theology and was ordained a priest at the young age of 22. Las Casas soon returned to the New World after ordination, where he displayed personal development and an evolution of conscience. As a secular priest, he was *de facto* a chaplain of the Crown and therefore deeply implicated in the colonial project. As an agent of the established power, he witnessed up close the exploitation of the land, the forced labor, the forced religious conversions and even the mass killings that accompanied the colonization. He

also saw firsthand the factions in the clergy, which in some sense facilitated these atrocities. This eventually drove him to join the Dominican order, many of whose members at that time stood for moral clarity and coherence and resisted the prevailing order.

One decisive moment for las Casas came during the preparation of a homily for the feast of Pentecost. Preparing a sermon on the Book of Sirach, he came across these words: “Ill-gotten goods offered in sacrifice are tainted. Presents from the lawless do not win God’s favor.” (Sir 34:21-22).

This Scripture further cauterized his maturing conscience and propelled forward his advocacy on behalf of the Indigenous people.

Not long after, in response to his strenuous advocacy, the imperial government granted las Casas the title Protector of the Indians, a title he embraced to distance himself from the status quo, document the empire’s human rights abuses, advance a critique and counternarrative in service of the dignity of Indigenous populations (including in the famous Valladolid debates on the rights and treatment of Indigenous people), and build alternative structures more consistent with the Gospel and human dignity. He had to contend with his own vested interests as well as with enemies within the church. He was eventually named bishop of Chiapas, a vast diocese that encompassed a wide swath of territory in what is today southern Mexico and Guatemala.

Las Casas and Human Rights

The life of las Casas is significant for many reasons, one being that his advocacy marks an inflection point in the development of the human rights tradition in the Western imagination. Very often, human rights are presented as entirely a creature of the Enlightenment; this partial narrative leaves out an important Christian contribution to its development. More important, this one-sided presentation erases the Indigenous historical dimension of the Western conception of human rights.

Here, it is important to be careful. On the one hand, we need to avoid simplification, overlooking the painful history of the conquest and reducing Indigenous history to its functional relation to the development of Western thought. We also need to recognize las Casas’ own implication in the colonial system. However, it must be noted that las Casas’ ministry matured within a journey toward greater moral integrity, in the light of the Word of God. And an essential step in that spiritual journey was that he allowed himself to be converted by the evident humanity of the Indigenous people he encountered—by their cosmivision and universe of values, by their religious reverence for life and the complexity of their social organization. It was shameful and immoral to deny their dignity as human beings.

In the figure of las Casas, the one missioned to civilize and evangelize is himself civilized and evangelized. This priest, in turn, becomes a pointed evangelist of human dignity to a Western culture blind to the moral weight of genocide and unrestrained exploitation. He is a “betwixt and between” figure: one between empire and periphery, Europe and the New World, established religion and Indigenous wisdom, oppressor and oppressed, Gospel and history, privilege and poverty. Here, I would argue, is the real birth of modern human rights: in the crucible of disarmed recognition of the dignity of the oppressed, penetrating self-critique, openness to radical revision in the fiery light of the Gospel and penitence as a way of life.

The Latin American theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez, O.P. (who, curiously, also found late refuge with the Dominicans), wrote extensively on las Casas. In a 1992 essay, “Bartolomé de Las Casas: Defender of the Indians,” he notes that las Casas anticipates Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s injunction to read history from below—that is, from the perspective of the victims of history. For Father Gutiérrez, las Casas asks us to read history from the perspective of “the other,” as if we were the other:

We need, he said, to see our modern historical moment “from below.” Las Casas’ discussion with theologians affirms this, and in my opinion it is a very central point in understanding Las Casas’ theology. He says if we were Indians, our points of view would be very different. In his discussions with other theologians, Las Casas said, “If you were an Indian, your theological opinions would be very different.”

There are connections here with the global reality of migration today.

Today’s reality

I am the bishop of a diocese on the southern border of the United States. When I consider the topic of migration, I think of those who arrive at the border every day, coming from countries all around the world, looking for safety and to be part of a community that can sustain them. Every day, because of this office entrusted to me by the church, I find myself in a place “betwixt and between.”

This is what it means to live on the border: One lives enmeshed and implicated in the aspirations and hopes of the poor knocking at our nation’s doorstep, the stark reality of death in the desert and in the waters of the Rio Grande, the joys and anxieties of those who are able to obtain safe passage, the frustrations of those who cannot. One also encounters the prosaic realities of border enforcement and border walls and broken immigration laws, the posturing and compromises of politicians, the everyday heroism of ordinary people. One hears Spanish and English; one encounters people Latino and Anglo, from Mexico and from the United States. One lives in a world of *quinceañeras* and human trafficking, *corridos* and cowboy boots and Our Lady of Guadalupe. All of these collide at the border, sometimes cacophonously, sometimes painfully, sometimes tragically and often beautifully.

Having served at the border now for more than a decade, one of the things that angers me most is how often complexity and nuance at the border are flattened and manipulated. We can all see how the border is represented by politicians, pundits and the media. One of the most troubling examples of this is when the border and migration are spoken about in terms of “a crisis.”

There is no denying that the number of people coming to our border in recent years has been considerable. This comes with political, social and logistical challenges. But there are those who abuse the language of crisis in order to present migration at the border as fundamentally problematic, as something to fear and as a perilous threat. Let me be clear, as someone who lives this reality every day: This is not just wilful mischaracterization but often part of a deliberate, historical project of dehumanization at the border.

This reductionist approach is a manipulative, mediocre and fearful type of thinking that must be challenged. It flattens the reality of border communities like El Paso, which for decades have done yeoman’s work to welcome migrants every day, much of it done by the Catholic Church. It flattens the reality that border communities are beautiful, safe, diverse, economically and culturally vibrant communities. It flattens the reality that binational communities on the border are living, breathing organisms, interconnected in thousands of ways. It flattens the reality that respect for the rights of asylum-seeking persons and vulnerable migrants are enshrined in our national law and in international law for a reason. It flattens the reality that migrants contribute in ways uncountable to our nation’s prosperity, vitality and resilience and cannot be scapegoated for our nation’s ills.

Yet this language of crisis is repeated over and over again and has become a staple of both political parties, even by those wishing to effect a certain pragmatism. This is a fundamental pastoral challenge for our church—to unbind our social imaginations and see the shared humanity of the other before me.

I think that this is where Las Casas’ wisdom can help us. Were he alive today, he would suggest to native-born Americans that if you were a migrant crossing the border this very day, your opinions about migrants and the border would undoubtedly be very different.

I have shared the story before of an experience I had crossing the border in 2019 following major restrictions on asylum-seeking persons, known as the “Remain in Mexico” policy. This policy stripped asylum seekers of the right to enter the United States and returned many of them to places like Ciudad Juárez, a city that sits just across the river from El Paso, Tex.

One day following the policy’s implementation, I walked with a family from Honduras over the international bridge as they prophetically challenged this policy, just by their presence, by merely petitioning for mercy and refuge. I was there only in solidarity. It was tense; there were scores of observers from the international media, and there were border enforcement officers perturbed by this disruptive challenge to the new policy. I was at a loss as to how the situation would resolve itself. I must confess, I was fearful of the consequences this action might have for me. Would things turn violent? Would I be arrested? As I began to walk across the bridge, the family’s 9-year-old girl grasped my hand. Celia was her name. We smiled at one another, and I said to her in Spanish, “*¡Vamos a marchar, como en un desfile!*” ‘Let’s march, like in a parade!’

Looking back now, I can say I did not lead Celia across the bridge. Rather, she led me. She led me not just across a bridge but more deeply along a journey of moral coherence and conversion. This was an evangelizing experience—not for her, but for me. A young refugee, dehumanized by a policy decision, led me, an ordained minister, down the path of moral integrity and conversion. Suddenly, I saw the world quite differently through her eyes. *If we were migrants, indeed our opinions would be very different.*

A spiritual gaze

One can approach the issue of migration from multiple angles, of course. There are the principles of Catholic social doctrine. There is the failure of nation states and the global community to meet the needs of historically high numbers of displaced persons. There is the historical weight of racism embedded in the structures of immigration enforcement at our southern border. There is the polarization and gridlock that precludes efforts to overhaul our national immigration system. And there are the growing numbers of climate-displaced persons; there are wars and land grabbing and violence against women and poverty and inequality and lack of opportunity and human rights violations driving migration. We all see the religious, cultural and ethnic tensions in certain parts of the world provoked by the movement of persons, the shockingly high number of children and women trafficked as sexual and economic slaves, and the push and pull factors of economic inequality.

No one in the contemporary world has been more prophetic on the question of migration than Pope Francis. But the starting point for Pope Francis is unmistakably and indisputably spiritual. We have simply rendered ourselves unaccountable for our brother. “*The Lord asked Cain, ‘Where is your brother Abel?’ He answered, ‘I do not know.’*” (Gn 4:9). At the root of our inability to address global migration is a fundamental misrecognition. It is not primarily a question of how many migrants we should let in or how many visas we should give out. Rather, it is a question of the borders we have internalized, the spiritual borders that prevent us from recognizing our shared humanity with people who migrate.

Do we know the immigrant nurses who kept our country healthy and ministered to our dying relatives during the pandemic? Do we know the farmworkers and meat processing plant workers and poultry packers and drivers and store clerks who keep us fed? The teachers who educate our kids? The Uber drivers who ferry us around? The contract workers who prepare food in our kitchens and who keep the facilities clean? The care workers looking after our parents and grandparents right now? The undocumented veterans in our armed services?

We have forgotten that despite all the fits and starts, despite the history and legacy of injustice and exploitation, migration is an indispensable part of our American narrative, not something to fear. Yes, it has always been aspirational and asymptotic, but undoubtedly a thread woven deeply into our common history, key to our national prosperity in the deepest sense of that word and essential to our future.

If, then, the problem is spiritual, the solution must be as well. The remedy, Pope Francis proposes, is the recovery of a spiritual gaze. We are desperately in need of contemplatives and mystics, people with penetrating vision who can see the sin at the root of the systems—political, social and economic—that we have erected which displace and uproot persons and then brutally police them and push them into the shadows. So too do we need contemplatives and mystics, people willing to suffer with those who suffer rather than disregard them or seek quick escapes.

The mystics

We need people “betwixt and between” who can serve as spiritual ambassadors of dialogue and encounter, who can discern more durable and just solutions, ways to put love into practice. Pope Francis has repeated many times that we are not just experiencing a period of epochal change, but that we are in the midst of a change in epoch, a rapid transformation in our ways of life and how we relate to one another. Who will be ushers of this change, its Moses and its Deborahs? Its prophets? This spiritual vision starts simply by asking this question: *If we were migrants, if we were hungry, if we were abused and exploited women, if we were politically persecuted, if we were trying to reunite with family on the other side of the border—would not our opinions be very different indeed?*

Las Casas’ insight is that Jesus’ self-identification with the poor teaches us that truth is not always seen most clearly from an abstract distance. It is revealed with greatest clarity when we seek it through the eyes of the *anawim*, God’s beloved poor.

This work is urgent because we need new solutions, including political solutions. In the last couple of months, both political parties came to the brink of enacting a major legislative assault on our system of asylum and protection at the border. This was a moment when political leaders spoke unreasonably and irresponsibly of “shutting down the border,” as if one could, with the stroke of a pen, shut down a living organism. This was a moment when serious political leaders considered suspending our obligations to the vulnerable just because they became politically inconvenient.

These are not the political solutions we need, because they are not *just*. We must not mistake an ill-suited compromise between contending, politically motivated interests for a just solution. Less still can it be a system in which the majority seeks to annihilate the minority in the quest for a winner-take-all political victory, which it subsequently takes as license to impose a draconian and vengeful agenda.

In this sense, our pursuit of justice is connected with the recovery of a mysticism, a spiritual training in the act of recognition—an honest search for structures which promote human solidarity, interrelatedness and the flourishing of the family, and an understanding that the good of the earth and the fate of the poor are connected. Grounded in a deep sense of mutual responsibility and accountability, it should uncover and do penance for our constant human propensity to violence and look for common ground. It should make room for the unpredictable and uncontrollable narrative and needs of the other, who is no longer seen as other but as my neighbor, my brother, my sister.

The work of the church

In what way must the church be engaged? This is something I think about deeply not only as a border bishop but also as chairman of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Committee on Migration. Here, I think, we can turn again to las Casas for inspiration. What defined las Casas’ work and ministry? I think there were three elements.

First, we can recognize his solidarity with the poor of his time, which was born of and engendered spiritual conversion and capacious social imagination. We need to continually ask the question: *What if we were refugees, if we were undocumented?* We need to ask if our institutions—our Catholic schools and universities, our service agencies, our parishes and diocesan structures—are fully engaged in the lives of the poor and people affected by the reality of forced migration. Are we in the streets? Are we taking risks? Or are we inward-looking? This is the pastoral conversion Pope Francis is asking of our church.

The second element, of course, is las Casas' unrelenting and eloquent defense of the rights of the dispossessed. His lifelong advocacy for the dignity of the poor, which extended into his 80s, can serve as an inspiration. It is important that the entire Catholic community in the United States organize a robust, tenacious, unrelenting and eloquent defense of the rights of those who migrate, in season and out. And in a church that is rediscovering the practice of synodality, it can no longer just be the bishops, it can no longer just be migrants, it can no longer be just the professional advocates and scholars—it needs to be all of us together.

The third element of las Casas' life and work that I think it is important to highlight is his rich social creativity. He did not limit his advocacy to rhetoric or letter writing. As bishop of Chiapas, he endeavored to open new social spaces at a distance from the political and economic structures of the time—*encomienda* and slavery—where local populations could engage in new, just social practices from the bottom up. Chiapas was a laboratory for these counter-cultural efforts toward social justice, and in many ways, this experimentation continues both in the church and society of southern Mexico in Indigenous communities up until today.

The creative rearranging of social space has happened in our country, too. Historically, the church in the United States has been one of the main institutions welcoming and assisting migrants in integrating into this country. We have much to be proud of. The Catholic Church in the United States is an immigrant church. In the 19th and 20th centuries, in particular, when waves of Catholic migrants arrived to the country (largely from Europe but also from Latin America), the U.S. church established an extensive network of institutions to assist migrants and aid them in transitioning to mainstream American society—our parochial schools, our universities, our hospitals, our social service agencies, efforts by pioneering religious women and men, our Catholic labor unions, our legal clinics.

It is true that much of this work was done to buffer Catholic immigrants against the prevailing ethnic and religious discrimination of the time and was not necessarily aimed at social transformation. But in retrospect, these creative spaces provided ferment for a more just and vibrant United States and were exercises in the creative reorganization of social space that led to outcomes more consistent with human dignity. And their legacy lives on today in our existing universities, hospitals and organizations like Catholic Charities, Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Catholic Relief Services, the Catholic Campaign for Human Development and more.

But this is not just history. This creative reweaving of society from the bottom up, nourished in our Christian vision of creating a space where everyone belongs, is happening even as we speak. You might not know it, because the media and the politicians are fixated on the challenges and on the narrative of “the crisis.” But communities are not waiting for politicians. This work is happening in organized acts of Christian hospitality at the border where churches and local communities are welcoming the next generation of newcomers.

It is happening in places like Oak Park, outside of Chicago, where churches are coming together to find housing for migrants and help them integrate. It is happening in New York City, where parishes are working to provide a dignified welcome to migrants shipped around the country on buses by cynical politicians. It is happening in some Catholic universities, which are considering how best to defend the Dreamers on their faculties and staff, continuing to employ them even if their legal protections are abolished by judicial fiat. This is powerful work, a reweaving from below, a real form of Christian resistance to the forces of indifference and exploitation and atomization in our society today.

The situation in Texas

Let us consider an emerging situation at the border right now. As you may know, the attorney general of Texas has made efforts to shutter a longstanding migrant hospitality center on the U.S.-Mexico border, Annunciation House. This Catholic organization has a history of engaging in this work for more than 45 years and works very closely with our parishes and parish migrant shelter centers in El Paso. Very early on in this legal battle, I issued a strenuous defense of Annunciation House, not only because I know the work that the organization does very intimately but also because of some more foundational reasons.

The attack on Annunciation House represents an escalation in Texas' efforts in recent years to militarize the border and to enact legislation criminalizing migration and people who migrate. You have seen the Humvees and the concertina wire and the National Guard soldiers on television. While these actions are transparently political, they are serious. I must tell you that people are dying in El Paso because of these efforts, in the river and in the desert. I have administered the last rites to them. And as I mentioned earlier, they are part of a broader brutal historical project in Texas to criminalize and police people who migrate, people of color.

People of faith have a duty to resist these racist projects.

There are two additional reasons I would like to mention. The first is that Texas' efforts constitute a direct attack on a faith-based provider and an attack on the ability of people of faith to put into practice deeply held religious convictions. This is not just a reflexive defense of our own institutions. We need to be prepared to more forcefully engage on this front because this is not an isolated episode. But on a deeper level, conscience is the last bulwark against dehumanization—and when it is threatened, it should alarm us all. And the church must respond.

Religion and people of faith have historically been the motor of change toward a more just and compassionate society in the United States, and the muzzling of this voice in our political climate raises fundamental concerns.

The last reason I have felt a duty to speak out in defense of Annunciation House is because the state of Texas is now *attacking the Christian act of hospitality*. I spoke earlier about Pope Francis and his spiritual point of departure. His practical point of departure has been to engage directly with vulnerable people on the move, to go to the global hot spots of migration—to borders, to the places where the rubber hits the road for those who migrate, the places where international conventions and the rule of law are often suspended—but also to places of hospitality. The Holy Father has a perceptive sense of the injustice of the global barriers we erect against people who migrate, the injustice of the walls and detention centers. For this reason, he has leaned in with his personal visits and shows of support to places of hospitality. For Pope Francis, acts of hospitality are not just acts of mercy but acts of reparative justice. As he has said, in touching the flesh of the poor, we touch Jesus. This is where the people of God are called to be today.

The field hospital

Our church is not, as Pope Francis famously said, a nongovernmental organization. It is a people redeemed by Jesus Christ, the field hospital where we are taken from dysfunction and sin to freedom, from cynicism and hopelessness to reconciliation and redemption. If there are any places where Pope Francis' metaphor of the field hospital really becomes enfolded, it is in the migrant shelters that dot the U.S.-Mexico border and run through Latin American and the Caribbean, as well as the shelters in the interior of our country.

Hospitality is about providing aid with no other motivation than compassion. It collapses the political distances between us and creates co-presence, reweaving a fractured world; those who would categorize and patrol us based on immigration status are really opposing this. This is the real reason that Christian hospitality finds itself in the crosshairs of political debate and the reason religious leaders have an obligation to strenuously defend it.

You can see why the Holy Father's message to decolonize our imaginations through the practice of a spiritual mysticism and to touch Christ through the flesh of the poor and those who migrate resonates so much with a border bishop. But I think these two proposals of Pope Francis can be deeply renewing for the broader church in the United States and our advocacy for those affected by the reality of forced migration.

While we need to be engaged in the fight for immigration reform on the national level through federal advocacy, that is not sufficient. We need to ensure that the church is actually engaged in the building up of the reign of God by prophetically proclaiming and creatively enacting justice and mercy, allowing ourselves to be knit back together

for the healing of the world. As the Rev. James Cone used to ask, *does the church have anything to say to the world at this time?*

Migration is a privileged space in which this salvific mystery is being acted out. If the church is not present in this arena, the proclamation of the Gospel is truncated. And this should take place not only on the border but throughout the country, in acts of hospitality, in organizing on a local level for more just policies, in opening up spaces where the flesh of Christ can be touched in encounter with the poor. This can reset and reframe the church's advocacy, making it more credible and giving it more depth.

And we do need prophetic witnesses. We cannot work for a world we cannot imagine. We need mystics who can see through to the other side to justice and who can walk with us to that place, and people, like las Casas, who can fruitfully engage borders and the tensions of modern life. Our church needs people who can help us to rewrite the next chapter of our national story so that it is inclusive, grounded in fraternity and justice, and cognizant of the unique role that migration has played in enriching our country.



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