News
Migration



Sr. Norma Pimentel, a Missionary of Jesus, greets Esther Chicas, a recently arrived migrant from El Salvador, and her child, Andrea, at the Humanitarian Respite Center in McAllen, Texas on Nov. 11. Pimentel has urged Catholics to "defend life" through projects such as Catholic Charities' work with the migrant population, especially at the border. (OSV News/David Agren)

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McAllen, Texas — November 17, 2023

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On a Saturday afternoon at the Humanitarian Respite Center in the Texas border city of McAllen, Sr. Norma Pimentel greeted migrant guests, who had just been released from Border Patrol custody and were arranging travel to their final destinations in the United States. She later welcomed a U.S. senator, who came to the Catholic Charities facility to volunteer and learn more about migration matters.

Dressed in her usual blue habit, striped Oxford shirt and sandals, Pimentel welcomed the migrants and dignitaries with the same warmth — though the motives for their visits drastically differed.

"I always ask, 'How are you?'" she said of her ice breaker with migrants. It's a simple but probing question, which provokes strong emotions and shows concern for the well-being of people who have endured the traumas of the migrant trail.

She also offers encouragement as migrants prepare for new lives in the United States. "You came from so far away, you made it this far, I know that you're going to make it wherever you think you're going," she tells them. "Don't give up."

With politicians and public officials, she said, "They want to understand: Is it really a crisis? … They want to see for themselves what is happening. It's important because how can you address something that you can't figure out?"

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In many ways, Pimentel, a Missionary of Jesus, has become the face of the Catholic response to migrants in the Rio Grande Valley, where she leads Catholic Charities in the Diocese of Brownsville — though she's quick to credit her staff, priests and religious, and parishes communities for attending to the needs of migrants on both sides of the border.

She's also a sought-out speaker and advocate, who has become a well-known migrant defender — and even a target for organizations such as Catholic Vote, which launched legal action to reveal communications between Catholic Charities and the Biden administration.

Pimentel told OSV News in a pair of interviews that "any investigation is welcome." But the notoriety still takes some getting used to.

"I didn't have this in mind when I became a nun," Pimentel said. But her mission has always remained the same. "We have to defend life," she said.

But notoriety of her outreach — which draws volunteers from across the country — and the scrutiny from vocal opponents of the Biden administration's border policy reflect the rising tensions over immigration issues, especially as migrants arrive at the border in seldom-seen numbers.

The respite center in McAllen and a similar facility opened in the Brownsville cathedral gym offer a friendly welcome and a little dignity for migrants after arduous journeys. Staff work to get migrants ready for trips to their final destinations, helping them purchase bus and plane tickets — paid for by the migrants or their families.

"With the rising number of migrants," Pimentel told OSV News. "It looks like there's a trend in the world, migration."

She continued: "There are those that come because the situation in their country is really bad. But for others, they're just hopeful: This is my chance to come, to be safe and have my kids grow up. They're encouraged by others that came who say: 'Come, it was easy to get in. Maybe you can get in, too.'"



Migrants, mostly from Venezuela, are seen from Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, as they gather near the U.S. border wall Sept. 24 after crossing the Rio Grande with the intention of turning themselves in to U.S. Border Patrol agents to request asylum. (OSV News/Reuters/Jose Luis Gonzalez)

Pimentel attributes the rising numbers to U.S. political rhetoric, too, explaining that it reaches faraway countries.

"If you hear governors and politicians, they say, 'This administration has no control over borders, they're letting other people in,' and that's what they hear in other countries. They just get it wrong," she explained.

"They're encouraging people to come. We ask people here: 'Why did you come?' And many of them say: 'I just heard that. Maybe it's an opportunity to come. They're telling us that they're letting everyone in.' "

Pimentel doesn't shy away from politics, but she focuses on policies instead of personalities. She expressed dismay that asylum was being used for "political"

purposes rather than providing protection for people fleeing political persecution and violence.

Additionally, no governments "have addressed comprehensive immigration reform." She continued, "We're just simply responding and reacting to situations instead of addressing and establishing the proper process of immigration we need to offer."

Pimentel drew media scrutiny over the summer for her decision to allow migrants to take the buses provided by Texas Gov. Greg Abbott to destinations such as New York and Chicago. Pimentel disagreed with the original intent of the busing, saying the governor wanted to "create a crisis when there was no crisis."

But she recognized that border town mayors "don't want people to stay here," and migrants themselves were requesting travel to New York and other big cities. To avoid creating a burden on overwhelmed cities, Catholic Charities worked with sister organizations to receive the migrants and ensure all travelers on the buses had sponsors with verified addresses — "to do it the right way," she said.



Sr. Norma Pimentel, a Missionary of Jesus, poses Nov. 11 at the Humanitarian Respite Center in McAllen, Texas, which helps migrants released by Border Patrol reach their final destinations in the United States. The center, a project of Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley in the Brownsville Diocese, has served more than 1,500 migrants daily. (OSV News/David Agren)

The respite center in McAllen welcomed 1,500 migrants daily earlier in this fall — and sometimes more. Pimentel suspected the numbers swelled due to crimes committed against migrants waiting on the Mexican side of the border, who were being kidnapped for ransom — prompting them to cross rather than wait for appointments provided by an app known as CBP One to enter the United States.

Drug cartels also control the flow of people, sometimes smuggling them through Mexico and even charging them for permission to cross the Rio Grande River, according to people working with migrants.

The number of migrants served by the respite center has tumbled somewhat recently — something Pimentel and observers attribute to the Biden administration announcing the deportations of Venezuelans, prompting migrants to take a wait-and-see approach.

Volunteers, however, are always welcome, she said — especially for sorting clothing donations, a process she described as ideal "if you have penance to make up for everything bad you've done over the year." She also encourages people to try helping migrants closer to home.

"If you want to come down here, come down here," she said. "But there are people to respond to locally."