News
Migration

The border wall is seen in the background as migrants from South and Central America look to surrender to immigration officials after crossing into the United States from Mexico in Ruby, Ariz., June 24. (OSV News/Reuters/Adrees Latif)

by Rhina Guidos

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A sister who founded an immigration law center in California criticized Catholic leaders for not speaking up for migrants and refugees as activists and allies brace for an onslaught of changes from the incoming Trump administration.

Sr. Ann Durst, a member of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, and an immigration lawyer, voiced disappointment with Catholic leaders who preach, yet maintain what she sees as an "unbearable" silence from the pulpit as candidates for public office painted an often-negative view of newcomers to the United States.

"I am saddened by the fact that church leadership controls who preaches the Gospel and then doesn't preach it," she told GSR. "And so, it makes the sound of silence resonate as a few other things have done. The silence is unbearable for me and has been. I cannot comprehend it."

Durst founded Casa Cornelia Law Center, which has for more than 30 years helped migrants and refugees in the San Diego area. With other women religious in the area, her life's work has focused on newcomers. She is worried about what will happen to them, given the incoming president's campaign promises to implement harsh immigration policies.

President-elect Donald Trump promised mass deportations in his second term. He has also threatened to end the humanitarian parole immigration program, which has allowed refuge to people from places such as Nicaragua, Venezuela, Cuba, Ukraine and Haiti. He also has said he will end Temporary Protected Status and the popular Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program. The programs provide recipients a reprieve from deportation and allow them to work.

On Nov. 11, Trump announced the appointment of Tom Homan as his "border czar." Homan carried out a policy that separated children from their families if they were caught trying to cross the border without legal permission. He recently told CBS' "60 Minutes" that "families can be deported together" to prevent separation.

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More than half of Catholic voters voted for Trump, according to The Associated Press' VoteCast. The news organization on Nov. 8 said Miami Archbishop Thomas Wenski spoke of "cautious optimism" for a second Trump presidency, chalking up the president-elect's comments to "hyperbole."

At the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' meeting in Baltimore Nov. 12, El Paso Bishop Mark Seitz, chairman of the migration committee, told media it's too early to tell what will happen once the new administration takes over. But the bishops must continue to insist on the dignity of every person, he said.

If Trump's first term in office is any indication, "we should be concerned," said Catholic Dylan Corbett, executive director of El Paso's Hope Border Institute.

"It's not just rhetoric, it's not just campaign promises. Now there's a track record and experience, and that should be quite troubling," Corbett told GSR in a Nov. 6 interview. "I think this is going to be a real moment when the local communities are going to have to band together to protect newcomers, to protect the immigrants because they're under threat. The Trump campaign put the target on them once again."

Archbishop Timothy Broglio, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, speaks during a news conference Nov. 12. In comments about immigration, he said, "our primary responsibility is to live the Gospel … If that comes into conflict with laws or even the force of the border, then we have to try and make the Gospel prevail." (OSV News/Bob Roller)

The administration and its supporters also have put targets on Catholic and other organizations that help migrants, Corbett said, pointing to attacks against Catholic Charities around the country. He also cited Annunciation House, which the Texas attorney general accused of being a "stash house." (A judge in July stopped efforts to shut down the nonprofit.)

"It's a difficult moment for us because the state leadership [in Texas] has targeted organizations working with migrants at the border, and the Trump campaign has also targeted organizations which are working to welcome people at the border," Corbett said. "It's another front in their war on migration to attack providers of humanitarian care."

He said organizations expect that the "atmosphere of intimidation will continue" and ramp up. But the Biden administration was not always helpful on border issues either, he said, noting it left "a very mixed legacy" on the issue.

"They did make some positive steps toward putting in place a system to manage immigration at the border, including additional parole programs, including additional support for local communities and organizations working at the border to process arrivals.

"But at the end of the day, they failed to put in place a system," Corbett said. He pointed to the administration's failure to work with Congress to pass comprehensive immigration reform, while continuing Trump's "enforcement tactics" at the border that included restrictions on asylum.

"The problem is that the longer that we wait to put in place a humane, safe and effective system here at the border to process asylum seekers and other vulnerable populations, we open up a space for political extremists to come in and do real damage," he said.

Facing challenges to heed Gospel teachings that urge helping the stranger, there some Catholics will engage in civil disobedience because "it's the right thing to do," Durst said. It's not about being faithful to a political party, but to a set of religious beliefs, she said.

"We just have to be comfortable that we are being faithful to the Gospel. There's going to be rough riding in some instances, and there's going to be injustice. People won't like us, some of us; that's not new. But it's hard," Durst said. "The important thing is that we're truthful and compassionate. I don't think we have to be brash or offensive, but we certainly have to be truthful."

It's a sentiment repeated by USCCB president Archbishop Timothy Broglio. In a meeting with media Nov. 12, he said that "our primary responsibility is to live the Gospel of Jesus Christ and to respond to that Gospel. If that comes into conflict with laws or even the force of the border, then we have to try and make the Gospel prevail."

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