News
News
Migration



Jesuit scholastic Joseph Nolla distributes Communion during Mass celebrated Oct. 15, 2024, at the Senda de Vida migrant shelter in Reynosa, Mexico. (OSV News/David Agren)



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The National Catholic Reporter this week collaborated with Global Sisters Report to find out what Catholic organizations are doing to prepare for President Donald Trump's threat of mass deportation of immigrants.

GSR national correspondent Dan Stockman has covered immigration for a decade and reported for GSR's 2024 series, "Welcoming the Stranger," taking a closer look at women religious working with immigrants and migrants.

NCR is republishing the mass deportation story today, and executive editor James V. Grimaldi conducted an email interview with Stockman to go with the story.

Grimaldi: **Dan, you've covered immigration for a long time through the eyes of nuns around the world. How is what Trump is threatening with mass deportation different from other immigration episodes in the past?**

Stockman: The biggest difference between what we've seen for the last four decades and what Trump is calling for is the direction of travel: If deportations do occur, instead of millions of people migrating into the United States, we could see millions of people being removed from the country. Of course, mass deportations might never come to pass; experts caution that there is currently not the staffing or funding to make it happen. Experts further note that it could be tied up in the courts for years before it even begins (President Barack Obama established the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals or "Dreamers" program in 2012 and it is still tied up in litigation.)

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To date, most of the humanitarian efforts with U.S. migration have been aimed at migrants here, either because officials have been overwhelmed or to fill the gaps in essentials such as food, clothing and shelter. We know how to donate food and bottled water, how to volunteer to sort clothing and how to donate to groups ministering to migrants. No one is certain how to minister to people being removed from their homes and sent to who knows where.

In recent years, humanitarian efforts have moved back and forth across the border as needed: When migrants are flowing into the United States, the new arrivals are served either along the border or wherever they are sent. When there have been crackdowns or closures, efforts have moved south of the Mexican border to serve the thousands of people waiting there for the opportunity to cross, often in squalid conditions. If countries refuse to accept deportees from the United States, no one currently knows where they will go.

The people you and our colleagues spoke with sounded calm and collected in your story. I know immigrants are fearful. Do the workers seem afraid, and how is that affecting their preparation?

There is always a fear of the unknown, but one Catholic sister told me that, at least right now, fear may be the biggest obstacle to being effective. We cannot be afraid of what we don't know will happen, she said, we need to instead put that energy into action building networks of like-minded groups and individuals. That way, once the situation and needs are clear, we will know who to turn to for help, who to support, and who to stand in solidarity with.

If the workers are afraid, they are afraid for the people they serve; afraid that the lives they are building here will be destroyed; afraid that the precious little they have will be lost, that people, who finally felt safe after years in mortal danger, will be in danger again and what that will mean for them. These workers believe Jesus' words in the Gospel that when we serve the poor, the outcast and the brokenhearted, that we are serving him. If they are afraid of anything, they are afraid of what the coming policies and decisions could mean for our shared humanity. What would we gain, some are asking, if we save the country but lose our souls?

What are the big stories for Catholics you expect to see coming out of the first days, weeks and months of the Trump administration?

Obviously, there will be the decisions and policies that are implemented beginning Jan. 20, 2025; but here at NCR and GSR, there will also be coverage of how those decisions and policies affect the people they are aimed at, and also how the Catholic Church responds to both.

NCR will no doubt aim its lens at the official church response — some people are already criticizing the bishops for their silence so far — and GSR, along with NCR, will show how the faithful — congregations of religious, Catholic organizations and ministries, parishes and people in the pews — are mobilizing or standing up for those in need.



Migrants run to hide from the U.S. Border Patrol and the Texas National Guard in El Paso, Texas, May 8, 2023, after crossing into the United States from Mexico. (OSV News/Reuters/Jose Luis Gonzalez)

Many of the religious men and women along the U.S.-Mexico border are operating in dangerous territory controlled by Mexican cartels. How do they stay safe?

Frankly, they don't stay safe. No matter what, there is enormous risk, and they accept that as part of their efforts to meet the needs of the time.

But they do take steps to minimize the risk whenever possible. One of the biggest things they do is stick to the mission and do not stray from the organization's normal activities.

If you are, say, a search-and-rescue organization, do not leave caches of water and food in the desert for those attempting the crossing. If you are an advocacy group, stay in the arenas you have been operating in; do not suddenly take your efforts to the border. If you are a humanitarian shelter for those released by Border Patrol, do not purposely help people who have not presented themselves to officials to ask for asylum.

And there is not only the danger of the cartels: there is also the danger of state and local officials who oppose the work, such as efforts by the state of Texas to shut down Annunciation House. There is the physical danger of organized crime, but there is also official danger from those watching, waiting and hoping for any misstep.

How involved will Catholics be in filing legal challenges to orders from the Trump administration?

It's certainly hard to say now, but will also be a little difficult even after it begins. The vast majority of the legal work done is not the splashy lawsuits or high-profile injunctions, it is friend-of-the-court briefs, legal assistance, pro bono attorneys, and the legal work that is almost never seen, such as conducting interviews and taking depositions, filing paperwork and doing research. That will likely be happening more than ever, even if it's not publicly known.

> "What would we gain, some are asking, if we save the country but lose our souls?"
>
> — GSR national correspondent Dan Stockman

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What are the greatest needs right now for Catholic groups who aid and assist immigrants?

They will tell you they need support and funding. They can always use volunteers and advocacy, but they will also tell you not to wait until a crisis to write a check or hit the "donate" button. Funding now will help them retain attorneys, build up supplies, equip volunteers or make plans for what is coming.

What will you be looking for and asking your Catholic connections in the next few months?

My two big questions will be: 1) What are you seeing and hearing? and 2) What are you doing? We're always looking at what is happening, especially since it seems to change dramatically every few months or years, and we always need to know what people and groups are doing in their ministries so we can report on them as part of our mission to "connect Catholics to church, faith and the common good with independent news, analysis and spiritual reflection."

As a sister put it in an email I received the day the story was published, "GSR continues this gift of amplifying our witness to the broader church and world."