



FORWARD

## Civil rights activists call for an end to scapegoating of migrants

Scores of American politicians are generating fear of refugees for their own selfish reasons.

PHOTO BY NICOLETTE MONIQUE LUNA / STAFF



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# MESSENGERS OF HEAVEN

*Gente Unida volunteers walk along the U.S.-Mexico border in a solemn remembrance of refugees around the globe.*

By NICOLETTE MONIQUE LUNA

It was actually pretty quiet at the border on a sunny but brisk winter morning. Not a riot or humanitarian crisis in sight. There were foxes, but no FOX, open fields but no open border. Indeed, a hulking metal wall was a rusty slice of nationalism vivisectioning a binational hillside festooned with blocky concrete houses on the developed south and fragrant chaparral mixed with a touch of salty sea breeze on the still natural north.

There were no teeming swarms of immigrants, just a swarm of gnats and a team of human rights activists in running shoes and hiking boots trudging along a sandy path threading a riparian oasis between Tijuana's 2.3 million



## PRAYERS FOR LOST SOULS



A Gente Unida activist reads a passage from scripture that urges people to be kind and helpful to the less fortunate. United Nations human rights monitors estimate as many as 1.3 million migrants may be on the move every day around the world.

PHOTO BY NICOLETTE MONIQUE LUNA / STAFF  
BUTTERFLY IMAGE / ADOBE



## ANGELS OF HOPEFULNESS

Gente Unida marchers were each given a butterfly to release into Border Field State Park in memory of a migrant who died somewhere in the world. Butterflies were allowed to warm in the palms of the volunteers before they flew away into the riparian meadows of the borderlands between Imperial Beach and Tijuana.



PHOTO BY NICOLETTE MONIQUE LUNA / STAFF

people and San Diego County's 3.3 million souls. ▶

"Beautiful, *verdad?*" offered Enrique Morones, the Gente Unida founder who organized Walk for Migrants. "We are so blessed to be able to enjoy a morning like this when so many other people can't."

Morones picked a perfect December morning in Border Field State Park — warm in the sun, cool in the shade, capped by an azure dome spotted by an occasional tumbling cloud. He and his fellow walkers were there to remember the suffering and tragedy of migrants around the world, including near the U.S.-Mexico border.

Padre Dermot Rodgers, in his traditional brown Franciscan friar's robe and sandals, reminded the line of the reason for the season. It was two weeks before Christmas on *el Día de la Virgen de Guadalupe*, but Father Rodgers stopped and gathered the pack every few minutes like an Easter Station of the Cross procession.

Instead of the suffering of Christ, Father Rodgers shared stories of suffering by immigrants from Haiti, Syria, Somalia, Ukraine, Venezuela, China and other corners of the world beset by poverty and violence.

"We ask for basic and simple justice," he said in his light Irish brogue, a vestige of his native Belfast,

Northern Ireland. Rosary beads dangling from his weathered fingers and a serious countenance crossed his otherwise welcoming face.

Justice, however, is rarely basic or simple, he said. Inequity, war and corruption have pushed tens of millions out of their native countries and on to the migrant trail, an invisible highway of desperation crisscrossing the planet. Like the earnest walkers in the bottom left corner of America, as many as 1.3 million migrants are on the move this very day, said Rodgers.

Many of them never reach their destination, he said, struck down by heat, cold, robbers, rapists, accidents and hunger. More than 1,000 migrants died along the southern border in 2022 alone, according to the United Nations Human Rights Commission. Rodgers gathered marchers to pray a portion of the rosary for Joselyn Quinteras of El Salvador, a migrant who died of dehydration and heat exhaustion in the desiccated southern Arizona desert near Tatumcari.

"She was abandoned in the wilderness by the *coyotes* she had paid to guide her across the border," he said. "They found her body three weeks later."

Quinteras, like the other migrants remembered along the way, was honored with a tangerine butterfly

released into the cyan sky.

"Butterflies are symbols of hope in many cultures," said Rodgers. "They are revered in Latino cultures as messengers to heaven. Butterflies remind us that we are never alone and always connected to the spiritual world."

*Transfronterizo* human rights activist Hugo Castro is a man known for his remarkable courage while helping Central American migrants traverse the perilous journey through Mexico where they are preyed upon by cartels and petty criminals alike. Castro was severely beaten and left for dead in a rural roadside ditch a few years ago while accompanying migrants. Morones said it is a miracle he survived.

Castro is a diminutive and soft spoken man, which betrays his reputation as a fierce defender of the weak and vulnerable. He said it was fitting that a Franciscan monk and a team of activists clutching rosaries gathered on the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe to fight for the rights of migrants.

"It helps us to recognize the necessity of fighting for human rights, which is really a spiritual quest," he said. "Some of us do it for spiritual reasons to light a flame of hope and love."

Marching along the border to honor migrants "*es muy importante*," Castro said, but the event is even more important for the activists walking together in the comforting sun. Caring for others requires people of good will to also care for themselves, he said, and to be periodically recharged with inspiration.

"*Hay un gran crisis humanitaria en todo el mundo*," he said. "We need to remember that God is on their side and our side. Walking today with *el padre y las mariposas* helps me to remember that and gives me encouragement to do more work."

Cecelia di Mino was a teenager adrift when she landed at Southwestern College and found herself, she said. Today she is a Harvard graduate who remembers her humble South County roots. She traveled from Las Vegas to participate in the walk, which she felt called to.

"I was blessed with opportunity so many other people do not have," she said. "Sometimes as people find success and run toward their goals they forget their past, they forget about those they left behind. Migrants are so often the people left behind. They are criminalized and victimized."

Looking down the path, Di Mino said she saw reasons for optimism.

PHOTO BY NICOLETTE MONIQUE LUNA / STAFF



## MONARCH MESSENGERS

Franciscan Padre Dermot Rodgers said butterflies are a symbol of hope in many cultures and have a special place in the hearts of Latinos. "They are revered in Latino cultures as messengers to heaven," he said. "Butterflies remind us that we are never alone and always connected to the spiritual world." Monarch butterflies, which undertake long migrations between Oregon and Mexico, are symbols of immigrants and DREAMERS. Gente Unida activist Frank Modic, a hospice chaplain, raises butterflies to be released at ceremonies and funerals. The sleeping butterflies awaken and become active in the warm sunlit hands of participants. After a few moments, they test their wings and take flight.



PHOTOS BY NICOLETTE MONIQUE LUNA / STAFF



## WINGED PRAYER

Hospice Chaplain Frank Modic began to raise butterflies to release at weddings, funerals and spiritual gatherings. He also accompanies Gente Unida to the notorious graveyard in Holtville that holds the remains of almost 1,000 unidentified migrants.



PHOTOS BY NICOLETTE MONIQUE LUNA / STAFF

“The people (here) have great intention and energy,” she said. “Releasing the butterflies..was really beautiful. There is a lot of love. (We need) people to pay attention (to migrants) and treat them with dignity and respect.”

Retiree Dr. Christauria Welland is far from retired. The former educator now helps run the Oaxaca Education Fund that provides schooling and food to indigenous people in Mexico’s southern states. One



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**CECELIA DI MINO**

*SC alumnae, Harvard graduate*

part of her organization’s mission is to help people thrive where they are so they do not become displaced refugees.

“A little support can go a long way,” she said, “but the need is great. Mexico is a wonderful but complicated society. Doing humanitarian work there can be difficult because there are so many barriers and challenges.”

Hope gives her the power to push on, she said. “Education is a force multiplier,” she said. “One transformed person can transform others. That is how it has always been since the beginning of time.”

Morones and company had planned to march all the way to the beach at the international border, but recent downpours had flooded the path. Padre Rodgers said the God-sent rain was a blessing for the plants and animals of the park, including the squadron of butterflies launched by the marchers that morning.

“The butterflies were born in the desert southwest of Southern California and will later migrate to the Columbia River Gorge around Portland, Oregon,” he said. “Our butterflies represent our migrants who are also undertaking a great trek. May God protect them as they make their journeys.” ■

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