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.
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 vivisecting 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 teaming 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
his light Irish brogue, a vestige of his native Belfast, Syria, Somalia, Ukraine, Venezuela, China and other minutes like an Easter Station of the Cross procession. Rodgers stopped and gathered the pack every few Christmas on of the reason for the season. It was two weeks before Franciscan friar’s robe and sandals, reminded the line Mexico border. migrants around the world, including near the U.S.-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 migrants were there to remember the suffering and tragedy of the Gente Unida founder who organized Walk for the 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 the migrants. “Hay un gran crisis humanitarian 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.
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.

“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 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.”

“I was blessed with opportunity so many other people do not have. 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.”

CECELIA DI MINO
SC alumnus, Harvard graduate