

## How Catholics are helping immigrant children separated from their parents

J.D. Long-García

June 19, 2018

Around 20 to 30 new children have been attending Sunday Mass at [St. Eugene de Mazenod Church](#) in Brownsville, Tex. Parishioners pray for the children during the liturgy and then serve them breakfast.

“They want to take care of them and let them know they’re loved,” said the Rev. Kevin Collins, an Oblate and pastor of the parish. The children come from Casa Padre, the nearby shelter for unaccompanied minors.



*Immigrant children are seen at a tent city in Tornillo, Texas, June 18. (CNS photo/Mike Blake, Reuters)*

A few years ago, the nonprofit [Southwest Key Programs](#) bought the building, which used to be a Walmart, and converted it into a detention shelter for undocumented minors who entered the United States illegally without their parents. Around 5 percent of the 1,500 children who are detained there have been separated from their parents.

The number of children at centers like this one has been escalating since Attorney General Jeff Sessions announced a [“zero tolerance” policy](#), vowing to prosecute everyone who enters the United States illegally. Mr. Sessions said that children who enter illegally will be separated from the adult who accompanies them, whether the adult is a parent or a smuggler.

*“You can see a certain sadness in them.... I’m sure they don’t want to go back.”*

Some of the deacons at St. Eugene's go into Casa Padre once a week. Father Collins said he has been trying to get parishioners to serve Salvadoran pupusas rather than breakfast tacos since the children tend to be Central American.

"You can see a certain sadness in them," Father Collins said. "They're in between. They left their home countries, and now they don't know what's next. They're hoping and praying something happens. I'm sure they don't want to go back."

Bishop Daniel Flores of Brownsville met with a group of the children after Mass recently, Father Collins said.

"We've said for years that detention centers are not the way to handle illegal immigration," Bishop Flores said in an interview with **America**. Law enforcement used to make a "prudential judgment," he said, often releasing unauthorized entrants with an ankle monitor. Now, the zero-tolerance policy has led parents to be referred to criminal courts while their children wind up in the care of the Department of Health and Human Services.

*Bishop Flores: "You can't use kids as a deterrent. You can't use human beings that way."*

"The parents do not know what's happening to their children," Bishop Flores said. "Once they get out of the court system, it is hard for them to locate their children. This is something [the local church in Brownsville] does every day—help parents find their children."

In the Rio Grande Valley, the community wants to help, he said. The community recognizes that the immigrants are asylum seekers leaving cruel situations in their home communities, the bishop said.

"These kids are scared," Bishop Flores said. "This is a pretty aggressive deterrence policy. You can't use kids as a deterrent. You can't use human beings that way."

Secretary of Homeland Security Kirtsjen Nielsen [defended the practice](#) on June 18, explaining that by law her department cannot detain children with their parents. D.H.S. must either release both parent and child or separate them, she said.

*"What can be more sacred than the family? It is torture to take the kids away."*

"We do not have the luxury of pretending all individuals claiming to be a family are, in fact, a family. We have to do our job," she said in remarks at the National Sheriffs' Association Conference.

The practice follows efforts by the Trump administration to curb both legal and illegal immigration. Last September, Mr. Sessions announced the termination of the [Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program](#), an Obama administration policy that protected undocumented immigrants who came to the United States as children from deportation.

In April, Ms. Nielsen announced the administration would crack down on so-called loopholes available to those who [seek asylum in the United States](#). Homeland Security has also

ended [Temporary Protected Status](#) for U.S. residents from seven countries, including more than 250,000 Central Americans.

## **Taking Action**

On Father's Day, more than 2,000 people protested the separation of families in Tornillo, Tex., [The Texas Standard reported](#). The border town is the site of the first "tent city" erected to house the increasing number of unaccompanied migrant children.

"We are horrified about what's happening," said Maria Elena Manzo, a leader with [Communities Organized for Relational Power in Action](#). "What can be more sacred than the family? It is torture to take the kids away. I don't know what could be worse."

Ms. Manzo, a parishioner at Sacred Heart in Salinas, Calif., said many in the Salinas Valley are undocumented. They work in hospitality, agriculture and construction.

"We have a thriving economy because of immigrant labor in those industries," said Ms. Manzo, who engages in dialogue with business, civic and community leaders as part of her work with C.O.P.A. "It is in our interest to figure out an immigration reform that keeps the people here."

*"What can I do?' That's what everyone needs to ask themselves. We can't be paralyzed. We need to act."*

Business leaders want immigration reform because that means more profits, she said. "The sheriff wants people not to be afraid, so they can keep crime under control," Ms. Manzo said, adding that she also engages officials from ICE in conversations.

"We can't give into fear," she said. "'What can I do?' That's what everyone needs to ask themselves. We can't be paralyzed. We need to act."

In El Paso, activists are signing petitions and marching, according to the Rev. Bob Mosher, a Columban priest. Before beginning his work at the Columban Mission Center in the border city, Father Mosher spent nearly 30 years in Chile. He said one benefit of working under an oppressive regime is that it creates a sense of solidarity.

Father Mosher and other activists learned that border patrol agents were stopping asylum seekers on the bridge to El Paso. They would ask for their documents and when they asked for asylum, they would send them back, he said.

*"I don't think any Catholic can say we're going to back the [Trump] administration no matter what it's going to do."*

Last Friday, he joined a group of 20 activists who met six Guatemalan asylum seekers. They accompanied them across the bridge. "We got them through," he said. "This is something we are doing. We meet [asylum seekers] early in the morning and accompany them across."

The Rev. Mike Walsh, a Vincentian, noted the [work of Dallas Area Interfaith](#), who along with the Diocese of Dallas developed parish issued identification cards for undocumented immigrants. While they have no legal bearing, the IDs have improved the relationship between law enforcement and undocumented immigrants.

“The church is looking for a humane way to enforce the borders and not hurt people who have been here for 20 or 30 years,” said Father Walsh said, the parochial vicar of Holy Trinity Catholic Church in Dallas. There are students in his community who fear the deportation of their parents, he said.

*“In the long term, these kids will be damaged psychologically.”*

“The border is a legitimate concern. Enforcing immigration laws is also legitimate,” he said. “But I don’t think any Catholic can say we’re going to back the [Trump] administration no matter what it’s going to do. There has to be a respect for human dignity and family unity.”

Father Walsh also pointed out that Congress has consistently promised immigration reform for years, yet nothing has come of it. “Now, families have been here for decades, and there’s a human situation there,” he said. “They shouldn’t just be kicked out.”

In 1948, the [United Nations recognized](#) the right of individuals to seek asylum from persecution in other countries. In 1951, the United Nations prohibited asylum seekers from being detained simply for seeking asylum while it recognized that seeking asylum may require individuals to “breach immigration rules.”

Speaking on the practice of separating children from their parents, the Rev. Pat Murphy, a Scalabrini priest who heads up the Casa Migrante shelter in Tijuana, Mexico, said, “In the long term, these kids will be damaged psychologically forever.”

In a way, that summarizes Bishop Flores’ approach to advocating for separated families: “Keep it real, keep it human, and keep it as focused as we can.”

“It’s all about the kids,” he said. “This began because we began prosecuting a misdemeanor charge [of unauthorized entry]. We don’t have to do it this way.”