

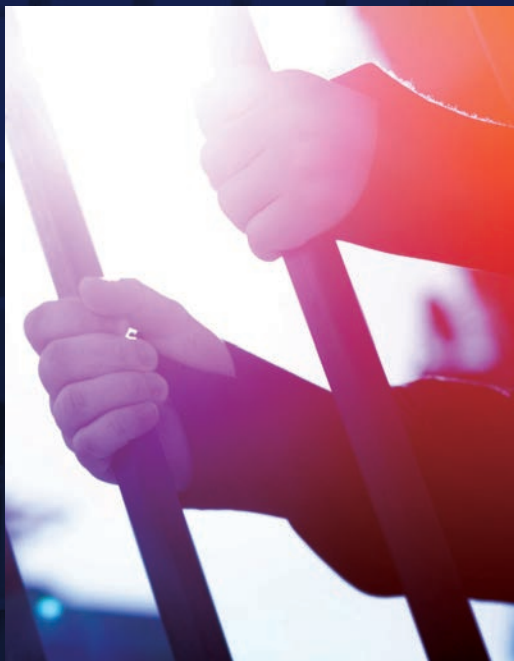
In My Prison Ministry There Are No Criminals

by Tony O'Connor, SM

I have not been more passionate about any other ministry in my many years working in five countries than my walking with unaccompanied minors (11-17 years old) from Guatemala, Honduras, Salvador, and now Nicaragua. I am surprised what swirls up from deep within me and only recently have I gained a clue to what it is and why.

In Peru, I was in part time prison ministry, but my preference and passion does not come from that. Rather, it comes from another lived experience. In the bad old days when I was young, I spent five years of high school in a boarding institution and my eight years of seminary training far away from the crazy world. For me quite frankly, it was awful!! I don't know how I survived! It must have been God's grace!

Those past experiences draw me to these kids who like little birds in a cage yearn to be free. They are great kids too, boys and girls. The drought-victim Guatemalans are small, short, and stumpy. Most of them are indigenous and bilingual, Spanish and their own dialect. They are mainly from the countryside and are very religious. There is nothing more moving



than to see 20 or 30 of them kneel before the table on which I have celebrated Mass and pray aloud all together in their own dialect, devoted, heads bent, oblivious to anything around them, and of course unembarrassed and without shame.

The Hondurans are taller and more sophisticated, mainly city kids, both girls and boys. The Salvadorans, equally as tall, are a little quieter, perhaps more reserved because of the gang wars and violence of their country. They are very proud of their martyr Archbishop Oscar Romero, "San Romero" as they call him, canonized by Pope Francis on October 14, 2018. The Nicaraguans, those few that escape their homeland, say that the "government wants to recruit them to fight against the people."

In Texas there are many refuge centers for minors. Technically they are detention centers where they are processed to then join their sponsors further north, (usually family members). The process is rather rigorous, taking six weeks to two months for those who are lucky. In the Diocese of Brownsville there are more than 12 such centers. I have access to most of them although Casa Padre (the Father's House) with 1,300 boys is one of the closer ones. The other centers have 300 to 500 kids.

Working at the centers, we concentrate on Masses and more so the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Confessions for these kids are like a Rite of Passage. In captivity (although treated very well) they have time to reflect on their lives as they await the new life they hope to lead further north. These confessions are heart felt and profound. You can see the kids heaving a sigh as they walk out on a lighter step. They don't speak of the arduous and often violent trip they have made over thousands of miles, but rather their failures in family back home, their need of God at this moment, and a hope in their hearts that they will get to live a new life. It is awesome to witness the depth of these kids and their utter sincerity and faith in God.

Our Parish, San Felipe de Jesús has become itself a center of refuge for some of these kids. Almost daily some 30 to 60 are bussed from one center or another for Mass in the morning, afternoon visits, and for a breath of fresh air and a change of scenery. They are carefully supervised. One escaped last year - the kid had so much adrenaline in him as he shot for the door that I swear the door of the church opened on its own!

After the morning Mass or during the afternoon visit, we give the kids some food, different from the food at the center, including a Coke which is coveted and enjoyed immensely. They also receive a simple wooden cross as a memento of their first visit to San Felipe and a rosary both of which are very valued.

On a Sunday, with a Mass full of people, the community deeply loves having the kids there. They are applauded while the choir sings and "welcomes the stranger." The parish, although poor, always seems to have the wherewithal for food, the Coke, and the cash to buy crosses and rosary beads. What we lack is capital to give each a Catholic paperback bible or a Catholic New Testament. Something they would so dearly love to have.

So, this is a very special sort of prison ministry. A **prison ministry without criminals**. Their only so-called crime is for being minors, wanting a better future for themselves, and wanting to help their families. They don't dwell on their month's journey up through Mexico. However, one kid with a heavy heart spoke of a companion who died of dehydration on the way. Another, who praised the refuge center's attention of the unaccompanied minors, said he was chased by alligators as he crossed a river swamp in Tampico (Mexico), and he had all his clothes ripped off him by members of Las Zettas gang just outside of Reynosa. However, in the center he feels safe. Here in San Felipe de Jesús they feel that way too.