

May 23, 2019

Dear friends/family/colleagues:

I have just come home from my second intense but moving afternoon helping process Latino asylum seekers who were bussed to Albuquerque from ICE detention in El Paso. I know all of you/us have read about this pressing, overwhelming situation at the border, but many of you are probably quite far removed from the immediate action. I'd like to share my reflections - human, not political - with you so that you, too, can glimpse the humanity of the crisis that is unrolling to the south.

Last week two busloads (100 folks) came to us from Honduras and Guatemala. Today they came from diverse countries; I personally talked this afternoon with parents and families from Ecuador, Guatemala, Brazil, as well as Acapulco and Chihuahua in Mexico. There may have been folks from other countries whom I didn't personally talk with. ABQ receives these asylum seekers after they have turned themselves in to ICE at the border. Typically, they have been detained in El Paso for 2-3 days and stripped of all their possessions except the clothes on their backs (even their shoelaces are taken away, I guess for fear they will use them to hurt themselves). The adults, at least the heads of household, are clamped with an ankle monitor, and then after several days they are turned over to an El Paso church-related charity that cannot begin to accommodate them all. Albuquerque Interfaith, a collective of churches, some charter schools, and some unions, has organized to receive busloads of them here (only families or parents accompanied by children come to us); we give them very temporary housing and care while we help them arrange transit with their sponsors to their final destination anywhere in the country. Other cities in NM and Texas, I know, are similarly receiving such asylees from the border.

The scene in El Paso is very different from what we face here. The department administrator of my UNM department is from El Paso, and she recounted to me her experience last weekend when she was in El Paso and attempted to cross the border into Ciudad Juárez to visit relatives there. She said she was in tears as her car inched for five hours through the check-point, while she watched large groups of asylum seekers desperately attempting to push through the barriers, and panicked border patrol with guns raised trying to push them back.

We witness none of this in ABQ. Those sent by the busload to us here have already been processed by ICE; our task is to give them brief, temporary shelter (arrangements are made with local motels to rent rooms for them at military discount rates), two families per room. They spend at most 2 or 3 nights here, we contact their sponsors across the U.S. and give them explicit information about how they should purchase travel tickets for them, and then another team of volunteers gets them to the bus station or the airport to send them off. While they are here in ABQ they sleep in motel beds rather than on detention floors, they get hot showers, they are fed, they are checked by a doctor if necessary or if they have any sign of flu given the deaths that have already occurred in detention, and they can select appropriate clothing and shoes from donations. Once their sponsors have bought their tickets to Chicago or Florida or

Georgia or New York or wherever, a travel team takes them to the airport or bus station, equipped with a bag of food, and makes sure they get through TSA to their flight or onto the right bus. Then they are sent off. And then we await the next busload or two a few days later.

This is the broad sweeps of what ABQ Interfaith has organized, entirely through volunteer effort. I'd like to share just a few more human glimpses of the process as I've experienced it the last two weeks.

1. My task is "intake," that is, being a warm human being who fills out the initial paperwork with them that we need in order to contact their sponsors and organize their travel plans. This is work reserved for bilinguals as these folks cannot be expected to speak any English at all. But first we all go out to greet them with smiles and "bienvenidos" as they descend from the bus. They have no idea who we are. We are probably the first folks they have seen outside of the ICE detention. We make sure they feel welcome – and that they know we are not the government or ICE.
2. As intake, I take 2 parents with children or two families up to their shared motel room. That's where I fill out the paperwork we need. They all have their ICE papers. Whatever is written on those ICE papers we MUST retain in the paperwork we fill out, even if it has errors. Personal names may be misspelled by ICE, birthdates may be wrong (by as much as 8 years, in my experience!), even the wrong child with a completely different name is listed as accompanying the parent – it doesn't matter. We are told, "ICE never makes mistakes" – if the travel tickets are reserved in any name other than exactly how the name is written on the ICE papers, the parent or child may be denied access to the plane or bus. All this I explain to the parents so they are very clear what we are doing and why we are doing it, and also how very important it is that they protect their ICE papers like gold and answer to any name the papers list for them.
3. I also place a call to the family's sponsor anywhere in the US to explain to him/her what s/he must do to purchase the travel tickets and report back to the ABQ travel team so that they can get the asylee to their plane or bus. The call to the sponsor is an amazing experience. In my short experience I've learned that: a) I immediately must let them know that I am a church volunteer, I am not with the government; b) their family members are safe and sitting beside me and I will let them speak briefly in a few minutes (I am not a kidnapper or coyote asking for money); c) I must repeatedly spell out Albuquerque, the city of departure for the tickets they buy, because most sponsors have never heard of it; d) I make sure they know that New Mexico is in the US, not Mexico (since half the US population thinks NM is in Mexico); e) they need to figure out how to buy the tickets from ABQ to their location, we cannot help them with that; f) the asylees cannot travel the same day I call, as they have just arrived from detention and are dirty, hungry and exhausted; the tickets can be bought for the next day; g) tickets leaving ABQ must depart between 10:30am and 11pm, as the volunteer travel team cannot make itself available earlier or later than those hours; h) they need to know the time difference between ABQ and their location to buy appropriate tickets and report the time accurately to the travel team.

4. When I pass my cell phone to the asylee so that they can briefly talk to their sponsor, it is again very moving. This may be the first personal contact they have had with each other in many days, even weeks. Today unfortunately I got one sponsor's answering machine, but I still had the asylee record her voice so that the sponsor would know all is well. The travel team will have to call again to give that sponsor the necessary info. Last week I had a stunning experience: The sponsor had great difficulty writing down the name of Albuquerque (I spelled it out in Spanish at least 5 times slowly letter by letter) and also the travel team phone number. When I passed my cell to the male Guatemalan asylee, he immediately started talking to his sponsor (his brother) in Maya! So... I immediately wrote out Albuquerque and the phone number in large letters/numbers and asked the asylee to repeat all that info again in Maya. Today there was a family of Brazilian asylees – lo and behold, ABQ Interfaith quickly called and got a Portuguese speaking volunteer to come help out.
5. Today my brother Paul accompanied me and we worked as a team. Paul is refreshing his Spanish from years ago, so while I did the heavy Spanish lifting, Paul showed the families around the motel room. We are asked to make sure they are familiar with everything: how the faucets and showers work; how to open and close the blinds; how to control the lights; that toilet paper goes into the toilet not into the waste basket; that water from the sink is drinkable; etc. and etc. He did a great job, also getting the family to the medical room to be checked and then to the clothing room to select clean clothes. Needless to say, his Spanish got a workout and he did beautifully.

I think I've gone on long enough. I feel blessed to be able to contribute in this small way, to alleviate a little the human pain that is everywhere present. The asylees are exhausted, very surprised by what we are doing, and extremely grateful. They express their gratitude to us over and over.

And I am grateful to you for reading through this reflection, and for any and all prayers you send our way. We have no idea how or when this humanitarian crisis will end. Please know, though, that folks in ABQ and in many cities across the south are stepping up, trying to reframe the hateful, negative public discourse and instead "welcome the stranger" as Christ instructs.

Warmly, Lois

(Feel free to send this reflection on to others if you feel so inclined)