



U.S. Catholic Church in mission overseas

MARYKNOLL

Summer 2026

maryknollmagazine.org

Walking in Peace

FROM THE EDITOR

We pray that by the time you read this magazine, peace has returned to the Holy Land and the greater Middle East. Yet the reality is that war is more easily ignited than extinguished.

A day after the start of the conflict between the United States and Israel against Iran, Pope Leo XIV warned that the “spiral of violence” threatened a “tragedy of enormous proportions.” At the same time, Archbishop Paul S. Coakley, president of the U.S. bishops conference, warned that the “growing conflict risks spiraling into a wider regional war.”

The joint Maryknoll leadership of priests, brothers, sisters and lay people issued a statement pleading for a cessation of the conflict, saying, “We see the faces of our neighbors. ... and we feel the trembling of families caught in the crossfire.” They also issued a separate statement condemning the extreme tactics of immigration enforcement. Both statements are addressed in this issue.

We also publish a moving reflection on St. Óscar Romero, who was martyred when he enjoined soldiers of El Salvador to stop killing their own people. Readers will also find in this issue an introduction to our Maryknoll seminarians in Nairobi; a profile of our priest candidate who will be ordained on June 6; and articles on a Maryknoll sister’s prison ministry in Hong Kong, the work of lay missionaries in Brazil and ministry to migrants in El Paso, Texas.

We leave you with Jesus’ words, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.” (Mt. 5:9)

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**“To those who love God, all things
work together for good ...”**

Romans 8:28

Maryknoll, the Catholic Foreign Mission Society of America, Inc., was established in 1911 by the U.S. bishops to recruit, train, send and support American missionaries in areas overseas. Maryknoll is supported by offerings and bequests.

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RevistaMisioneros.org
Magazine of the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers



46

Octavio Durán/U.S.

FEATURED STORIES

- | | |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 10 Bearing Fruit in Africa
<i>By Paul Jeffrey</i> | 40 United by God’s Love
<i>By Giovana Soria</i> |
| 18 Letters from a Hong Kong Prison
<i>By Andrea Moreno-Díaz</i> | 46 Spreading God’s Tenderness
<i>By Giovana Soria</i> |
| 24 A Saint’s Final Footsteps
<i>By Octavio Durán, OFM</i> | 52 Maryknoll Student Essay
Contest Winners |
| 34 Teaching Peace in Public Schools
<i>By Kathleen Bond, MKLM</i> | 60 Maryknoll Joint Leadership
Statement on War |

DEPARTMENTS

- | | |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|
| 4 Photo Meditation | 51 Prayer of Consecration
to the Sacred Heart |
| 8 Missioner Tales | 58 World Watch |
| 16 Spirit of Mission | 61 Readers’ Responses |
| 30 Orbis Books | |

FRONT COVER:
Maryknoll Father Roberto Rodríguez joins
the Society’s annual Pilgrimage Retreat to
the Sites of the Central American Martyrs.
COVER CREDITS:
Front: Octavio Durán/Guatemala
Back: Paul Jeffrey/Kenya

The Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers, the Maryknoll Sisters of St. Dominic and the Maryknoll Lay Missioners share the Maryknoll name and charism of commitment to the mission of Jesus Christ, sharing God’s love with people worldwide. While these three Catholic organizations often work together in mission, each is responsible for recruiting and supporting its own missionaries. The Maryknoll Affiliates is a movement grouped into local chapters both in the United States and abroad of lay people who seek to reflect the Maryknoll charism within the context of their own lives, careers and communities.



Photo meditation on nonviolence

PUT BACK YOUR SWORD

By Joseph R. Veneroso, M.M.

*The blood of Cain still cries out
To heaven, amplified by billions
Throughout millennia since our exile
From Eden made all humankind
Refugees on an earth no longer home.*

*Isaiah's vision of beating swords
Into plowshares and spears into
Pruning hooks now falls distorted and
Profaned by stealing from the sick
And robbing food from the starving.*



*By refusing to sit in the back of the bus
Rosa Parks took a stand that caused
Martin Luther King to march with millions
Across bridges and artificial barricades
Giving power and life to a dream.*

*Without bullets or bombs did Gandhi
Sit in silence and walk in protest
Till once-mighty Britain learned too late
Pharaoh's obstinance was no match
For God's command: let my people go.*

*The Dalai Lama's unending quest for peace
Took form when Buddhist monks walked
From Fort Worth to Washington, rallying
Thousands along the way to reply: Yes, we
Are our brothers' keeper, our sisters' ally.*

*The light of Dorothy Day shone forth
From prison cells to expose
The vulgarity and futility of all wars
She would not dignify as just, sending
Catholic Workers to build true peace.*



MISSIONER TALES



Fachtu Robbi Almalik/Unsplash

Jasmin was only 8 years old when she died from complications of dengue fever and pneumonia. She was one of 11 children of doña Julia and don Lucio, our next-door neighbors in our parish of Santísima Trinidad (Holy Trinity) in the Amazonian area of Bolivia. I met Jasmin and her family two years ago when I arrived in March of 2024.

Jasmin was a vivacious, smiling little girl who loved to play and dance. She participated actively in the cultural dances of her Indigenous Moxeño people, especially during Christmas and Easter celebrations.

She died on Feb. 2, the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord. The feast,

also called Candlemas, is a day on which people have candles blessed to represent the light of Jesus guiding their families and homes. In Bolivia, it is also called the feast of Our Lady of Candles (*Candelaria*), since Mary gave birth to Jesus as the light for all the world to see.

After the funeral Mass of Resurrection in our parish church, the whole Moxeño community walked in quiet procession to the cemetery. Small candles were lit and placed around Jasmin's gravesite. It was a sign that Jesus has overcome darkness and the sadness of death by the light of his resurrection.

All of us in the community have

been saddened by the death of Jasmin, named after the jasmine flower by her mother. I believe that this young girl, who was like a fragrant flower, will never fade away; she shines like her name, living forever in the loving embrace of Jesus, light of the world.

Michael Bassano, M.M.

Have you ever entered a prison? It can be very daunting and disorienting as you pass through security and iron doors clang behind you. It was there that I encountered a very frightened young man, 19 years of age, sentenced to 12 years in prison for gang affiliation and drug trafficking. I visited him monthly while caring for my father here in the States.

As we grew in relationship, the young inmate revealed his vulnerability, sharing an early childhood of poverty; the rejection of an alcoholic father; and helplessness at ongoing physical abuse. He had left home at an early age and encountered other young men who projected their anger in violence toward others. As he gradually shared his story and cried out to God for assistance, a greater inner clarity began to surface. Not only did he come to understand the self-rejection and repressed anger which grew out of a life of abuse, but he could also admit how his anger had caused extreme harm.

Like the tax collector in St. Luke's Gospel, he experienced the merciful and compassionate love of God as he forgave his father and asked for

givenness for himself. He made the decision to withdraw from all gang membership and activity.

After 12 years of suffering, this young man left prison transformed. Through the grace of God, he came to know the Truth, and it was this inner Truth that made him free.

Maureen Hanahoe, M.M.

I remain active in the Alcoholics Anonymous program in the area of Mombasa, Kenya, where I serve as a Maryknoll lay missionary. I attend four meetings a week at hospitals and substance abuse rehabilitation centers.

I also sponsor young men — now that I'm 74 years old, most people are young to me. I help them work the Twelve Steps and practice AA principles to improve their lives and the lives of those around them.

Leaving their drug of choice is the first step. Finding spiritual and communal support is the next. Many people with addictions have lost everything they had — which, in Kenya, may not have been much in the first place. They have lost jobs, families, safe housing, even personal integrity.

When someone comes to AA seeking relief, perhaps a small measure of personal dignity remains, and that is what we work with: the desire to be better. Through prayer, reliance on a personal higher power, and developing a new life in community with others in sobriety, addicts learn to turn their suffering into moments of hope, one day at a time.

Francis Wayne, MKLM

Bearing Fruit in AFERICA

Text and Photos by Paul Jeffrey



Young African men begin their journey to missionary priesthood at the Maryknoll house in Nairobi

By the time Michael Clement was growing up in a Catholic parish in Tanzania founded by Maryknoll priests, the U.S. missionaries had long moved on to start new missions. What Clement knew about them he gleaned from dog-eared copies of *Maryknoll* magazine.

"I saw in those old magazines the charism of people who found Christ in working with the poor," he says. "I wanted to do that also."

Clement completed his studies at the diocesan minor seminary, the equivalent of high school, and went on to university. As he approached graduation, his desire to become a priest remained strong. Remembering the old magazines, he sought out Maryknoll and joined a Maryknoll-run clinical pastoral education program at Bugando Hospital in Mwanza. It was his first formal step toward becoming a Maryknoll priest — a vocation once limited to U.S. residents.

"Maryknoll is changing," Clement says. "What was planted by those missionaries long before I was born is today bearing fruit in Africa."

Babluu Ekama Kyamba volunteers in a Nairobi slum with Mama Africa, a service organization, as part of a Maryknoll discernment program for the missionary priesthood.

Clement now lives at the Maryknoll Formation House in Nairobi, Kenya, where he and more than a dozen other young African men discern their calling to the priesthood through study, prayer, manual labor and pastoral work ranging from hospital chaplaincy to accompaniment of homeless families. "Decades ago, Maryknoll sent missionaries from the United States to the four corners of the world to proclaim the Gospel to people who hadn't necessarily heard it," says Maryknoll Father John Waldrep, director of the Nairobi house. "Now we're at a different place."

Clement and five others are part of Maryknoll's introductory discernment program, while seven other young men at the formation house are further along the path as seminarians. Their next step will be going to Chicago to continue their training.

The young men study philosophy for three years at Tangaza University, a Catholic campus in Nairobi that draws students from 45 countries to prepare for religious vocations in a wide variety of Catholic orders and congregations.

Tangaza's rector, Spiritan Father Patrick Mwanja, says that Maryknoll has played a central role in "making Christian faith at home within African culture and traditions." He speaks from experience: After earning a doctorate in theology in Europe, he returned to his native Kenya and enrolled at the Maryknoll Institute of African Studies, housed at Tangaza.

What he learned there, Father Mwanja says, allowed him to see how "theology must take flesh in Africa, with culture being a ground for both good theology and effective pastoral ministry."

Father Mwanja says those who prepare for church vocations at Tangaza will serve a Church that is increasingly lay-oriented and more open to context.

"Instead of that typical hierarchical pyramid where you have the priest at the top and everyone else below, today the Church is celebrating synodality. Small Christian Communities are revitalizing the Church at the grassroots," he says. "And in encounters with people of other faiths, we are developing values that we all cultivate together."

Father Joseph Ouma Oindo, a diocesan priest and research director at Tangaza, helps select and supervise the Maryknoll seminarians studying in Nairobi. "We don't look just at their academic performance," he says. "Are they also growing spiritually, participating in the spiritual exercises in the house? Are they growing in the pastoral experience to which they've been assigned?"

The men in discernment "must have a love for the people," he adds. "Are they called to evangelize both the rich and the poor? Can they help unify society? Can they overcome tribalism?"

Frederick Richard Luhende and Kyamba (top photo, left, right), with Alois Simpilisi (below), visit patients of all ages at St. Francis Community Hospital in Nairobi.





Above: Maryknoll Father John Waldep, director of the Nairobi house, celebrates the liturgy. Below: Michael Clement serves at St. Vincent Pallotti Church.

nied a visa three times. In response, Maryknoll Father Patrick Okok, a Kenyan ordained in 2025, was sent to supervise the waiting candidates in coordination with Maryknoll Father Brian Barrons, rector of the Chicago seminary program, who visits Nairobi several times a year.

For now, the two seminarians take online classes based in Chicago, but they have not given up hope of obtaining visas.

Visa applications have grown more expensive and more laborious than in the past, and different rules apply to different nationalities. Kenyans are issued visas that are valid for five years, Father Barrons explains, making it feasible for them to study in Chicago, leave for overseas training and then return to the States. Tanzanians currently cannot get F-1 student visas. Up until a few months ago, they could get another

type of visa, he says, but the reentry permit was good for only 90 days, meaning they would have to keep returning to Tanzania.

Despite these challenges, at the Nairobi House, Father Waldrep says he is excited about what the young Africans bring to the Maryknoll family. "These young men from Tanzania and Kenya bring a different dimension to Maryknoll," he says.

"The Gospel is the same, but how we're preaching it and who's preaching it, and the tools that they're using to preach it, all that has changed," he says. "That difference is exciting. They bring life, they bring exuberance, they bring a desire to share their faith with people of cultures different from their own. And that is what Maryknoll has always done." ✠

Paul Jeffrey is a photojournalist who works around the world with church-sponsored relief agencies. Founder of Life on Earth Pictures, he lives in Oregon.



Father Ouma says he has watched a transition unfold over the last decade, since the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers began to admit candidates from mission sites.

"The Maryknoll House was quiet and felt empty. Most of the older Maryknoll priests had retired and gone back to the United States," he says. "Then the Africans came in and brought new life with them." Now, he notes, "There is a new crop of very passionate Maryknoll priests coming up, men who want to take Maryknoll to the next level."

Elwin Majungu Mlimira is another resident of the Nairobi house. He and another seminarian have already finished their three years of discernment and preparation — but are awaiting visas to the United States to continue their studies with the Maryknoll seminary program in Chicago.

Like Clement, Mlimira grew up in Tanzania, where he attended a school

built by foreign missionaries.

"The Maryknoll fathers came from afar to share our struggles, because they saw us as human beings. They came to train local clergy and catechists so we Africans could run our own parishes," he says. "Once the parish could sustain itself, they moved on to another place. Now it's time for us Africans to do that."

When Mlimira first approached Maryknoll, he says, the Society was not accepting local prospects. He recalls the impact of seeing Father John Siyumbu — the first African to be ordained a Maryknoll priest — at the altar. "I was there when he came back to Kenya and celebrated his first Mass at home," Mlimira says. "As I watched him, I knew we are now welcomed."

That warm welcome is not matched by the U.S. State Department, however. Mlimira and his fellow candidate have each been de-

God Everywhere, Always

By Joseph R. Veneroso, M.M.

It's not unusual for a prayer gathering to start with this invitation: "Let us take a moment to put ourselves in the presence of God." One day, it struck me: Where do we think we've been? When *haven't* we been in God's presence?

Thinking back on discussions about the existence of God, the analogy that occurs to me is of fish debating the existence of water. The fish appreciate the importance of water only after they are taken out of it. Alas, by then it's too late.

Last year, Pope Leo XIV shared a short spiritual tract that he said has guided his faith. During a press conference on the papal plane, he cited *The Practice of the Presence of God* by 17th-century Carmelite Brother Lawrence. As you might expect, this small book suddenly shot to the top of the bestseller list.

In his monastery in France, Brother Lawrence was assigned the menial task of scrubbing pots and pans. This lowly post enabled him to achieve tremendous spiritual growth. He began practicing awareness of God's abiding presence and realized that if he could experience divinity in the kitchen while doing dishes, he could experience it everywhere.

Brother Lawrence had previously

thought that only practices such as solemn high Mass in a vaulted cathedral or intense prayer, fasting and meditation could give rise to awe and reverence. He came to realize these were readily accessible anywhere, anytime. This awareness transformed his mundane life into continual worship — whether scouring pots, talking with ordinary people, breaking bread at a meal or attending Mass. "Our biggest mistake is to think that a time of prayer is different from any other time," he wrote. "It is all one."

Brother Lawrence never disdained popular devotions such as praying the breviary, saying the rosary or making novenas. But as he grew older, he found them inadequate unless they expressed a humble, intimate love of God and a fervent desire to rejoice in God's presence. "Do not always scrupulously confine yourself to certain rules or particular forms of devotion," he wrote, "but act with a general confidence in God, with love and humility." He encouraged chatting with Jesus throughout the day, as you would with your best friend.

Bishops, nobility, theologians and ordinary people flocked to hear this simple yet powerful message. Brother Lawrence taught that prayer doesn't achieve God's presence; rather,



The moon is pictured in the background as gulls fly above Maryland's Chesapeake Bay at sunset, revealing the presence of God in nature. (OSV News/Bob Roller/U.S.)

prayer comes in response to God's presence. As St. Paul states in The Acts of the Apostles, "In him we live and move and have our being." (17:28)

God is everywhere, all the time. Franciscan Father Richard Rohr puts it succinctly: "We are always in the presence of God. What we lack is awareness."

Sin creates the illusion of separation or abandonment. In the Genesis story of the Fall, Adam and Eve are expelled from Eden — yet God remains with them, communicates with them and cares for them. Throughout Scripture, God continuously reaches out to bring back wayward humans.

King David sings in Psalm 139, "Where can I go from your spirit? From your presence, where can I flee? If I ascend to the heavens, you are there; if I lie down in Sheol, there

you are. If I take the wings of dawn and dwell beyond the sea, even there your hand guides me, your right hand holds me fast." (v. 7-10)

Sin makes us want to forget this inspiring, yet unsettling truth. To be aware of God's loving presence everywhere, all the time, requires the death of our egos, our false sense of self, and the giving up of unhealthy habits. It's not just being born again, but living life anew. Fully. Authentically. Joyfully.

Be aware of God, who is everywhere, always. Practice the presence of God at all times — in joys and in sorrows, in failures no less than in achievements, in disappointments as well as successes. Think, say and do everything in that awareness. Like Brother Lawrence, let your life be transformed into perpetual adoration. ✠

Letters from a Hong Kong Prison

By Andrea Moreno-Díaz

A Maryknoll sister accompanies incarcerated people from other countries

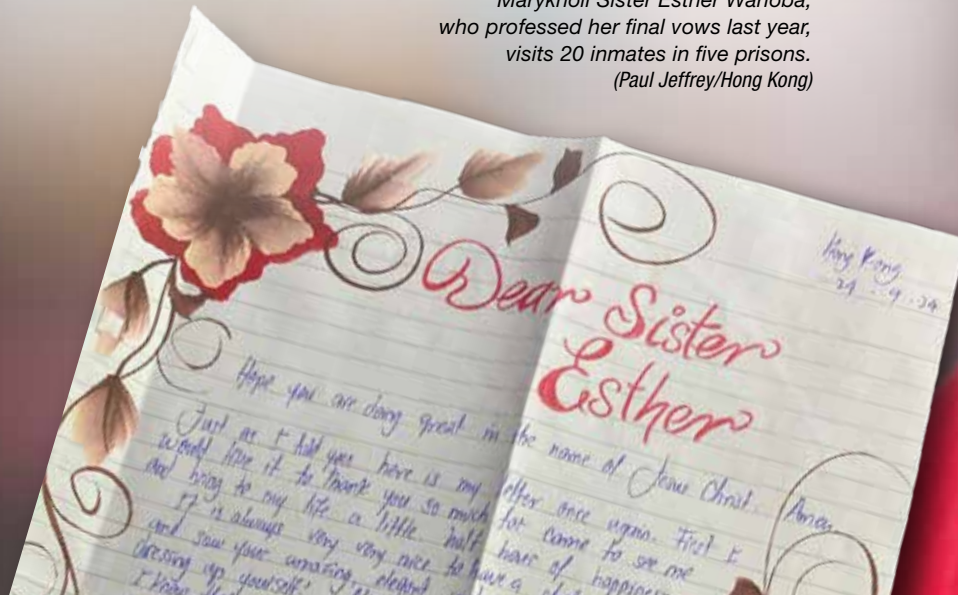
Asha, 35, is far from her home back in East Africa. She sits on one side of the visitation booth of the Lo Wu Correctional Institution for women in the city of Sheung Shui in northern Hong Kong. On the other side of the window is Maryknoll Sister Esther Warioba, who has become Asha's only outside connection in a foreign place.

Wearing a checkered white and brown uniform, her hair carefully arranged into Bantu knots, Asha explains the thick, two-inch scar on her body from a machete attack over a debt dispute that compelled her to seek quick money back home.

A few weeks later, she was arrested for attempting to smuggle drugs into Hong Kong, a special administrative region of China. After pleading guilty, she was sentenced to seven years. Asha says she was tricked by a friend who promised her a job and used her as a courier.

"There are many women from different countries — from African, South American and Asian countries," says Sister Warioba of the five prisons she visits in her ministry with Voice for Prisoners, a Hong Kong-based nonprofit organization.

Maryknoll Sister Esther Warioba, who professed her final vows last year, visits 20 inmates in five prisons. (Paul Jeffrey/Hong Kong)





On her way to the Lo Wu Correctional Institution, Sister Warioba purchases personal care items that have been requested by inmates. (Andrea Moreno-Díaz/Hong Kong)

Before her visit, Sister Warioba makes a stop on the dusty road next to the Lo Wu prison. At a steel shack that functions as a shop for prison visitors, she buys pre-approved personal necessities such as sanitary pads, deodorants, shampoos and conditioners.

She retrieves a piece of paper carrying the names, prisoner ID numbers and countries of origin of the 20 inmates she visits. She has scribbled their requests next to their names.

Sister Warioba also makes sure to buy international calling cards. Prisoners are allowed one 10-minute phone call per month. For inmates from remote countries and who receive no other visitors, those precious minutes are the only way to

hear a loved one's voice.

For all other times when prisoners like Asha need a friend, Sister Warioba is there.

"Sister Esther has been like my blood sister," Asha says. "She listens to every word. I appreciate her presence so much." Then she adds, "If you don't pray, you can't make it here."

"I usually feel energetic when I go there, even if I'm tired," Sister Warioba says. "Listening, meeting the prisoner, it takes energy, but it is also a blessing."

However, prisoners are allowed only two visits per month — each lasting half an hour — and therefore much of the communication in between visits is relayed through letters.

Besides being pen pals for the inmates, volunteers with Voice for Prisoners, like Sister Warioba, maintain contact with the families of foreign-born inmates via the phone application WhatsApp. In turn, inmates' relatives text photos and letters, which volunteers then print and bring to their "i-friends," a term for the prisoners they visit.

Sister Warioba says that this helps families know how their loved ones are doing.

Voice for Prisoners, which was founded in 2018 by Oblate Father John Wotherspoon, also works on awareness campaigns about trafficking tactics that ensnare impoverished people like Asha.

"The best way to help prisoners is to help them not go to prison," Father Wotherspoon says. "You've got some bad guys who are in the trafficking business, and they exploit poorer people who urgently need money, especially women who need money for their families, their education and their medical bills."

Father Wotherspoon has traveled to countries in Africa, Southeast Asia and Latin America to raise awareness about the risks of drug smuggling to Asia, which has some of the world's toughest laws for drug-related crimes, including the death penalty. He has also met with journalists, local authorities and organizations such as the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.

As part of the Voice for Prisoners' deterrence initiative, the campaign called No More Mules/*No Más Mu-*

las publishes letters from inmates in Hong Kong prisons on its website. The objective is to create awareness of the coercive, fraudulent and — many times — violent strategies of traffickers, as well as the risks of drug smuggling.

Sister Warioba, who is from Tanzania, was asked soon after her arrival in Hong Kong in 2018 to visit Swahili-speaking inmates from East Africa, although her ministry since then has expanded to inmates of different regions.

Every Sunday, Sister Warioba's voice reaches inmates via a Voice for Prisoners radio program for those who don't speak Cantonese or Mandarin. She writes and records Scripture reflections in Swahili that are aired on the show called "Prison Visitation on the Air."

"They really want to connect with God," Sister Warioba says. "They're grateful to Catholics who are very near to them."

Marta, 30, from Venezuela, is another inmate whom Sister Warioba visits. She is serving an 11-year sentence at Lo Wu after pleading not guilty to drug smuggling.

"Having Sister Esther visit me is a blessing from God," Marta says. "She knows how to inject me with peace. She's talkative, full of knowledge, and doesn't underestimate anyone."

Marta participates in a Voice for Prisoners academic program which supports rehabilitation and recidivism prevention. "I love the power of knowledge," she says. "Back in



Oblate Father John Wotherspoon, the founder of Voice for Prisoners, travels the world to combat human trafficking. (Courtesy of Esther Warioba/Hong Kong)

Venezuela, there were many nights I asked God to give me the chance to study.”

The organization’s 2024 annual report states that “inmates who earn an associate degree are 85% less likely to return to prison, and those with a bachelor’s degree are over 95% less likely to reoffend.”

In 2025, Marta earned an associate degree in general studies; she hopes to obtain a bachelor’s degree in social studies before her release. Sister Warioba says that this is one of “the many chances at transformation” for inmates in the Voice for Prisoners program.

“My dreams for the future are not

impossible,” Marta says. “I hope I can find a job where I can do what others have done for me. I dream of helping prisoners, kids, single moms like me.”

The main worry of many inmates is for their families, Sister Warioba says. Voice for Prisoners helps support families back home by paying children’s school fees, and recently began offering small business grants to ex-prisoners’ families to help them restart their lives.

Father Wotherspoon says that’s “what Jesus told us to do: to care for people who are homeless or sick or in prison.” He is grateful to volunteers like Sister Warioba “who try to be compassionate to these people in prison and help them keep going until the day they can get back to their families.”

For Asha, whose physical scar still aches, that accompaniment has helped her heal spiritual wounds. “In Africa, being in prison is a bad omen. I used to have anxiety, shame, self-hatred and fear,” she says. “Since meeting Sister Esther, everything changed.”

Sister Warioba says that love encapsulates her approach.

“Love brings us together,” she says. “Some of them are afraid to go back to their families. I say to them, ‘You’re a child of God. If you are close to God, there is a way that everything will work out.’” ✠

The names of prisoners in this article have been changed for their protection.



Maryknoll Sisters

Making God’s love visible

“I hope you come to find that which gives life a deep meaning for you. Something worth living for ... something that energizes you ... I can just encourage you to start looking and support you in the search.”

—Ita Ford, M.M.



Come Join Us!

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Maryknollsisters.org

A Saint's *Final* FOOTSTEPS

By Octavio Durán, OFM



Óscar Romero's photographer returns to El Salvador the shoes the saint wore at his martyrdom

As I held Archbishop Óscar Romero's empty shoes in my trembling hands, I felt a gravity heavier than their weight.

It was the evening of March 24, 1980. That fateful day had begun ordinarily at San José de la Montaña seminary in San Salvador, where I was a student. Our daily routine

proceeded normally — until the 5:30 p.m. Mass ended, and devastating news shattered our world. Archbishop Romero had been assassinated while celebrating Mass at the Divine Providence Hospital chapel.

El Salvador's political situation was deteriorating dramatically. Violence engulfed the country as government forces committed widespread human rights abuses against civilians suspected of supporting leftist movements. Tensions had reached such extremes that Archbishop Romero felt compelled to directly address the armed forces in his Sunday homily, begging soldiers to stop the brutal repression sweeping the nation.

In a powerful sermon given on March 23, 1980, Archbishop Romero spoke with unwavering moral clarity: "Brothers, you are members of our own people. You kill your fellow peasants ... When faced with a man's order to kill, God's law must prevail: 'Thou shalt not kill.' No soldier is obligated to obey an order contrary to God's law. It is time to reclaim your conscience.

"In the name of God, and in the name of this suffering people whose cries rise to heaven more loudly each day, I implore you, I beg you, I order you in the name of God: Stop the repression!"

Brother Octavio Durán presents St. Óscar Romero's shoes to Sister Tránsito de la Cruz (center) and Sister Reina Mancía. (Courtesy of Octavio Durán/El Salvador)



Archbishop Romero and seminarians Octavio Durán and Joaquín Álvarez Campos (left, right) visit *María Auxiliadora* parish in San Salvador. (Courtesy of Octavio Durán/El Salvador)

This prophetic statement sealed his death sentence. Yet even as his words resonated throughout the basilica and across radio broadcasts nationwide, no one could have foreseen that his life would be taken the very next day.

That evening at the seminary, Father Gregorio Rosa Chávez, our rector, approached me with grave urgency. He requested that I accompany him to the medical facility where emergency personnel had transported the archbishop's body.

As darkness fell, the taxi ride — a blur of motion and dread — took us through the crowded streets of a city already erupting with grief, outrage and uncertainty. Upon arrival, we found Monsignor Romero surrounded by frantic doctors and weeping religious sisters. His body still retained warmth, and a single, precise bullet hole in his chest

marked exactly where hatred had pierced his compassionate heart.

Mechanically I took photographs, using my camera as an emotional shield between myself and the unbearable reality unfolding before me. Monsignor himself had given me the camera to document the archdiocese's work.

Trauma has erased many details from my memory, the mind's way of protecting us from what we cannot immediately process. Yet one image is etched in my mind: when his body was wheeled away for autopsy, his shoes remained behind on the floor, suddenly empty and abandoned.

I knew well those simple, worn-down shoes. I had seen them faithfully carry him through El Salvador's dusty streets and roads, to remote villages and to the humble homes of its most impoverished citizens. They had also taken him to the pulpit, where

he boldly spoke truth to power.

These emptied vessels had transported a man who walked alongside the suffering, who refused the comfort of silence when his people desperately needed a voice for justice. Without thinking, I carefully placed them in my camera bag.

As we returned to the seminary in stunned silence, El Salvador trembled on the edge of an unimaginable brutality. Our shepherd had fallen, and 12 years of civil war would claim over 75,000 lives. Half a million of us had to flee our country.

Throughout my four and a half decades in the United States, these shoes have accompanied me, tucked away safely yet always present. Silent companions witnessing my own journey, they saw me become a Franciscan friar and anchored me through life's triumphs and hardships. I've occasionally shown them to trusted friends and colleagues, watching as understanding dawns on their faces while I explain what these ordinary-looking objects are. They carried a man of small physical stature and towering spiritual presence; they are the shoes of a prophet, a saint who spoke when others fell silent.

They officially became relics with St. Óscar Romero's canonization, which I attended in 2018 along with his friend and disciple Cardinal Rosa Chávez — El Salvador's first cardinal.

But in time I came to realize that the shoes were like immigrants who yearned for their birthplace. The worn leather that once cushioned

Monsignor's feet belonged in the country whose soil is embedded in their soles.

So, 46 years later, I returned the shoes to their homeland.

On January 14, on pilgrimage to Central America with the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers, I had the privilege of presenting Monsignor's shoes to Sister Tránsito de la Cruz, superior of the community at Divine Providence Hospital. There, the Missionary Carmelites of St. Teresa lovingly tend a memorial museum in the little apartment where St. Romero had

A photo taken by Octavio Durán shows Monsignor Romero at a First Communion celebration. (Octavio Durán/El Salvador)





The Mass, presided by Monsignor Arturo Bañuelas (center), took place in the Divine Providence Hospital chapel, where St. Romero was martyred. (Octavio Durán/El Salvador)

lived. The delivery took place in the chapel where he was martyred.

The priests and deacons on the Maryknoll pilgrimage seemed to hold their breath as Sister Tránsito received the shoes. Her weathered hands trembled slightly — perhaps remembering the times when St. Romero himself walked these grounds, bringing comfort and courage to the sisters during uncertain times.

"These belong here," she whispered, tears glistening in her eyes. "They have completed their journey."

As they passed from my hands to

hers, I felt both emptied and fulfilled.

Others on the pilgrimage took turns holding the shoes, sacred objects connecting present-day servants to the one who had gone before. "Just holding them inspired in me a tremendous call to continue his witness of walking with the struggling poor in total faithfulness to Christ," said Monsignor Arturo Bañuelas of El Paso, Texas, who has served in priestly ministry at the U.S.-Mexico border for five decades.

"I held the tiny shoes of a giant," reflected Father Iván Montelongo, who at 32 was the youngest of the 19

pilgrimage participants. Ordained in 2020, he is director of vocations for the Diocese of El Paso. "As I held them, I prayed for the courage to go where Monsignor went, toward the discarded," he said. "As I kissed them in veneration, I felt what Isaiah might have felt when the heavenly ember touched his lips."

In giving the shoes away, I gained newfound clarity. They represent a path that few possess the courage to walk — one of sacrifice and unconditional love, placing one foot before the other, even when each step brings you closer to crucifixion.

The shoes now rest where they belong, in the museum on the hos-

pital grounds alongside Monsignor's other modest possessions, including the vestments he wore at the time of his martyrdom and photos of his pastoral visits. All who make the pilgrimage to honor his memory can contemplate their significance.

But St. Romero's legacy is not confined to museums or memorials. It lives in continuing acts of remembrance, in the courage of those who still speak truth to power, and in the hope that justice will someday walk freely in the land our martyr loved. ✠

Brother Octavio Durán, editor of The Franciscan Way Magazine, lives in Butler, New Jersey.

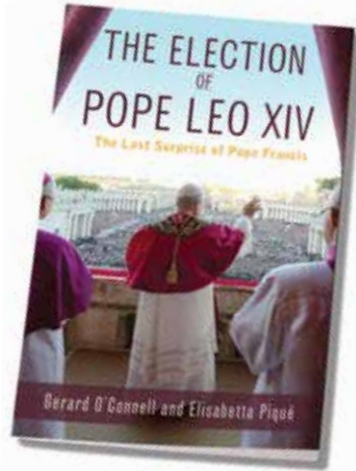
ORBIS  BOOKS
Spotlight

Preview by Robert Ellsberg

For many viewers, the 2024 film “Conclave” provided a fictional glimpse of the election of a new pope. Readers of Gerard O’Connell’s book, *The Election of Pope Francis: An Inside Account of the Conclave that Changed History*, published in 2019, already knew a great deal about the actual inside process. Jesuit Father James Martin called it “the closest you’ll get to a conclave unless you’re named a cardinal.”

O’Connell is the Vatican correspondent for the Jesuit magazine *America*, while his wife, Elisabetta Piqué, is the Vatican correspondent for Argentina’s *La Nación*. Part of what had made O’Connell’s book so intimate, and makes their new book so poignant, was their personal friendship with Argentina’s Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio, who would become Pope Francis. They were among the few Vatican watchers confident that their friend would become the new pope.

Now they have collaborated in writing a new book, *The Election of Pope Leo XIV: The Last Surprise of Pope Francis*. As with O’Connell’s previous book, they follow a diary format, tracing the story from the death and funeral of their friend Pope Francis, the gathering of cardinals, the intrigue of outsiders (especially from the Unit-



ed States) hoping to influence the narrative, the conclave itself, and its surprising conclusion in the election of Cardinal Robert Prevost, the first U.S.-born pope.

This conclave, unlike the previous one, cannot be said (yet) to have changed history. What it did show was a quickly solidified consensus among the College of Cardinals to continue the synodal path of Pope Francis. For those (especially conservative American partisans) who had imagined that the conclave would endorse their desired “course correction,” this came as a surprise.

The more widespread surprise was shared by those who assumed that an American-born cardinal could never be considered. Evidently, Cardinal Robert Prevost, with his time as a Peruvian bishop, passed that bar.

But as O’Connell and Piqué came to understand, Prevost was actually Pope Francis’s preferred successor, in that sense his “last surprise.” He evidently saw in Prevost, with his formation in religious life, his experience as a missionary in Latin America, and his global experience, a shepherd cut from similar cloth. Pope Francis advanced his responsibilities and put him in a critical office in Rome that would give him an overview of the world Church, while also raising his profile among the cardinals who would choose the next pope.

None of this was clear in the days and weeks following Pope Francis’ death and funeral (movingly recounted by Piqué). Day by day, the two journalists allow us to follow in their footsteps, interviewing many papal electors, taking their measure of the Church’s needs, and eventually providing inside details of what went on behind the locked doors of the con-

clave. Many surprises occur, some worthy of fiction — such as the discovery of a cardinal’s inadvertent mistake in bringing a forbidden cell phone into the Sistine Chapel. In other cases, their reporting at the time may even have affected the outcome, such as when they published a story indicating that a widely favored candidate had not actually had the blessing of Pope Francis.

Father Martin again provides his enthusiastic endorsement for an “unputdownable” book that “reads like a thriller.” The traditions and protocols by which the Catholic Church chooses a new leader are mysterious and fascinating. But more important is what this election signifies for the future of the world’s largest religious organization, and its implications for the wider world. ✂

Robert Ellsberg is the publisher of Maryknoll’s Orbis Books.



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believing it to be impossible and beyond our reach.*

*— Pope Leo XIV
Message for the 2026 World Day of Peace*





TEACHING PEACE IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

By Kathleen Bond, MKLM

Maryknoll sisters and lay missionaries in Brazil lead program to manage anxiety and prevent violence in public schools

Here in the coastal capital of João Pessoa in northeastern Brazil, a fifth-grader named Camile lost her mother and grandmother within a week. Camile had always been a strong student. But the 10-year-old's grades dropped, and she became disruptive in the classroom.

Fortunately, Camile attends one of the 10 public schools where Maryknoll missionaries and local partners offer weekly classes for struggling students. After five weeks in the program, the school psychologist said Camile's attention span and behavior had already improved.

"We support schoolchildren, enabling them to experience a culture of peace among themselves and beyond the classroom," says Maryknoll Sister Euphrasia "Efu" Nyaki.

The culture of peace effort began three years ago when a local principal, Danielle Ventura, approached the AFYA Holistic Center for Women, cofounded by Sister Nyaki and the late Maryknoll Sister Connie Pospisil. Ventura was seeing increased cases of conflicts, property destruction, self-harm and suicidal ideation. She asked for a pilot project to help students deal with stress and trauma.

Having worked in holistic health for more than 30 years, along

with my husband and fellow Maryknoll lay missionary, Flávio José Rocha, I was eager to help. Together with the center staff, we launched AFYA in Action in Public Schools, a project aimed at reducing violence and building a culture of peace in peripheral neighborhoods.

Even before the outbreak of COVID-19, Brazil numbered among countries with the highest rates of anxiety and depression in the world, according to the World Health Organization. Mental health worsened due to the pandemic — especially for young people. Returning to the classroom after isolation, students struggled to regulate their emotions and get along with peers. Some girls resort to cutting, a harmful practice they use to cope with feelings they find unmanageable.

We started with simple exercises to improve concentration and reduce anxiety. "After the AFYA workshops I saw that students were learning to self-regulate in moments of crisis with breathing exercises," Ventura says. "The number of anxiety episodes in the classes reached by the project decreased significantly."

Sister Nyaki notes another behavioral problem in addition to anxiety. Both boys and girls frequently get into conflicts with others.

Maryknoll Lay Missioner Kathleen Bond, Maryknoll Sisters Azucena San Pedro and Euphrasia Nyaki and staff Bruna Ferreira and Mylenna Kerollin host students at AFYA Holistic Health Center in João Pessoa, Brazil. (All photos courtesy of Kathleen Bond/Brazil)



“Violence is often rooted in unresolved trauma,” she says. “If we are truly committed to building a culture of peace, we must first create spaces where life’s wounds can be acknowledged and healed.”

To create those spaces, AFYA in Action in Public Schools serves over 5,000 students and professionals in neighborhoods close to the AFYA center and in metropolitan João Pessoa. Our weekly classes reach approximately 400 students from the third to the ninth grades.

Flávio, who has worked for over 20 years with groups using Theater of the Oppressed interactive methods, says, “Helping boys deal with their anger in a positive way is one of the benefits of our workshops.”

An exercise he teaches is called Squeezing the Lemon. “I invite the boys to squeeze their hands for

five seconds while thinking about something that made them angry,” he explains, “and then slowly open their hands for 10 seconds.” This practice, he says, “calms the mind and helps the boys better manage their emotions.”

Activities connected to nature, such as making animal sounds and movements, are especially popular with the children. The Butterfly Breath, for example, combines slow, alternate hand movements and deep breaths.

“Students in the project have improved their behavior inside and outside the classroom, as well as performing better academically,” says Gerlande Lima, a psychologist at Joacil Brito Elementary School. “One student was constantly getting into fights. After participating in the weekly sessions, he avoids

fighting and is more focused on his studies. When he sees conflicts during recess, he often shares with classmates the breathing and meditation techniques he has learned.”

In addition to the weekly classes, the second pillar of our project is monthly formation sessions for 25 to 30 school staff. We teach them the methods we use so that they can become multipliers and use them in their respective schools.

A highlight of the school year — and the third pillar — is the annual school visit. Each of the 10 schools brings a busload of 25 students and accompanying adults to our center to tour the medicinal herb gardens and learn more about care for the earth and holistic healing. “Afyā” means “health” in Swahili. One of the things they talk about afterward is AFYA “brownies,” made with oat flour, bananas, collard-pineapple juice and black beans!

During the visits, students and staff share how they apply program techniques. “After I started participating in the workshops, I began to feel better,” says Maria da Silva, a 14-year-old student at Deputado Arnaldo State School. “Doing the techniques to deal with stress and anxiety, I have learned to live in a new way.”

Bruna Ferreira is an AFYA staff member who co-facilitates the workshops at Deputado Arnaldo.

“Maria grew so much during the year. She was quiet at the beginning,” she says. “Slowly she opened up — before, she hardly ever smiled, and even this changed.” With the support Maria received, Ferreira says, she found the courage to reveal her suffering as a victim of violence.

The fourth pillar of the program is offered at the center on an individual level to children who have experienced deep trauma.

Facing page: Maryknoll Lay Missioner Flávio José Rocha helps boys manage emotions at Deputado Arnaldo School.

Right: At Joacil Brito School, Bond leads girls in weekly group sessions run by lay missioners and AFYA staff.



Mission begins with a SMILE



Bond, who has served in Brazil for more than three decades, practices Maryknoll Lay Missioners' commitment to nonviolence as she and her husband teach peace.

Trained AFYA therapists give sessions in somatic experiencing, a therapy developed by Dr. Peter Levine to help people learn to regulate their nervous systems. By working with bodily sensations, the method seeks to "complete" responses to past trauma that had been left incomplete or became "fixed." This enables them to move on from experiences that made them emotionally wounded, angry or fearful.

Sister Nyaki, who gives trauma workshops throughout the world, says, "Working for more than 25 years in trauma healing, I have encountered men, women and children who expressed their unhealed pain through violent reactions toward others. Given the opportunity to heal, their behavior shifted." She adds, this allows them to "cultivate connection, empathy

and peaceful relationships within their communities."

This summer, as Maryknoll Lay Missioners celebrates 50 years of mission service in Brazil, teaching skills for nonviolence and mental health is a fitting way to head into the future.

Young Maria says she will share these lessons with others. "I am helping my grandma, who takes strong prescription medicine for her nerves, to breathe deeply and do the exercises," she says. "Thank you for teaching us so many good things for our health." ✨

Maryknoll Lay Missioner Kathleen Bond, trained in organizational leadership and in holistic health therapies, serves in Brazil with her husband, Maryknoll Lay Missioner Flávio José Rocha.



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United by God's Love

By Giovana Soria

A Maryknoll seminarian reflects on his vocation journey as he prepares for his upcoming ordination



Victor Mutobera's earliest childhood memories include pretending to celebrate Mass. "I used to gather with my friends and my twin brother, and we would assign roles," recalls the Maryknoll seminarian. "Some formed a choir, others acted as lectors, and I played the priest."

The children salvaged an old car tire, which young Victor would roll along the road, saying he was on his way to a village to say Mass.

The transitional deacon, who will be ordained to the priesthood on June 6, was born into a devout Catholic family in Kakamega, Kenya. His parents baptized him as an infant and raised him alongside nine siblings.

Becoming an altar server at his parish, Mutobera often traveled with priests to outstation chapels. It was a joyful experience, he says. He remembers people telling him, "You're going to be a good priest."

He attended a diocesan minor seminary, equivalent to high school, while considering entering the major seminary. Mutobera's parents advised him, "Earn a degree first. If God still calls you afterward, you can join the seminary."

While studying at Kenyatta University in Nairobi, the capital, Mutobera met Father Lance Nadeau, then a chaplain and now the superior general of the Maryknoll Society. "What inspired me most was how he preached the Gospel both through words and his way of life. He was a great example to me," Mutobera says. "His homilies were so powerful and moving that the chapel couldn't accommodate everyone, so we set up tents outside." The priest's

Maryknoll Seminarian Victor Mutobera, 36, shown at the Maryknoll Society formation house in Chicago, will be ordained a priest on June 6 after eight years of intensive preparation. (Octavio Durán/U.S.)



Maryknoll Father Lance Nadeau, then a university chaplain, meets young Mutobera's parents Roselyn Barasa and Timothy Mutobera in 2019. (Courtesy of Victor Mutobera/Kenya)

sermons, he adds, "made me reflect deeply on my vocation."

Mutobera completed a bachelor's degree in economics and statistics. During his college breaks, he visited Maryknoll missions in Tanzania. He also traveled to Turkana, in northern Kenya, where Father Nadeau supported a mission helping fishermen improve their skills and enhance their livelihoods.

That was the turning point for Mutobera. Father Nadeau dedicated his life to people, he says. "This is what I want to live for." He joined the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers in 2018.

After studying philosophy at Tangaza University in Nairobi, in 2019 Mutobera traveled to Chicago to begin his year of spirituality with the mission society.

Attending church for the first time in the United States felt quite different, he recalls, because he was accustomed to services where people sang, danced and clapped. "Here

was the solemn Mass, with only one person singing in the choir, and the rest of the congregation listening," he says. "Over time, I began to recognize how meaningful and beautiful the Mass and its music were."

Maryknoll's formation for priests and brothers includes two years in mission in the Society's Overseas Training Program. Mutobera was assigned to Bolivia, where he appreciated the strong sense of community and family-oriented culture. He stayed with a host family. "I found joy in being with them, even though I didn't yet understand Spanish," he says. "Just being there and listening helped me build a relationship with the family."

"We value his humility, spiritual values, and his vocation for helping those in greatest need," says René Arze, Mutobera's host father. The family was inspired to volunteer at the seminarian's ministries.

"It was truly inspiring to see the affection and respect he earned

from the children and young people he assisted," Arze continues. "I feel deeply honored when he calls me 'Dad.'"

Mutobera's service at Cristo Rey, an orphanage run by the Augustinians for children and teenagers who have experienced violence, involved caring for those who had been either removed from or abandoned by their families.

"I helped young kids with reading and taught values that are essential for a good Christian life. A lay Franciscan missionary and I talked to the teenagers about hope, the importance of trust, friendship, and the role of God's love," the seminarian says. "There were kids interested in learning music. I taught them to play the guitar." He adds, "Cristo Rey provided a very good environment for the children to experience the love and the family they might not have had."

In addition to his ministry at Cristo Rey, the seminarian joined pastoral visits to two prisons in Cochabamba. There, missionaries led worship services and offered holy Communion to inmates.

During his Overseas Training Program, Mutobera also assisted in Maryknoll's mission to the Amazon. At a rural parish in the Isiboro Sécure National Park and Indigenous Territory (TIPNIS), he taught catechism classes, brought Communion to the sick and accompanied priests to remote communities to celebrate Mass.

Three years ago, the seminarian

returned to Chicago to continue his theological studies at Catholic Theological Union. While completing his Master of Divinity, he served in ministry at Mother of the Americas parish in the Little Village community. The Spanish he had learned in Bolivia helped him serve Hispanic parishioners.

At Mother of the Americas parish, Mutobera provided catechism classes for youth, oversaw altar servers and volunteered in migrant ministry. "The ministry is about being just, good neighbors, brothers and sisters, and sharing God's love with those who need it most," he says. Every Saturday, the parish opens its food pantry, offering food and clothing to about 350 people.

Maribel Lenus, director of the migrant ministry, says that their goal is

As part of his overseas training, Mutobera tutors at-risk students at the Cristo Rey home for youth in Cochabamba, Bolivia. (Courtesy of Victor Mutobera/Bolivia)





While in Chicago earning his divinity degree, Mutobera serves with other volunteers in migrant ministry at Mother of the Americas parish. (Courtesy of Victor Mutobera/U.S.)

to support the community, especially parishioners living in the shadows. Some have stopped working, she says. Children from families without citizenship or permanent residency are afraid to attend school, feeling anxious that their parents might be detained by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). The ministry includes informing migrants about their rights.

Lenus is grateful for Mutobera's compassion toward others, she says.

"Mission involves building connections with others who may differ from us," Mutobera says, "but we are united by God's love." God's grace, he continues, has been evident throughout his vocational journey. "I discovered love, joy and Christ in those I encountered."

Mutobera says he has learned valuable lessons from fellow semi-

narians and missionaries, notably the formation rector, Maryknoll Father Brian Barrons: "He emphasized the importance of community involvement and teamwork."

Father Barrons, who visited the seminarian's hometown last summer, says there he was able to see how Mutobera's faith and vocation were shaped within his family.

"Victor's love for God and God's people will serve him well in mission," he says. "You feel his warmth in the things he does, the words he uses to welcome and encourage others, and most especially in his very Christlike lifestyle. He is a true missionary disciple."

After eight years of formation, Mutobera, 36, looks forward to his ordination. "I am deeply grateful," he says. "I pray that the good Lord will continue to lead me." ✧

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Spreading GOD'S Tenderness

By Giovana Soria || Photos by Octavio Durán, OFM

At a march and vigil March 24 attended by hundreds of people including five bishops, protestors hold posters of people who died in ICE detention or were killed by agents.

Missioners offer hope and accompaniment to migrants in detention centers

Every week, Adrián (not his real name) eagerly looked forward to a visit from Scalabrinian Sister Leticia Gutiérrez at the Camp East Montana immigration detention center in El Paso, Texas. "It's my only opportunity to see people beyond the barracks," Adrián would tell her. "Listening to you and talking with you lifts my spirits."

Adrián, a 27-year-old asylum seeker from Guatemala, was arrested last year by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) while working in construction in Philadelphia. He was detained in a local facility for several months and then moved to another in Buffalo, New York. In December, he was transferred to El Paso.



Director Ruben García welcomes a young migrant with disabilities at a shelter run by Annunciation House, which he founded with friends in El Paso 48 years ago.

Adrián is among hundreds of detained immigrants visited by a group of volunteers, including Maryknoll missionaries, led by Sister Gutiérrez, director of the diocesan Migrant Hospitality Ministry.

The Migrant Ministry, explains Sister Gutiérrez, follows a pastoral accompaniment model of attending court hearings, visiting people in detention centers and reaching out to their families.

Volunteers go to El Paso's two immigration courts three times a week. Outside the courtrooms, they recommend that people going to hearings take a photo of their alien registration number to send to family members, so that if they are

arrested, loved ones can monitor their status. "We suggest that they memorize a phone number or write it down somewhere on their body," Sister Gutiérrez says.

After their hearings, individuals with a deportation order — despite having the right to appeal within 30 days — are detained by ICE. Before they are handcuffed, they are given a chance to share a spiritual moment with volunteers.

Maryknoll Father Kenneth Moody describes this time as intense. Hearings might take up to three hours, he says, "while the act of offering support and prayer lasts only three minutes."

The missionary says, "It involves re-

assuring detainees that the Lord is always with them, and that they can turn to him."

Father Moody, who spent 24 years in Venezuela and 14 years in Bolivia before starting his border mission in 2021, counts his Spanish skills and a willingness to listen as key assets for this work.

Sister Gutiérrez says that in their second task of accompaniment, the volunteers go to detention centers to make "friend visits." "We conduct weekly personal visits to those who were detained in court," she says. Sometimes, she adds, their family members reach out for help. "In Adrián's case, his fiancée visited him and, worried about his emotional health, asked us for assistance."

At Camp East Montana, one of the country's largest detention centers, facilities are like warehouses. In a "barracks," as detainees call it, over 70 overwhelmed people sleep in the same space, Sister Gutiérrez reports.

The Migrant Ministry ensures they receive at least one initial phone call and deposits \$25 into their accounts for family contact. "We bring them prayer books and word search puzzles to help pass the time," she says. "We pray with them whenever they ask and accompany them until their deportation or release."

Father Moody used to celebrate Mass once a month at detention centers for 60 to 80 detainees. "I encouraged them to seek God during their hardest moments," says the missionary, who recently returned

to Maryknoll headquarters in New York. "The detention centers were harsher than jails. In jail, up to six people shared a cell, but in immigration centers, detainees were packed into large open spaces."

The third objective of the pastoral accompaniment model, Sister Gutiérrez explains, is engaging with family members. "They suffer from anxiety and depression. We use listening therapy — showing them we are there for support," she says. The detention experience is unsettling for the whole family, she adds. "One day, detainees might be kept in this detention center, and the next, transferred to another at midnight — creating a profound sense of uncertainty for their loved ones."

Sister Gutiérrez visited Adrián from December to late January. His fiancée, with the help of organizations that assist immigrants, paid his legal costs and filed a habeas corpus petition. He was released on bond with an electronic ankle monitor.

Adrián, whose asylum case continues, was moved to Annunciation House, a volunteer-led organization in El Paso that has been welcoming immigrants and refugees for 48 years. Currently, the house hosts 10 to 15 people daily who are released from ICE custody.

Another shelter within the network — the Papa Francisco (Pope Francis) shelter — serves women and families previously authorized to live in the United States. Many have lost their work permits due to ruptures in immigration protocols



El Paso Migrant Hospitality Ministry is run by Scalibrinian Sister Leticia Gutiérrez.

and cannot support themselves, says Ruben García, founder and director of Annunciation House.

The people living at the shelters are either in the asylum process or actively seeking another type of immigration relief, García says. Often, they held official documents, such as a work permit, a temporary Social Security number or a driver's license. Previously, people in that situation would not have been detained. However, under the Trump administration, ICE has been instructed "to set those documents aside and detain them," he says. "That is catastrophic for families."

Many of them believed that because their cases were still pending, they would not be detained, García explains. "They come out deeply shaken and visibly distressed."

Many of the individuals released from detention arrive without their

personal belongings, copies of their documents or case paperwork, he says. Volunteers help them organize their travel back to the cities where they had previously lived.

The work of volunteers, including the long-term service of many Maryknoll missionaries, is crucial, García says. It is up to us to listen to God's Spirit and then respond to his call, he adds.

Kevin McCarthy, who promotes mission for Maryknoll's Mission Formation Ministry, moved to El Paso last year. Every week he visits a detention center.

McCarthy says that he is concerned about a 27-year-old detainee from Ecuador. "She seems very depressed," he says. "She told me, 'Today marks two years that I've been locked up.'" The young woman, who is considered at risk of self-harm, has been placed in a small cell with only one other woman.

Maryknoll's message — and that of Catholic Social Teaching — is to uphold the dignity of every human person, McCarthy says.

For Sister Gutiérrez, the ministry of accompaniment strengthens the faith of religious workers and volunteers, giving them a deep spirituality rooted in their encounters with detainees.

"For the inmate, God is the only true support," she says. "Let us persist in spreading God's tenderness through listening, dialogue, and acts of kindness, and keep our hope and faith in God, who continually accompanies his people." ✠



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O Most Sacred Heart of Jesus:

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Your heart burns with a love for all people to return to a right relationship with you.

We celebrate the abundant gifts you have given this nation, founded on the self-evident truths that our Creator has endowed all people with the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

We make reparation for the offenses against you and against human dignity that have taken place in this nation.

May our hearts be united to yours, so that our families and communities enjoy peace and happiness; may broken relationships be reconciled, injustices repaired, and the wounds of our land be healed. May your holy Catholic Church serve as a sign, pointing all people to your infinite love.

O Desire of Nations and Center of History, we ask you to bless these United States of America.

Who live and reign with God the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit,

God, for ever and ever.

Amen.

Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, have mercy on us!

Immaculate Heart of Mary, pray for us!

Painting at Sacred Heart Church in Prescott, Arizona (OSV News/Bob Roller/U.S.)

2025 Student Essay Contest Winners

Pope Leo XIV — a citizen of both the United States and Peru — speaks of building bridges through dialogue and encounter. We asked students to share personal stories of how they, or someone close to them, were changed by an encounter that bridged cultures and revealed God's love.

We received submissions in two divisions (grades 6-8 and grades 9-12) from students enrolled in a Catholic school or religious education program. The following are the winning essays.



DIVISION I

Avalin Shafer of St. Martin of Tours Academy in La Mesa, CA

Bridging Love Through Basketball

Growing up in San Diego, California, right next to the United States-Mexico border, I often heard frightening stories about Tijuana. Adults talked about kidnappings, danger and crime, and because of those stories, I imagined Tijuana as a place to fear. Even though it was so close that I could see its lights at night, it felt like a world away. I didn't realize how deeply those stories were shaping my ideas about Mexico until basketball, my favorite sport, gave me a chance to see

things differently.

Basketball has always been a huge part of my life. My brother played all the way through varsity, and I grew up watching his games and learning to dribble, shoot and compete. I loved the rhythm of bouncing balls, the squeak of sneakers on the court, and the rush of working as a team. But I never expected basketball to become the bridge that changed the way I viewed another culture.

On my team, many girls come from Tijuana, Mexico. At first, I felt nervous around them. They spoke Spanish fluently, and I worried that our different languages and backgrounds would make things awkward. I stayed quiet during warmups, unsure how to start conversations. Even though we wore the same uniform, I still felt divided from them by the border I had heard so many scary stories about.

But slowly, basketball began to take down those walls. During practice, we ran drills together, encouraging each other when we missed

Avalin Shafer, shown with teacher Katie Morland, won the Bishop Francis X. Ford Award. (Courtesy of Leonel Yoque/U.S.)

shots and celebrating when we succeeded. We cheered loudly, saying things like "Let's go" or "Nice shot" and shared high fives and laughter. Even without perfect words, we understood one another through the game. With every practice, the fear I had carried began to fade. I started to see my teammates from Tijuana differently. They were funny, talented and determined girls just like me. I realize that, even when people come from different places or speak different languages, we are all God's children, equal and loved by him.

The moment that changed everything came during one of our toughest tournaments. We had fought our way to the championship game. The gym was loud and bright, and my stomach fluttered with nerves. I looked at my teammates from Tijuana, sweat already shining on their foreheads, and saw that they were determined. This time, it was not us and them. It was simply *our* team.

We played our hearts out. I remember the slap of the ball, the sound of the crowd, and the pounding in my chest as we tried to keep up. Even though we lost, we left the court smiling. Together we had given everything we had. In that moment, I realized how wrong my assumptions had been and how much richer my life had become because of these friendships. Since then, we've won many games and championships together, but win or lose, I feel blessed to be on the same team together.

One teammate, Eliza, especially

taught me about love that crosses borders. She is from Tijuana and she is relentless, always diving for loose balls, grabbing rebounds and practicing harder than anyone. One day I was frustrated because I kept missing shots. Eliza stayed after practice with me, rebounding every ball and saying softly, "One more. You can do it." Her kindness, encouragement and patience revealed God's love to me in a way I will never forget. She did not care that we came from different countries. She cared that I did not give up.

Ephesians 4:3 says, make every effort "to preserve the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace." Basketball had become more than a sport. It was a bridge of unity, peace and friendship. Before this experience, I never realized how fear could create borders even when people live close together. Through this encounter, I learned that love can look like cheering for someone, staying after practice to help them, or sharing a simple smile or a high five across cultures.

This moment reminds me of Pope Leo XIV's words about building bridges with dialogue, with encounter, uniting us all to be one people, always at peace. My friendships with my teammates from Tijuana are exactly that, a bridge built through shared experience, respect and God's love. Now, when I look across the border at the lights of Tijuana, I do not see danger. I see the beautiful faces of my teammates, shining with sweat, joy and unity. And I feel peace.

DIVISION II

Sewa Adedayo of Michael A. Riffel
Catholic High School in
Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada

*A Story of Culture, Compassion
and God's Love*

I used to believe that people stayed with those who understood them best because it was easier. You talk to people who understand your jokes, your feelings and childhood memories. You stay close to what you feel familiar with. I never doubted that, until an unexpected encounter showed me how much life can change when you step outside of your comfort zone and let God work through something simple.

It happened in the summer right after Grade 10. My church partnered with a local community centre to host weekly drop-ins for newcomer families who recently had arrived in Canada. I did not volunteer because I was especially helpful or mature. I only joined because my friend Abby practically begged me to come with her. I promised myself I would stay for one session, smile politely and never return.

When we arrived, the gym was full of families from different countries like the Philippines, Nigeria, South Africa, Ukraine and a few others I did not even recognize. Kids sprinted around the room, their laughter mixing with accents I had never heard before. I suddenly felt small, unsure of what to say, and



Sewa Adedayo, shown with principal Amy Sanville, won the Bishop Patrick J. Byrne Award. (Courtesy of Stacy Allan/Canada)

worried that I would accidentally offend someone. My plan was to hide behind the snack table and avoid awkward conversations. But that changed when a girl about my age walked in with her little brother. From what I learned, they were from Afghanistan and had been in Canada for only three months. Her name was Laila, and she held her brother's hand tightly. She looked around the hall with the kind of expression people wear when they want to disappear. I recognized it instantly. I had worn that exact same look on my first day of high school.

Something nudged me, gently but clearly. I knew it was not just my own conscience. God sometimes pushes us toward people we are destined to meet, even if we do not understand why at the time. So, I walked up to her, introduced myself slowly, and asked if she wanted to join a particular group that was

making bracelets. Her English was shaky, but she nodded. At first, we sat in silence, stringing beads. I felt awkward, unsure of how to start a conversation. But then her brother accidentally spilled his beads everywhere. He looked scared, like he expected to be yelled at. I knelt beside him and helped him gather the beads. When I looked up, my eyes met Laila's, and I could see the relief for her brother's safety in her eyes. That moment opened a door between us.

Over the next hour, we talked — not perfectly, but honestly. She told me they had left Afghanistan after losing their father. She explained how hard it was to start over in a place where she could not understand the language, where she did not know the way of living, where her mother cried at night because everything felt overwhelming. She said the hardest part was feeling invisible at school, having no one to talk to, and no one spoke slowly enough for her to understand. She felt alone, even in a classroom full of people. Listening to her, my heart felt heavier than I expected. I realized how many things I took for granted — being able to understand my teachers, having friends at school, and feeling at home in the place where I lived. But I also realized something else. Compassion does not require perfect words; it only requires presence.

From that day on, I kept going to the weekly drop-ins, not out of obligation, but because there was some-

one I was always looking forward to meeting. Laila and I slowly became friends. We taught each other new things. She showed me how to write my name in Dari, and I helped her practice English phrases for school. We laughed at misunderstandings, shared snacks, and celebrated her first full conversation in English. But the moment that changed me happened during one of our walks home after the program. Her little brother ran ahead of us, and she said quietly with an honest tone, "Before I met you, I thought God forgot about us ... but your kindness made me think maybe God sends help in small ways, through people."

I had no idea one simple invitation to make bracelets could affect someone that deeply. I went home that night and cried, not out of sadness, but gratitude. I realized God's love is not always shown through big miracles. Sometimes it appears in a teenager who awkwardly tries to make conversation in a crowded hall. Sometimes it shows up in shared laughter, patient listening or helping a child. This experience did not just bridge cultures. It opened my eyes to the kind of person I want to be: someone who sees other people, especially when the world overlooks them. It taught me that compassion is a language everyone understands, no matter where they come from.

Most importantly, it showed me that when we choose kindness, we become living proof of God's love, often without realizing it.

DIVISION I



SECOND PLACE TRAVIS GRAHAM-JONES

St. Benedict's Preparatory School
Newark, New Jersey

When Travis' family moved from Georgia to New Jersey, he found his new school overwhelming. Things began to change as he made friends with a student from Ecuador: "our kindness ... brought us together." Thanks to his new friends, Travis also discovered a passion for soccer: "Playing and learning alongside them helped me better understand how important it is to connect with people from different places and backgrounds."

DIVISION II



SECOND PLACE ARPIT SINGH

Ascension of Our Lord Secondary School
Mississauga, Ontario, Canada

Arpit, who was born in India, describes a Christmas celebration with a friend whose family is from Peru. Embraced by their warm hospitality, he reflects on how, for the first time growing up in Canada, he did not feel the need to hide his identity or explain himself. "God's love appears most clearly when people make space for one another," he writes in "The Night I Felt at Home." "That is where unity begins. That is where peace grows."

THIRD PLACE RAMSIE DAMRELL

Immaculate Conception Catholic School
Dardenne Prairie, Missouri

Ramsie takes us along on a family trip to a resort in Mexico, where her parents make a point of getting to know the service staff and leaving them extremely generous tips. Ramsie learns that "kindness is not just about giving money," but "seeing people for who they are and treating them with love and respect." She concludes, "Kindness is the one currency that never runs out. The more you give it away, the richer your heart becomes."



THIRD PLACE FAITH GUY

St. Mary's School
Lynn, Massachusetts

In her deeply moving "Lessons from the Garden," Faith describes developing an intergenerational friendship with an older woman at their parish's community garden. As they raised vegetables together for the food pantry, Faith writes, the woman's wisdom and example taught her more than just gardening. At the end of the season, Faith saw that "the garden was not just full of food but of hope and love."



Essays of all winners will be published on
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For future news on the Maryknoll Student Essay Contest,
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Welcome the Stranger

By Susan Gunn

As the United States navigates a turbulent 2026, the immigration landscape has been defined by a sharp escalation in federal enforcement. The rapid expansion of mass detention and deportation has created a humanitarian crisis for immigrant families and their communities. In response, Catholic leaders and advocates are raising a unified moral voice, insisting that national security must not come at the cost of human dignity.

As part of this prophetic response, the Maryknoll Joint Leadership released a statement on U.S. immigration policy in March. Representing the Maryknoll Sisters, Fathers and Brothers, Lay Missioners and Affiliates, the statement draws on decades of global experience accompanying displaced peoples. The Maryknoll leaders express profound concern about the shift toward punitive policies that prioritize exclusion over encounter and unequivocally reject the trend toward indiscriminate detention.

The statement offers a searing moral critique of the current situation: “To criminalize the act of seeking safety and to profit from the incarceration of our brothers and sisters is a collective failure of conscience that denies the inherent sanctity of every human life.”

The leadership further emphasizes that these policies do not exist in a vacuum, stating, “We cannot ignore the role of U.S. foreign and economic policies in fueling the very displacement we now seek to penalize at our borders.”

The human costs of these policies are being felt far beyond the border, reaching deep into the United States. In a webinar titled “Witnessing ‘Neighborism’ amid the U.S. Federal Government Siege of Minnesota,” Greg Darr, a returned Maryknoll lay missionary, reported on the local fallout of harsh practices of immigration agents. Darr described the state-sanctioned violence that brought turmoil to the Twin Cities — but also an unexpected wave of grassroots resistance.

Reflecting on communities’ refusal to see their immigrant neighbors as “others,” Darr noted a spiritual resilience emerging from the crisis. “In the face of such overwhelming force, we are seeing the birth of a ‘neighborism’ that refuses to let fear dictate our relationships,” Darr said. “People are discovering that their faith requires more than just passive concern; it requires standing as a shield for the person next door.”

This call to action is echoed nationally by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, which offers an online tool for



An 8-year-old girl arranges luminaries with messages about her mother, a DACA “dreamer,” during a vigil in Chelsea, Massachusetts. (OSV News/Brian Snyder/Reuters/U.S.)

people to tell members of Congress to “ensure immigration enforcement respects human dignity and religious freedom for all.” The bishops warn that enforcement tactics now being used often infringe upon the religious freedom of those seeking to provide charitable aid and spiritual accompaniment to migrants.

The Maryknoll joint leadership state-

ment concludes with a final challenge to the faithful and the nation alike: “Our faith demands that we move beyond a politics of fear and toward a theology of hospitality that recognizes no borders to God’s love.” ✠

Susan Gunn is director of the Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns in Washington, D.C.

FAITH IN ACTION:

- Read and share the full text of the Maryknoll Joint Leadership Statement on U.S. Immigration Policy. <https://tinyurl.com/MKLImmigration>
- Watch a recording of our webinar “Witnessing ‘Neighborism’ amid the U.S. Federal Government Siege of Minnesota.” <https://tinyurl.com/WitnessMN>
- Write to Congress to protect the human dignity of immigrants. <https://tinyurl.com/USCCBonlinetool>

The Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns, based in Washington, D.C., is a resource for Maryknoll on matters of peace, social justice and integrity of creation, and brings Maryknoll’s mission experience into U.S. policy discussions. Phone (202) 832-1780, visit www.maryknollogc.org or email ogc@maryknollogc.org.

Maryknoll Joint Leadership Statement on U.S.-Israel War on Iran

The four organizations of the Maryknoll family — the Sisters, Fathers and Brothers, Lay Missioners and Affiliates — speak today from a place of deep sorrow and shared hope. For over a century, our missioners have crossed borders to accompany communities in the Global South, sitting at the tables of those the world often forgets or disregards. Today, as the shadow of war between the United States, Israel and Iran stretches across the Middle East, we do not see a conflict of “interests” or “assets.” We see the faces of our neighbors. We mourn every life lost in this spiral of violence, and we feel the trembling of families caught in the crossfire of a war they did not choose. We join a global chorus in pleading for a stop to the fire, urging leaders to set aside their weapons and return to the difficult, sacred work of the negotiation table.

In a world increasingly divided by labels, we reject the idea that any nation or people exists outside the circle of our common humanity. When leaders speak of threats to civilization, they risk blinding us all to the truth that we are one human family, bound together by the same joys and the same fragile breath. We believe that true peace is not just a quiet battlefield; it is a vibrant enterprise of justice. It cannot be built upon the ruins of cities or the shattered lives of civilians, for every act of indiscriminate destruction is a wound dealt to the heart of God. We urge those in power to look past the cold logic of military dominance and rediscover the culture of encounter — a way of seeing the “other” not as a target, but as a brother or sister.

[W]e are reminded that being a peacemaker is not a passive wish but a courageous choice. We call upon the leaders of the United States, Israel and Iran to make the courageous choice for dialogue over destruction. We advocate for an immediate de-escalation that protects the innocent, a commitment to diplomacy that honors international law, and the swift, unhindered delivery of aid to those whose lives have been upended. Together, as the Maryknoll family, we stand firm in the belief that even in the darkest hour, the path to reconciliation remains open to those who seek it.

*Maryknoll Sisters
Maryknoll Lay Missioners
Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers
Maryknoll Affiliates*

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READERS' RESPONSES

WHAT WOULD JESUS DO

In the Readers' Responses in the Winter 2026 issue of *Maryknoll*, a letter opposes open borders and asserts that Bishop Seitz had advocated them. An editor's note followed, clarifying that neither the bishop “nor Church teaching” advocated for open borders, simply proper vetting.

My first thought regarding this dilemma is that, yes, proper vetting sounds appropriate. Yet I wonder what is “proper vetting.” Is there a long time frame, i.e., months or years? If so, how hard is it for the illegal immigrants and their impoverished families to withstand?

My next question is, how difficult is “proper vetting?” Does it require uneducated applicants to justify their entry?

Then I wonder, what would Jesus do? I think he'd advocate for open borders, even if it were difficult for citizens of the home country. In addition, when we hear assertions of the dangers of “undesirables” coming into our country, I do believe it is considerably less than the percentages of our own citizens who are “murderers, rapists, drug dealers, and sex traffickers.” A very large percentage of the people in the city where I live are immigrants, yet I very seldom hear of crimes being committed by immigrants compared with our native citizens committing crimes.

So, if I believe Jesus would advocate open borders, and it may also increase crime in our country, what would I propose? *I don't know.* I

hope smarter citizens of our wonderful country than I, our Church leaders and our politicians, can conceive of a better way than the current dilemma we face.

*Michael O'Sheasy
Gainesville, Georgia*

SHAME ON YOU

You have finally pushed so far past reality with your “From the Editor” and “The Church Raises Its Voice on Immigration” in the Spring 2026 *Maryknoll* magazine that I no longer have any desire to read your opinions and magazine. Shame on you for not understanding how a large number of good, caring, decent, law-abiding practicing Catholics feel about illegal immigration.

The hypocrisy of Pope Leo and the U.S. bishops in condemning the immediate deportation of illegal immigrants from the United States is without equal. A country or any institution without rules and laws ceases to exist. Perhaps Pope Leo could open the entire Vatican City to all immigrants across the world who would like to live in the buildings and on the grounds.

*Marc D. Varney
Clovis, California*

SADDENED BY HATE

I was very saddened to read some of the Readers' Responses in the Spring edition of your magazine. The hateful comments about immigrants were really upsetting. However, I think it was important to print them, as well

as the positive ones. I was pleased to read the editor's article supporting immigrants and calling out ICE agents, who have killed American citizens and terrorized thousands of poor people.

Keep up the good work and God bless Maryknoll.

*Kathleen Skinner
Tuckahoe, New York*

MAKE ROOM

I read Jennifer Tomshack's article about Maryknoll Lay Missioner Theresa Glaser's work in Kenya. So inspiring! A beautiful person doing good work. I wouldn't know about it except for your magazine.

I am saddened by some of your readers' negative responses to immigration issues. It is a sin that the wealthiest nation in the world cannot move down the bench to make room for those who are in need.

*Stephen McCarthy
Wayland, Massachusetts*

BROKEN HEART

It broke my heart to read some of the Readers' Responses in your Spring 2026 edition. Misinformation about immigration to the United States is rampant. The facts show plainly that the majority of those caught up in the government's current deportation program are people seeking asylum under federal law or with temporary protected status granted in recent years by our government responding to violence or

repression in their home countries.

Justice and fairness require that we seek out accurate information about this issue and refuse to take at face value the misinformation being spread by biased news organizations and others seeking to blame immigrants for problems in our nation. No one argues about deporting criminals who have arrived here illegally. But these numbers are relatively small and are not the people the American bishops are seeking to assist.

*Michael J. DeMott
Rochester, New York*

ACTIONS COUNT

Thank you for speaking the truth about our Christian faith and the treatment of immigrants. I read with dismay the negative letters from readers in the Spring 2026 issue. It is obvious to me that racism was rearing its ugly head in these letters, along with fear of people who speak a different language. The states in which these writers live are more isolated, and it is possible that the writers "fear what or whom they do not know."

As a practicing Catholic, I love receiving *Maryknoll* magazine as it makes my heart lighter knowing that there are people truly doing God's work! I am following Pope Leo's words closely, and I would remind people who say they are Christian that actions count more than words.

*Paula Serafino Cross
Wilbraham, Massachusetts*



Maryknoll Father John Barth, who serves in Thailand, distributes food and water to survivors of an earthquake in neighboring Myanmar. (Courtesy of John Barth/Myanmar)

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Young men in the discernment process to become Maryknoll priests study philosophy at Tangaza University in Nairobi, Kenya, where the mission society has a formation house. (See story, p. 10.)

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