



# CASA ALEXIA

## A Border Ministry

### Un Ministerio en la Frontera

The El Paso community spontaneously constructed a memorial to commemorate the lives of the 22 victims from El Paso and Mexico who were assassinated in a hate crime on August 3, 2019. Twenty-five other persons were seriously injured, some of whom are receiving extended treatment.



View of the permanent memorial erected near the site of the assassinations. It contains 22 spiraling rings to commemorate each person who died. (El Paso Times photo)

## A Year in Review 2019

The Sisters of Casa Alexia, A Border Ministry, commit ourselves to:

**“Be a hopeful presence in solidarity with people on the border, especially immigrants and victims of violence, by promoting actions responding to their needs.”**

Casa Alexia is a joint ministry of the Latin American Region and United States Province of the School Sisters of St. Francis that helps the congregation to realize its vision of a world transformed through peace, justice and love.

In July 2019, Sisters Kathleen Braun and Frances Ann Hicks moved to Milwaukee, Wisconsin, to serve in other ministries. Now, five sisters and their partners in mission serve on both sides of the U.S.- Mexican border. Sisters Josefina López, Carol Jean Ory, Arlene Woelfel, and Christa Parra, IBVM, serve in Juárez; Sister Joannes Klas serves in the El Paso area. Sisters Arlene and Christa live in El Paso with Sister Joannes. This report focuses on the accomplishments of Casa Alexia in 2019.



## MISSION STATEMENT

The mission of Casa Alexia is to stand in solidarity with migrants, immigrants and victims of violence in the El Paso-Juárez border region:

- Raising awareness regarding the social, economic, and political realities of the border
- Offering accompaniment and counseling to victims of violence and their families
- Advocating for the human rights of immigrants, detainees, and victims of violence and injustice
- Providing education and pastoral services for those in need

**“We must continue to show the rest of the country...**

## Reflection

2019 was a year of deep sorrows and new challenges. Our sister cities of El Paso and Juárez were deeply affected by the mass shooting on August 3, 2019, that killed 22 U.S. and Mexican nationals and injured 25 others. In response to that tragedy, El Paso Bishop Mark Seitz issued a pastoral letter on October 13 encouraging Catholics to overcome racism with acts of inclusion. “Hate visited our community and Latino blood was spilled in sacrifice to the false god of white supremacy,” he wrote. The shooter had previously published a four-page document detailing his hatred of immigrants and Hispanics.

The genius of Bishop Seitz’s reflection is that it addresses two major social issues that our border community experiences: attitudes of racism, and the influx of migrants. And since much of our work this year has been accompanying the poor and migrants, we have chosen short excerpts from the Bishop’s letter on each page of this newsletter. A copy of the pastoral letter, *The Night Will Be No More*, is available online (see link below).

In this issue we share various aspects of the work with migrants as it is unfolding in this borderland. There is a short synopsis of the changes that occurred in El Paso with the introduction of the “Return to Mexico” program. The second article describes the situation with the migrant shelters in Juárez. A third article is a personal reflection by our newest member of Casa Alexia, Sister Christa Parra, IBVM.

We also take this opportunity to thank all those who have accompanied us over the years by their presence, prayers, and financial support. Their presence in our lives has been an essential element in developing ministries that are meaningful to the people we accompany.

We are especially excited about Sister Christa joining our border community. She is a member of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary religious order and receives financial support from the Wheaton Franciscans. Through her presence, Casa Alexia is transforming into an intercultural, intercongregational and intergenerational community. We are all excited about such growth possibilities.



*Wall mural in central El Paso, Texas, near the Paso del Norte International Bridge crossing.  
Sister Cities Los Dos Art Project  
(Sister Christa Parra photo)*

**I know that God will never allow the hate that visited our community on August 3 to have the last word. We must recommit ourselves to the hospitality and compassion that characterized our community long before we were attacked, with all the risk and vulnerability which that entails.**

***The Night Will Be No More, Pastoral Letter of Bishop Mark Seitz, October 13, 2019  
Read the letter at <https://www.hopeborder.org/nightwillbenomore>***



... que el amor es capaz de reparar cada herida.”

*The Night Will Be No More* – Pastoral Letter of Bishop Mark Seitz, October 13, 2019

## Situation of Migrants in the Border Region

### Changes in El Paso

Changes in U.S. government policies have drastically affected the service to migrants in El Paso. In 2018, there were 23 hospitality centers where migrants could stay for a few days after being released from the Border Patrol. At these centers, the migrants could make travel arrangements to stay with family members or sponsors while they awaited their court hearings. They were provided with food, showers, health care, clean clothes, and hygiene materials. They also received food for the journey to their final destinations.

By June 2019, only two hospitality centers remained open. Previously, each center would house 60 - 80 migrants per day; now each one serves between 15-30 persons per day. Most migrants are returned to Mexico to await resolution of their petitions for political asylum.

El Paso also has a detention center where about 800 men and women are detained while their cases are being processed. Sister Joannes goes there when called upon to celebrate Communion services and to co-lead a class in mind-body exercises to alleviate stress.

The reality is that the situation of migrants in the border region changes daily.



*Migrants living in tents near the international bridges while awaiting their interviews with migration officials. (Sister Christa Parra photo)*

### What About the Migrants in Juárez, Mexico?

The situation for migrants in Juárez is very difficult and complicated. Most of them are very poor people from Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Nicaragua. They arrive in vulnerable conditions, tired, but with high hopes of realizing their dream. They consist of families, one parent, or moms with one to four children. Some find work while they await their interviews with immigration officials.

There are about 16 shelters in Juárez. The Casa de Migrante (sponsored by the Catholic Diocese of Juárez) has housed hundreds of migrants over the years. During 2019, its capacity of more than 600 was surpassed by Central Americans and Cubans.

On August 2, 2019, a federal shelter, “Leona Vicario,” was opened by the Mexican government. At the refuge, a large team of employees and volunteers offers humanitarian aid, medical care, guidance by lawyers, and more. In December 2019, there were 800 people in this hostel. Around Christmas there was a small-pox epidemic, and the migrants were given medical attention by the government.

Some migrants move to other cities where they have family members or friends. They planned to work there while awaiting the date for their immigration interview. Appointments are scheduled three to four months apart. Often people must go through several interviews to resolve their political asylum petitions, most of which will be denied.

Many Mexican migrants also arrived in Juárez, fleeing organized crime violence in their places of origin. From August to December 2019, approximately 3,000 Mexicans settled on four of the five international bridges of Juárez and El Paso, TX. They refused to live in the shelters because they feared losing their turn to apply for political asylum. They lived in small tents, enduring the cold, risking everything to see their dream realized. In January 2020, the Mexican government forcibly moved them to the shelters to avoid cold-related illnesses.

We see no end to this migration tragedy. This whole situation gives evidence of an international humanitarian crisis of people looking to escape violence and seeking enough resources to live with dignity.



Sister Christa Parra, IBVM

## A Reflection by Sister Christa Parra, IBVM about her Immersion in the Border Reality

In August 2019, I had the great pleasure of meeting Sister Kathy Braun at the Leadership Conference of Women Religious Annual Assembly. I shared my dream of accompanying our most vulnerable brothers and sisters at the U.S.-Mexico border. She told me about her recent transition from ministry in the El Paso-Juárez area to her new role in provincial leadership.

Sister Kathy very kindly connected me with the sisters at Casa Alexia. After much discernment, the dream has now become a reality. I'm grateful to have the blessing of my Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary community, financial support from the Wheaton Franciscan Sisters, and the warm welcome of the School Sisters of St. Francis to Casa Alexia. We truly are an intercommunal, intergenerational, and intercultural community.

I moved to El Paso in October 2019 from Phoenix. I was drawn to Casa Alexia by the rich ministry experiences each sister has had in various Latin American countries. In addition, they continue to be in solidarity with our brothers and sisters on the margins in their various ministries at the borderland. I'm learning a lot these days, especially from the sisters with whom I now live in community.

I am also blessed to minister with a humanitarian assistance group in Juárez. The model we are following is grounded in the invitation Pope Francis gave us when he said we are called to accompany our migrant and refugee brothers and sisters following these four verbs: *acoger* (to welcome), *proteger* (to protect), *promover* (to promote human development and dignity), and *integrar* (to integrate).

Each day I park on the El Paso side and walk across the Paso del Norte Bridge into Juárez. On my way to Instituto Nacional de Migración (INM), I walk through a small tent city where hundreds of people from Mexico must wait to request asylum fleeing cartel violence. Their names are on a waiting list.

There are five bridges connecting Juárez and El Paso; three of the bridges have tent cities. Only 10-20 people seeking asylum can request asylum once their names are called. As they wait, they choose not to go to a shelter out of fear of losing their spot on the list. The tents, garbage bags, and tarps offer little protection against predators and bitter cold nights. There are lots of children.

Not very far from the tent city is the government building INM. Our brothers and sisters recently released from the El Paso detention center arrive at this port of entry. The detention center—called the *hielera* (“the icebox”)—is known for its freezing temperatures, cramped cells, and little food. This is where adults and children are held.

I have heard terrible stories about the way people have been mistreated at the detention centers. When the adults, children, and babies come off the buses they are exhausted. Their clothes tell a story as well, as they sometimes are full of mud, worn, or ripped. Some have traveled for weeks or months to the border where they present themselves to seek asylum. Some are being returned after a court hearing for asylum.

... through which solidarity, friendship and charity may take place.”  
*The Night Will Be No More – Pastoral Letter of Bishop Mark Seitz, October 13, 2019*

Some have tried to cross with a coyote. At INM, they receive a six-month permission to work and live in Mexico. They encourage everyone to go to a shelter as it is much safer.

I'm part of a small group of volunteers that welcomes our brothers and sisters. We offer some food, water, and basic necessities such as a toothbrush, shoelaces, and diapers to people as they come off the vans. I also offer to cut off the paper bracelets that they receive at the detention center. Migrants who have these bracelets and no shoelaces are targets for crimes. Each interaction gives me a chance to encounter the faces of God and listen to their sacred stories.

In the afternoon, I also spend time in a *colonia* called Anapra to accompany a small group of women and their children in a *Casa de Acogida* (House of Welcome). I feel at home and blessed to be in these spaces. I feel honored to hear their stories and share our lives. They welcome me to their table for the afternoon meal and we visit. They embroider bags while their children play on the floor around them. Their joy and sadness are shared in this space.

Each woman's sacred story has layers of trauma. First there is the trauma of why she fled her country, then the trauma of the journey north (in most cases with a smuggler or coyote), then the trauma of being detained by border patrol, and finally the experience of being in a detention center. Under the "Migrant Protection Protocol" (MPP), also called the "Remain in Mexico" program, these women are forced to wait in Juárez for multiple court dates several months apart. In Juárez, they are vulnerable to all kinds of dangers including being kidnapped, held for ransom, or trafficked.

The MPP is endangering the migrants. However, in this *Casa de Acogida*, women have another option. They are building an intercultural and intentional community while healing from their trauma. They pray together. During the celebration of Our Lady of Guadalupe, they prayed a Novena around an altar with the images of Mary from each of their countries in Latin America.



They are also making embroidered bags to sell for an income. The day after Thanksgiving, we sold their products in El Paso at an Alternative Black Friday event. The bags that we sell become instruments of solidarity. Each bag has a story of a woman who made it and so it is an invitation to pray with and for her.

All of this is in the early stages, changing, and growing every day. One of the women I work with tells me that the migrants are our teachers and will show us how to best accompany them. I pray for the grace to stay open and learn from our teachers. I'm waking up to the realities of the border and no longer just dreaming about being here. I'm grateful to have Casa Alexia as a starting point from which to learn and grow. *Mil gracias, hermanas*, for making this possible!

*Sale of products made by women awaiting resolution of their petition for asylum at El Paso's Alternative Black Friday event (Sister Christa Parra photo)*



Our reaction cannot be non-engagement. We must make a commitment...

Thank you!



### Sister Fran

We give thanks to Sister Fran Hicks for her many years of dedicated service in El Paso and Juárez, Mexico. She was the pastoral coordinator of Fort Hancock Parish for several years, and served as a chaplain for ACTS retreats. She used her educator skills to provide training programs and English learning experiences for children in the *colonias* on the outskirts of El Paso and at a women's cooperative in Juárez. She established the first library for children and youth in the *colonias*. She was a tireless advocate for people in need. Above all, she is a dreamer and an activator!

Sister Fran has moved to a central retirement home in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where she continues to share her gifts in many ways. She is greatly missed!

### Sister Kathy

We give thanks to Sister Kathleen Braun for many years of dedicated service here in the Borderland: for your accompaniment of women and children at the La Posada Shelter for women and children and your teaching of mind-body-spirit healing techniques at the detention center. For your pastoral care work as a chaplain for the elderly, and for co-leading a training program in the self-care healing techniques of Capacitar International. Most of all, thank you for simply being YOU. You are greatly missed! We wish you many blessings in your new ministry as a Provincial team leader within the School Sisters of St. Francis' U.S. Province.



... to be anti-racists in active solidarity with the suffering and excluded. ”

*The Night Will Be No More – Pastoral Letter of Bishop Mark Seitz, October 13, 2019*

## Reflection by Associate Cathy Berg



Cathy Berg

Sometimes in retirement, I struggle with thoughts of becoming irrelevant to the family and society as well. But I have found a permanent solution to that.

I have always found such fulfillment in my work as a pastoral minister in the parish where I prayed. Health

issues gradually changed my focus and I had to watch as younger, more energetic ministers took my place. But here's where that fact that we are family became so clear to me: Not everyone can be the frontrunner or primary mover or shaker in any project.

I was so jealous of the missionaries who went into the homes and communities of the poor and hungry. I felt that I could help by contributing to the food pantry of St. Vincent de Paul. So I did that.

I wanted to help with the issues of migrants and defend them against the injustices they were suffering. Prayer didn't seem like enough. Being an associate of the School Sisters of St. Francis gave me an opportunity to do something to support the mission of the sisters working for the people of El Paso and of the Mexican border town of Juárez. Every month I send a donation to my sisters living and working in the area. I get a short "thank you" note back from my friend telling me how my donation was used to help in some way.

The acknowledgement is unnecessary because I know how hard the community works for their people. I am so happy to know that I can still fulfill my missionary desires through them. We are all one family, truly.

Thank You!

## to our lay associates who minister with us in so many ways

We want to recognize the tremendous help and support that our lay associates offer to this ministry at the border. In her reflection (left), Cathy Berg shares what it means to her to be able to help with the food distribution program in Juárez. Maria Torres co-leads (with Sister Joannes) a training program in Capacitar self-care practices with the men and women incarcerated at the El Paso detention center.

Pauline Hovey uses her writing skills to share what is happening on the border. Her articles have appeared in regional and national magazines and newspapers, and she has volunteered at the interim shelters in El Paso. The associates in California have established a "Giving Tree" at Christmas time, in which parishioners donate gift cards that are used to buy clothing and other essential items for needy people in El Paso and Juárez. Several associates and friends have participated in immersion programs in the border region.

All the associates accompany us through their prayers and emotional and financial support. In a special way, we want to recognize Rose Brown of El Paso and many others in the Southwest who support us by offering their prayers and suffering for people in need. We were overwhelmed by, and are grateful for, the outpouring of support and solidarity with our Latin American neighbors that was generated during our national gathering of sisters and associates in Milwaukee in July 2019.

# How Can **YOU** Partner with the Sisters at Casa Alexia?

## **BECOME INFORMED**

Come for an immersion experience at the border, which will help you:

- Learn about the border reality
- Learn about the effects of globalization on border life in the areas of economic justice, human rights, the environment, and population explosion
- Share with others about Casa Alexia and its important ministries

## **PRAY**

- Pray for healing and an end to violence in Juárez and all of Mexico
- Pray for a better life for immigrants and just immigration laws
- Join the sisters and associates for prayer and reflection
- Join the sisters and others for prayer vigils

## **VOLUNTEER**

Volunteer in El Paso or Juárez with:

- Food distribution in Juárez
- Office administration support
- Assistance with various ministries

## **TO BECOME INVOLVED, CONTACT**

**Sister Joannes Klas**

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*In March 2018, one of our sister's relatives passed away and left her a sufficient amount of money for the parish in Juárez, Mexico to build a much-needed pastoral center. Located just across the street from the church, this two-story building offers the parishioners a place large enough for parish celebrations and the weekly catechetical classes. The kitchen is also used as a snack bar for these groups. Every third Sunday, the center hosts a meal for 20 to 60 migrants from the "Leona Vicario" federal shelter. These families are bused to the parish for Mass and interact with parishioners during mealtime.*

## **CONTRIBUTE**

### **TO MAKE A CONTRIBUTION**

Use the enclosed self-addressed envelope or visit [www.casaalexia.org](http://www.casaalexia.org) and click on "Get Involved" and then "Online Giving." Please indicate that your donation is for Casa Alexia in the "Additional Information" box at the bottom of the page.