

In the Heartland With Bishop Pates

Visiting Our Neighbors to the South

In fulfilling my role as Chair of the International Justice and Peace Committee of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, I recently traveled to Central America and the countries of Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador. These countries have been featured in news reports concerning the arrival of their children into the United States. I was accompanied on this trip by staff of the Bishops' Conference, Richard Coll and Cecilia Calvo.

A principal focus of our trip, which was designed to be an expression of solidarity of the bishops of the United States with the bishops of the three countries, was the serious problem with mining or extractives. All three of these countries enjoy rich mineral deposits especially gold, silver, nickel, and iron ore.

Our visit consisted of in-depth conversations with the bishops, with Catholic Relief Services' (CRS) representatives and Caritas (an international outreach organization of the Catholic Church) as well as several meetings with civilians in those communities which have been negatively impacted by mining.

Our experience was capsulized in El Salvador. For several years, under both conservative and liberal governments, proposed mining by transnational countries has been roundly rejected. The bottom line being that mining as exercised in this country is incompatible with the human cost.

On balance, this might seem counter-intuitive. After all, El Salvador's economy badly needs a boost and foreign investment. Obviously, minerals are abundant. Why not mining to respond to needs? The human cost surfaces in the question when one becomes aware of the fact that death inducing chemicals – cyanide and strychnine are introduced in the mining process. This has

deleterious and tragic consequences on the workers and contaminates the water supply along with enduring negative health outcomes impacting children and the entire community.

Driven by the prospect of enormous profits (the price of gold has risen from \$271 ounce to \$1,332 ounce since 2001) the transnational companies sacrifice the human good, ethics and moral practice for the sake of greed. The firms promise all sorts of benefits to the communities - education, improvements in infrastructure, job opportunities but essentially fail to deliver.

Tragically, neighbors and family members become estranged and opposed to one another. The companies seed corruption by buying off community leaders. Local citizens who see beyond the immediate benefit and work against the tragic consequences become targets of violence. A significant number of martyrs has arisen in the wake of this violence as they have advocated humane values and the survival of physically and spiritually healthy communities.

The Catholic Church through its bishops, priests, religious and faithful have landed squarely in favor of life and the discontinuation of mining as it is presently operated - the outcome of which is deadly. The call of the American Catholic church is to stand in solidarity with our fellow Latino Catholics in pursuing ethical objectives with the U.S. government and American companies.

Another issue that surfaced during the visit to these three countries is the drug trade which passes en route through Central America from the fields of South American countries to the United States and Canada. This trade breeds violence, corruption and extortion. When asked what the United States can do about this, Archbishop Rubén Salazar Gómez, Cardinal Archbishop of Bogota, Columbia, said it is necessary to address the insatiable appetite in North America for drugs and narcotics which feeds the notorious operation. In totality, the use of drugs is a human tragedy and the reason for the death inducing culture it spawns to our South.

A hot topic while our visit was taking place was the unfortunate migration of children from these three countries to the United States. Their families and others were fed "misinformation" that the children would be received in the United States, united with their families and offered the

opportunity of education and a better life. The instigators of this false information and the migration are known as “coyotes.” They spread unfounded rumors and then coordinate dangerous journeys which result in much suffering and frequently physical and sexual violence to the children.

Unfortunately, the “root causes” of the expansive migration north reside in the lack of work, a desperate desire to provide a life for one’s family and the consequence of educational systems that have not kept pace to provide employment in these countries.

We might ask, but what concern is all of this to us? We espouse a basic rule of thumb that in terms of assistance, outreach and support – our families and neighbors come first. In this context, it is to be remembered that Central and Latin America are our closest neighbors to the South. Isn’t it logical, therefore, to support them as they reach out to us their brothers and sisters in the human family? In turn, they have much inspiration to offer us in terms of family life, hard work, a genuine spirit of hospitality and friendliness.

Would it not be opportune for us to extend assistance in helping to provide work opportunity, engage in educational upgrading and assist them in developing safe and abundant water? An overwhelming majority of the Latinos I visited want to stay in place. Their aspirations mirror universal desires: to marry, come together as family, enjoy the rich relationship of family, friends and neighbors in the context of a life-giving culture. They hope to enjoy all of this within the providence of a caring and loving God.

We must ask with Pope Francis: What is the investment that will best attain and ensure the life and dignity of each member of the human family particularly our close neighbors to the South?