Deporting the Heart: Unaccompanied child migrants and the globalization of indifference

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There is a story, often quoted in church circles, about a man who lived near a river. One morning he went to get some water and saw a body floating downstream. He dove in, rescued the body, pulled it to shore and gave it a proper burial. Two days later, he went for water again and saw three more bodies floating down the river. He pulled them out and buried them. A week later, there were even more bodies, then more burials. As this trend continued over time, he realized his efforts at burying the dead were not enough. He sought long-term solutions and began looking upstream to understand why the bodies were floating down river in the first place.

Today one of the strongest northward flowing currents is not in the Bighorn, Shenandoah or Nile rivers but in the surge of unaccompanied minors attempting to cross the U.S. border. A river of desperate children is flooding this country’s overwhelmed immigration system. Between 2004 and 2011 about 6,800 unaccompanied minors traveled across the U.S.-Mexico border each year. The number jumped to 13,000 in 2012 and to 24,000 in 2013. By the end of this year, more than 90,000 unaccompanied minors could flow up to the U.S. borders from countries like Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador.

What is happening upstream that is causing such a massive influx of children? Many of these children are coming because of the mistaken belief in their home countries that the United States is giving away green cards, that amnesty is in the works for young people, that there is a free pass for unaccompanied minors. But these reasons account for only a trickle in the river. The real explanation is much more complex.

In November 2013 I was part of a delegation of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Migration and Refugees Services Committee that journeyed “upstream” to Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras to look at this issue in greater depth. Meeting with high-level government officials and church workers on the ground, especially those from Catholic Relief Services, we received a firsthand look at the root causes for why children are coming north. Given the enormous financial and human cost of reaching the U.S. border, it is amazing they are coming at all.

Up the River: Riding La Bestia

Unaccompanied minors coming from Central America first face a perilous trek to the Guatemala-Mexico border. If they are lucky enough to get into Mexico, they still have a long journey ahead of them. With scarce financial resources, these children—along with pregnant women and many others—hop on freight trains to travel as far
as 1,500 miles. This train system is known as La Bestia (“the Beast”) or El Tren de La Muerte (“the Train of Death”).

Many lose arms and legs jumping on and off these trains. Some are jolted onto the tracks and fall to their deaths. All are easy targets for harassment, robbery and assaults by violent gangs that systematically prey on these vulnerable migrants for profit. Eighty percent will be robbed and 60 percent of the women will be raped.

These criminal actors will require on average $100 from migrants to ride atop the train. On the way, predators frequently kidnap them and demand phone numbers of relatives from whom the predators can extort money. If they refuse, they are tortured or killed. We talked to one man named Mario, who narrowly escaped death after being kidnapped with a friend. When Mario and his friend did not give the names and numbers of relatives, the captors shot and killed his friend right in front of him.

One would think such dangers would be enough to keep even the bravest of hearts from undertaking the journey north. But even the nearly certain prospect of abuse and exploitation has not stemmed the tide. As Juan Sheenan of C.R.S. in Honduras noted, “What parents would allow their 14-year-old to take a 20- to 25-day perilous journey to the United States? We have to look at the root causes that are pushing Central Americans into the U.S.”

Midstream: Economic and Social Issues

There are many push factors that precipitate the northward flow of children, but endemic poverty and the desire to unite with relatives on the other side of the border are important reasons. The average per capita income in many of these countries is between $4,800 and $7,500. Most make much less. With few opportunities, they leave home seeking a life beyond subsistence.

But it is not just the poverty. Family ties also draw people northward. When I started working in rural areas of Mexico and Central America two decades ago, many of the villages comprised women and children. The men had traveled north to work. But this scenario is changing. In addition to pregnant women, children are now taking the risk. This is why the bishops argue that the costs of immigration must be calculated not just in terms of the economic and labor equations but the social equation as well.

When I met a 7-year-old named Raúl, he was living in a state-run foster facility in southern Mexico, where he had been placed after being detained at the border. He left home because his father was in New York and he was tired of growing up without him. When I asked what town in New York his father lived in, he said it is called Vida Mejor—Spanish for “better life.”

At the Riverhead: Violence

Our delegation found out that even more than economic pressure and family ties, it is fear for their safety that drives so many north. Violence has made living at home unsustainable. The insecurity stems principally from the coercive and forcible recruiting pressure from gangs like MS-13 and 18th Street. The reach of these gangs is expanding, and they have developed sophisticated networks that infiltrate all sectors of society, including businesses, government, police, the military and the judicial system. Ironically, these gangs were formed and hardened on the streets of the United States and then deported back to their home countries.
Some of these gangs also have diversified, morphed and consolidated into transnational criminal organizations, like the infamous Los Zetas cartel. In addition to smuggling arms and drugs, the cartel now profits from extortion and human trafficking. Some control whole neighborhoods or regions and demand protection money or a war tax from all economic sectors, even the smallest of street corner vendors.

Gangs use children, some as young as 10, for many of their operations, terrorizing students and teachers to gain new members. The gangs force boys and young men to join their ranks, and if these recruits refuse, the recruits—or even their family members—are seriously injured or killed.

Many children and their parents live in constant fear. As Maria, a woman we met in El Salvador, said: “If we stay, our kids will fall prey to the gangs. If they migrate, they may die on the way.... We have no way out.... The only one who can bring us out of this is God.”

Honduras now has the world’s highest number of homicides per capita, and the situation is getting worse. With almost no chance of facing prosecution, gangs murder with impunity. Because of the breakdown of the rule of law, people constantly feel threatened. Many migrants from these countries want to come to the United States precisely because there is a rule of law—even if they have to break the law to reach it.

Mary Hodem, the regional director of C.R.S. in Latin America, sums up the forces driving the mass migration. “The dramatic increase of Central American children and teenagers arriving at the U.S.-Mexico border is a direct result of the growing desperation [of people]...in Central America,” she said. “The violence in these communities makes life all but impossible.”

In the end, young people have no horizon of hope. Many have only four choices: steal to get by, join the gangs and likely die, refuse to join the gangs and be killed—or migrate. The words of one mother capture the dilemma so many face: “It is horrible. We can’t protect our children. Either we see them die here, or they die on the way to a better life.”

**Downriver: Choices in the United States**

The unaccompanied minors coming to the U.S.-Mexico border are not just leaving their countries but fleeing them. Almost all migrants would choose to stay at home if they could. Until we deal with the root causes of their departures from their home countries, people will keep coming. And unless we deal with issues of human insecurity beyond our borders, we will have weaker national security within our borders.

Meanwhile, many politicians are becoming entangled in their own rhetoric as they make the issue into a political football. While many Republicans see this border crisis as an opportunity to vilify the Obama administration, the president himself—having overseen the deportation of almost two million immigrants while failing to achieve any significant immigration reform—has earned his reputation as “Deporter in Chief.”

But the situation of these migrants cannot be understood in the narrow, partisan terms of U.S. political theater. Honduras is a failed state, El Salvador and Guatemala are failing states and Mexico is a failing state. This is why the most vulnerable parts of their populations are seeking refuge elsewhere. Given their well-founded fear of being killed upon deportation, many of the children at the border are not just economic migrants but refugees. Most are not criminals and should be given every applicable protection under international and domestic law.
But there is another kind of failed state. It is the failed state of mind and heart that thinks we have no responsibility to these children. Pope Francis condemns the “globalization of indifference,” our having so normalized the suffering of others that we have lost the capacity to weep, to suffer with victims and respond with compassion. As one worker in El Salvador put it, “If the migrant is not your brother or sister, then God is not your father.”

Catholic social teaching emphasizes that the moral health of a nation is gauged by the way it treats its most vulnerable members. There are many religious organizations and even government agencies throughout the Americas that are doing everything possible to alleviate the suffering of those who have no good options. These groups are committed to building better bridges instead of constructing longer walls and to developing stronger bonds rather than erecting tougher barriers.

But beyond domestic policy are some hard spiritual questions at the heart of the nation’s immigration debate: Might these children be the Holy Innocents of our own day and age? Are we more aligned with the armies of Herod than those of the crucified and risen Christ? Do we seek the self-interest of empire rather than the justice of God’s kingdom? In the face of the injured and suffering of the world, are we more like the priests and Levites, who do what is legally justifiable but morally scandalous, than the good Samaritan?

What should most concern us is not just the northward-flowing river of unaccompanied minors but the rivers of compassion in the human heart that seem to have evaporated. When people in Murrieta, Calif., protest and confront buses carrying young migrants and their families, and citizen militia members in Texas are told to take aim at “illegals” and tell them “Get back across the border or you will be shot,” we have bigger problems in our country than a broken immigration system.

The main issue is not just why children are coming but what kind of nation we are becoming as a result. In the midst of Israel’s moral drought, the prophet Amos said, “Let justice surge like waters, and righteousness like an unfailling stream” (5:24). If not even these children can move us in our own times, then the rivers of compassion have dried up within us. Not only have we lost touch with our origins, our history and our faith; we have become a desolate spiritual landscape and have deported something of our own hearts and souls as well.

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