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# Solidarity, Social Justice, and Faith: Humanitarian Action on the U.S.-Mexico Border

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This article examines how notions of solidarity, social justice, and faith guide humanitarian work at the U.S.-Mexico border. Based on interviews and participant observation in three regions, it examines the narratives of lay and religious actors serving migrants, refugees, and asylum-seekers, to understand the moral and political resonance of their work in the context of border surveillance, migrant detentions, and mass deportation. Different notions of solidarity and justice jostle one another, espousing political and structural dimensions, whilst faith inspires the conviction that change can be enacted. A radical message for social action is, notably, fuelled by anger and courage, and used to confront pain and fear in the humanitarian and political sphere. This article contributes to a better understanding of how notions of human dignity, justice, and advocacy are articulated by humanitarian actors at the border, a site of striking civic and faith-based resistance to the criminalization of refugee and undocumented communities.

Keywords: advocacy, civil society, faith-based organizations, forced migration, humanitarian work, justice, refugee, religion

## Introduction

Hope has two beautiful daughters; their names are Anger and Courage.  
Anger at the way things are, and Courage to see that they do not remain as they are.  
Augustine of Hippo

This article examines how the notions of solidarity, social justice, and faith guide humanitarian work at the U.S.-Mexico border, documenting the viewpoints of both lay and religious actors serving migrants, refugees, and asylum-seekers. When describing how the everyday work of assisting refugees might be underpinned by solidarity, guided by notions of social justice, or motivated by faith, people living at the border offered surprisingly variegated responses. For one lay social activist, with

long-term ties to local communities and the Catholic Diocese, St. Augustine's phrase—*Hope has two beautiful daughters*—captured the powerful tensions inherent in social action: anger at visible injustice, courage to bring about change. For many humanitarian actors in this region, faith and social convictions helped to navigate such tensions and express a radical message against the injustices of the world.

Since the end of the Second World War, communities of faith have played very crucial roles in refugee resettlement, local integration, and policy advocacy within the U.S. (Eby *et al.* 2011). Yet the roles of faith-based organizations, their relationships with the state or non-governmental organizations, and the motivations of volunteer and professional staff working on behalf of refugees and migrants, are not well understood. Eby *et al.* (2011) specifically noted that faith-based voluntary agencies 'employ staff of varying beliefs and backgrounds. As such, people of faith may work for secular agencies, or agencies representing faith other than their own, and vice versa' (p. 591). At stake is the presumed distinctiveness of faith-based organizations, given the observation that 'differences between faith-based actors are often greater than those between secular and faith-based organizations' (Ferris 2011: 606). For their part, Ager and Ager (2011) argued that we need to seriously engage with issues of faith in humanitarian practice: there are contexts where faith and religion are mobilized to 'intellectually sustain a robust defence for the foundation of human rights' (p. 467), in ways that prove more authentic than the framing of secular humanitarianism. The ethos that guides the work of faith communities, and the critical role faith-based organizations play in forced migration issues, often remain under-theorized and unseen, especially in the global North (Wilson 2011; Tiedje and Plevak 2014).

This case study focuses on the narratives of service providers who work directly with cross-border migrants (for ethnographic research on the migrant and borderland communities, see Holmes 2013a,b; De León 2015; Jusionyte, 2018; Vogt, 2018; Castañeda 2019). Conceptually, we interrogate the notions of solidarity and social justice, delineating their practical, moral, and political resonance in the context of an ongoing refugee crisis. Empirically, we examine how faith-based and secular actors understand the moral and political landscape of humanitarian work. Our main research question asks: *How do solidarity and social justice, as well as faith, guide the meaning and practices of humanitarian work at the U.S.-Mexico border?* Having specified our methodology and the refractions of recent U.S. immigration policy, this article proceeds in three sections: we examine what solidarity means and how it is enacted in border communities; how different notions of justice are articulated by faith-based and secular actors engaged in border issues; and how faith and social action intersect with an emotional landscape of love, pain, anger, and courage.

## Overview

### *Scope and Methodology*

The U.S.-Mexico border is a vast space where large numbers of migrants are assisted, controlled, and accounted for. Local responses involve multiple

institutions: Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), Customs and Border Patrol (CBP), federal courts, faith-based and secular groups running migrant shelters, and other state-funded, private, or civic groups offering education, employment, health, housing, and/or legal services. Interviews—in Spanish and English—were facilitated by diverse church and university contacts. Careful attention was paid to positionality in the field: the author introduced herself as a university professor who wished to understand how local organizations engaged with migrants and refugees. Being multilingual, middle-aged, a woman, a teacher, a practicing catholic, and a non-U.S. citizen proved helpful in connecting with a wide range of service providers, migrants, refugees, and returnees.

Fieldwork was based on 133 semi-structured interviews and participant observation in the border areas of Tijuana/San Diego (August 2018), Houston/McAllen/Brownsville (March and May 2019), and El Paso/Juarez (August 2018 and July 2019). This coincided, in 2018, with political and media attention paid to migrant caravans travelling from Central America to the U.S. southern border, and with an uptick of returnees, deported from the U.S. By 2019, faith-based organizations had made plans for considerable expansion of migrant shelters to accommodate increased migrant flow; in these shelters, the work of priests, nuns, and lay volunteers focused on short-term assistance and hospitality (Moore-Eissenberg 2019). In 2020 (August–September), six key respondents were re-interviewed regarding sweeping changes in immigration policy to halt cross-border migration and COVID-19 infections. The study, initiated as part of a multi-country project on *Religion and Social Justice for Refugees* (Ager *et al.* 2020), received ethical approval from Yale University.

In Tijuana/San Diego, interlocutors included volunteer and professional staff (interns, directors, lawyers, psychologists, social workers, educators, priests, nuns, and pastors) working for Catholic, Quaker, evangelical, non-denominational, and LGBT migrant shelters, transition and rehabilitation facilities, orphanages, local civic organizations, and transnational organizations such as Salvation Army, American Friends Service Committee, and YMCA. In Houston/McAllen/Brownsville, they included faith leaders and social activists in a region known for a ‘border surge’ of Central American migrants and one of the fastest-growing populations of immigrants and refugees in the U.S. (Kammer *et al.* 2017: 17), most of whom remain undocumented. Some respondents were met at the 2019 Homeland Security Conference, held at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, which convened scholars, policymakers, law enforcement officials, social activists, and landowners with property earmarked for border wall expansion. In El Paso, the author participated in a structured immersive experience called the Border Awareness Experience (BAE) led by a Christian organization sheltering refugees and migrants. This involved joining a small group (~10 people) of lay and religious people to live for a week in one of the migrant shelters, serving meals, and cleaning facilities. A coordinator facilitated structured time to interact with migrants, federal court attorneys (processing asylum or deportation cases), law enforcement officials (including ICE and CBP), and representatives of worker collectives, transition and rehabilitation facilities, and migrant justice groups, to

facilitate learning and shared reflection on border issues. In all three sites, time was spent observing asylum-seeking processes, immigration checkpoints, migrant shelters, protest art, rallies, and markets, crossing into Tijuana and Juarez by foot. Interviews with migrants themselves (young men, women travelling alone or with young children, trans women, male deportees, and migrants living within and outside of shelters, mostly from Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, and Nicaragua) inform this analysis, but are not reported in this article.

Respondents were purposively sampled to reflect both volunteer and leadership roles in faith-based and secular organizations. They were asked to explain the nature and challenges of their work; following this, their perspectives on solidarity and social justice were solicited, without providing initial definitions of these terms. Interviews, lasting between 45 min and 120 min, were recorded on tape or in notebooks, with informed consent; nonetheless, this article uses pseudonym names and minimal socio-demographic identifiers to protect confidentiality. After transcription and translation, English textual data were analysed for word patterns, by a research assistant using software to help pinpoint the potentially distinct experiences of migrant vs. service providers, as well as civic vs. faith-based assistance. The author independently indexed all verbatim interview data with a priori codes, to mark text characterizing personal history, work challenges, and viewpoints on solidarity, justice, faith, and religion, for thematic analysis.

#### *Border Surveillance, Migrant Detentions, and Mass Deportation*

At its border with Mexico, the U.S. ‘remains mired in an immigration crisis with no end in sight’ (Kammer *et al.* 2017: 14). While restrictions on migrant allowances and protections had tightened under previous U.S. administrations (Massey and Pren 2012), the rate of immigration raids, detentions and deportations have ‘escalated to unprecedented levels’ under the Trump administration (Miller *et al.* 2020: 800). Policies enacted in the past three years have included the ‘promotion of a U.S. Southern border wall; implementation of *Zero-Tolerance* which ordered the separation of children from their families and their subsequent detainment without a clear means of family reunion; deployment of 5000 U.S. soldiers to the Southern border and sanctioned use of teargas on children and families trying to cross; and industrial tent facilities that housed over 3000 separated children and adolescents without due process’ (Miller *et al.* 2020: 800).

As detailed by Garrett (2020a,b), the U.S. security apparatus rests on infrastructure (border walls), surveillance (drones, sensors, cameras), and boots on the ground (law enforcement and active-duty military personnel). The *Zero Tolerance Policy*, which officially lasted from 6 April 2018 to 20 June 2020, was designed to discourage family units from entering the U.S. to claim asylum. CBP agents would stand at the midpoints of ‘bridges designating the international boundary, preventing targeted migrants particularly from northern triangle countries from crossing the line into U.S. territory to claim political asylum. . . A waiting system was designed and put into effect keeping migrants in northern Mexico forcing

thousands to have to stay in tents or improvised shelters in order to get a chance to appear before an immigration judge to make their asylum case... Eventually, many migrants gave up attempting to cross legally [...] thus violating as a misdemeanor the U.S. law known as 1911.8 U.S.C. 1325' (Garrett 2020a: 3–4). Where apprehended, migrants were taken to holding processing centres, dubbed the *hielera* [ice box], and separated by age and gender; children were sent to juvenile detention centres by the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) under the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) auspices, and adults to ICE detention centres, known as *pererra* [dog kennels], before they could plead their '1325 unlawful entry' charge to a judicial magistrate (Garrett 2020a,b).

In March 2019, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) enacted Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP) to remove aliens arriving from Mexico 'whether or not at a port of entry' (<https://www.dhs.gov/migrant-protection-protocols>). This policy—colloquially known as *Remain in Mexico*—expedited a process of immediate refoulement, with enormous implications for legal rights, humanitarian needs, and coronavirus exposure (Keller and Wagner 2020; Miller *et al.* 2020; Slack and Heyman 2020; Garrett 2020a). On 21 March 2020, the U.S. administration sealed the border, halting most legal immigration and all asylum claims at ports of entry. Such border enforcement, immigration detention, and deportation policies are effectively 'anti-immigrant actions' (Garcini *et al.* 2020) and 'anti-asylum border practices' (Slack and Heyman 2020); they prove 'hostile to border crosser and border dwellers' as 'borderlanders, migrants and refugees suffer under the constant duress of political and economic calamities by government authorities' (Garrett 2020a: 6).

Official CBP data help to give a sense of cross-border apprehensions (individuals detained while crossing elsewhere than ports-of-entry) and inadmissibles (individuals who presented at ports-of-entry but lacked required documentation). By mid-2019, data on unauthorized border crossings were rising month-by-month, peaking at 144,116 in May, a level three times higher than the previous year. This prompted Carla Provost, head of CBP, to state in her testimony to Washington senators: 'Apprehension numbers are off the charts' (Washington Post, May 8th). By May 2020, this number had drastically fallen to 23,197 (Figure 1), following implementation of the MPP policy, with over 60,000 people taken in custody and returned to Mexico (Miroff 2020). These refugees are not under UNHCR protection, given that neither the U.S. nor Mexico declared the border situation an 'emergency' (Miller *et al.* 2020: 801; Van Fossen 2020).

Years of surveillance, detention, and mass deportation have given rise to migrant justice movements that seek to counter the criminalization of a misdemeanor charge (1325 'unlawful entry') and the practice of migrant incarceration in dangerous or inhumane conditions. Many acts of civil advocacy, including hunger strikes and multiple legal actions, have been initiated to counter human rights abuses that stem from border surveillance and militarization (Miller *et al.* 2020), with many grassroots organizations establishing networks of binational

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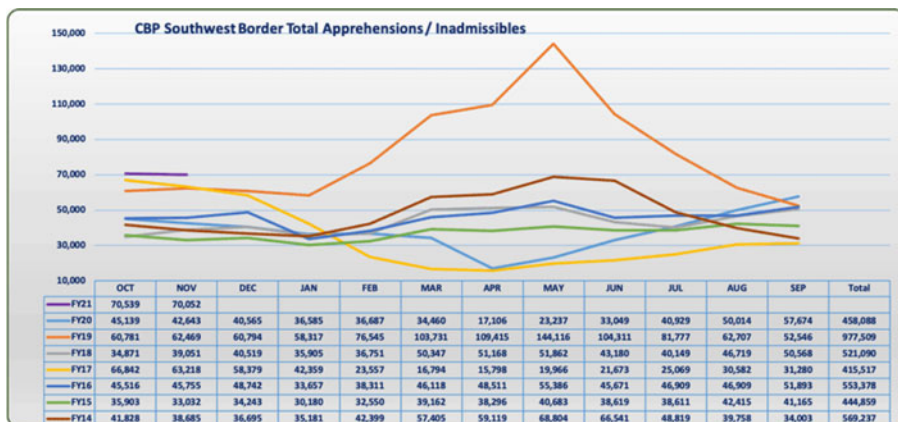


Figure 1.

**Number of people stopped by U.S. Customs & Border Protection at the US-Mexico Border. Source: U.S. Customs & Border Protection. <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/sw-border-migration>. Accessed 4 January 2021.**

solidarity for issue-based organizing (Télez and Sanidad 2015). As one lay volunteer, engaged in prison solidarity work, stated in her interview:

This is one of the most heavily militarized zones in the country, where you have a multitude of law enforcement agents—different types of officers who carry weaponry and badges under the Department of Homeland Security. So that includes ICE, CBP, DHS Officers, BP Agents. . . Then you have DEA and U.S. Marshals which are Department of Justice, then you have military police, you have state troopers, Texas Rangers, Sheriffs, El Paso Police Department. . . [It can get] really confusing with all of the badges and the officials. . . [ . . . ] The point is at any given moment, you're being surveilled, you're being policed, you're being controlled. We have this element of being overpoliced in this community.

You have at least three inter-government agencies that now all have their hands into immigration policy. Oh, four, because you have Department of Defense now, throwing in money to build tent cities for the bases, you have Homeland Security which has ICE under its umbrella, and CBP, and DHS which runs the Office of Refugee Resettlement. A lot of agencies, a lot of money, and very little oversight. [El Paso]

## Solidarity

### *What does Solidarity mean for Practice and Policy?*

Solidarity remains 'a rather opaque term'—but one defined by three key features: standing together in the face of risk or threats; expressing support for each other's

interests; and sharing values and willingness to join forces in collective action (Dawson and Verweij 2012: 1). When articulated in public health ethics or movements of civil resistance, notions of solidarity extend beyond normative values to the realm of collective action. Dawson and Verweij (2012) discussed, for example, the context of pandemics: appeals to solidarity are made in response to shared risks of contagion and high death rates, as a means to justify both rational behaviour and reasonable intervention where people prioritize their own interests to the detriment of collective ends. They called for a solidarity research agenda, one that would help us reflect on moral theory and public policy. Indeed, how solidarity plays out in practice and policymaking is a contested area, ‘reflective of the way modern societies work’ (Prainsack and Buyx 2012: 209).

Solidarity is enacted where people manifest a collective commitment to share risks, burdens, or possible threats. It is a value that interlocks with notions of ethical behaviour and social justice. It is also a concept with (political) teeth—entailing more than altruism or beneficence. Indeed, the notion of solidarity as beneficence, motivated by human compassion, has drawn sharp critique in analyses of the humanitarian sector (Fassin 2005; Bornstein and Redfield 2011; Ticktin 2016). For Chouliaraki (2019), ‘solidarity as pity’ is different from ‘agonistic solidarity’. The former ‘relies on the imagery of pain’ (p. 254), necessitating a barrage of imagery to depict suffering as radical otherness and vulnerability; this drives a self-centred, commodified solidarity whereby humanitarian action is construed within a neoliberal understanding of moral responses to suffering and advocacy. By contrast, agonistic solidarity is about the ‘communication of human vulnerability as a political question of injustice’ (p. 265)—a combative solidarity emphasizing the place of legitimate and sustained advocacy.

How is solidarity articulated in international law, border politics and policy? In the European Union (EU), solidarity is a normative and structural principle regulating action between Member States, ‘enshrined in the very essence of EU law’—given that Border Checks, Asylum, and Immigration policies shall ‘be governed by the principle of solidarity, and fair sharing of responsibility, including its financial implications, between the Member States’ (Morano-Foadi 2017: 7, quoting Article 80 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union). This call to unity and shared responsibility proves, nonetheless, hard-to-achieve. As illustrated by Ryngebeck (2015), EU institutions have played a part in turning ‘irregular migration’ into matters of security: service providers, including faith-based organizations, may be obliged to report undocumented migrants or face restricted funding. Acts of solidarity to help the undocumented, in matters of housing and health care, become criminal acts, while civic and faith-based acts of resistance against criminalization are built around notions of human dignity and social inclusion. Similarly in the U.S., we see that exclusive forms of solidarity, bounded by the nation-state, are combatted by inclusive forms of migrant solidarity: while border policing protocols are activated to exclude irregular migrants from the nation, to the point of breaching international and federal laws regarding asylum-seeking processes (Slack and Heyman 2020), migrant justice activism, both secular and faith-based, ‘continues the tradition of civil initiative [...] to

protect the victims of human rights violation when government is the violator' (Lorber 2013: 45).

### *Portrayals of Crisis and Solidarity*

How is solidarity enacted in border communities? In migrant shelters, solidarity lives in images on walls and in the sharing of everyday experiences—a shared history, made in movement and action, linking the present to the past. In Casa Vides, a migrant shelter in El Paso, a large wall painting commemorates the struggle in El Salvador, the faces of people who died, the country they left, mass graves and extra-judicial killings (Figure 2)—it presents a homage to human rights and social justice through the phrase of Archbishop Oscar Romero (*Si me matan, resucitaré en mi pueblo*). A river of names runs through the communal dining and living areas—names of people who died crossing the border, including many listed as anonymous [*sin nombre*]. This striking visualization of past sacrifices and loss makes this a sacred space of solidarity, in areas where people come together to prepare food, eat meals, hold meetings, coordinate assistance, and respect one another's humanity. It is in this living area that nuns and lay volunteers in residence will first greet the men, women, and children who are dropped off by law enforcement upon release from custody.

A short car ride way, in the Centennial Museum of the University of Texas at El Paso, an exhibition—called 'Uncaged Art'—displays the work of some of the 6000



Figure 2.

**Mural, Casa Vides, El Paso, Texas. Photograph by Mark Eggerman.**



migrant children from Central America, detained at the Tornillo detention centre (<https://www.utep.edu/centennial-museum/museum/past%20exhibits/uncaged-art.html>). Historic images of the Tornillo [lit: screw] encampments are juxtaposed with images of Nazi and Japanese concentration camps, leading one of our lay interlocutors, with whom we visited the Museum, to remark that, for migrants, ‘abuse has been structural, not situational’. In stark contrast, the Border Patrol Museum exhibits very different images of crisis and solidarity—paying homage to agents who died in the line of duty and displaying the materiality of border patrol surveillance (infrared cameras, armed vehicles, river boats). Also nearby, the El Paso Diocesan Migrant & Refugee Services displays a large painting of a family wading across the Rio Grande—calling attention to the way ordinary folks help one another cross to the other side. In sharp juxtaposition, such images reveal deep tensions in how migrant justice groups, law enforcement officials, and faith communities represent the border in space and time. This iconography, serving to bear witness to collective action and shared community, reveals three different expressions of border solidarity: the *combative solidarity* of Uncaged Art, fighting the incarceration and criminalization of migrants; the *nationalistic solidarity* of Border Patrol agents, protecting a frontier that must be policed and controlled; and the *faith-based solidarity* of Catholic migrant and refugee services, highlighting physical, emotional, and spiritual journeys.

### *Hospitality and Justice*

When asked to express—in their own words—what solidarity means in everyday life, interlocutors highlighted a common purpose across multiple networks of migrant support. Compare, for example, how the leaders of two faith-based organizations explained the centrepiece of humanitarian assistance. The first narrative is a reflection from Father P, the director of a shelter and social service centre established by the Scalabrini order—whose founder is known as *Padre de los Migrantes* [Father of Migrants]. He stated:

Solidarity is on so many levels. For example, the Casa [House] is not just *a Casa*, but a network of Casas throughout the world. We have that solidarity connection, and then, we’re in solidarity with so many groups that support us. . . . Solidarity is seen in all sorts of donations that come to the door. Solidarity is seen with people who volunteer and give a couple of hours. Solidarity is with other shelters in the Tijuana area, where we have a unity. We get together. We talk about our common problems and offer solutions to organize together. [Tijuana]

For his part, the Director of a Quaker organization, dealing primarily with issues of human rights and legal status, explained:

Our trainings are divided into five parts: looking at the concept of self; the U.S. constitution; human rights; documentation as a tool for defending rights; organizing, so that people see themselves as social agents capable of exerting change in their communities—there is expressed solidarity by holding each other together. One term we use in Spanish is *mandar obedeciendo* [lit: leading by obeying]. That’s

how we try to define leadership within the organizing work that we do with immigrant communities. So, I think that's where solidarity sits with me. It's how we act as an ally, not for the sake of being politically correct but for the sake of being politically just. [San Diego]

The scope of humanitarian assistance on the border has changed over time, given the massive influx of Central American migrants to the U.S. border. Reflecting on these changes, Father P stated:

The centerpiece of La Casa is hospitality. You know, we opened this place 35 years ago for hospitality for the migrants coming from the south to cross. Then, fifteen years ago, people started coming home because they were being deported. . . . In the last five years we've been looking at how we're doing hospitality and came to the conclusion that we have to be doing more than just food and shelter. We have to offer a way of life, and so that's why we've been trying to expand our services—with lawyers, psychologists, the work placement program. So, people could start their lives again. It's more than: 'Have a blanket, have a taco, and good luck'.

For faith-based actors, solidarity is thus rooted in notions of both hospitality and justice, to meet human needs for shelter, food, work, political voice, and human dignity. Yet shelter spaces are scarce, necessitating a strict triage of beneficiaries by gender, family status, and migration recency. By March 2020, many shelters closed their doors to new arrivals, given concerns of COVID-19 exposure (Fry 2020).

### *The Force of Law*

Stepping in where the state will not provide, civic and faith-based organizations organize themselves into loose coalitions to address issues of migrant detention and incarceration. The Detained Migrant Solidarity Committee, for instance, is a prison-solidarity organization to protest treatment in detention and immigration courts. One of its volunteers, Valeria, affirmed: 'we're constantly working in crisis mode all the time'. Politically, the goal is to:

engage in the work of dismantling the prison-industrial complex because that is what immigration detention is. . . . You're holding people for a civil matter, to wait their asylum cases or deportation in a facility that is run very much like a prison. People who go into immigration detention are categorized based on their risks: there's blue, orange and red. Red is the 'criminal' population, people who've been charged with crimes [or] perceived as a threat to the guards—that means you're black, or that means you may look Muslim, even though you're Punjabi. . . . Basically, the more brown you are, the more exotic-looking you are, you are going to be criminalized. You're definitely going to be put in with the *rojós*. [El Paso]

Social activists like Valeria assume considerable risks fighting a system that criminalize acts of solidarity enacted on behalf of irregular migrants. Thus,

Valeria emphasized the need to be constantly aware of the power dynamics confronting social action:

There are really serious consequences of retaliation from ICE. It happens. Last year, a high number of immigration advocates who were at-risk for deportation went to go speak in Congress—the following month or so, they all had deportation proceedings. There is a risk [of being] targeted by ICE. People who are activists and organizers do [migrant justice work] at great risk, especially with this government. . . You get to the point where you have to remind yourself: This is my comrade. We're building a movement together. [El Paso]

Border spaces are challenging for law enforcement agents also. Agent D, a national recruiter for the border patrol agency, stated his views firmly: agents engage in risky, heroic, and important work. They embrace a mission that puts them at the forefront of protecting people against risk and defending the nation:

We catch the bad guys, the sex offenders and drug smugglers. . . We are not supposed to do this work we are now asked to do—[to] catch and process poor people who cross the border. [El Paso]

Feeling under threat, and currently vilified rather than praised for their work, CBP agents close rank and stress their differences from ICE officers—'we're the guys in green, they're the guys in blue [uniforms]'. Agent D was not shy to talk of his Cuban origins, nor to reveal that morale amongst agents was low: 'when they first arrive, they feel like Rambo. . . . But now we have had suicides. . . Recruitment into the agency is really difficult, because the work is not what it used to be. . . We used to have to catch bad guys, who would run away to escape, now we have families running towards us to get processed. . .'. Agents are not supposed to 'change nappies or make up the bottle milk of infants in detention', which they are called upon to do, given a current lack of manpower in migrant-holding institutions.

## **Social Justice**

### *Fair Society and Policy*

With respect to achieving a fairer society for asylum-seekers and refugees, actions of social justice are guided by the three principles of redistributive, recognitive, or representational justice. Thus 'redistributive justice involves allocation of material or human resources towards those by circumstances have less. Recognitive justice involves recognition and respect for cultural and gender difference, and representational justice involves equitable representation and political voice' (Charitonos *et al.* 2020: 2, quoting Lambert 2018: 227). The lens of social justice embraces equity, recognizes human dignity and equal worth, and speaks up for due process in social, economic, and political policy. It is, essentially, a political ideal (Lister 2019): 'the theorization and politics of social justice are about the kind of society and the kind of world in which we want to live together [. . .] ultimately, we are

weighing up the effects of policies and practices on individual lives and on the quality of social relations. The costs of social *in*justice are born by and large by those who lack voice and power' (p. 10). How then are notions of social justice articulated by secular and faith-based actors working on behalf of migrants?

### *Shelter, Voice, and Service*

When asked 'what does justice or social justice mean to you', Catholic and Quaker faith leaders were quick to highlight principles of redistribution, recognition, and representation on behalf of marginalized voices in society. Thus

Justice is about the basics of life and shelter, but it's also giving people a voice in the world, too. We give people an opportunity to be heard—and listening to them will cause us to be a voice for them. Be a voice for the voiceless. [Tijuana]  
It is that people not live in fear. [San Diego]

Issues of social justice led to envisage fair solutions to border crossings. One human right lawyer, who worked in a faith-based migrant shelter, rooted the concepts of justice and fairness within a radical re-thinking of citizenship and migration rights:

Well, I'm a radical, in the sense that I believe that just the concept of nationality is discriminatory. I mean, just because you were born in a country you have some rights, that others don't, who were not lucky enough to be born in your same country. Nationality should be abolished. But, I mean, that's a very radical, crazy concept for many people, especially lawyers. Really, I'm a closet radical nationality hater. I think that the first solution would be that we make it easier for [migrants] to stay legally. I mean, most of these people just want to work. . . So, give them an easier path to become documented. . . [Tijuana]

Cross-migration rights were understood very differently by pastors who directed evangelical rehabilitation shelters, helping male migrants with a history of drug addiction. While their ministry centred on service to God and fellow humans, it was not one that would cross the law or advocate for open borders. As one pastor stated:

Justice is law and order. The government has to regulate borders. Now, I'm for people being given an opportunity to cross borders, but legally, with papers. Yes, that is a fair solution. There are some who cross the border with fake names, with fake papers, they've stolen someone else's identity. I don't approve of that. That's forgery. There are those who work without papers, they get apprehended, serve some time, then get deported. That's just federal law.  
There are many different situations of course. There are women crossing on their own. Now there are children trying to cross on their own, many children. . . What do you expect the authorities to do? They have to detain them, put them in detention centers, even in foster care. They can't let children just roam the street. There are even people crossing with children, who can't prove they are related to the children. I

say, what are you thinking? You simply cannot have open borders, that would be nice, very Kumbaya, but it's not realistic.

Many people, they come, they say Pastor, pray for me, I'm going to attempt to cross the border, pray for me. I say no. I cannot pray for what I don't believe is right, but let me tell you what I can do for you. . . I have a sense of service. I found God, and I help my neighbor, and that's how simple it is. The Church is fundamentally service. [Tijuana]

### *Inclusive Justice Moving to Action*

For members of faith communities, notions of justice were rooted in an understanding of Christian love and social inclusivity in action. Anne, a theology schoolteacher, stated with calm conviction: 'From my perspective, faith is absolutely connected to social justice'. She went on to explain:

The concept of justice isn't just the Western traditional framework of people getting what they deserve, fairness, equality, consequences of actions, and so forth. Justice in the Biblical tradition is fullness and wholeness of relationships between God, humanity, creation—thriving and flourishing as God intends. And as humans, our role is to create these communities of solidarity and inclusivity in as many ways as possible. The essence of justice is the Hebrew word of Shalom, which is more than peace, but fullness of life. . . And Christianity is profoundly rooted in standing with the oppressed and the marginalized and putting oneself at risk. You look at any number of people, whether it is Martin Luther King or Archbishop Romero, Gandhi or Nelson Mandela, how much they suffered, they are Christ-like figures. Jesus was all about including the marginalized, practicing civil disobedience throughout, that is why he was crucified: that was a political act. For me, personally, as a Christian, Jesus never says 'worship me', he says, 'follow me'. This is where solidarity is, where everyone belongs.

God is always about inclusivity, and not marginalization. . . I saw an interview with the Archbishop one time, and the interviewer said something to the effect of God doesn't choose sides—God loves everyone. The Archbishop said no, no, God always chooses sides, God is on the side of the oppressed and the marginalized and that is where we are called to be. But all of us are vulnerable in so many different ways, and I suppose all of us are oppressed and marginalized in different ways. I think he was saying that God is with the weak and vulnerable and wants us to become who we are, empowered if you will, to recognize and live from the divine image within us. [Houston]

For emphasis, Anne added:

To be empowered, it's 'power with' rather than 'power over' people. . . Power 'with' [is] a resource that is open-ended—from a spiritual perspective, rooted in love, love as connection and relationship, coming together in community and inclusivity to act together and work for the common good. . . Power 'over' is a limited resource, power concentrated in positions of authority, ultimately rooted in fear. Ultimately, violence of any kind, systemic or personal, is fear. That whole concept of 'power with'

comes more from the Quaker tradition, but certainly falls in line with the Catholic social teaching on social justice.

Anne drew explicit links between faith-based love, social inclusion, and fighting injustice. But this was not an easy position to hold. Teaching English, history, and theology to high-school seniors, she specified: ‘as much as I have been engaged in the border crisis, I teach about the Holocaust and Japanese internment camps, and I say to students that this [internment] is happening in our own culture—this is happening again. That has been a wakeup call for me—I feel that we are reliving history and we can’t be complacent. You have to engage with your own time. Transcend and try to transform’. In her words, solidarity and justice are about moving love into action, to ‘change the structures of power’:

Being willing to put oneself out there in solidarity to engage with others is not a ‘power over’ in a savior way, but a ‘power with’ to take the lead from people who are in the situation. Love is not just about feeling compassion, but it is moving into action, where that be charity or to change the structures of power. . . . We say ‘love in action is a harsh and dreadful thing’ [after Dostoyevsky]—Dorothy Day [co-founder of the Catholic Worker Movement] talks about that in her autobiography. Love in action—you are seeing and doing things that are not easy, when you are not backing down and speaking truth to power, and the consequences of that, throughout history, is prison and assassination. It’s a harsh and dreadful reality, because you are immersed in conditions that are inhuman. Social justice or working for the common good is about everybody having what they need to live a life of fullness. [Houston]

Migrant advocacy work thus necessitated a stance of all-encompassing, inclusive justice. In the words of a social activist from the McAllen border area: ‘I think we need both charity and we need social justice, but social justice is, in my opinion, a lot more difficult to get than justice. And I do like some of the things some of the folks say: if you want peace, work for justice. . . . If you want justice, you have to work on reconciliation. If you want reconciliation, you have to work on forgiveness. I see justice work being different from charity’.

## **Faith**

### *Changing the Public Discourse on Immigration*

In speaking about the role of faith in migrant advocacy, one interlocutor mentioned co-writing a report, commissioned by the Carnegie Foundation, entitled *Recovering the Human Face of Immigration in the US South* (Kammer *et al.* 2017). This report opened with a powerful statement: ‘More than ever, it is necessary to re-imagine and re-moralize public discourse on immigration’ (p. 1), then addressed three questions: How can faith leaders ‘change the negative and polarizing discourse around immigration, more effectively welcome immigrants into their congregations for greater inclusion, and engage in effective advocacy in support of immigrant justice?’ (p. 2). Authors emphasized that the Christian

Church is a Pilgrim Church (p. 6) and saw the Biblical theme of hospitality to strangers as ‘the greatest antidote to our society’s epidemic of fear’ (p. 18). They stressed that Christian teachings, as jointly identified by U.S. and Mexican Catholic bishops, explicitly support the right for persons to migrate to support themselves and their families. This report thus clearly articulated the roles that faith communities must play in social action; namely, humanize the public discourse on immigration, work towards social inclusion, and establish coalitions to urge comprehensive policy reform and to advocate for an immigration policy rooted in faith and morality. World-wide, faith-based organizations are similarly engaged in working on the ethics of hospitality and the politics of asylum (Wilson 2011).

### *Faith is Conviction*

For many people of faith, social justice advocacy is thus a way of putting faith into action. In the words of Father P:

Faith, I think, is the basis of religious communities. In fact, outside the front door, it says ‘Stranger, you’re welcome here’. So, our goal is to make every person here not a stranger but a friend. Our goal is that when people leave here, they leave just a little bit better. Faith, I think, is what keeps us going. Faith is what inspires people to help us, you know, since we’re not a government agency or a social service agency. You know, we have social services, but with the flavour of the Catholic faith. So, this is the heart of religious communities, that we are people who welcome others. [Tijuana]

For the director of the Quaker organization, upholding human dignity was at the heart of faith.

Faith for me is how the community upholds itself, upholds each other individually. People who are the most marginalized people in the community are able to be the example of how I should live and direct my life. So, what moves me in faith is how I uphold someone else’s dignity in the decisions that I make. [San Diego]

Decisions to uphold hospitality and human dignity were at the heart of everyday practice. For example, the Scalabrini migrant shelter changed its working staff schedule to accommodate Muslim Cameroonian refugees who had journeyed from Panama to reach Tijuana: during the fasting month of Ramadan, food would be served before dawn and after dusk, when kitchens were normally closed. Moreover, religious affiliation did not determine who would receive, nor who would provide, migrant services. Of three women working in prominent positions in this Christian shelter, for example, one insisted: ‘I am not a Catholic. But I work here’. Another declared: ‘I’m agnostic, but raised a Mormon. Commitment is very important in the Book of Mormon. Humanitarian work is also very important. . . My religion background set the road for me to get to this office’. The third prayed ‘to Mother Earth. All religions are welcome. I know that if that is important to me, it’s important for anyone to go to whatever they believe. . .’. In faith-based

shelters, attendance to religious services was expected, but ranged from understated catholic masses to evangelical sermons featuring public conversion testimonies. What largely came across was faith in the values of human dignity and service, anchoring hospitality and justice work on behalf of migrants. One of the directors of a migrant shelter, a Catholic priest, defined faith most succinctly:

Faith is a conviction, the belief you can change things. I have faith that the world can welcome change. [El Paso]

Faith is thus closely tied to social action—and to humanitarian work—in response to lived experiences of migrant border policy. As Chris, a college graduate and long-term volunteer in a migrant shelter, noted:

Our reality is shaped by the people we are here to serve—not every humanitarian aid organisation or advocacy group is set up like that; here, but the direction of the work is determined by the people who are being directly affected, not by an external mission or agenda. That’s the reality that we are responding to, first and foremost. I think that there has become such a gap between the reality of the migrants that we serve and the [work of] people in policy—which sometimes seems so far removed from [local] realities.

From the perspective of folks here, people who have been here a long time, there is this deep sense of a lack of trust, or faith, in policymakers, in the political process. In the minds of the church community here, at the heart of living out their religious faith is also a very political message: countering the narrative of the current Administration. It would look different, away from the border. Action on the local level—what I would consider to be hospitality—makes a very radical statement, I think, in these times. [El Paso]

Faith is thus more than private belief. Chris made explicit connections between faith, solidarity, and social justice through collective and concrete action in service of one’s community:

The other important piece of faith for me is thinking of it in terms of not just me, but in terms of me and my community, whoever that may be. So if I’m going to express a belief, and have a conviction, it had better be expressed in concrete action in my community, not just me acting by myself on my own, but what we’re doing together. . . Faith has an element of trust in it—to have a conviction about the possibility of something, and believing that it can be achieved. . . And that belief is expressed through action. . . For me, the heart of all social justice—what gives it meaning—is the concept of looking at the person in front of me, who’s not me, and seeing that my destiny is tied to theirs at the deepest of all levels. . . I always come back to one man, who came with his mother [to the shelter], he was just two days older than me, and I saw myself in him—and I realized that until he, and all the other people who are fated to live in the margins. . . [emotion leaves the sentence unfinished]. . . I see my fate and his, tied together. . . Right or wrong, I see social justice as connected to the individual and the society, through our encounters with one another, shaping the way that we think, the way that we act, the way we feel and respond to one another. . . [El Paso]



*Love, Pain, Anger, and Courage*

How does faith and social action intersect with the emotional landscape of humanitarian work on the border? Anger and courage, for example, were emotions that resonated strongly in many interviews. During the BAE, our group assembled every evening in the migrant shelter's basement—these were important moments to reflect on the immersive experiences and conversations of the day. We noted that ordinary people (both secular and faith-based) were doing extraordinary work—willing to ‘pay the price’ for social justice, in the event that federal law criminalized their activities. One lay participant returned to the essence of Catholic social teaching with this simple phrase: ‘the two feet of love are justice and charity’. Another, reflecting on the aptness of St. Augustine’s phrase (*Hope has two beautiful daughters*) in a context of migrant detention and deportation, recalled that:

Anger and Courage, the daughters of Hope, are indeed sisters. They don’t always agree, they push you in different directions, but they are of the same family, not so different from each other in the practice of faith. Love, hope, and courage are beautiful to see. This is a testimony of how anger can be channeled into action and courage. [El Paso]

Sister C, quiet and self-possessed, confessed:

I have no problems expressing my anger. I get angry and I sit with that anger before I write letters to the Governor. He just vetted a bill that continues to allow the police to arrest children. I have a seething letter in my head. We’re talking of children here, whatever side of the immigration issue you may be. [El Paso]

Anger thus pushes one to act in love, in service of one’s neighbour. As Chris noted: There is ‘always something you can do. What is striking, to me, is to think that migrants themselves are the protagonists of change. [There are people who] mount a huge organizing effort for those who are directly affected by immigration policy. . . . Anger has to be cultivated. Intentionally, we have to remind ourselves of our conscience’.

He pointed out how anger, courage, or love permeated the very language used to describe migrants:

This is even down to the language we speak, institutionally. One day, this agent comes to the [shelter] and says: ‘I have 45 bodies for you’. And I say: ‘You mean people. This is our house, and here in our house, we talk of people as people’. The agent replied, ‘I don’t need to be lectured by a college graduate’. There’s toxic masculinity built in the institution, it’s in the air they breathe. . . [El Paso]

Such tense interactions exemplify a struggle embodied in notions of recognitive justice vs. punitive justice. But as Chris realized, local agents themselves are caught in the forks of structural violence: ‘[they] come from one of the most crushing areas of in-opportunity in the U.S. and offered stable salaries to work as border patrol or detention officers’. Agents who share Latin heritage and attend church

with their local community are recruited to defend the metering policies devised by ‘politicians far from the border regions’.

For Valeria, the experience of systemic violence in border areas was visceral—it affected entire generations of her family, and called for anger, even rage:

We’re all coming from a place of violence. . . experienced in this community. This comes from generations of intergenerational violence and settler colonialism. I am the product of . . . my indigenous ancestry, my colonial ancestry. . . I’m caught in that pain. . .

It’s very personal. It’s sometimes of pure rage that I do this work, but also of pure love. To exist and do work in this space is to really hold a painful tension between love and pain. People are too comfortable with the idea that you can only hold one at a time. But I think the glory of life is being able to hold those two things in tension. That’s what exists in this space and that’s what I see in the men, women, and children here—the two tensions that they hold all the time. That’s the tension that my grandmother felt. It’s something that I feel trapped in, trying to breathe, and knowing that the people I work with feel the same way. . . . It feels like spiritual warfare. [El Paso]

This ‘world of pain’, however, was fought with love and courage. Anne, the schoolteacher, reflected: ‘you can’t love without having that sense of charity and justice, not working to meet immediate needs, which is extraordinarily important, but also changing systems and structures. . . And that’s where the pain comes in. When you do that, you are going to suffer. The culture doesn’t agree with you. You are going to face some sort of pain and sacrifice. If you engage in solidarity with the people in those situations, you are going to suffer’.

For attorneys working on asylum-seeking cases, the present-day situation was ‘pretty much the worse we have seen’. In 2020, one stated: ‘this is a cross-border community where you can’t cross the border’, with migrants deported to Mexico, no hearings, asylum cases in a holding pattern, and ‘the presumption right now that you have to earn your way out of detention’. Her response was to ‘cultivate indignation, to feel outrage, to know this is outraging [. . .] because the government is supposed to serve the people, the people I meet at the border’.

## Conclusion

This study examined how narratives of solidarity, social justice, and faith guide the meaning and practices of humanitarian responses at the U.S.-Mexico border. It yielded two main insights, which address two subsets of our main research question.

*What are the grounds for solidarity in calls for social justice on behalf of migrants?*

In this complex borderscape, demands for justice are framed as demands of solidarity, and vice-versa; different notions of solidarity and justice jostle one another, each embedded in distinct expressions of collective action. In this region, the call for solidarity in justice takes on political and structural dimensions. Migrant solidarity movements assume a stance that embraces the political, not just the personal, landscape of risk and danger—to challenge the social discourse on

immigration, and the moral, social, or legal basis for migrant exclusion. Faith-based solidarity, specifically, is rooted in notions of hospitality, justice, or service; however, in the policy context of anti-immigration border practices and a punitive justice system, even hospitality and service can express a radical message of social action.

In a perceptive analysis of solidaristic action, [Sangiovanni \(2015\)](#) argued that, historically, solidarity is expressed through shared experience, shared identity, or shared action, but what really matters is shared action—‘what we together *do*, rather than what we happen to *be*, or what we have *experienced*’ (p. 15). Nationalist solidarity, for instance, is designed to defend a shared identity under threat, the product of a shared history; on the border, this defends a political imaginary, represented through border patrol iconography and a federal narrative of alien ‘off the charts’ apprehensions. Border Patrol agents, for example, stand together in readiness for collective action, on behalf of the nation-state; they too assume personal risks to defend a political and judicial system, reconciling ‘what they do’ with where they come from in terms of religious belief, transnational identity, or economic inopportunity. By contrast, Christian solidarity is usually understood as grounded in the shared experience of human suffering, consonant with charity. On the border, however, we see faith-based solidarity is more explicitly articulated as joint action (action with the other) than charity (action on behalf of the other), in what one of our interlocutors referred to as ‘power with’, not ‘power over’ people. It is a combative solidarity ([Chouliaraki 2019](#)), one rooted in liberation theology to speak out against poverty and social injustice, as did Archbishop Romero, or rooted in civic activism to bring about a fairer society and immigration policy.

It is most useful to examine solidarity as a vernacular practice, rather than an ideal ([Rozakou 2017](#): 103), given its diverse forms of social engagement and its political stakes ([Papataxiarchis 2016](#): 209). This helps to focus attention on the operational landscape of humanitarian assistance—what is done on-the-ground on behalf of migrants and refugees—and reveal how fraught social action can be. In a militarized region such as the U.S.-Mexico border, acts of solidarity can manifest themselves as acts of rescue and support, acts of protest and resistance, or acts of control and law enforcement. Two recent ethnographies have shown that, for emergency responders, the border is a terrain of ‘entanglement’ marked by the competing claims of law, ethics, and justice over migrant bodies ([Jusionyte 2018](#)), and that, for local communities, migrant shelters are ‘points of contestation’ impacted by the politics of security and the moral imaginaries of charity, inclusion, and justice ([Vogt 2018](#)). Similarly, we show that service providers, the interlocutors of our study, must decide whether to champion both justice and charity—negotiating deep frictions between law, social justice, and compassion. This is a long-standing dilemma for international humanitarian organizations ([MacDonald 2018](#)), but also a live issue for grassroots humanitarianism and civil society actors who respond to local needs ([Fechter and Schwittay 2019](#)). Many faith-based and secular actors on the U.S.-Mexico border will situate their work within larger networks of migrant support, keenly aware that acts of solidarity rooted in charity or compassion do little to change harmful power differentials in the context of mass deportation and

detentions—if when extending help to a person in need, one remain clothed, sheltered, and safe, saying little more than ‘have a blanket, have a taco, and good luck’.

*What is the role of faith?* For many of our interlocutors, faith is the conviction that change can be enacted. Local expressions of faith are rooted in concrete action, the reality of border experiences, and a belief in humanity. For evangelical churches, faith does not necessarily carry the radical flavour of social justice. However, many faith-based actors in this region espouse the social teaching of the Catholic Church on Justice, Peace & Human Development, calling for two complementary ways of putting faith into practice: social justice—addressing the social structures that contribute to suffering and injustice—and charitable works—addressing immediate needs (Two Feet of Love in Action, [United States Conference of Catholic Bishops 2020](#)). Faith is here a conviction that change can be enacted and that power, in society, can be rooted in love for one’s neighbour, rather than rooted in fear.

Notably, we see a place for anger and courage, as well as love, in the expressions of religious and philosophical thoughts guiding humanitarian practice: faith gives one the fortitude to bear suffering in the world, but also to change the world through one’s anger at injustice and one’s courage in political action. Anger, as well as courage, has to be cultivated: indeed, many lay and faith-based humanitarian actors see collective action as fuelled by anger, even rage and outrage, to bring about the hope of more humane and just immigration policies. Anger is here a ‘cognitive good’—a ‘source of moral and political knowledge’ to register injustice and ‘the ugly facts that structure our political reality’ ([Srinivasan 2017: 20](#)). Together with courage, it has a place to fight pain and fear in the humanitarian and political sphere.

The U.S.-Mexico border, while subject to a political and legal regime of surveillance, detention, and deportation, is also a site of striking civic and faith-based resistance to the criminalization of refugee and undocumented communities. This study contributes to a better understanding of how notions of human dignity, social justice, and collective advocacy are locally articulated, jostling one another to spur humanitarian practice at times of crisis.

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