Columns
Horizons
Social Justice



Catholic sisters listen to a father named Santiago speak Dec. 3 in Washington. Santiago, 37, spoke about his family's journey from Honduras to Mexico and, eventually for him and his youngest son, to the United States. (Courtesy of Network Lobby)



by Susan Rose Francois

NCR Contributor

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

December 10, 2021

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

I couldn't help but think of St. Joseph on the first Friday of Advent, as I listened to a father named Santiago tell the story of his holy family's perilous journey from Honduras to Mexico and eventually, for part of his family at least, to the United States.

I was standing in a circle of Catholic sisters who had traveled from across the country to Washington's Lafayette Park. We had just finished a prayerful procession in front of the White House.

Holding signs that said, "President Biden, Catholic Sisters Say: End the Immoral Use of Title 42" and "President Biden, Love Your Neighbor," we walked slowly back and forth in front of 1600 Pennsylvania Ave., singing songs of hope, justice and solidarity.

> "We will work with each other, we will work side by side/ We will work with each other, we will work side by side/ And we'll guard each man's dignity and save each man's pride."
>
> —*They'll Know We are Christians by Our Love*

> "O come, O Wisdom from on high/Who ordered all things mightily/To us the path of knowledge show and teach us in its ways to go."
>
> —*O Come, O Come Emmanuel*



Members of 24 congregations of women religious from around the country gather outside the White House Dec. 3, 2021, to demonstrate against President Joe Biden's continuation of Title 42 expulsions. Title 42 is a provision of the U.S. public health law that Trump administration officials implemented to keep migrants out as COVID-19 infections began rising in the U.S. in 2020, and it has remained in place during the Biden administration. (CNS photo/Rhina Guidos)

This was not my first time walking for peace through justice in front of the White House. However, it was the first time I was so aware of the privilege that allows me to do so, as a white woman, a U.S. citizen, and a Catholic sister. This privilege came home as I stood in the circle, holding the Network banner with two sister friends, next to the impromptu stage where Sr. Tracy Kemme of the Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati was interpreting for Santiago as he told his story.

Santiago, 37, is married with three children. His family originally migrated from Honduras to Mexico, where they lived for 11 years. Eventually, however, it was clear

that it was not safe for them to remain in Mexico. "There was a lot of violence around where we lived," Sister Tracy interpreted for Santiago. "They assassinated a relative of mine and burned a person alive in front of my house."

Like Joseph and Mary embarking on the flight into Egypt, Santiago found it necessary to flee. However, because of economic reasons, his wife and two older children had to stay behind. Only Santiago and his youngest son could make the journey to the United States.

Like Joseph, Santiago did not find room at the inn. When he and his son applied for asylum at the border in Nogales, they were detained, processed and immediately sent back to Mexico. When he asked why, a border agent told him that the border is closed, and nothing can be done.

Advertisement

Currently, with the Biden Administration's continued use of Title 42, our southern borders are closed in the name of public health. Title 42 is a little-known provision of U.S. law, invoked by former President Donald Trump and continued by President Biden, that has effectively closed the border as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, in a September letter to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, respected public health experts denounced the use of Title 42 "that continues to unethically and illegally exploit the COVID-19 pandemic to expel, block, and return to danger, asylum seekers and individuals seeking protection at the border." The letter goes on to outline common sense public health measures that would protect border patrol officials and migrants, while keeping the border open to asylum-seekers, as required by international law.



Susan Rose Francois stands outside the White House Dec. 3 in Washington. (Courtesy of Susan Rose Francois)

Just one day before we gathered in Washington, the Biden administration also announced its intention to continue the Migrant Protection Protocols, or MPP, which was also expanded to exclude migrants from countries such as Haiti. Despite its name, Migrants Protection Protocols effectively means that a nation founded by immigrants has turned its back on human persons seeing refuge and instead puts them directly in harm's way, without resources to protect them from criminal elements. More than 60,000 asylum-seekers were returned across the Mexican

border under MPP during the Trump Administration.

Santiago described the border as a very difficult and dangerous place to live. After being turned away by border officials and returned to Mexico, he looked for shelter for himself and his young son. He soon found that criminal groups control everything in border towns. Santiago was threatened and, on more than one occasion, he narrowly avoided being kidnapped. The dangers that Santiago described made it clear to me that the continued implementation of Migrant Protection Protocols and Title 42 is a scandal, inhumane and immoral.

Like Joseph, Santiago is clearly a man of deep faith during times of struggle and uncertainty. After describing his escape from the kidnappers, he told us: "So, God is great. If I'm here telling this story today, it's because God never abandoned us."

Like Joseph, Santiago is making a way forward for his family. He told us that he doesn't give up, and that is how he found his way eventually to the Kino Border Initiative, a Jesuit-sponsored organization that provides assistance to asylum-seekers on both sides of the border.

"Joseph is certainly not passively resigned," writes Pope Francis in *Patris Corde*, "but courageously and firmly proactive." Santiago's story echoes the experience of the countless mothers and fathers who, like Joseph, are courageously and proactively seeking asylum at our borders to protect their families.

As I listened to his story, I was standing in the circle across from a young boy … Santiago's son. The look on his son's face, simultaneously filled with pride in his father and yet evoking the emotion of hearing their personal journey shared publicly, just about broke my heart.

We are better than this, I thought. If we are going to "build back better," as the president is apt to say, let's build back some compassion and humanity into our immigration policies, I said to myself.

And so, when the sisters around me began to chant, I joined in with all my heart. "President Biden, Catholic sisters say end Title 42 … NOW!"

I stand in solidarity with Santiago and his son, with his wife and children on the other side of the border, a family separated by the continued immoral use of Title 42.

I stand in solidarity with all of today's Josephs, mothers and fathers, aunts and uncles, cousins and siblings, friends and neighbors, walking the perilous path to safety for their holy families.

Will you join me?

This story appears in the **Advent** feature series. View the full series.