Columns
Migration



Humility of Mary Sr. Eilis McCulloh speaks at Network's Invest in Welcoming Communities press conference Sept. 13. The group called on Congress to invest in welcoming communities and move away from the path of militarization at the U.S.-Mexico border and in communities across the U.S. (Courtesy of Network Lobby/Catherine Gillette)



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In the poem "Home," British-Somali poet Warsan Shire writes:

> you have to understand,
> that no one puts their children in a boat
> unless the water is safer than the land

I often think about this poem when a major news outlet reports on another "migrant crisis" at the United States' southern border. Sometimes, I want to shout the excerpts from "Home" from the rooftops so that those determined to demonize migrants and refugees can hear it. However, more often than not, Shire's words live in me as a sort of lament when the news speaks of another migrant death.

Two weeks ago, I clicked on my news alerts on Facebook and saw a report about a 3-year-old boy who died in the Rio Grande while his family was trying to enter the United States. I sent the article to my team at Network Lobby. One of my co-workers replied, “How many does it take?”

It shouldn't take even one.

As I write this, there have been three deaths in the Rio Grande in the past two weeks and at least 89 deaths since 2018. This is just in the Rio Grande and does not account for the deaths along the rest of our southern border. Those numbers shocked me. How many of these deaths made the evening news?

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Each report of a migrant death should horrify us, if for no other reason than the fact that they were preventable. However, I fear we are long past the point where one migrant death while crossing the Rio Grande (or the desert) shocks us to our core.

As I sat down to watch the evening news recently, I was horrified to see that the lead story was about the migrant surge and the measures Texas (and the U.S.

government) are taking to prevent them from seeking asylum in the United States. There was no mention of the 3-year-old — no mention of the life lost — no mention of the dangerous routes these people take.

Have we become so desensitized by the language we hear on most news reports that demonizes migrants as part of a "surge" or "crisis" that we forget that these individuals are the cherished parents, children, aunts or uncles, nieces or nephews, grandchild and friends of someone? Their lives matter. The human right to migrate matters.

In remarks honoring World Migrant and Refugee Day, Pope Francis said, "the right to migrate, a fundamental human right, has for many become an obligation driven by dire circumstances." In naming migration a fundamental human right, Pope Francis also called on the rest of us to "embrace the spirit of empathy and unity, welcoming those who seek refuge with open hearts and minds."

What does welcoming with an open heart and mind look like? It means doing all we can do to ensure that all migrants and refugees are welcomed with dignity. It might look like Jesuit Fr. James Martin's recent tweet in response to a group harassing asylum seekers in New York City. Martin simply quoted Scripture, writing, "For I was a stranger and you did not welcome me."

For more than 7,000 Catholics across the United States, it meant signing onto Network Lobby's Immigration sign-on letter calling on Congress to invest in welcoming communities and divest from the militarization of the border. Before delivering the letter to Congress, Network hosted a press conference on Sept. 13 near the Russell Senate Office Building. Joined by three members of Congress and numerous faith and secular partners, we called for a narrative of hope and welcome that placed people first and ensured that the Shelter and Services Program — a federal grant program that supports organizations that provide services and shelter to migrants — was fully funded at $800 million dollars.

This time calls each one of us to respond in some way. Maybe our motherhouse property owns a house or extra space that we can open as housing for asylum seekers or refugees. Maybe our parish has an empty convent or rectory or some other access to housing. Maybe we are able to locally sponsor a family by furnishing

a house and serving as mentor or friend. Maybe we can gather a group of people to make bag lunches for asylum seekers who are bussed to cities across the country. We can also write letters to the editor, call our members of Congress and advocate for our migrant siblings.

And, we can all pray that all migrants, asylum seekers and refugees around the world find places and people of welcome. It is on us to create a more welcoming world.