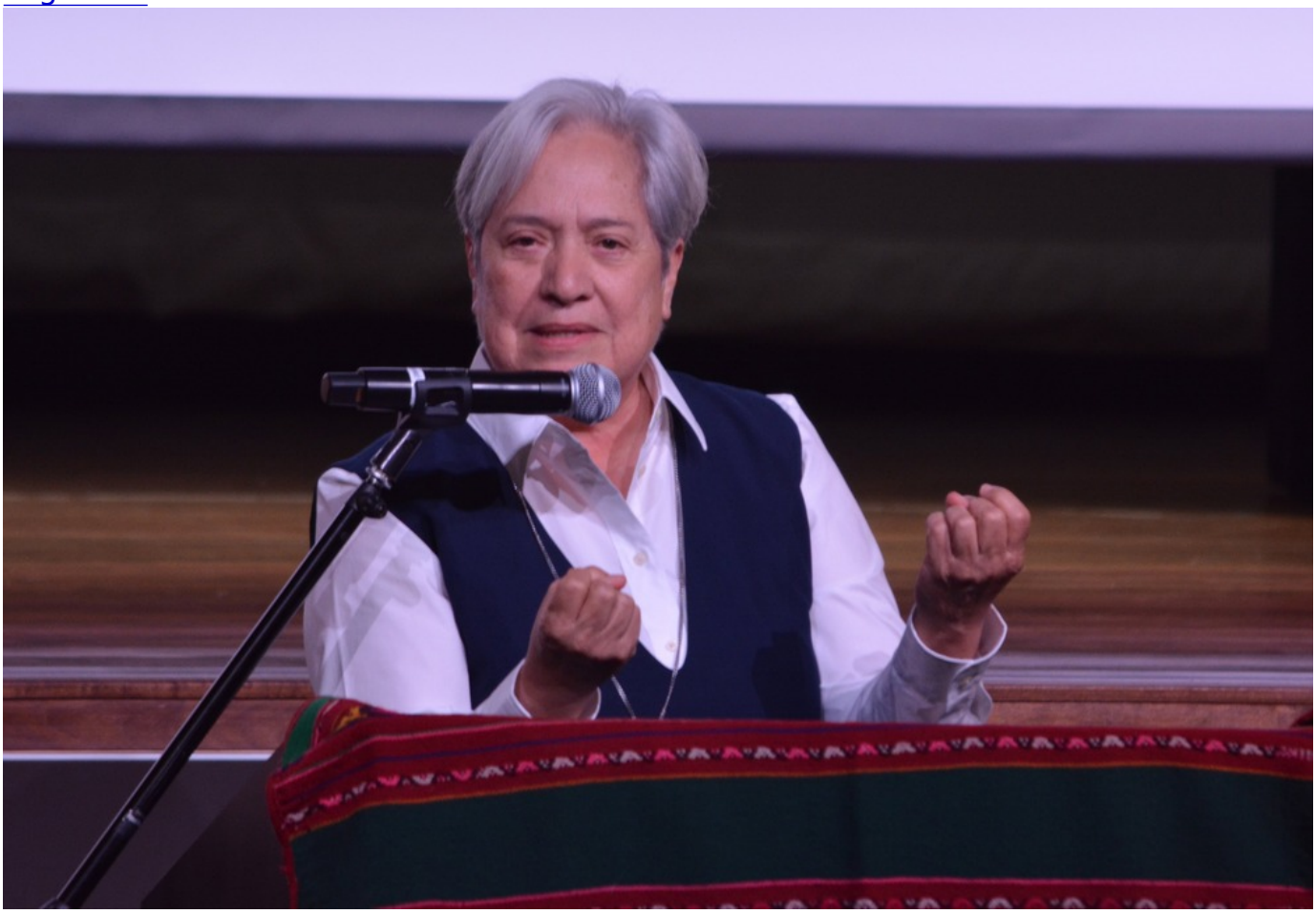
Migration



Sister Norma Pimentel, a Missionary of Jesus, gives a talk in Chicago April 15, 2024, showcasing her artwork of immigrants who sought shelter at her organization's humanitarian respite center after being released from detention at the U.S.-Mexico border. Her work was on display nationally for the first time at Holy Name Cathedral in Chicago. (OSV News/Simone Orendain)



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A religious sister best known for helping more than 100,000 migrants and asylum-seekers at the U.S.-Mexico border in southern Texas was in Chicago April 15 to share her artwork nationally for the first time and reiterate a message of love.

Sister Norma Pimentel, a Missionary of Jesus, stood at a podium at Holy Name Cathedral, positioned between copies of five oil and pastel paintings whose subjects were women and children who sought shelter after being released from detention centers at the border.

"That little kid is holding that backpack," she told a priest in the audience who asked about a specific painting. It depicted a girl in pink and lavender with her mouth slightly open, eyes looking to one side while holding a colorful heavy looking bag. "She's so happy because that backpack is filled with a lot of goodies and stuff, socks, hygiene items, toys, candies. ... But at the same time she's sort of not knowing what to do."

Norma, head of Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley in the Diocese of Brownsville, told the audience of more than 200 that by the time children arrive at her organization's humanitarian respite center "they've gone through so much."

Norma, a fine arts major before completing advanced degrees in theology and psychology, said, "The only reason we're here is because ... we want to encounter Jesus in our lives.

"He very clearly told us that we will find him in them: those innocent, fragile people that come to the border in the United States and are simply asking for an

opportunity for life. That's all."



Copies of Sister Norma Pimentel's art depicting immigrants who sought shelter at her organization's humanitarian respite center are on display nationally for the first time at Holy Name Cathedral in Chicago April 15, 2024. Sister Pimentel, a Missionary of Jesus and head of Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley in the Diocese of Brownsville, Texas, is known for aiding migrants at the Southern border. (OSV News/Simone Orendain)

The sister recalled her early years as a novice after being arrested for supporting efforts to close down a local congressman's office. He voted for U.S. funding of a war in a Latin American country that left people fleeing to the U.S. border. She said the experience made her realize her true calling.

"A God that loves us is one that challenges us to stand up and to tend his people," Norma told the crowd, adding people should "not hold back with the love God gives us when we encounter him."

"That love is there to share and to care for others, especially those that most need us," said the daughter of Mexican immigrants.

Norma, 70, answered audience questions ranging from what to do about Chicago's burgeoning refugee population to addressing fear of immigrants. She advised that everyone should "be yourself" and listen because "God will tell you what to do. This is his work," she said. "I tell people to be present to them. Listen to them. Know their story and you will know what they need."

She recounted stories of how she dissuaded people from being fearful of immigrants. That they were not to be feared, but that in fact some refugees themselves showed compassion and gave consolation to children who became separated from parents, she described.

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Norma's speaking engagement was the first of an annual series at the cathedral called the Bishop Kevin Birmingham Lecture. The Chicago auxiliary bishop, whose duties included being Chicago Cardinal Blase J. Cupich's representative to the Illinois Patrons of the Arts in the Vatican Museums, died unexpectedly in October at age 51. His family attended the lecture.

Birmingham's youngest brother, Brandon Birmingham, delivered inaugural remarks. He told OSV News in an interview beforehand that Norma was "extremely talented."

"But the message (behind the art) of the immigrant experience, it's very (much) what Kevin was all about, tending to God's people," said Brandon, a public school art teacher. "That was the motto on his coat of arms."

It also was the title of the talk and a phrase that Norma used multiple times.

Norma said she was "very happy" to be able to highlight, on a national scale, her work of giving humanitarian aid to immigrants combined with her artwork.

After the talk she shared with OSV News that this was the first time her art was being seen nationally and even with a busy schedule she makes time for painting.

"Shhhh, it's a secret, OK," she laughed. "(It takes) not very long, just a couple of days."

Using photos that the immigrants allowed her to take, she said, "I start one day and the only thing I do is the eyes and the expression because that's the most important part and then once I do that, the next day I finish the rest and the third day I just touch up whatever I need to touch up and that's it. It's done."

She told OSV News after receiving the Chicago invitation from the Illinois Patrons of the Arts in the Vatican Museums, she was invited to San Diego and then "another place."

"I hope that my art can bring us to an awareness of the immigrants as a people that are here to gift us with their presence more than to hurt us," she said.