News
Ministry



Sister Norma Pimentel, left, and Bishop Daniel Flores enjoy pizza during a recent Christmas event at the Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley Humanitarian Respite Center in McAllen, Texas. (Photo courtesy of Pimentel)



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Sister Norma Pimentel remembers well the first time her new bishop joined the religious sisters in the Diocese of Brownsville at one of their gatherings.

He came into the kitchen where she was preparing plates of tamales, and "he begins doing what I'm doing," recalled Pimentel, a Missionaries of Jesus sister who has gained an international profile for her work with migrants as the executive director of Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley.

"I had never seen (that) from another bishop," she told RNS in a Spanish interview on Dec. 12, explaining that a bishop would typically sit down and the sisters would serve him. "He doesn't want to distinguish himself as special, just one among us," said Pimentel, who also leads the women religious of the diocese.

For his part, Bishop Daniel Flores says that when Pimentel calls him and makes a request, like asking him to call another bishop to smooth the way for migrants leaving the diocese for another part of the country, his answer is: "Yes, Sister, I'll do it."

"My attitude as a bishop is if you have someone who knows what they're doing, let them do it," said Flores about the sister named among Time magazine's 100 most influential people of 2020.

The relationship between Pimentel, dubbed by some media outlets as "the pope's favorite nun," and Flores, recently elected as the sole U.S. member of the Vatican council responsible for preparing the next synod, is notable both for the high profile of its individuals and for the rarity of such a partnership between a sister and bishop.

Fifteen years ago when Flores arrived as bishop, becoming Pimentel's boss, neither of them had the kind of international profile the duo have separately acquired. As

the individual spotlights on the work of each have gotten brighter, their collaboration in serving the people of Brownsville and advocating on the international stage has mostly stayed in the dark.

In an English-language interview on Dec. 10, Flores said that the two communicate "pretty frequently" to keep each other informed, as Flores meets with other bishops in Texas and at the national level and Pimentel has a close-up view of the migration situation on the ground. The two also collaborate to speak with groups visiting the diocese, as well as on addressing poverty and supporting the youth who experience it, he said.

The bishop heaped praise on Pimentel's advocacy around migration issues and her leadership of the respite center in McAllen, Texas. "Sister's a very good spokesman for the things of the church's Catholic social teaching," he said.

Calling Pimentel's approach "common-sense" and "practical," Flores said, "She runs a pretty disciplined respite center."

Pimentel appreciates that Flores — who just completed a term as chair of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' doctrine committee, responsible for reviewing the "doctrinal integrity" of the conference's documents and providing theological expertise — also has an ability to give a homily with "a depth that you understand" to the faithful.

The two are Texas-born with Mexican heritage. Pimentel was born in Brownsville in 1953, when "we knew everybody," and has watched as the population of the Rio Grande Valley essentially quadrupled. Flores, born in Palacios in 1961, became bishop of Brownsville in 2009.

Both have dogs and both turn to artistic hobbies when they need a change of pace — Pimentel, who has a bachelor's degree in art, paints portraits of the migrants she meets at the respite center. Flores, who has told media that he grew up wanting to be a paleontologist, frequently doodles dinosaurs during his meetings.

But according to Pimentel, one of their key commonalities is an emphasis on pastoral work. Flores "focuses not so much on governing as on pastoring," Pimentel said, adding that they both delegate administration to trusted and capable team members.

"I prefer to be with the people," she said, explaining that "for me, it’s always more important that the person leading an organization has sensitivity for the people."

That approach for Brownsville’s leaders reflects a value of the Vatican, where Pope Francis has told priests to be "shepherds" who have "the smell of the sheep."

In the Rio Grande Valley, smelling like the sheep means navigating the bilingual norms of the border region, where families often have connections to both the U.S. and Mexico. The Diocese of Brownsville is the only U.S. diocese where every parish has a Spanish Mass, according to data released by the USCCB.

Flores, whose ancestors came from both sides of the border, said that from his own experience and speaking with the diocese’s kids, "you grow up with kind of like two worlds in your head": Spanish for cultural, familial customs, and English for school, the news and football.

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The bishop said he tells the diocese’s young people, where the average age is 26 years old, "it’s a blessing to be as bilingual as you can because that means you have access to worlds of ways of thinking and perspectives, and it’s a richness," pushing back against an approach in previous generations that confined Spanish to the home.

Both Pimentel and Flores agreed in separate interviews that supporting their diocese’s young people is the biggest challenge they face. Pimentel cited the difficulty youth face in negotiating the many options they have and what they are exposed to on the internet "as they discover their identity."

"The youth of today need a lot of help because they have a lot to give, and if we don’t pay attention to them, they can get lost," Pimentel said. During her interview with RNS, she paused the conversation to admire the clean, new shoes eagerly shown to her by a young migrant from Colombia.

The bishop said youth must be included in synodality, "We need to listen much more to young adults," he said. "You can find some very genuine powerful expressions of faith, but also a longing for maybe a different way of doing things."

Flores said pushing the youth to stay in school and seek vocational training or college can be difficult given the economic pressures they might feel to "make quick money," which can lead them toward gangs. (The four counties that make up the diocese all have slightly higher high school graduation rates than the state average of 81.1% , according to a Texas Tribune project tracking students who began eighth grade in 2011.)

But the bishop has seen the diocese's youth participate in the "strong community sense in the Valley" and began to choke up as he recalled how they waited for hours in lines of cars to take their grandparents or parents to get COVID-19 vaccinations when the shots became available. "The Valley had a very high rate of the vaccination of the elderly. That tells you something," he said.

"There's a great openness to being helpful to people who are in some distress," said Flores, emphasizing that those who are not migrants or have not experienced poverty are often only a few generations removed from those experiences.

The Rio Grande Valley experiences poverty at a much higher rate (about 25% across all counties) than the national average (11%). And while Pimentel is internationally known for her work with migrants, many people miss that "what I do is respond to the humanitarian reality, humans who suffer in the Valley," she said, work that extends to issues with food insecurity and struggles to pay rent and utility bills.

Pimentel dismissed the idea that President-elect Donald Trump's anti-migrant rhetoric had been responsible for the flip of the Valley's previously blue counties, citing the economy instead. "The people of the Valley are suffering a lot economically," she said. Flores also said anti-migrant sentiment is "less vociferous" in the Valley, despite a desire for orderly processes.

Nevertheless, Pimentel and Catholic Charities have been a target for an anti-migrant conservative push, including an investigation by Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton. Paxton's efforts have repeatedly faced legal roadblocks from various judges, one of whom called his investigation "harassment."

Flores recently drew blowback from some LGBTQ+ Catholic advocates for his work on a USCCB doctrinal note rejecting gender-affirming medical treatments for transgender people. The bishop told RNS the document had been part of a "long process" that involved listening to "people who work in health care" and "trans persons," part of Catholic social teaching's dedication to "realism."

But despite Flores’ and Pimentel’s frequent headlines, as the faithful celebrated the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe last Thursday, most did not seem to know their diocese’s leaders had acquired fame — or controversy — outside the Valley.

Instead, they told RNS about Flores’ attention to the diocese’s youth, Pimentel’s kindness to migrants and Our Lady of Guadalupe’s impact on their lives.

Lidia Trujillo, the mother of a middle-schooler at Guadalupe Regional Middle School, said of Pimentel, "She has taught us to love our neighbor, to be compassionate, not to think that they’re coming to steal something from us, but instead that we have to be compassionate and share what we have."

Trujillo said her children had benefited from Flores’ attention. "We are a very unified community, and Bishop Flores is the best bishop in the world, at least for us. He’s very, very good with our community."