Reflections from the U.S./Mexico Border
A group of 7 parishioners spent a week (October 6-12) on the Border to better understand the realities of migration from Mexico into the United States. You are invited to hear their stories and experiences during the weeks ahead.

A Wall & Border Like No Other
Reflection by Fr. Peter Byrne, SJ

It wasn’t the first time I crossed a border or stood at a wall that excluded people. In the fall of 1988, British checkpoints at the border of North of Ireland and the Republic stopped our car, asked for documents, searched other vehicles for weapons and explosives. In Belfast, a solid steel wall marked the border between Catholic and Protestant neighborhoods. After young men and women smashed and tore down the Berlin Wall one of my brothers gave me a chunk of that hated barrier. Beethoven’s 9th Symphony announced the joy of freedom with its collapse.

But this wall and border felt very different — ominous and cruel and cynical. We stood at Nogales and Douglas, AZ, separated from Nogales and Agua Prieta, Mexico by 16 foot steel poles with strings of razor wire on the US side. The extent of the wall, the amount of money to build and maintain it, the desperation of people to cross the border and continue their trek through the fierce and hostile desert still ahead — this wall and this border were different. Part of a cruel policy. Disturbing questions kept surfacing: “What is becoming of us as a nation? What are we doing? Why so much fear?

A Dining Room of Hope

But encounters with people are what this story is all about. These encounters, some brief and fleeting, some longer, are what struck me most. Just inside Nogales, Mexico we visited a small, cramped dining facility of the Kino Project. A young mother, one infant nursing at her breast, others at her knees and waist, waited patiently for food as she listened to instructions on seeking asylum. She was a Pieta, a young Mary, in flight, from hopelessness and violence in Guatemala or El Salvador. Having been in El Salvador in 1989 just before the Jesuits, their cook and her daughter were murdered; having visited El Salvador again in 2004 as well as Guatemala, I know how our government bears significant responsibility for a good part of the chaos and economic disruption in these two countries, chaos and disruption that cause so many to migrate north in search of a future for their children.

Then there was Gustavo, two years old, perched in a stroller looking up with a thatch of brown hair and a huge smile and his sister, Kimberly. Kimberly! I exclaimed with amusement and admiration for her mother who carried much determination and joy.

There was Obie, a Border Patrol Officer, who, along with his seven-year-old daughter, shared dinner and conversation with us one evening, a man of integrity and wisdom, justice and compassion. Obie, who treated those in our country without documentation, with firmness, yet respect and kindness.

There was Sean, another Border Patrol Officer from Buffalo, NY. We talked about how well the Buffalo Bills were doing this year and perhaps they might beat the Patriots for a change. Wait til next year!

There were the three Sisters of Notre Dame who organized the program and extended such gracious and generous hospitality. With tireless service, they introduced us to many people on both sides of the border, people with different perspectives and viewpoints.

OVER
A Cross in the Desert

We met Stephanie who worked in a Department of the Coroners’ Office of Tucson which received the remains of those who died crossing the desert. Their mission attempts to find relatives of the deceased. Stephanie’s mother had carried her through the desert to the US as a three-year-old years before. She is now an American citizen, worked for her degree and is committed to this profound work of Corporal and Spiritual work of Mercy. On our last day, we planted a cross in the desert for Wilma Ramirez Marchdo, age 42, from Brazil, who died in the desert far from home. We prayed, sang songs and marked her passing less she be totally forgotten except to God.

“Remember!
You were sojourners in Egypt”
“Do this in remembrance of Me.”

The power of Scripture and the radical beauty of the Eucharist guided us. Under all the muck and mess of the Church, in spite of all our fears of others, our own despair of the world that can overwhelm us, the mystery of the Gospel, the nourishment of the Eucharist and the presence of the poor shone so strong and bright and clear and offered us the inner compass we needed.

A Night God Crossed All Borders

This is the title of a video by Jesuit, Mark McGregor on migrants seeking posada — shelter. As we all draw closer to Thanksgiving, then to Advent and beyond to Christmas we recall the dangerous memory of how God, in Jesus, crossed all borders, slipped into our midst totally vulnerable to our welcome or rejection. Our God took the immense risk of turning the divine face towards us and, yes, crossed all borders to be with us forever in our brothers and sisters. What will become of us as a Nation and as a Church? Much of that answer lies at a Wall, the Border and the People on both sides.