



10 years

Restoring Human Dignity

BY PAUL BINZ

Respite Center continues responding to God's call to help

As the Humanitarian Respite Center marks 10 years of existence with more than half a million people passing through its doors, its history is a decade of answering the call to encounter, to meet “The Other” and welcome the stranger. In this it is a fulfilment of the Church’s mandate on the subject, as framed by Pope Francis and Bishop Daniel E. Flores. Shortly after Pope Francis began his papacy in 2013, he issued

“*Evangelii gaudium*,” an apostolic exhortation on the “proclamation of the Gospel in today’s world,” which included focus on refugees and others in migration.

“Migrants present a particular challenge for me, since I am the pastor of a Church without frontiers, a Church which considers herself mother to all,” the pontiff wrote in “*Evangelii gaudium*.” “For this reason, I exhort all countries to a generous openness ...”

Bishop Flores often cites in his homilies God’s call for action on behalf of others. Charity is not just Mass on Sunday or giving a dollar to the man on the street corner, “and then ‘That’s nice’ and we go home,” he has said. “God who has given us the gift of his love wants us to act.”

His remarks note that those working at the Respite Center have taken these words to heart.

“What impacts me the most is the quality and the consistency of the volunteers every day, every day – preparing food, washing clothes, mopping floors, helping people get bus tickets,” Bishop Flores said in 2019 as the center marked five years of operation.

“*Porque sin la compasión, no más son números, y no podemos permitir que se proponga esta idea que el inmigrante es un número y un problema; es una persona,*” he said. (“Because without compassion, they (immigrants) become nothing more than numbers, and we cannot allow this idea that the immigrant is just a number and a





LEFT: Sister Norma Pimentel and Auxiliary Bishop Mario A. Avilés serve Thanksgiving dinners to Respite Center visitors in 2022. (Photo by Paul Binz)

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AT TOP: Sister Norma Pimentel takes time to greet children at the Respite Center.
BELOW: A father and his two children beam after a dinner at the Respite Center. (Courtesy Photos)

problem. The immigrant is a person.”)

The Respite Center was born in June 2014 in the borrowed parish hall of Sacred Heart Catholic Church in downtown McAllen in response to a wave of immigration, mainly from Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador in Central America, spawned by gang and political violence as well as economic hardship. After detention by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, the new arrivals were released at the bus station pending resolution of their immigration status. Before leaving the Rio Grande Valley on public transportation with permission to continue to other destinations, they were left waiting without food and shelter in downtown McAllen.

In response to the large numbers of these distressed immigrants in and around the McAllen bus station, Sister Norma Pimentel, executive director of Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley, opened a temporary aid station in the Sacred Heart Parish Hall “for a couple of days.” But it was never able to close due to the continuous stream of visitors coming by for welcome and assistance, which soon included meals, showers, overnight shelter, and travel and immigration advice.

The number of new arrivals at the center tripled in its first 2½ years, reaching more than 36,000 by the end of 2016. As the most visible arm of Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley, the Respite Center’s performance under the direction of Sister Pimentel brought consistent national, international and papal recognition.

“I am overwhelmed with gratitude and hope by the response of so many – the hundreds of people from our community and those who have traveled from all parts of the United States to encounter the suffering of our brothers and sisters who seek asylum,” Sister Pimentel said. “To see the dedication, care, love and compassion with which they serve the families ... it reflects the natural goodness of people.”

The center attracted volunteers and aid from non-Catholics, too. Dozens of organizations – religious and secular, local and national – have participated, including Georgetown University, the Hispanic Heritage Foundation, the Meadow Foundation, and locally, the Salvation Army, the Jewish synagogue, Latter-Day Saints, and United Methodist, Lutheran, Baptist, Presbyterian and other churches.

“Almost every denomination has helped,” Sister Pimentel said.

Bishop Flores said of a recent visit to the Respite Center, “We had some visitors – university students from Honolulu, San Antonio – and they’d been working at the Respite Center. I’m in amazement at this simple act of trying to take care of people in distress – it’s a deep act of love, but also faith.”

Despite its international reputation and the attention it has brought her, Sister Pimentel is quick to clarify that the Respite Center has been about the people it serves and the many volunteers who serve them, not about her.

Nonetheless, Sister Pimentel quickly became the face of the Respite Center and Catholic Charities, earning a long list of accolades. In just the first couple of years of the Respite Center, these included:

- The Keep the Dream Alive Award of Catholic Charities USA
- *Texas Monthly* magazine naming her an Indispensable Leader, and a nomination for Texan of the Year
- McAllen Chamber of Commerce naming Sister Pimentel its 2015 McAllen Woman of the Year
- *The Monitor* newspaper naming her its 2015 Rio Grande Valley Citizen of the Year
- Sister Pimentel invited to the 2016 Easter Prayer Breakfast at the White House
- Receiving the 2016 Loaves & Fishes Award for Faith in Action from Catholic Charities of San Francisco
- Our Sunday Visitor naming her one of its eight Catholics of the Year for 2016

Time magazine in 2020 named Sister Pimentel to its annual list of the 100 most influential people in the world.

“I think this selection comes as a recognition for the work we do here on the border, that of restoring human dignity to those in need,” she said. “It is a recognition of the generosity of the people of the Rio Grande Valley and from throughout the United States. Together we recognize that we have a responsibility.

“When we see human suffering, we cannot turn our backs; we must respond.”

The Respite Center had precedents in Cameron County with Casa Oscar Romero, which operated for 10 years between 1982-92 in response to a previous surge in immigration from Central America,

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Blue Mass

Bishop Daniel E. Flores celebrated a Blue Mass for first responders at the Basilica of Our Lady of San Juan del Valle - National Shrine on June 5. This act of thanksgiving brought together different agencies of law enforcement for a special blessing.



Heartbeat of Heaven

Festival Internacional de Cine Católico hosted a premier of the documentary of the life of Blessed Carlo Acutis, who at a young age built a website to catalogue eucharistic miracles. His work can be found at <http://www.carloacutis.com/> and at local exhibits throughout the diocese. Recently, Pope Francis approved a second miracle, which qualifies Acutis for sainthood.

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and in La Posada Providencia in San Benito. Sister Pimentel worked for several years as head of operations at Casa Oscar Romero, which moved into Brownsville in 1987 and still serves immigrants and refugees today as the Ozanam Center.

At the end of 2016, the growing numbers of visitors passing through the Respite Center's limited space at Sacred Heart Parish prompted plans for construction of a permanent center on an adjacent downtown site. However, these plans did not come to fruition as surging numbers of refugees shifted the focus back to service and forced the center to move twice to accommodate them.

The Respite Center has been the eye of the storm through various waves of immigration and other crises, including the coronavirus pandemic, protests from neighbors at one of its temporary locations, and criticism and attacks from conservative elements. Despite that, the Humanitarian Respite Center has weathered the storms. Continued need and the endless stream of visitors means there is no end in sight for the center's good works.

"How we treat the poor is how we treat Christ. And to give him even a cup of water invites a blessing from God," Bishop Flores has said.

Reflecting on the achievements of the Humanitarian Respite Center and of those who have worked there, Sister Pimentel had this to say upon receiving the Outstanding Leadership Award at the Leadership Conference of Women Religious in 2019.

"There are times we must decide who we are, what we stand for," she said. "We must ask ourselves, dear sisters, 'What else must I do in the world today?'"

"In times of extreme pain and suffering, extreme measures of love are needed." □