

Bishops end border visit calling for urgent reunification of children

SAN JUAN, Texas — In less than 48 hours, a group of Catholic bishops saw the faces of triumph and relief from migrants who had been recently released by immigration authorities, but ended their two-day journey to the border with a more “somber” experience, visiting detained migrant children living temporarily within the walls of a converted Walmart.

During a news conference after the second and last day of their visit July 2, they stressed the “urgent” need to do something to help the migrant children.

“The children who are separated from their parents need to be reunited. That’s already begun and it’s certainly not finished and there may be complications, but it must be done and it’s urgent,” said Cardinal Daniel N. DiNardo of Galveston-Houston, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Archbishop Jose H. Gomez of Los Angeles, USCCB vice president, celebrated Mass in Spanish with about 250 children at the facility on what once was the loading dock of the superstore.

“It was, as you can imagine, very challenging to see the children by themselves,” Archbishop Gomez said during the news conference. “Obviously, when there are children at Mass, they are with their parents and families ... but it was special to be with them and give them some hope.”

He said he spoke to them about the importance of helping one another.

The visit to the facility known as Casa Padre capped their brief journey to the border communities of McAllen-Brownsville near the southern border. Casa Padre gained notoriety earlier this year because it houses children separated from their families, as well as unaccompanied minors in a setting with murals and quotes of U.S. presidents, including one of President Donald Trump saying, “Sometimes by losing a battle you find a new way to win the war.”

The facility is run by Southwest Key Programs, a nonprofit that operates it under a federal contract. Bishop Joseph C. Bambera of Scranton, Pennsylvania, along with Auxiliary Bishop Robert J. Brennan of Rockville Centre, New York, also were part of the delegation July 1 and 2, led by Cardinal DiNardo.

The building houses about 1,200 boys ages 10-17, said Bishop Bambera, and though the care they receive seems to be appropriate — it's clean, they have access to medical care, and schooling and recreational facilities — it was clear that "there was a sadness" manifested by the boys, he said in a July 2 interview with Catholic News Service.

"We can provide the material environment to care for a person and it's provided there, but that doesn't nurture life. That takes the human interaction with the family or a caregiver," he said.

Though many of the boys held there are considered "unaccompanied minors," some were separated from a family member they were traveling with, said Bishop Bambera. And when you see them, "those boys bear clearly the burden of that" separation, he said.

Bishop Bambera said the boys listened intently during Mass and seemed to have a particular devotion and piety, one not seen in children that age. During Mass, "I saw a few boys wiping tears," he said.

Bishop Daniel E. Flores of Brownsville, head of the local Brownsville Diocese, accompanied the delegation, which included a visit on the first day to a humanitarian center operated by Catholic Charities. He said there's a need to address the "push factors" driving immigration from Central America, a place where migrants are fleeing a variety of social ills, including violence and economic instability.

The U.S. border bishops have frequent communication with their counterparts in Mexico and Central America on variety of topics, he said during the news conference, but the problems driving immigration to the U.S. are complex.

He said he has spoken with parents in Central America about the danger of the

journey but recalled a conversation with mothers in places such as Honduras and Guatemala who have told him: “My son will be killed here, they will shoot him and he’s 16. What am I supposed to do?”

“These are extremely complex and difficult situations,” he said. “This is a hemispheric problem, not just a problem on the border here.”

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