

A Desert Experience: A Reflection by Friar Andrew Dinegar

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From June 18 - July 8, 2018, I visited Santa Barbara's Ite Nuntiate Franciscan Intentional Community, located in Elfrida, Arizona. Elfrida is a very small town, with a population of about 460 people, located 25 miles north of Douglas, Arizona. Douglas itself is a border town. The Ite Nuntiate Community was started by **Friar David Buer** in September, 2017. Currently, two other friars live in Community with Brother David. They are **Friar Sam Nasada** and **Friar Luis Runde** from the Sacred Heart Province.

On June 18, Brother Sam and I visited Ajo, Arizona, for two days, staying with his friends, the Weyers, who are involved with the Ajo Samaritans. The Samaritans are a group of religious and lay volunteers who serve in desert ministry. Their work involves groups of folks who drive deep into the Sonoran desert, walking the migrant trails, carrying gallons of drinking water, snacks and other supplies, and placing them along the routes where the migrants could find these life-saving items as they cross the unforgiving desert.

On the morning of June 19, Brother Sam and I woke early. Along with Sister Judy Bourg, a School Sister of Notre Dame, and John Heid, a local volunteer, we started out on a journey which took us 14 miles in to the desert on a four-wheel-drive vehicle, and then walked another mile along a migrant trail to place our supplies. John and Sister Judy are very knowledgeable with the local desert migrant trails.

Ajo Samaritans is an offshoot of Tucson Samaritans (<http://www.tucsonsamaritans.org>), a humanitarian aid organization founded in 2002. It is a mission of Southside Presbyterian Church and seeks to help prevent deaths and suffering along the U.S.-Mexico border. The Samaritans are made up of volunteers who drop off food and water in various locations in the Sonoran Desert. They come from various faith traditions or none at all. Using two donated four-wheel-drive vehicles, they carry water, food, emergency medical supplies, communication equipment and maps out to the desert daily to help save the lives of people who are crossing the landscape.

The four of us came upon a few empty water bottles (gallon-sized) and a hoodie sweatshirt, items which had been discarded by migrants walking the trail. I had been thinking of that old adage, "If these walls could talk...." Well, I used that adage in context of, "If these items could talk;" "If these desert floors and trees could talk." What would they say? What would they speak to me?

Ending migrant deaths and related suffering on the U.S.-Mexico border is also a mission of the non-profit organization Colibri Center for Human Rights (<http://www.colibricenter.org>). From January to June 20, 2018, the number of migrant deaths (recovered remains) in Pima County stood at 56. From 1998 to 2017, more than 3,200 remains have been found. Colibri is working in partnership with the Pima County Medical Examiner and the families of those missing by comparing information about missing individuals and those who died and whose remains were recovered in the desert. Colibri's mission includes finding the missing and identifying the dead. Over the last 12 years, the ministry had collected nearly 3,000 detailed reports of missing persons who had disappeared in the desert.

On Tuesday evenings, in Douglas, a group of religious and volunteers gather at a local McDonald's restaurant, approximately three blocks from the US-Mexico border crossing to remember our brothers and sisters who tried to cross and lost their lives in the desert. During the weekly vigil in Douglas, participants hold up crosses bearing the names of those who died while trying to cross the border into the United States. The vigil serves to remember all the migrants who have died in Cochise County. We each read the name on the cross out loud, held it up, and laid the cross on the side of the road leading to the border crossing. It started as a response from the Douglas faith communities to the finding of the bodies of six dead migrants who were trapped in a sewer ditch during a heavy rain. When most people in our country ignore this atrocity or put the blame on migrants. These few people in Douglas make sure that all brothers and sisters of ours in God are not forgotten.

Another ministry which we had visited, in the Mexican border town of Agua Prieta, south of Douglas, was C.A.M.E. (Centro de Atencional Migrante "Exodus"). Here I learned more about the brutal and life-threatening journey that migrants must endure. Hundreds die annually in the inhospitable desert. Most of these are slow, agonizing deaths of thirst and heat exhaustion. Most would-be crossers travel from southern Mexico and even as far away as Central and South America. Statistically, for every 1 who makes it, 2 do not. Many are abused and robbed by their "polleros" or "coyotes" (people they pay to lead them to cross the border). Others are blocked at the border and tumble back into Agua Prieta, or are apprehended by the U.S. border patrol and deported. The majority of them are left far from home, penniless, demoralized and often injured or ill.

For this reason, the C.A.M.E. Migrant Center was established in 2007. This is a short-stay center where migrants receive a meal and a place to rest. They are provided information on where they can receive medical assistance. The shelter is a free, safe place where people can spend the night, connect with their families, wait for additional funds to return home and receive basic humanitarian care. The center does not receive government aid but operates on donations from organizations such as Rancho Feliz, churches and other relief groups in the area.

One day Brothers Sam and David, a group of young women from CalState East Bay campus ministry, and I visited an immigration trial in the Federal Courthouse in Tucson. In what is named "Operation Streamline", the detainees filed into the room seven by seven for a dose of rapid-fire justice. In less than a minute and in quick succession, each migrant pleaded guilty to illegally entering the United States and was sentenced. If applicable, the clients could apply for asylum. They were overwhelmingly Central American and Mexican men, many of which were still in the dusty, sweaty garb they had been wearing when they were caught by Border Patrol agents. They looked dazed, tired and resigned to their fate, many having just completed a harsh trek across the sweltering desert. Some of their heads drooped as they listened to the judge.

Within my three-week visit with my brother Franciscans, I—along with other volunteers-- visited the migrant trails in the desert on three separate occasions. Each trip was different. We drove many miles into the desert on each occasion, and walked up one mile, if not more, to get to our 'destinations,' where we repeated the same processes of placing supplies for our brothers and sisters who would pass through these routes. The desert is not a joke. Extreme temperatures, dry heat, views that have no end in sight (the desert floor and sky go on for miles!). It's foreboding and not kind to people who enter into it.

When I say, “enter into it,” I mean more than just walking through the desert, physically. I also mean emotionally and spiritually. The desert takes you out of yourself. In my case, the desert was challenging me. It made me stop and take a look at my life and place it into the context of our brothers and sisters who risk their lives to leave their personal hell and try to live a better one, at any cost. And not only our brothers and sisters in this desert, but in all the ‘deserts’ throughout our world. The deserts of poverty, loneliness, abandonment, addictions and abuses, worldliness, pride, and the list goes on and on...

My ‘cost’ was being stripped down to my core, my soul, to taking a look at my life and the gifts and graces which God had given me and continues to try to give me (if only I would stay open to Him). All the things that I had, many of which those who are crossing the border don’t have. I looked deep inside myself as I looked deeply around the desert, and saw a comparison: my emptiness, my shallowness, my false self. I had many opportunities and offerings in my life, many of which I had not taken, for whatever reasons, and many I had taken...for granted, and not put to good use. There are people out there in the world, who would jump at the offerings that I have had, if they could. During each of my three visits to the desert, the desert had held me hostage, with (literally and figuratively) nowhere to run or hide. I was as exposed to myself as I was to the elements, and I had nowhere, nothing to do, to turn to, except to go interiorly, and visit with God and try to find myself and live the life for which I was created.