It was the pictures of the children that inspired them -- children hungry, disheveled, living in cage-like dwellings in large numbers. It was also the long lines of tired, weary, people who still had hope in their hearts trekking to the border for a new world that called them.

Sister Patricia Colla, RSM and Sister Maryanne Tracey, SC, friends for years, talked and prayed about this. They had seen the images of children and adults seeking a homeplace of security and were drawn to respond. In November 2019 they journeyed together to McAllen, Texas to be present to these people by working with the Humanitarian Respite Center run by Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley.

In a sense they moved into the "known unknown". Public media had told through pictures and words the type of conditions and lack of basic needs of such very poor people who lived in countries south of us. These people were often publicized by the media and politicians in opposite ways: as people who were a serious threat to our country or as parents and children and just human beings who were hungry, poorly clad, seeking welcome at the journey's end. Thousands have yet to find that.

Sisters Maryanne and Pat chose to be that welcome for over two weeks at the Mexican side of the border. The Humanitarian Relief Center, under the direction of Sister Norma Pimentel provided the avenue. Initially the conditions of the migrants overwhelmed them. The multiple tents in muddied surfaces of Matamoros touched their hearts, and they rolled up their sleeves, travelling from Brownsville, TX to Matamoros, Mexico daily.

"On a freezing cold rainy day with families living in these tents with no heat we gave out hats and gloves. Sweaters and coats came later. So very little for 37 degree weather. They were freezing as we were." (Sr. Pat, second from left; Sr. Maryanne, second from right)
For two women who were used to managing and directing and running programs, life became almost as simple as that of the Latinos they met each day. Making sandwiches, fixing the daily brown bag of food, handing out needed items such as underclothes and socks, soap and shampoo, razors and combs immersed them in the realities of the potential immigrants to our country, people standing still surviving rejection. They became a presence of the expected hope each day.

The program the two Sisters worked with tried to provide for basic needs on a daily basis, assist with the completion of forms, bring those allowed to enter the United States to the airport and bus station to travel to their next home, and make contact with the new home. The workers from the Humanitarian Relief Center were trusted and respected along with those from multiple other groups who came to respond.

For the two Sisters, considering their long history of commitment to the poor, it was not always easy. They were used to having time to communicate with those served, and allow themselves to be taught new lessons in return. Language difference was a challenge. The impact of the policies that led to this situation added to a sense of band-aiding rather than healing. But every moment they spent in the journey from Brownsville to Matamoros and in being part of some relief to a discouraged multitude of travelers was worthwhile. As they said, "It was a daily encounter with the face of God."

Sister Pat returns with happy memories of the eyes of the children -- their big brown eyes dancing while playing and especially with a second glass of milk. She now commits herself to writing letters and making contact with her local politicians, encouraging them to visit any of these centers with open eyes for learning who these people really are beyond political rhetoric and media alarms. She will encourage others to spend time working with groups such as Catholic Charities in the areas where the migrant people are "housed"; special urging will be to religious congregations of women and their leaders to open the way for their members to freely choose to be part of this ministry as part of their own Congregation's mission.
Sister Maryanne comes away deeply remembering two things: the people and how "they go with the flow" and are so easy to work with as well as the volunteers from so many locations and church groups who impressed her with their commitment and service, many for extended lengths of time. The poor she remembers from the border will continue to be a priority for her, and she has a new sense of the meaning and potential effect of making phone calls and writing letters to senators and representatives urging them to make a difference.

If you might be interested in volunteering, the two sisters would like you to know that age is not a barrier. The work is not physically strenuous. You need to be able to stand and walk, see what needs to be done and do it, and be willing to work in companionship with others. Try it!**

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