Bilingual Eucharist Celebrated in Waters of the Rio Grande at Texas Border Crossing Party

By David Paulsen, Episcopal News Service

For the second year, members of the board of RGBM and members from Good Shepherd in Silver City and St. James’ in Alpine, joined with hundreds of others at Lajitas, Texas, to celebrate Voces from Both Sides/Voces de Ambos Lados, a popular event that celebrates the unity of peoples across the Rio Grande. Fr. Paul Moore, Pastor at St. James’ and many assistants, celebrated a bilingual Eucharist in the middle of the river and distributed communion to people who wished to participate on both sides of the international boundary.

Unlike last year, when the river was only knee-deep, the changing of the river made a boat necessary in chest-deep water. Gratitude is due the good people of OLA YO, who were hugely instrumental making this event possible once again. “For me, it was a statement that borders are political, not spiritual, realities,” Moore told Episcopal News Service. “That people in the church are joined and are one.”

The U.S. government previously declined to actively patrol the Lajitas Crossing, and Mexicans and Americans passed freely across the river to visit relatives, shop, attend school and work. That changed on Mother’s Day weekend in 2002 when U.S. authorities detained 20 people on immigration charges and made clear they were ending the open passage as part of an effort to secure the border after the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks. Now, anyone entering the U.S. by crossing the river at Lajitas risks arrest.

Starting in 2013, the organizers of Voces From Both Sides arranged for federal and local authorities to send the boat for a few hours, allowing for the border-straddling party with music, food, drinks and religious worship. “The organizations have kept us informed since the beginning, and basically no one is crossing the border, so no laws are being broken,” Bill Brooks, U.S. Customs and Border Protection spokesman, told the San Antonio Express-News in a story about the third Voces From Both Sides. People from both sides met in the middle of the river but end the day back on the side where they live.

“I hope it continues, because it’s just a day,” said Marcy Reed, an Episcopalian who lives about 25 minutes away in Terlingua. She and her husband are both teachers at the Terlingua school, and some of their students have family members back in Mexico. Voces From Both Sides is away for those relatives and friends to reconnect without having to drive hours out of their way, she said. “I was really nervous last year with Trump in office,’ she said. ‘Should President Trump’s stance on immigration mean on end to Voices From Both Sides? I really wasn’t sure it was going to happen. It still did.”

Last year, the Episcopal service was first on the day’s lineup at 10:30 am, which meant the sound system hadn’t been set up yet and only about 150 to 200 people had arrived for the day’s festivities. Even so, about 30 people from both sides of the river received communion.

“We’d love to have more people join us,” he said. In addition to his parish duties, Moore is chair of Rio Grande Borderland Ministries.

The Diocese of the Rio Grande is the largest among the contiguous 48 states and covers 1800 miles of border in Texas and New Mexico. Moore’s church is about 90 miles away from Mexico, and he works with other churches along the border on a unified ministry that focuses on the needs of the border in every way,” he said. The church is engaged in issues such as poverty and hunger, as well as immigration. “Christian beliefs have political implications,” he said. “One of the political implications here is you can divide us politically, but you cannot divide us spiritually.”

Residents of the Big Bend region of Texas, however, are divided by and forced to overcome great geographic distances. Reed and her husband sometimes drive 80 miles to attend St. James’ Episcopal Church in Alpine, Texas, because services are sporadic at Santa Fe in Terlingua. Along the way, they take advantage of the better grocery options in Alpine.

They sometimes take trips into Mexico, such as when a student invites them to a quinceañera, a 15th birthday celebration, in San Carlos. The community of Puente Lajitas on the Mexican side of the Rio Grande has all but dried up since the river crossing closed. Now, a trip that once took a few minutes by pickup truck across the river now takes three to four hours by way of the official border crossing to the west in Presidio, Texas.

It’s hard for Reed to imagine a terrorist using Lajitas as an entry point into the U.S. “It would be such a risky place to cross. That’s just not possible,” she said.

All the same time, “I don’t think anyone’s coming over here stealing anyone’s jobs in Terlingua,” she said. “There aren’t that many kids involved. Before the federal government cracked down on river crossings, the flow of people in both directions that together the communities on both sides of the river Reed said.

Construction started in 2013, and the border wall is still under construction and expected to be completed in 2020.

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