

# Washington letter

## U.S.-Mexico cross-border efforts not just for politicians

WASHINGTON — While Presidents George W. Bush and Vicente Fox were making headlines over new forms of U.S.-Mexico cooperation, the bishops of their two countries were doing a little collaborative trail-blazing of their own.

Representatives from the U.S. bishops' Committee on Migration and the Mexican bishops' Commission for Human Mobility met in Mexico City in April and are scheduled to meet again in October to address several different subjects on which they want to collaborate.

In some ways the agenda of the bishops parallels that of Bush and Fox: Both are focused on the massive flow of people across the border from Mexico to the United States, for instance.

Where the government leaders are tackling the migration issues from the perspectives of law, sovereignty and economics, though, the church leaders are zeroing in on the people doing the migrating and the church's role in supporting them.

"Of concern to the two groups of bishops: protecting the human rights of migrants; supporting migrants in various physical and spiritual ways; showing solidarity with the people and church of Central America and South America; and issuing a joint statement on migration.

Surprising as it may sound for two countries that share a great deal of common history as well as a huge border, the sessions are the first time the U.S. and Mexican bishops have collaborated on migration concerns at the national level, said Bishop Nicholas DiMarzio, chairman of the U.S. bishops' Committee on Migration.

Cross-border pastoral statements issued by bishops' conferences — such as the one expected from the migration panels next year — are even more unusual.

"Remember, episcopal conferences themselves are fairly new," said Bishop DiMarzio, who heads the Diocese of Camden, N.J. "They've only been around for about 30 years."

Bishops of border dioceses have long worked together on issues of mutual interest including migration, poverty and regional concerns. For instance, in 1992, the bishops of El Paso in Texas, Las Cruces in New Mexico and Ciudad Juarez in Mexico issued a joint statement calling for justice for migrant farmworkers.

Bishops from the Pacific Northwest in the United States and British Columbia in Canada earlier this year issued a joint statement on the future of the Columbia River watershed.

But the work of the bishops' migration commissions of Mexico and the United States is the first time such cooperation has been expanded to the national conference level, Bishop DiMarzio said.

"The issues of migration are now more national issues," he explained, noting that there are Mexican immigrants in many parts of the United States that had none just a decade ago.



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When the bishops' migration commissions meet again in October, they will continue to work on the planned joint statement on migration. Bishop DiMarzio said the elements of the statement have been settled — its primary focus is human rights — and the drafting process has begun. It's expected to be presented to the Mexican bishops at their annual meeting in April and to the U.S. bishops at their general meeting in November 2002, he said.

Most of the seven issues of concern that the binational group agreed upon were arrived at fairly smoothly at last April's meeting, according to Bishop DiMarzio.

"It's amazing how easily it came together," he said. There were some areas of difference, though. For instance, the U.S. bishops had to help their Mexican brothers understand their interest in encouraging Mexican priests, religious and lay missionaries to accompany migrants to the United States, even if only temporarily.

In his own Diocese of Camden, Bishop DiMarzio, for the last two summers, has recruited Mexican seminarians to spend two months of their vacation at New Jersey parishes with concentrations of Mexican immigrants, he said.

At dinner with the visiting seminarians a few weeks ago, Bishop DiMarzio said one told him: "I experienced here what I have not experienced in Mexico — the faith of my people."

Both the religious workers who return to Mexico and the immigrants to the United States benefit from such visits and other types of exchanges, he explained.

With its greater financial and staff resources, the U.S. bishops have pledged to provide most of the labor necessary for the joint effort, Bishop DiMarzio said.

The U.S. bishops' Committee on Migration can't directly finance a project in Mexico, he said, but it can help by lending staff, by helping the Mexican bishops obtain funding through foundations or by encouraging the support of Catholic Relief Services, the U.S. bishops' overseas relief agency.

He's also urging the Mexican bishops to look to Europe for examples of how the church in other countries has handled massive emigration. For example, the Catholic Church in Spain and Italy sent missionaries with people who left those countries in search of better lives in Germany, France and England, he said.

What does the U.S. bishops' conference get out of this collaboration?

"We get a partner," Bishop DiMarzio said. "Dealing with migration by definition is international. But it's difficult to deal with without a partner. With the Mexican bishops we have a partner."

Zapor reports for Catholic News Service based in Washington, D.C.