

Ministry on the Border Fulfills a Sister's Lifelong Dream

By Abigail Springsteen

"Thank you for walking with us. Thank you for loving us." These words, written with gratitude, are words Sister Christa Parra, IBVM, will never forget. They were written by immigrants she assisted with patience and grace as they sought asylum in the United States.



Sister Christa, one of the youngest members of the congregation of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary, began living and ministering last fall with the School Sisters of St. Francis at our Casa Alexia mission on the border in El Paso, Texas, and Juarez, Mexico. At present, she is living at her community's motherhouse in Phoenix until the COVID-19 outbreak subsides enough for her to return to her work at Casa Alexia.

Growing up in Phoenix, Sister Christa was always aware of the inequality on the Mexican side of our southwest border. "My work at the border is in my DNA," she said. She had a dream and a hunger to help those who were struggling to make a new life in the United States.

Sister Christa's vocation journey was filled with dilemmas. Growing up, she saw herself being married and starting her own family. That's all she ever wanted, and religious life wasn't a thought that occurred to her until an encounter with a religious woman who would change her life forever: Sister Gabby.

While on retreat, Sister Gabby was inspired by a young priest who encouraged her to pray for more youthful folk to come to the religious life. Coming into St. Simon and Jude Cathedral, she saw young Christa praying.

"I was praying and asking God what *God* wanted me to do." Sister Christa reported. "The thing was, I was *talking* to God, but I wasn't *listening* to God. I was afraid of what I might hear." Shortly after praying, she was approached by Sister Gabby, asking if she ever thought about the religious life.

"I told her I wanted to be married and that she had the wrong girl!" Sister Christa said. Seeing something more in her, Sister Gabby invited her to come to the convent just to meet the sisters and see how they lived their life.

“From that moment, she planted a seed in me,” she said. “When I saw the sisters without their habits, and when I saw how happy and down to earth they were, something sparked inside of me.”

Nearly three years later, Sister Christa graduated college and was engaged to her high school boyfriend. “At the time, I thought I could no longer think about the religious life because I was engaged.”

But shortly thereafter, she was invited to volunteer in Peru with the sister to live her dream of serving in another country. When it was time to go home, she had a change of heart.

“I realized that when I went back to the United States, I wasn’t ready to be married,” she said. “I broke off my engagement.”

After taking the necessary time to process and think about what she needed to do, Sister Christa knew what God wanted. After three more years of discernment, she was ready to start her journey to religious life.

Because she was aware of the inequality on the Mexico side of the border, Sister Christa knew deep in her heart she needed to be there.

“I kept asking ‘Why aren’t we there? We need to be there!’” Shortly after she took her final vows, she spent a week in El Paso, and then she knew she had to be there to walk with our brothers and sisters living at the margins.

While she was living her dream and answering God’s call to her, Sister Christa witnessed many hardships our brothers and sisters have to face as they wait to be admitted into the United States. Seeing people who have had to escape the corruption in their home country be denied entry to the United States has been difficult to witness.

“To watch our brothers and sisters being treated as criminals when they’re not has been very painful for me,” Sister Christa said. She finds it heartbreaking to see people arrive in torn and muddy clothes with no opportunity to even take a shower.

“The reason why so many people are suffering is due to the lack of compassion in our current government,” she asserts. The situation is made even more difficult now with the COVID-19 outbreaks, and Sister Christa wishes she could be back at the border helping. There are outbreaks in the detention centers, and those who are kept there are at a higher risk of catching the virus. Despite the troubling times, there is something that keeps her going: her love for God and God’s people.

“I never take for granted how full of love my heart is,” Sister Christa said. There have been many moments that she has found uplifting, but there was a particular time she was reminded of how powerful the love of God is.

“I was driving a young woman who had two children as she prepared for another court hearing.” Sister Christa recalled. “She kept saying ‘Please pray for me. Please ask God that I get into the United States to be with my mom. I can’t be here anymore.’ I kept telling her ‘Of course I will.’”

Two days later, while Sister Christa was working at the port of entry, the same woman approached her and walked into Sister Christa’s arms.

“Sister Christa, we didn’t make it,” the woman told her. “We didn’t get through.” Sister Christa knows that it is very common for the asylum-seekers to have a court date just to be sent back to the detention center and back to Juarez to wait for another court date to set months into the future.

“We got back into the car and we were driving to the shelter,” Sister Christa recalled. “I didn’t know what to say. Then she said to me ‘I know it wasn’t what I wanted, but I know God is with me.’” Sister was taken aback by the woman’s hope and courage.

“Her words were profound. The moment really moved me,” she said. It was a great reminder of what Sister Christa loves to say: God calls us to love, and God is love.



Sister Christa holds fast to the hope that God’s love will be carried by others. “I know God is in every single person I meet,” she said. For this reason, she hopes to see major reforms to assist everyone who is trying to enter the United States to become citizens.

Sister Christa would love to see safe spaces and community on the border for those trying to cross over. “They have a right to ask for safety and for help. It’s inhumane to make people wait,” she asserted.

“DACA recipients, our dreamers, should also have a pathway to citizenship. They were raised in the United States. This is their home.”

The opportunity to work with so many wonderful people has been a huge blessing to Sister Christa.

“I’m so happy to be in my religious life and so grateful for my vocation,” she said, noting that her whole journey as a sister continues to grace her. She has been very free, is one with the people, and continues to spread God’s devotion. She also hopes there will be others who will answer their call to a vocation.

“My advice to young people is to always keep religious life in the back of your mind as an option,” Sister Christa said. “It’s a full and beautiful life.”