News



Cardinal Michael Czerny, prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, delivers the Aug. 20, 2024, homily during Mass at the Cathedral Basilica Santa María la Antigua in the old town of Panama City during the 10th Meeting of Bishops and Migration Pastoral Agents of North America, Central America and the Caribbean. (OSV News screenshot/ADN Celam)



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Pope Francis' point man on immigration has urged Catholics to "welcome and protect" migrants, who ply increasingly perilous paths as they flee hardship and danger — only to meet indifference and hostility at the destinations.

In a homily celebrated Aug. 20 in Panama City for a meeting of bishops and migration pastoral agents, Cardinal Michael Czerny told participants, "Pope Francis says that our first two duties toward migrants is to welcome them and protect them."

Czerny, prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development continued, "We want to help God do the impossible and we are humbly convinced that everyone in the church is called to participate and contribute to this Christian welcome to those who pass through our parishes and our dioceses."

Preferring to "share" rather than reading his "nice homily," Czerny recalled a visit the previous day with six fellow prelates to the edge of the Darién Gap, the treacherous jungle separating Panama and Columbia, which is now traversed by migrants. There, he said, "we encountered migrants who came straight from hell and were now returning to the land of men. They come from all over the world: from Nepal, from Angola, from Haiti, from Venezuela. With this hell behind them, now they want to continue their path and they pass between us."

He then asked, "How is this passage between us going to be?"

The Mass was celebrated as part of the Aug. 19-23 10th Meeting of Bishops and Migration Pastoral Agents of North America, Central America and the Caribbean, which promoted the theme, "Walking with the migrant and the refugee." Participants said the meeting would help to inform a pastoral letter on immigration, which is expected to be released in November, while also drafting a regional response and raising the voices of Catholics on migration matters.

"A document is being prepared that can guide pastoral actions throughout the region," Father Gustavo Meneses, executive secretary of the Socio-Pastoral Observatory of Human Mobility in Mesoamerica and the Caribbean, told OSV News.

"It is a document that aims to establish actions that address the migration phenomenon regionally, together and also by laying the foundations … to begin a process of regional pastoral planning, to address the migratory phenomenon," he explained. "A response cannot be given alone and based on the efforts made by each country separately."

Participants also spoke of the importance of speaking out forcefully and in a unified voice on migration, which has proved polemic in the region as anti-migrant rhetoric rises and migrants hail from all parts of the world.

"The real intention of this moment is to speak out, but also to do the internal work among ourselves. As a church, we will have that actual voice, that real voice, if we do the material work of acknowledging that we are not several churches, but one church," Scalabrinian Sister Ligia Ruiz told OSV News. "On this topic of migration, we must be united."

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The conference unfolded amid increased crackdowns on migration in the hemisphere. Host country Panama announced plans with the U.S. government in June to begin migrant deportations, returning people having crossed the previously impenetrable Darién Gap. The first deportation flight departed for Colombia on Aug. 20.

"The U.S.-Mexico border has been moved (south) at the same time" as the deportation announcement, Ruiz said.

The flow of people through the Darién Gap has slowed in recent months with an estimated 400 migrants passing through daily so far in August — less than half the number transiting over the first six months of 2024 — according to an analysis by the Washington Office on Latin America, a human rights think tank.

Ruiz said the numbers "had been dropping to almost half" in the lead-up to Venezuela's July 28 election and remained steady. It remains uncertain if more

migrants leave after the opposition claims it overwhelmingly won the election, but President Nicolás Maduro refuses to release the vote tallies and has cracked down violently on protesters.

Migrants are also arriving at the U.S. border in reduced numbers — just 56,400 illegal migrants were detained between ports of entry in July, according to U.S. Customs and Border Protection, the lowest figures in four years — partly the product of the Biden administration restricting access to asylum.

Mexico has stepped up its enforcement, too. The Mexican government recently claimed that its "new humanist policy," working in cooperation with the U.S. government, has reduced arrivals to the U.S.-Mexico border by 77% since December 2023. Catholics working with migrants have told OSV News that Mexico detains migrants near its northern border, then sends them to the south in the hope they give up.

"The government policy continues being contention, persecution and detention. Perhaps this is how they managed to reduce the numbers on the northern border," Scalabrinian Father Julio López, executive secretary of the Mexican bishops' migrant ministry, told OSV News.

"But the truth is that the (migrant) flows continue."

This story appears in the **Immigration and the Church** feature series. View the full series.