

OPINION // OUTLOOK

## In this shutdown, our nation faces a true moral emergency [Opinion]

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A man prays outside Sacred Heart Parish in El Paso's Segundo Barrio neighborhood, near the border with Mexico. The church welcomes refugees and supports the immigrant community. MUST CREDIT: Washington Post photo by Sarah L. Voisin

Photo: Sarah L. Voisin, The Washington Post / The Washington Post

President Trump has recently called migration at our southern border an “emergency of the heart and soul.”

Indeed it is an emergency, but for different reasons than the president seems to think.

The recent and best nonpartisan data indicate that the tide of immigration on our southern border has actually slowed over the last two to three years. So while the president is wrong about a “crisis,” he is right about the heart and soul of our nation being at stake.

The soul of our nation is at stake in the way we talk about and treat people. It is at stake in the credibility of the information we use to support our claims. In this, we stand by Jesus’ preaching. Jesus told his disciples in Mark 9:37, “whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the One who sent me.”

By all means we should articulate an “emergency of heart and soul;” we understand that what is at stake is human dignity, the compassionate care of children and fairness in legal proceeding. These are the real emergency threats to our well-being and to the long-term health and vitality of our nation.

Remember this – nothing has materially changed on the southern border in the last month. Only the rhetoric has shifted, and that shift comes in light of the government shutdown.

More than 800,000 government employees are without pay. Some of those have been deemed “essential” and are required to work even though they will not be compensated until the shutdown ends. All of them have bills to pay, families to support and futures to plan for. Each one of them is a taxpayer who holds all of the same hopes and commitments that each of us possesses. Many of them have missed paychecks. This is a moral emergency indeed.

In addition, the president is considering diverting disaster mitigation funds intended to provide relief from Hurricanes Harvey and Maria to fund southern border wall expansion. It is unconscionable to imagine that after all Houston and southeast Texas have been through, not to mention our Puerto Rican neighbors, that long-term recovery dollars would be redirected. **Even considering the idea is abhorrent.** This is a moral emergency indeed.

To be sure, immigration is a complex issue that needs comprehensive reform. We must have sensible policies that allow the United States to responsibly receive and integrate persons into the country. We are, after all, a nation of immigrants. And, we write as Christians who are compelled by the command of Scripture (in Exodus 22, Deuteronomy 24, Jeremiah 7, among many others) to welcome the “widow, the orphan, and the alien in our midst.” Yes, security is

necessary to protect the vulnerable. Comprehensive reform can address all of these elements when the political will exists to do it.

We are asking for something much more basic than legislation. We are calling upon the president and all of our leaders, our faith communities and our neighbors to respond to the true moral emergency at hand – the demonizing rhetoric and a culture of fear that actually threaten our country far more than the absence of some length of wall.

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