

A Human Presence: On Scott Warren and No More Deaths

EDITORIAL

Readers of *Today's American Catholic* may be aware of Dr. Scott Warren. The 36-year-old geographer, teacher, and resident of Ajo, Arizona, was recently tried for charges relating to his work with No More Deaths, a faith-based humanitarian group that provides assistance to migrants along the Arizona-Mexico border. Warren was charged with two counts of harboring and one count of conspiracy to harbor and transport undocumented immigrants. His case ended in a mistrial on June 11 when the jury failed to reach a unanimous verdict.

Though this was temporarily good news for Warren, his family, and his network of supporters, the U.S. government has not dropped the charges against him. A status hearing on the case is set for July, and there is still the possibility a retrial. If convicted, Warren could face up to 20 years in prison.

The events leading up to Warren's arrest—including his decision, in 2013, to move full time to Ajo and become involved in the humanitarian efforts along the border—make for a compelling story. Those interested should read Ryan Devereaux's incredible piece of investigative journalism, "Bodies in the Borderlands," published at *The Intercept* this past May. Devereaux covers the history of humanitarian efforts at the Arizona border, details the decades-old U.S. policy of "prevention through deterrence" (where the security of larger border cities is increased, forcing migrants to cross through more dangerous terrain), and looks at the ways that the U.S. Border Patrol has stepped up efforts against humanitarian workers over the past few years.

In addition to leaving water, canned food, clothing, and first aid supplies in the desert for migrants, No More Deaths and related groups such as the Ajo Samaritans perform search-and-rescue missions for those reported missing. Too often this becomes a case of finding the bodies of those who did not make it. Around 3,000 sets of human remains have been recovered in the Arizona desert since 2000, though the total number of migrant deaths is well over 7,000. Over one five-day

span in December 2016, volunteers with No More Deaths located the remains of five bodies in the Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge just west of Ajo—a direct result of prevention through deterrence policies that route migrants through some of the harshest regions in the Southwest.

There is a life behind every one of these statistics, a fact that sometimes gets lost in the coverage of the situation at the border. This is what made the report released by No More Deaths in January 2018 all the more disturbing. In it, No More Deaths volunteers stated that Border Patrol agents had destroyed water jugs and other supplies the group had left for migrants. It was accompanied by video footage of agents kicking over jugs; in one highly circulated scene, an agent senselessly empties multiple gallons of water onto the desert floor.

It does not seem like a coincidence that Warren was arrested shortly after the report appeared. Border Patrol agents showed up at "the Barn," a small building on the outskirts of Ajo that migrant-advocacy groups used as an informal meeting space, and searched the premises without a warrant. They found Warren along with two Central American migrants who had been recuperating for a couple of days at the Barn after a long journey through the desert. Though they had located the Barn on their own, and Warren came and went freely throughout the course of their stay, prosecutors still charged him with harboring.

As Warren himself explains in a May 28 op-ed for the *Washington Post*, such an expanded definition of "harboring" sets a dangerous precedent. "[S]muggling and harboring laws have always been applied selectively," he writes, "with aggressive prosecutions of 'criminal' networks but leniency for big agriculture and other politically powerful industries that employ scores of undocumented laborers. Now, the law may be applied to not only humanitarian aid workers but

also to the millions of mixed-status families in the United States." In other words, the government may choose to prosecute a U.S. citizen simply for feeding or housing a family member who happens to be undocumented.

Warren's case is part of a greater pattern of criminalizing acts of kindness at the border. Since 2017 Border Patrol agents have routinely denied permits to volunteers seeking to enter the Cabeza Prieta refuge, issued citations for "abandonment of property"—i.e., food and water—on federal lands, and brought other felony misdemeanor charges. This comes after several years of mutual understanding between the two groups, with agents routinely giving volunteers the space to work and even sharing information. The change in tone in our national conversation around migration, however, has shifted this balance.

The case points to another distressing trend in our country's discourse: the suspicion of people who wish to do good, expressed as contempt in some circles for "social justice warriors" and others of conscience. In the words of writer Tom Scocca, this is "the idea that there cannot be any such thing as good, that good is a fraud and an insult, to be driven away with greater fraudulence and more ruthless insults." We have become so conditioned to a world where everyone is out for themselves, scamming to get something over on the next person, that the mere act of leaving a cup of water for a stranger becomes suspect.

No More Deaths has its roots in the 1980s Sanctuary Movement, which was created to provide aid to refugees who were fleeing violence in Central America. The founders of No More Deaths included former Bishop of Tucson Gerald Kicanas as well as other leaders from local religious communities. In light of Warren's case, the faith-based dimension of No More Deaths has brought questions of religious liberty to the fore. Namely, can the U.S. government outlaw someone prac-

ticing the parable of the Good Samaritan? Writer and pastor Brian D. McLaren summarized the situation in the pages of *USA Today*: "[The] longstanding American tradition of polarization continues today, with 'religious liberty' meaning, for some, the freedom to allow death by dehydration for border-crossers in the desert, and for others, the freedom to leave them a jug of water."

At the trial, Warren's lawyer made the case that his client's humanitarian work should be protected under the Religious Freedom Restoration Act. Warren himself cites his spiritual beliefs as among the motivating factors for his work in the desert. As Devereaux reported in a follow-up piece on Warren's trial:

In searching for human remains and "witnessing" the places where those remains came to rest, Warren testified, he believes that he is engaging in act of "spiritual completion," helping to provide the dead with "the thing that makes their soul live on in that place." The provision of humanitarian aid is an extension of that belief system, Warren testified, one that is "as sacred" as witnessing where people have died.

If the U.S. government succeeds in staging a retrial of Scott Warren, the perils of migration will not disappear. They will continue unless we confront the reasons why people are driven to flee in the first place—exploitative trade agreements that create economic unrest, fallout from global warming that has decimated the lives of small farmers, gang violence that is the direct result of young peoples' loss of prospects—and the ways we are complicit in them. Until such a moment of reckoning inspires widespread structural change, groups such as No More Deaths will remain an essential human presence in a rapidly dehumanized world.

Michael Centore
Editor, *Today's American Catholic*

How to Subscribe:

Send a check or money order for \$35.00 to TAC:
21 Overlook Drive
Hamden, CT 06514
Foreign subscriptions: \$50 for one year.

Address or Name Changes:

Send to TAC at the address above. **Please note:** It is important that you notify us with any changes of address so that we can update our records. Please write or email us at TACeditor@att.net.

How to Advertise:

Call 860-676-2280 and leave your name, address, and phone number on our answering service. We will send you an advertising rate sheet in the mail.

Comments, Corrections, Letters to the Editor:

Write to Editor, *Today's American Catholic*, 21 Overlook Drive, Hamden, CT 06514, or email: TACeditor@att.net; telephone: 860-676-2280.

Writers: Have an Idea for an Article?

TAC does accept unsolicited manuscripts but invites writers to send a query first: TACeditor@att.net. Suggested length: feature articles 1,200-1,400 words; half-page articles also accepted. Book review proposals accepted as well.

To Volunteer:

If you live in Connecticut and are available to volunteer time for proof-reading, preparing marketing literature, stuffing envelopes and related chores, please leave your name, area of interest and phone number at the TAC office: 860-676-2280.

To Contact TAC:

Please address manuscript submissions, letters and queries to the editor at: TACeditor@att.net. Our website, www.todaysamericancatholic.org, is now up and running as a work in progress.