

A liturgy in the borderlands

Alvaro Enciso plants crosses where migrants have died, to keep them from disappearing into oblivion.

by [Isaac S. Villegas](#) in the [October 2022](#) issue



(Illustration by Juan Bernabeu)

At 7:30 a.m. I pull into the BorderLinks parking lot in South Tucson, the meetup spot for Alvaro Enciso's weekly pilgrimage into the borderlands with his crosses. We load the two Samaritan SUVs with jugs of water, and then the eight of us pile in and head down Interstate 19 toward the border.

Our caravan exits and goes west somewhere before Nogales—still 20 miles from the border. As we drive into the desolate landscape, after a bend in the road a makeshift checkpoint suddenly appears. A federal agent stops us, plods around our vehicles while peering through every window, then asks each of us if we're citizens.

We're within 100 miles of the border, which means we're in what many have called the "Constitution-free zone" where US Customs and Border Protection has been granted authorization under a 1953 law to conduct warrantless searches and seizures, despite the protections of the Fourth Amendment. In her book *Illegal*, political scientist Elizabeth Cohen explains how the 1976 Supreme Court decision in *United States v. Martinez-Fuerte* has empowered CBP agents to "engage in acts that, for other law-enforcement officers, would be considered profiling." This borderlands zone circles the nation, encompassing all land within 100 miles of any national boundary, land or water. It includes the majority of the people in the country.

With the checkpoint far behind us, we turn onto a dirt road that first runs along the property lines of cattle farms and then cuts into a wilderness of mesquite groves and washes. The route takes us up and down hills carved with gullies from season after season of monsoon downpours. The speedometer hovers at 10 miles per hour for most of our journey deeper into the hinterlands of the Sonoran Desert, somewhere between Arivaca and Amado. Our guide is a handheld Garmin GPSMAP navigation device.

We're on our way to where the remains of Lucio Sanchez-Zepeda were found. An organization called Humane Borders, in partnership with the medical examiner's office, hosts an online database that tracks deceased migrants. The website provides GPS coordinates for the spot where human remains were recovered; God only knows how many haven't been noticed, those who remain undocumented even after their death.



We pull over into a clearing and unload our supplies: a bag of cement, jugs of water, a shovel, and a cross. The next stage is on foot, into the wilderness. Our single-file line snakes around creosote bushes and paloverdes. With the GPS device in her hand, the person at the front of our group leads us to the place where Sanchez-Zepeda's remains were found a decade ago. The entry in the database notes that he probably died of hypothermia.

We circle around the spot. One person digs; another pours the cement and then the water. Alvaro pushes his cross down into the hole, takes several steps back, pauses to look, then nods to the rest of us. We gather stones and place them at the foot of the cross. "When you add a rock, you honor his memory," Alvaro tells me. "You add your humanity, something of yourself, to this place, to this memorial."

To memorialize the dead is to claim a relation. It is to honor a mutual belonging, an intermingling—to recognize another's life as somehow part of our own. Alvaro marks

the landscape with the sign of the cross to pay his respects and to include the memory of these dead in his life—to open a space within him for them and for their plight, for the lives they could've had if they hadn't been cut short.

“I came to this country in the 1960s because I was promised the American dream,” says Alvaro, recounting his journey from Colombia to the United States as a young man. “Now, I'm out here to commemorate where dreams die, which is also a protest against the policies that kill our dreams and our lives.”

His word *our* claims a kinship that transgresses borders, a transnational solidarity. To join him in the desert is to conjure that kind of union, a spiritual communion as we link our humanity to the lives of the dead through Alvaro's rituals of remembrance. The jug of water I carry from the SUV, the turn I take with the shovel, the rocks I add to the base of the crucifix—these are my contribution to this liturgical act in the desert.

The word *liturgy* is derived from ancient Greek words for *people* and *work* to denote the collective labor of a group in service to the community. Our liturgy is for the community of the dead, to join our lives to theirs in a re-membering. In our ritual we declare our membership in a political body—like the ancient Greek polis—that refuses to live without a connection to the people who've died in the borderlands.

With the crosses Alvaro invites our participation in the care for the memory of the dead, to keep them from disappearing into oblivion. These acts of reverence cultivate a collective conscience as part of a political imagination that protests against the border, with the crosses as our signs of solidarity in defiance of this country's politics of alienation—in defiance of the violence involved in policing the division between citizen and alien. Our work in the desert is a kind of spiritual-political hospitality: to invite their spirits to occupy our minds and enlist our lives in the service of a stubborn hope for a world that doesn't yet exist, where no one will be sacrificed to protect the rights and privileges of citizenship on this side of the border. Alvaro's liturgies in the borderlands are prayers, prophecies for a polity that doesn't require the blood sacrifice of migrants. Every crucifix planted in the wilderness is an act of devotion to a stranger who should have been our neighbor.

In the United States, the laws that govern citizenship have produced a caste system, with border enforcement and immigration policies that render some among us deportable, disposable, alien to the protections of the law. They are “unambiguously

situated outside the boundaries of formal membership and social legitimacy,” historian Mae Ngai argues in *Impossible Subjects*. “Undocumented immigrants are at once welcome and unwelcome: they are woven into the economic fabric of the nation, but as labor that is cheap and disposable.”

The non-status of the alien is the flip side of the status of the citizen. Ngai shows how this development of the legal framework of citizenship is inseparable from our conversations about race. “During the 1920s,” she writes, “the legal traditions that had justified racial discrimination against African Americans were extended to other ethno-racial groups in immigration law.” The citizen-alien distinction is a racialized difference, a wall that slices through our ethics and politics, attempting to turn our attention away from human remains in the borderlands.

“Racism,” writes geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore in *Golden Gulag*, “is the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death.” The *Economist* reports that 650 people died last year while crossing into the United States through the desert. In a recent investigation, the US Government Accountability Office discovered that the Border Patrol has neglected its responsibility to keep track of the number of migrant deaths. These lives, apparently, aren’t even worth a number in a database. The migrant dead, forgotten by the state.

“You are a Mennonite priest, right?”

Alvaro turns to me after we finish stacking rocks around his memorial for Sanchez-Zepeda. “Here’s holy water, if you want to sanctify the crucifix.” Last year a Franciscan friar joined in the work of putting up the crosses in the desert, Alvaro tells me, and he’d sprinkle them with his sanctified water. He gave the group containers of the water to continue the practice after he left.

Alvaro hands me the plastic bottle, and I decide not to explain the differences between Catholic priests and Mennonite pastors. I pour the water, which splashes on the crucifix and rocks, then splotches on the ground, soaking into the caliche. “Lucio Sanchez-Zepeda, *presente*,” I whisper, “the Spirit of God, *presente*.” At this cross, the place where a person released their spirit with their last breath, to remember their life is a liturgical politics of epiclesis—an invocation for God to make this person’s life present to us, for the dead to be as present to us as the resurrected spirit of the crucified Christ.

The Christian faith turns the living toward the dead. The torture and execution of Jesus Christ conditions our imagination, our hope. Communion, the central ritual of the church, habituates our posture toward the death of Jesus—and, through our memorial of his crucifixion, we bow our lives toward the victims of our world’s violence. The focus of the eucharistic words of institution, as passed on to us from the apostle Paul, is a death: “For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (1 Cor. 11:26). The liturgy conjures his absent body; communicants re-present his life. Redemption, according to this Christian vision, is a stubborn memory. Communion proclaims an eschatology in which the disappeared aren’t left behind.

In the early centuries of the church, the faithful extended this ritual in honor of Jesus to others who had died. Christians gathered in cemeteries to share wine and bread with buried corpses—a communion feast that included the dead. The *Didascalia apostolorum*, a third-century treatise, offers counsel to those “who come together even in the cemeteries, and read the holy Scriptures . . . and offer an acceptable Eucharist, the likeness of the royal body of Christ, both in your congregation and in your cemeteries.” To memorialize Jesus occasions the remembrance of others’ deaths. At the cemetery, the eucharistic meal becomes a holy communion with the dead who are declared present with Christ. To proclaim the death of Jesus until he returns becomes a hope that has something to do with others who have perished. To gather for a ritual to remember Jesus is a “dangerous tradition,” writes theologian Johann Baptist Metz in *Faith in History and Society*, the formation in a community of a “dangerous memory.” The eucharistic liturgy, he explains, “claims unresolved conflicts that have been thrust into the background and unfulfilled hopes.”

In the borderlands, Alvaro’s crosses are dangerous memories; they bear witness to the unresolved conflict of the border. Each crucifix remembers a life, now dead, lost to the violence of immigration policies. His rituals gather a small community around unfulfilled hopes—to honor people who’ve journeyed across vast distances, who’ve persevered despite the unimaginable perils along the way, all for survival—for possibilities. Alvaro calls his project *Donde Mueren los Sueños*, “where dreams die.” His crosses mark the places where dreams have died, a landscape haunted with hope’s expired breath.

On the long drive back to Tucson, Alvaro tells me that he’s installed more than a thousand crosses in these borderlands. He assembles them in his studio at home, each one a work of art made with items found near other sites in the desert. “I use

what people have had to leave behind, what they've dropped while on the run further north." Photos from a wallet, metal from cans, canvas from backpacks, glass from bottles, rubber from a shoe. "Each of those objects marks part of someone's story, artifacts from a plot we'll never know," he says. "I include these fragments as a form of acknowledgment, of reverence, to honor them, for material from their lives to become relics on a cross."

He tells me that the database includes 3,600 deaths. "At this rate, four per week, I'll finish this work when I turn 127." He sighs. "But that doesn't even include the fact that more people die in the desert every week, every month, every year." He stares out the window for a while. "Let's just find a way to stop letting people die out here."

Now, when I see a crucifix, I can't help but remember Alvaro's crosses. When I commune at the eucharistic table, I remember the broken bodies and the blood-soaked landscapes. The ground hallowed with Alvaro's divine liturgies.

Photo above: Alvaro Enciso of Humane Borders uses GPS to locate the exact places where migrants have died and honors those places with the installation of a simple cross. (Photo by Isaac S. Villegas)