

Rest in Peace

Mass blesses immigrants who died during trek

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With wind whipping at his robes, a priest delivered a Dia de los Muertos blessing over the poorest of places: a pauper's cemetery hidden amid desolate ranch lands that have claimed the lives of many undocumented immigrants.

Father Piotr Koziel of Kingsville's Our Lady of Good Counsel Church delivered the rite for the visitation of the cemetery Thursday. In Mexico, families visit graveyards, tidy them up and commune with their dead loved ones as part of the traditional observance of Dia de los Muertos.

But the cemetery Koziel blessed was markedly different. It is the final resting place of 31 undocumented immigrants who died trying to cross the arid South Texas range surrounding this tiny hamlet. Their identities unknown, they have lain in isolation with no one to visit them - until Thursday.

"They came here in the natural pursuit of happiness that every human being is entitled to, but which we often take for granted," Koziel told a crowd of about 50 people who gathered for the service. "They lie here in the hope of resurrection that will bestow upon them the citizenship of the kingdom of God."

The freshly mowed land for the graveyard was donated by the San Pedro Kenedy Ranch years ago, and is maintained by Kenedy County Sheriff Rafael Cuellar and his deputies.

Cuellar, who retires in January after 33 years with the department, eight of those as sheriff, has earned a reputation as a lifesaver to the undocumented immigrants who cross the county's badlands.

"We've been two months planning this," he said before the blessing. "It means that it is more humane. I feel a lot better that Father Piotr is helping me with what I couldn't do in the past."

A week ago, the small graveyard was a tangle of prickly scrub brush and sunflowers. Grave markers were metal tags bearing the sad labels of "unknown female" or "skeletal remains."

But Saturday, a group of youths under the leadership of Koziel descended on the graveyard with rakes, hammers and weed-whackers. Texas A&M-Kingsville students put up a 20-foot wooden cross designed by student Frank Guerra.

A monument donated by the Turcotte-Piper Mortuary of Kingsville and the Howard-Williams-Turcotte Funeral Home of Falfurrias was erected. The Our Lady of Good Counsel youth group created 31 wooden crosses to place on the individual graves.

Among the small crowd were Cuellar, Kleberg County Sheriff Tony Gonzalez, parishioners from Our Lady of Good Counsel, students and others from the community. People carrying a Mexican flag, somewhat smaller than the U.S. and Catholic flags that also were displayed, discreetly joined the ceremony.

A choir sang the harmonious "Dios Te Salve Maria," and congregants placed carnations and flower wreaths on the graves.

Koziel, a Kingsville resident for almost five years, said he performed his first funeral for two undocumented immigrants at the graveyard last spring. He was surprised the Sarita cemetery even existed and was appalled at its condition.

"I saw how sad the place was," he said. "There was no sign of any sort or really any indication human beings are buried there. It really looked depressing."

Koziel said that, though he only lives a few miles away, he had no idea until June that so many immigrants were dying in the open expanses of Kenedy County.

At the mercy of smugglers, the immigrants venture into the harsh areas to the east and west of an immigration checkpoint on U.S. 77. In the treacherous South Texas heat, some collapse from exhaustion and dehydration on the trek, which can sometimes be as long as 25 miles.

In recent years, as many as two dozen undocumented immigrants annually have died of exposure. So far this year, nine immigrants have been found dead.

Those never identified are buried in the small pauper's graveyard.

"I wanted to bring a human face to this place," Koziel said, "and raise the awareness of the people around here that this is happening."

Koziel said he could empathize with the plight of the immigrants who have died as they struggled to enter this country. He struck out from communist Poland as a 19-year-old in 1986.

"I was looking for the same thing, but I was much luckier than they were," he said. "I can sympathize with those who are trying to better their life. In comparison with them, I didn't risk much at all."

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Caption: Father Piotr Koziel (in white robe) of Our Lady of Good Counsel Church in Kingsville leads a Mass at a pauper's graveyard for undocumented immigrants in Sarita. The event marked Dia de los Muertos, or Day of the Dead. A group of volunteers spruced up the graveyard Saturday. Crosses mark the graves of undocumented immigrants who have perished in the South Texas heat in Sarita. The wooden crosses, which have replaced weeds, were erected by students from Our Lady of Good Counsel Church and Texas A&M-Kingsville.