



Immigration and Lent: Mournful Women Weeping

by Nancy Brouillard McKenzie

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At the presentation of Jesus in the temple, Simeon told Mary that a sword would pierce her:

“(and you yourself a sword will pierce) so that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.” (Luke 2:35)

Although no actual physical harm came to Mary, Simeon’s prophesy came true. The sword that pierced her was the anguish, grief, and sorrow she experienced as her Son was crucified. Her sorrows were the focus of the 13th century poem *Stabat Mater Dolorosa* (*The sorrowful mother stood*), which was later set to music by a number of important composers, including Scarlatti, Haydn, Bach, and Vivaldi.

Throughout Lent, especially at the Stations of the Cross and on the Feast of Our Lady of Sorrows, the hauntingly powerful and beautiful introductory verse of the *Stabat Mater* draws us into the passionate sorrow and pain of the Mother of God at the crucifixion:

*“At the Cross her station keeping,
stood the mournful Mother weeping
Close to her Son until the last.”*

As we sing each verse of the *Stabat Mater*, we try in our own ways to understand the tragedy of Jesus on the Cross. Predictably, we remember the many injustices that occurred—for example, Jesus did not receive a fair trial and had no meaningful opportunity to be heard before his crucifixion. In addition, Mary had no opportunity to testify about her Son’s life, good works, and accomplishments.

Through the powerful words of the hymn, we stand with Mary at Cavalry and try to imagine her sorrow. We witness Mary’s inability to stop soldiers from tormenting and executing her Son. Mary does the only thing that she and many mothers can do: courageously stand by her Son and grieve. Jesus, despite his pain and anguish, suffered even more when He saw his Mother in her sorrow.

The beauty of the *Stabat Mater* is that it captures our hearts and makes us witnesses to the painful progression of Mary's suffering at the Cross. And yes, the power of those words brings us to tears.

Slowly and reverently, the verses of the *Stabat Mater* allow us to walk with Mary through her sorrowful Good Friday journey. We know that we cannot prevent the fulfillment of Simeon's prophesy or stop the crucifixion. We also know that we will never be able to stand in her sandals and experience her grief. Everyone's grief is different, and the pain of losing a child is unimaginable.

When we hear the *Stabat Mater* during this Lenten season, consider the sorrows of each vulnerable woman who is fleeing the surging violence in El Salvador, Guatemala, or Honduras and seeking asylum in the United States. That woman is often travelling alone with her children. She may have no one standing with her at home or on her journey. She faces what many of her predecessors describe as a "journey through hell."

Why are vulnerable women fleeing this region? The answer is simple: violence. Surging violence of record proportions now exceeds that of the civil wars of the 1980's and the military rule that followed. The surge includes escalating gender-based violence against women.

Survivors describe domestic violence that includes physical, sexual and psychological abuse; rape; torture; extortion; gang, criminal, and drug violence. There are also reports of women protecting their children from sexual slavery, gangs, drug dealers, and death. For them, civil protection is a myth, retaliation for reporting violence to civil authorities a reality, and death and mysterious disappearances a way of life.

Mary asks us to courageously support these women in their sorrow. How we express our support is a personal choice that may have risks. Are we afraid of what others may say about us if we offer support through vocal prayer and petitions at liturgies or in prayer groups? Will we advocate for changes to our immigration policy? Or will we leave an abused woman from this region to stand alone without any support? What would Mary do? What would she want us to do?

Nancy Brouillard McKenzie, an IVC Volunteer since her retirement from the federal government in 2011, is a volunteer at the [Columban Center for Advocacy and Outreach \(CCAO\)](#) in Washington, DC. The CCAO is the U.S. national advocacy office for the Missionary Society of St. Columban. The office serves as the line of communication between Columban missionaries serving in 15 countries around the world and policy makers in Washington, D.C. The mission of the organization is to work towards a more just, peaceful, and environmentally sustainable world by engaging in the political process guided by our faith and the Gospel.

