**Steve Spilde:** Today, it is my honor to welcome as my guest Sister Rose Elsbernd. Rose is a teammate, a mentor and a friend. She serves as a spiritual director at the Franciscan Spirituality Center and is a longtime supervisor in the Spiritual Direction Preparation Program. Recently, five FSPA sisters and staff traveled to volunteer at a facility on the border in Arizona. Rose joins me to talk about her trip and her efforts to respond with compassion to those seeking asylum. Welcome, Rose.

**Sister Rose Elsbernd:** Thank you, Steve. It’s good to be with you today.

**Steve:** You recently came back from a trip to Arizona. Could you tell us where you went?

**Sister Rose Elsbernd:** We went to, as a response to the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, had put out an asking for volunteers for people to work at the borders, partly because they were really in a need for volunteers. Many of the people who were helping during the winter were gone, and the students weren’t yet back from college. As most of these facilities depend almost – I would say 95 percent – on volunteers, there was a need for us to go down. We Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration wanted to respond to that, and there was a number of us that just volunteered to go. Only four of us could go with our Justice and Peace person, Pat Ruda, who has gone a couple other times. We went to Tucson with the intention of coming to a knowledge of what’s going on, because there’s so much that you don’t know, and you almost have to sort through the facts to know what it is. We were in Tucson. We did visit the border at two different places, and [we] went into Mexico twice. But mostly, we volunteered at Casa Alitas, which is a Catholic Charities-sponsored program that receives people from the border crossings, basically, either from Nogales or Yuma, and they have the paperwork. They have a file that’s maybe an inch-and-a-half that they carry with them. At this point, they’re legal to come into the United States.

What they do as they come into this Casa Alitas is immediately they get water, they get some soup for nourishment, and then they begin to make them feel comfortable enough, and they stay maybe one or two days until they can get transportation out to where their sponsor is. If they can’t find a sponsor, they start looking for one. There’s a lot of navigation that they have to do to get them on the road and out, but most of the time it’s a day or two. However, that’s very different from on the Mexico side. They might have been waiting on the Mexican side for a year, year and a half, or even two [years], to get the papers for asylum that they need. It’s kind of an interesting phenomena of how people are so desperate to get to a better life.

**Steve:** So, you went to this facility that serves as kind of a welcome for immigrants. These are legal immigrants [and] they have paperwork, but they’ve come to the border waiting to get in. They were waiting for a year or two on the Mexican side, and then they come in. But many of these immigrants really don’t have anything as they arrive, correct?

**Sister Rose Elsbernd:** No. What they get, of course, while they’re there, they will get products they need for just hygiene, and then they get a backpack. Maybe they get a pair of shoes if they need it, [and] definitely shoelaces, because all the shoelaces are taken out of the shoes in Mexico – even the children’s which is kind of like … They say it’s for their safety, primarily, so they can’t run. They get shoes, socks, a couple pair of underwear, two shirts, and usually one pair of jeans or something like that. That’s what they carry onto the bus or the airplane as they leave.

**Steve:** So, they’ve come into this country [and] they’re going to go to some … They might go to La Crosse if there’s an organization willing to sponsor them. But basically, what they have as possessions is what’s in that backpack.

**Sister Rose Elsbernd:** That is correct – very much so.

**Steve:** So, the people who come in, are they coming in primarily from Mexico or further south?

**Sister Rose Elsbernd:** You know, it’s kind of hard to tell. But I know there were people from Cuba, from Bolivia, from India. There are a lot of countries beyond what we would normally think of the Mexican people coming in. Where we were, there were mostly families – particularly women with maybe two or three children under 6. Sometimes [there was] a spouse with them, but not always. Then, while they got the clothing, they had a good place to sleep and then they were given three meals a day and an activity pack for the kids to play with. Before they got onto the airplane, they were also given some snacks to carry with them. It was harder for us because we were in COVID, so we couldn’t really mix a lot with the guest at the house. We could serve meals and we could provide clothes for them. I don’t speak Spanish, so a lot of it was done through eyes. And I wish we didn’t have masks, because you would have seen a lot more smiles.

**Steve:** When did this happen? Was this in April?

**Sister Rose Elsbernd:** The end of April to May 8. It was 10 days.

**Steve:** Like you were saying, mothers with three young children … So, they had come on foot to the border between Mexico and the United States, and then they sat at the border for maybe a year, maybe two years?

**Sister Rose Elsbernd:** That’s what it seems like until they can get the papers. They’re not going to be walking in the desert. Now, some of the men tend to walk the desert and come in that way. If they get caught, they will get sent back. In the desert, that was kind of a really sad thing. We went out to the desert with what they call Samaritans, which are in that area. They have different quadrants – different Tucson Samaritans took care of one area, [and] Green Valley took a different area. They go out and provide different places that they put water out just so that people can come, those who are crossing the desert in desperation. If they come across someone who is very dehydrated and needs medical care, they cannot do anything other than notify the border patrol. They do nothing illegal, but they do provide some solace in terms of water. Sometimes they walk pretty far up into the mountains with the water drops. We went on two different water drops, and on one of them we came to this … It would have been an area that you could tell people were around a lot because … in that area there was a barrel that they were going to fill with water. As we got there, the guide was really sad and she said, “It’s empty, but the ground is wet.” So, there are people who take it upon themselves to make life more miserable in the desert for those [who are] crossing and drain the water if they can. If it’s coyotes or if it’s just somebody who thinks they need to be an extra military force, that’s what’s sad: the efforts of some just to preserve life, and others who just want to destroy life. And in the desert, you will see crosses in which they have found … All I can say is, to be so desperate that you try to cross the desert time and time again and get sent back time and time again …

When we were in Nogales, there’s a receiving place there called Kino. One area was mostly women and children lined up to come in and get services, be it medical or legal aid or something like that. The other area was pretty much men at different ages. We talked to this one [who] had been in the United States and has a family established. His oldest child is like 12 or 13. He’s always had employment, but he got stopped and he doesn’t have a license, and that sent him back. He is trying desperately to get back to be with his family, who he’s had here for 15 years or more. But that’s one thing: They cannot have a license, and then they get picked up even if they are contributing with taxes and everything. I guess the number one thing is that education of how bad we need the reform, and how desperate people are [and] how suffering they are [and] how much suffering they go through to try to make a better life.

**Steve:** You had told me that there were unaccompanied women with babies. How does a woman end up at the border with a baby?

**Sister Rose Elsbernd:** That’s the question that most of the time is through violence. There was one day the bus came in and this lady came out. We were serving her water, and I just looked at it and I said, “That’s a newborn.” The next day, the medical staff checked everything out and it was born that day. Where it was born, I have no idea. But the problem is that in as they wait to get crossing, oftentimes they might get some favor if they allow a rape. Many of these children that are born in the United States were not conceived in their home country at all, but it was done usually by violence to gain favor from a coyote or somebody that’s going to help them.

**Steve:** A single woman headed to the border, but by the time she got through the border she had become pregnant and now she’s got an infant. And basically, what she owns has been given to her in a backpack.

**Sister Rose Elsbernd:** That’s correct. The baby was wrapped in a sweatshirt that day.

**Steve:** Andyou saw some young children who had been through this journey.

**Sister Rose Elsbernd:** When the kids come in, they just kind of cling to their mothers or their dads if they happen to have a father with them. They just kind of whisper. And then after a day or two, if they’re there longer than a day, they begin to be the child that you always see. There were a couple families that were there two days or longer because they were having trouble getting transportation. It was interesting because they’re in different pods, and all of a sudden, the kids that were in one pod were in the other pod playing together. They were even free enough to come up to us as we were serving and point that these little kids wanted seconds on that dinner. But yes, they are traumatized – you can tell that very easily.

**Steve:** I just can’t imagine a young child … You think of a 2- or a 3-year-old, they’re just busy and noisy. But to be so traumatized that they just sit there silent …

**Sister Rose Elsbernd:** And then you think what their experience is even now as they get on an airplane … And that was the other thing. [Sister] Kristen, who was with us, could speak more Spanish, so she often did transports to the airport, and occasionally they let her take them all the way up to – because they don’t speak English, for the most part – all the way up to the gate they were going to have to go to. There are so many good people in the process of it. I think Casa Alitas had seven paid employees. The last day we had 70 people come through, so 70 and then the next day you might have 25 or 30, but this is constant day and night. It’s mostly run by volunteers; they have between 300 and 400 volunteers. All the food pretty much is volunteered and brought in. Of course, there’s some that comes in through your different food projects. Clothing is either purchased or it’s all volunteer. All the people who work in those areas are pretty much volunteers of transportation, food, clothing, and even some of the people who are helping them get their passage and get their papers right. That’s almost all volunteer; it’s just amazing. It’s such a steady, steady stream.

**Steve:** I want to eventually circle back to how this experience connects with your faith. But before I do that, I first want to ask you to share some personal definitions. If I asked you how do you define God, what would be your answer?

**Sister Rose Elsbernd:** My favorite title, if you can use a title, is “Loving One.” I define God as kind of that mysterious and yet present awareness that gives meaning and purpose and warmth to life. In one way, it’s the one who kind of enfolds all of life and all of creation and all of people in goodness and love. … It’s kind of like, how do you define something that you’re so aware of, but you really can’t put words on it because you have to almost experience it? And you have to kind of have a whole sense of not being alone, that there’s a greater spirit, greater goodness, greater love that puts it all together. Then, of course, you have Jesus, who is the example of that. I don’t want to say there isn’t a Christ in life, [because] there is.

**Steve:** How did this trip influence your understanding of God, or maybe enhance your understanding of God?

**Sister Rose Elsbernd:** First of all, I think I went down with that – and I think I’ve said it, too – wherever there are people suffering, we need to do something to help that suffering. I don’t believe God requires pain and suffering for people to love him. But I do think that God requires us who are of gift to be able to reach out and to be the presence today. As I look at all of these people, be them the volunteers or the staff or even the border crossing guards and the bus drivers, there is goodness in them. And for whatever reason, they’re doing what they feel they need to do. But I don’t think I can be a Christian and say, “I don’t care.” I personally can’t be a Christian and then say, “These people don’t belong here.” These people are God’s people, just like us. I think that’s the piece that’s enriched for me, a sense of “They are my brothers and sisters.”

**Steve:** So that was made stronger through this experience?

**Sister Rose Elsbernd:** Very definitely, yes.

**Steve:** I also hear your explanation that – these are my words, not yours – but an opportunity because as you were participating in this experience, it really was God’s compassion flowing through you. You became a channel for that. Does that resonate?

**Sister Rose Elsbernd:** Yes, that is true. It’s kind of like you can read about the people desperate to come to the United States. You can hear all the ugly stories of the border patrols. But in reality, they are people who are seeking to do what they think is right. But I do have great compassion for all of them. I wish there was a way we could take the demon that we often think of the people crossing, as well as the border patrol.

**Steve:** I hear you saying everyone has goodness inside them.

**Sister Rose Elsbernd:** Exactly.

**Steve:** And they’re trying to do what they think is right. Like these immigrants, it’s not bad intentions. It’s just complete desperation.

**Sister Rose Elsbernd:** I would prefer to call them “asylum seekers.”

**Steve:** Okay, okay. They’re seeking asylum, and the places they’re coming from are places where they fear for their survival. And that fear may be very realistic.

**Sister Rose Elsbernd:** That’s very true, very true.

**Steve:** One of the things that kind of gets glossed over in the Christmas story is that Jesus was really a refugee. How did this enhance your understanding of Jesus and particularly his refugee experiences?

**Sister Rose Elsbernd:** I didn’t think of it as the refugee as much as Jesus, the one who accepted everyone. Jesus, the one who looked at the downtrodden and included all people. I looked at it from that point more, I think. And it’s kind of like, I could see Jesus kind of maybe in a real sad disposition and saying, “Oh, my people. Oh, my people.” I’ve been thinking a lot of the Beatitudes: “Blessed are the poor,” “Blessed are the meek,” “Blessed are those who suffer persecution,” and who are they? Hopefully, someday they will find the peace and they will find home, [and] they will feel a sense of community and belonging again.

**Steve:** What I’m hearing from you is really hearing the words of Jesus’ preaching to reach out. I think for me, as I listen to you I think, “I haven’t really given it much thought before.” But when Jesus was an infant and [King] Herod was trying to kill him, Joseph got the message that he should go to Egypt [because] perhaps it would be safer in Egypt. So literally in the night they left. Thinking about you talking about the woman who had just given birth and wrapping her baby in a sweatshirt, I don’t think Mary used a sweatshirt, but I’m sure it was whatever was available. I don’t imagine they had much more than a backpack, and they headed off to Egypt. It doesn’t imply that they knew anybody there. There’s a lot of desert between Israel and Egypt. It kind of sounds like a similar story.

**Sister Rose Elsbernd:** And the motivation of desperation.

**Steve:** Yes. It wasn’t like they were getting in their SUV and staying overnight at the Holiday Inn. A lot of it was on foot in the hot sun and not sure where they were going. They probably had to make their way through border guards, and there were some bad people along the way. They were really dependent on the care of strangers once they arrived in Egypt. … The title of this podcast is, “What Is Spirituality?” What is your definition of spirituality? And then, how would you connect this trip with your understanding of spirituality, or if this trip influenced your understanding in any way?

**Sister Rose Elsbernd:** I look at spirituality as kind of that window frame by which we look out at life. As we look through that window frame, it’s what gives us meaning, what gives us resilience, and what gives us purpose. For us who have a Christian spirituality, we look through that window frame and we know love because of our Christian identity. We know a sense of purpose in the sense of what life is all about, which we keep searching for. And in many ways, I think when tough times come through, we have that sense of saying, “I know I’m not alone and have a God who is enfolding me and holding me and wanting the very best for me.” In a very broad sense, that’s what I see spirituality is. And then you foster it and becomes a relationship more than just a window frame. I think it has to be so embedded in your life that it becomes almost a way in which you look at a sunset and you say, “That is beautiful, God.” Or you see a young child and you say, “God is good.” That’s what I see spirituality is. But I also see that you can’t just take it for granted. If you really want to keep searching that question of, “What’s life about and what am I about and who are you, God?” I think those are the questions that you live your whole life with.

**Steve:** How did this trip enhance your understanding of spirituality? Did it challenge it? Expand it? How would you connect this trip with your own spirituality?

**Sister Rose Elsbernd:** It expanded it into a more vivid picture of who my brothers and sisters are. And I think it also brought me to a lot more compassion, which is part of that whole piece of looking at life and others.

**Steve:** Some other important words. Your understanding of brothers and sisters got expanded. Your understanding of compassion got expanded.

**Sister Rose Elsbernd:** And my understanding of desert. When people say they’re in a desert, oh, my gosh.

**Steve:** If you’re having a tough day, you can think, “At least I’m not in the desert without water.” … You have a beautiful prayer that I think would be a nice way to close today. Could you share that with us?

**Sister Rose Elsbernd:** Yes. This was actually given in a lecture series. It was an invitation to individual prayer, but I could only hear it in terms of the people who are seeking asylum. It’s called, “This is a lesson on crossing the sands – remember it.” And it comes from a journal of 1996: “The sands are wide, the oasis few. It is always safest to remain where you are. But if you cannot remain where you are, then it is safest to go with a caravan. But if there is no caravan, then it is safest to go with a trusted band of companions. But if there are no trusted companions, then it is safest to go with one who knows the sands. But if there is no one who knows the sands, then you must cross the sands alone. There are two things to remember. First, take nothing with you but what sustains you: food and water. If you cannot take both, leave the food but carry the water. If you must carry water, you must carry water if you are to cross the sands. The second thing [is], never attempt to travel by daylight. The sun will kill you. You must wait until nightfall when it is safest to travel. Moonlight and darkness will be light enough. There are two things you must do: stay alive and keep moving. If you can do just those two things, you will come to another oasis. This is a lesson on crossing the sands. Remember it.”