

Encountering migrant otherness through solidarity and Christian humanitarianism in Chile

El encuentro con la alteridad migrante desde la solidaridad y el humanitarismo cristiano en Chile

Hedilberto Aguilar^{a*}  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9024-2681>
Miguel Mansilla^a  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5684-0787>

^a Universidad Arturo Prat, Instituto de Estudios Culturales y Territoriales, Victoria, Chile, e-mail: heaguilar@unap.cl, mansilla.miguel@gmail.com

Abstract

In the outsourcing of migration management, faith-based organizations (FBOs) play a fundamental role in receiving and hosting vulnerable migrants. The objective is to understand the motivations for solidarity action and what occurs when encountering vulnerable migrant otherness, from the perspective of religious, volunteers and staff members of these FBO. From a theoretical reflection, ethnographic observation and in-depth interviews conducted in Santiago, Chile, Iquique and Arica (2022-2024), the study found that religious and rights-based narratives converge among actors who wield public, social and cultural influence, countering social and political xenophobia by presenting a human face and serving as a bridge to Chilean society. As a result, the study presents a form of solidarity with otherness based on encounter, understanding and gratitude, from the receiver's point of view, a topic scarcely worked in Latin America.

Keywords: solidarity, religion, migration, humanitarianism, Chile.

Resumen

En la terciarización de la gestión migratoria, las organizaciones basadas en la fe (OBF) juegan un papel fundamental en la recepción y acogida de migrantes vulnerables. El objetivo es comprender las motivaciones para la acción solidaria y lo que acontece en el encuentro con la alteridad migrante vulnerable, desde la perspectiva de religiosos, voluntarios y funcionarios de estas OBF. A partir de una reflexión teórica, observación etnográfica y entrevistas en profundidad realizadas en Santiago de Chile, Iquique y Arica (2022-2024), se encontró que las narrativas religiosas y de derechos confluyen en actores que tienen una influencia pública, social y cultural, a contracorriente de la xenofobia social y política, que

Received on May 28, 2025.

Accepted on June 18, 2026.

Published on August 27, 2026.

* Corresponding author: Hedilberto Aguilar. E-mail: heaguilar@unap.cl

ORIGINAL ARTICLE LANGUAGE:
SPANISH.



This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Atribución 4.0 Internacional.

CITATION: Aguilar, H. & Mansilla, M. (2026). Encountering migrant otherness through solidarity and Christian humanitarianism in Chile. *Estudios Fronterizos*, 27, Artículo e188. <https://doi.org/10.21670/ref.2610188>

muestran un rostro humano y un puente con la sociedad chilena. Como resultado, se presenta una solidaridad con la alteridad basada en el encuentro, la comprensión y el agradecimiento, desde la óptica del receptor, escasamente trabajada en Latinoamérica.

Palabras clave: solidaridad, religión, migración, humanitarismo, Chile.

Introduction

Over the past 30 years, intraregional migration in Latin America has risen sharply, from seven million in 1990 to nearly 15 million in 2020 (Programa de las Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo, 2023), as a result of restrictive policies in countries of the Global North, causing them to become both sources and destinations of migration (Organización Internacional para las Migraciones & Foro Especializado Migratorio del Mercosur y Estados Asociados, 2022). This has mobilized several civil society organizations (csos)—many of them faith-based—at borders, transit points and destinations, from Ushuaia to Tijuana, both local and transnational, that carry out humanitarian and social integration work. Chile is no exception. The International Organization for Migration (iom), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the National Migration Service, among other agencies, regularly turn to csos to assist with migration-related efforts.

Solidarity with migrants holds little social value in Chile; they are perceived as a problem, a burden, according to public opinion—especially undocumented migrants, who are viewed as criminals: a moral failing that can only be remedied by leaving the country. According to the census, the migrant population in Chile rose from 1.22% in 2002 to 8.8% in 2024, transforming the country's socio-racial and cultural landscape. A look at the 2023 Bicentennial Survey (Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile [PUC], 2024) offers insight into Chilean perceptions. In 2017, 38% of Chileans believed there was significant conflict between Chileans and migrants; by 2023, that figure had risen to 78%. In 2023, 91% believed that immigrants had contributed to the rise in crime; paradoxically, only 6% had experienced frequent conflicts with foreigners. Racism, classism and discrimination have intensified since 2016 as so-called Caribbean migrants (Haitians, Dominicans, Venezuelans and Colombians) have been attributed characteristics associated with savagery, incivility, irrationality and ugliness (Navarro-Conticello, 2024).

Chilean society is intimidated (Gissi & Aguilar, 2023); newcomers offer “the public safe targets that justify fear, shock and hatred” (Bauman & Donskis, 2015, p. 222), which diminishes empathy toward them. Security policies seek to reduce the risks associated with these supposed enemies, thereby negating the state's obligation to welcome them. In contrast, ethics seeks to unite, creating a “clash of principles” between political power and social ethics (Bauman, 2011, p. 60).

Around the world, various religious groups seek to bridge the ethical gap between state-imposed restrictions on vulnerable migrants and host societies; they provide “spiritual and psychosocial support, mobilize material and non-material resources, and leverage their trust, reach and networks to address the needs of displaced people and promote social cohesion” (Trotta & Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2022, p. 67). This study focuses on Catholic and Evangelical faith-based organizations (fBos), not because they are unique, but because they are the most representative in the reception of migrants

in Chile. The Chilean population is identifying less and less with institutional religion, so serving immigrants does not necessarily confer legitimacy in the eyes of the local population. Affiliation with the Catholic Church fell from 70% in 2006 to 45% in 2023, while affiliation with evangelical churches remained stable between 2010 and 2023, averaging 17% (PUC, 2024).

This study aims to understand the institutional dynamics of FBOs as third-party actors in migration management, and to explain what happens to the people who assist migrants during face-to-face encounters. Alongside CSOs, FBOs seek to provide reception, protection and access to migrants' rights from a mission-based perspective (Zamudio Grave, 2019). This involves serving others universally and without proselytizing, unlike in other ecclesial contexts. The Catholic Church has been a pioneer in welcoming migrants, first by assisting Europeans traveling to the Americas and later by establishing a pastoral ministry dedicated to caring for Catholic migrants and evangelizing non-Catholics, with a focus on their comprehensive human development (Aranda Bustamante, 2005). According to official Catholic theology, the pastoral care of human mobility represents a visible sign of Christ for all humanity, which means that the Church, as God's representative on earth, has a duty to welcome those who have been wronged in various ways. Thus, it has evolved from a mission for migrants into a migrant mission against the lack of hospitality in many countries (Marchetto, 2003).

How is pastoral care for human mobility carried out, and how are evangelical ministries for migrants in Chile conducted and how do the FBOs relate to the Chilean state? What attitudes, beliefs and practices arise from the encounter with an "other" who is treated as different? What implications does this encounter with the "other" have for Chilean society? To address these questions, this study first situates the understanding of otherness and solidarity in a context where social life is becoming increasingly precarious, particularly due to state policies. It then outlines the methodology. Next, the findings are placed within an analytical framework. Finally, the study reflects on the outsourcing of migration management and solidarity as a bridge of openness between Chileans and migrants: migration as an opportunity for encounter.

The increasing precarity of life and solidarity with migrants

Solidarity involves relating to another who is in a different condition from one's own, in a context where people are classified and related to one another through affinity and difference (Hall, 2014). Borders establish divisions and identifications that, in this era, emphasize nativeness and blood ties as criteria for distinguishing nationalisms, implying that "every placement was preceded and will be followed by a displacement" (Agier, 2015, p. 47). The encounter with the "other" unfolds amid the questions raised by customs, words and meanings that can lead to misunderstandings. This causes temporary disruption, gives rise to readjustments and creative solutions; social boundaries are erected that, in an era of daily uncertainty, imply a state of liminality and a loss of status for vulnerable migrants (Agier, 2015; Mezzadra & Neilson, 2016).

For solidarity to exist, there must be confidence that one's own actions have an impact on society. In contrast, individualism—as both a cause and effect of anomie and conflict—has been a source of concern for social scientists (Kang, 2004). The discourse of meritocracy has attributed economic success or failure to the individual rather

than to the set of structural conditions that facilitate it. The precariat (the middle and working classes) bears the brunt of its existential uncertainty due to the loss of a shared vision of the future. Instead, a sense of ignorance, powerlessness and humiliation prevails; thus, “calls for solidarity sound ridiculous” (Bauman & Donskis, 2015, p. 86), and the suffering of others becomes a harbinger of one’s own fate.

Immigrants who are vulnerable due to their legal status are marginalized socially, symbolically and physically—both to include and to exclude them—as part of a broader spectrum of violence perpetrated by the state and the market (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2016). Mezzadra and Neilson point out that these borders represent sites of struggle regarding domination, dispossession and exploitation: a struggle for recognition and respect. Agier (2015) emphasizes that borders with “the other” intensify in the face of the fragility of the nation-state and its societies. Mistrust and inequalities hinder mutual recognition.

In Chile, there was a shift from a high degree of social connectedness before the coup d’état (1973) to a post-dictatorship era marked by individualism and a loss of trust in social ties. The tension between living standards and the actual possibilities for improvement, coupled with conditions of growing isolation in urban areas, led to a rise in individualism and to limited opportunities to look out for others, to engage in collective life, and, even less so, to practice solidarity (Araujo, 2018). The sense of powerlessness in the face of injustices and the individualization of economic failure is an “exacerbation of the self” (Román et al., 2007, p. 169) that weakens the collective resources at our disposal. Dockendorff et al. (2010) showed that a more neoliberal framework—one characterized by a moralizing, depoliticized and residual role—took hold as a result of the actions of individuals and private institutions. In contrast, a less widespread social democratic framework seeks to promote rights and social justice, which is at odds with the neoliberal framework.

Mascareño (2007) situates solidarity within a differentiated social system where exclusion is viewed as a moral problem, increasingly detached from the state’s sphere of influence and coordinated and delegated to private actors and civil society. At the same time, the human rights system incorporates and codifies expectations that place the individual at the center, beyond mere membership in a state, with the prevailing view that the state is responsible for implementing and promoting solidarity (Román et al., 2014).

Solidarity, in its Catholic form, originated in the Church’s social doctrine and natural law in the late 19th century as a middle ground between liberalism and Marxism: it sought to avoid the risks of individualism in liberal economies and the class struggle promoted by Marxism (Groser, 2014). The Chilean Catholic Church, therefore, influenced the development of 20th-century labor and peasant corporatism, becoming a standard-bearer for human rights in the face of the dictatorship. With the return of democracy, it fell into disrepute due to cases of sexual abuse and, in the eyes of certain sectors, when it allied itself with right-wing parties to promote its moral agenda (Veit Strassner, 2006). Nevertheless, religious organizations retain legitimacy in charitable work—the Catholic Church in particular, and to a lesser extent other churches (Bahamondes González et al., 2020; Comisión UC para el análisis de la crisis de la Iglesia Católica en Chile, 2022).

Latin American immigrants have not received widespread solidarity, except for the first wave of Venezuelans, who were viewed as victims of the political-economic system and whose values and behaviors were similar to those of the Chilean middle class (Gissi et al., 2019). Between 2010 and 2025, few studies focused on solidarity toward

migrants through FBO, except Ramos Rodríguez (2013), who refers to the Catholic Church's Pastoral Migratoria in Iquique, which sought to mitigate the initial impact of migrants' arrival amid restrictive policies. This cross-border perspective involving Peru and Bolivia was disrupted by the increase in the non-border population following the introduction of special visa requirements for Haitians (2018) and Venezuelans (2019), which, during the COVID-19 pandemic, led to an influx of people entering through unauthorized crossings (Liberona Concha et al., 2022).

For Levinas (2000), solidarity lies in the renunciation of the self for the bare face of the other, an epiphany of visitation and transcendence, in whose revelation of the infinite lies the trace of God: "To go toward Him is not to follow this trace, which is not a sign; it is to go toward the Others who are found in the trace" (Levinas, 2000, p. 74). The state that establishes security policies is the same one that pressures a humanitarianism that is indispensable only to prevent death (López Reyes & París Pombo, 2023). For Derrida (2008), this tension becomes explicit when hospitality shifts from a private to a public matter. From the protection of one's own home against an invader-parasite who might take one hostage, the question of whom to admit emerges: "sovereignty can only be exercised by filtering, choosing, and therefore excluding and exercising violence" (Derrida, 2008, p. 59). Solidarity with migrants is permitted but limited in the public sphere.

Stefoni et al. (2023, p. 6) question the concept of a migration crisis established by the state, as it "calls into question the relation between humanitarian discourse and the implementation of stricter migration control and management policies". Consequently, vulnerable migrants are partially or completely deprived of their rights, which elicits "empathy and compassion" (Stefoni et al., 2023, p. 7) toward them as victims, while any political demands would render them undesirable. These authors conclude that the "migration crisis" simultaneously promotes xenophobia and, to a lesser extent, solidarity with victims rather than with citizens. The line between victim and "othered" subject can be blurred.

According to Groos (2023), solidarity with migrants in Iquique—a city that experienced violent incidents against Venezuelans in 2021 and 2022 when they flooded public spaces—is shaped by *crimigration*. In the face of explicit xenophobia, pro-migrant CSOs reacted, and they became "targets of immigration control and have experienced repression at various levels and from different actors" (Groos, 2023, pp. 5-6). Hostile conditions intensified amid the uncertainty of the pandemic, coupled with the perception of border and migration chaos, which led to only a few churches assisting migrants (Tapia Ladino & Quinteros Rojas, 2023); even so, they remain highly visible institutions in crises of human mobility from the south to the north of the continent (López Reyes & París Pombo, 2023).

Immigration Law No. 21.325 of 2022 proposes the potential criminalization of organizations that assist irregular migrants (Groos, 2023), "going so far as to penalize conduct that facilitates entry motivated by a spirit of solidarity" (Bolívar et al., 2023, p. 145). To date, no sanctions have been imposed on FBOs, but enforcement of the law remains subject to the discretion of officials (Thayer Correa et al., 2020); furthermore, it encourages the political and media exploitation of the criminalization of migrants, which creates adverse social conditions for this type of solidarity, while increasing human trafficking (Quinteros Rojas et al., 2019), especially in the electoral context (Bolívar et al., 2023).

A migrant who lacks state citizenship is at risk of losing it, or—even if they possess it—is in a state of socioeconomic hardship and is “othered”. “Otherization” is:

(...) the result of a discursive process through which an in-group (“We”, the Self) constructs one or more dominated out-groups (“They”, the Other) by stigmatizing difference—real or imagined—presented as a negation of identity and thus a potential ground for discrimination... Asymmetry in power relations is central to the construction of otherness. (Staszak, 2009, p. 43)

Methodology

Table 1 summarizes the ethnographic studies conducted during activities at FBOS.

Table 1. FBO ethnographies and number of staff members, volunteers and clergy through 2024

Acronyms	Name	Sponsoring religious organization	City where the ethnographic study was conducted	Participants in the reception of migrants
SJM	Servicio Jesuita a Migrantes	Society of Jesus (Jesuits)	Santiago and Arica	About 200
Incami	Instituto Católico Chileno de Migración	Chilean Episcopal Conference	Santiago and Iquique	About 200
Vicaría	Vicariate for Social Ministry	Archdiocese of Santiago / Caritas	Santiago	12
PMM	Pastoral Migrante de la Iglesia Metodista	Methodist Church of Chile	Santiago	7
PML	Pastoral Migrante de la Iglesia Luterana	Evangelical Lutheran Church of Chile	Santiago	12
Edes	Ejército de Salvación (Salvation Army)	Salvation Army	Santiago and Iquique	16
WV	World Vision	Multidenominational Evangelical	Santiago	15
FASIC	Fundación de Ayuda Social de las Iglesias Cristianas	Multidenominational (Evangelical and Catholic)	Santiago and Arica	10
ADRA	Adventist Development and Relief Agency	Seventh-day Adventist Church	Santiago	4
FMJ	Fundación Madre Josefa	Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd	Santiago and Iquique	28
FS	Fundación Scalabrini	Congregation of St. Charles Borromeo (Scalabrinians)	Santiago	30
FMW	Fundación María Ward	Sisters of the Congregation of Jesus	Santiago	4
Epes	Educación Popular en Salud	Evangelical Lutheran Church of Chile	Santiago	2
SEM	Servicio Evangélico Migrante*	Multidenominational Evangelical	Santiago	More than 50

* It operated from 2016 to 2020.

Source: created by the authors

Some of these organizations have downsized due to a lack of funding (WV, PMM) or have changed their approach to providing care (FMW, Epes, ADRA, Edes).

These FBOS were selected because they were present in at least one of the cities studied, almost all with a national scope, and because their approach to serving migrants was based on a rights-based perspective rather than merely on providing assistance or proselytizing.

A total of 31 in-depth interviews (lasting between 45 minutes and an hour and a half) were conducted with 10 men and 21 women (staff members, volunteers and religious leaders between the ages of 24 and 48) at twelve of these thirteen FBOS between September 2022 and November 2024 in Santiago, Iquique and Arica. Participants were interviewed based on their availability and direct contact with migrants. There are more women, reflecting a trend toward greater female representation in direct care.

There are three types of agents: *a*) volunteers—who work without pay or for a nominal salary—; *b*) staff members—hired assistants who receive a salary—; and, *c*) religious leaders—priests, nuns and pastors—. This study did not include organizations and churches that operate in specific contexts or whose congregants are migrants, as they require a separate analysis. In addition, interviews were conducted with officials from the municipalities of Lo Prado, Quilicura, La Cisterna and Alto Hospicio, as well as with the Metropolitan Region's Department of Health, in order to cross-check opinions and observations. Names were completely anonymized in the transcripts and in cases where the person or institution might be at risk.

It must be recognized that actions and beliefs can involve a mix of altruistic and selfish motives, as well as motives of giving and reciprocity, which create tension within these moral acts (Komter, 2007). The focus here is on the motivation behind these agents' actions and on what occurs in their encounters with others, from an anthropological perspective on values and emotions, when the vulnerable migrant influences their interactions.

These migrants turn to FBOS for assistance from strangers whose religious background can serve as a potential source of trust in the interaction. They may seek necessities such as food and shelter, as well as documentation, psychological support, support networks, help in coping with the grief of migration, and so on. In this process, they are listened to, seen and treated as human beings by another human being who, through empathy, restores their sense of humanity.

Data analysis was conducted on two levels: 1) narrative, which reveals the symbolic connections with lived experiences; for this, structural discourse analysis (Hiernaux, 2008) proved useful, as it aims to identify cultural patterns in verbal content, their meaning or ways of viewing things; and, 2) ethnography, which involves the description of social events from the perspective of the actors: "An ethnographic study is concerned with both practices (what people do) and the meanings these practices take on for those who perform them (people's perspectives on those practices)" (Restrepo, 2018, p. 25).

Ethnography and in-depth interviews are complementary; one serves as a reference point for the other, and together they can determine the reliability of the information (Pujadas, 2000). The ethnographic study was conducted during public service hours at the FBOS. Few direct interactions were observed, as most required privacy. However, conversations took place with migrants while they were waiting and as they were leaving, facilitated by the fact that one of the authors is also a racialized immigrant. For their part, the interviews helped clarify how FBO agents interpret their daily

practices and experiences. Likewise, conversations and meetings organized by government, academic and nongovernmental institutions helped shed light on the institutional perspective on the role of the state and international agencies in outsourcing migration management.

Organizational context

Structure of the FBOS

The oldest and largest FBOS—which operate on a regional basis and have more than 50 staff members—are the Instituto Católico Chileno de Migración and the Servicio Jesuita a Migrantes (SJM). Both organizations engage in public advocacy for more humane laws, run campaigns to combat stigma and provide support during times of political and social upheaval. Incami offers specialized courses on immigration law and rights, which religious and civil society organizations attend. The SJM maintains comprehensive statistics and reports, such as the *Statistical Yearbook*, which cross-references public data, its own data and data from academic sources. The Vicariate for Social Ministry (Vicariate), which operates nationwide, divides its tasks, including a line of work focused on migration in collaboration with other FBOS, and develops programs to be implemented in parishes. The Madre Josefa and Scalabrini foundations carry out ongoing, focused work in migration assistance, including counseling, services for women and children, job-training workshops, psychosocial support and shelters. World Vision (wv) works with children along the northern border and in Santiago.

The María Ward Foundation (FMW) temporarily partnered with shelters between 2020 and 2024 at the request of municipal and state authorities, but funding ran out. The Lutheran (PML) and Methodist (PMM) pastoral ministries, FASIC and the Salvation Army have offices in churches with programs focused on legal, psychological, employment and spiritual counseling. Public Health Education (Epes) focuses on programs related to women's labor, sexual and reproductive rights. The Evangelical Migrant Service (SEM) was implemented in various churches, where volunteers—college students in Santiago—provided Spanish-language classes, legal and cultural orientation, assistance with government procedures and humanitarian aid. The Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) responded to migration crises, particularly by providing financial support and implementing strategies to welcome migrants at certain churches during the migration crisis from 2018 to 2022.

Catholic FBOS have much more diversified funding than evangelical ones, receiving support from the European Union, UNHCR, Caritas, the private sector, government programs and national and international donors and foundations. Evangelical organizations tend to rely on one or a few sources of funding; for example, wv and ADRA receive funding from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), which, in the face of Donald Trump's drastic cuts, were forced to scale back their programs and staff; Epes, FASIC, PMM and PML receive funding from denominational church programs in the United States; the Salvation Army relies on a general fund that is allocated annually; this fund prioritizes assistance in various areas, with migration being a focus between 2017 and 2024. The SEM ceased to exist because it failed to establish a volunteer-based administrative and funding structure (2016-2020). Thus, it is evident that Catholic FBOS have greater economic and organizational stability than their evangelical counterparts.

There is a significant disparity in the FBO's territorial coverage and size. Incami has 23 offices, while María Ward has only one location. The Methodist ministry began in 2023 with seven staff members and religious sisters, but by 2025 it had only two people left in Santiago. The Salvation Army carried out its humanitarian work from Iquique to Santiago, operating from a series of churches along the way. At the same time, the PML, which has a small staff, operates three service centers in Santiago, Concepción and Punta Arenas. Therefore, they are very diverse: Catholic organizations have greater stability in their religious staff and office workers, while the financial uncertainty faced by evangelical organizations leads to instability in their hiring and volunteer programs, as programs are scaled back or shut down annually when funding decreases.

The structure reflects these asymmetries: while Incami has offices suitable for this work, SEM depended on local churches' willingness to host volunteers on their premises, leaving it at the mercy of their members' mood. The Madre Josefa Foundation (FMJ) and WV adapt their workspaces to serve groups of women, while Epes already had such spaces in place for its work with Chilean women. The PMM in Santiago and the PML in San Bernardo do not always have signs indicating their presence; they are known more through word of mouth and networks with churches and pro-migrant organizations, and they have been provided with spaces within the churches themselves. Organizations with more resources and stability can set up dedicated sites for migrant services, while smaller ones adapt whatever space is available to host workshops, provide personalized assistance or offer emotional support.

The tension between humanitarianism and security

López Reyes and París Pombo (2023) state that humanitarianism and security policies are two sides of the migration governance model promoted by international organizations such as IOM. In line with Fassin, the humanitarian rationale is a mechanism of "inclusion and exclusion, based on the vulnerability, illness and fragility of migrants, while humanitarian institutions and organizations operate under the logic of compassion" (López Reyes & París Pombo, 2023, p. 18). Amid the tension between the state and FBOs, the latter act as auxiliaries of migration control—whether intentionally or not—even as they acknowledge that they collaborate with a state that criminalizes migrants and, in turn, relies on partnerships for humanitarian efforts that serve to polish the state's image by guaranteeing a minimum set of rights.

Each FBO, depending on its size, has a connection with one or more government entities. Incami and SJM have ties with the legislative branch and, at times, with the executive branch; FASIC with municipalities in Arica, Iquique or Santiago; FMW with Estación Central; the Madre Josefa Foundation with Iquique, La Serena, Santiago, Talca and Temuco—and so each organization maintains relations at different levels, including regional ministerial secretariats (Seremis) for education, health and children's affairs. This gives rise to specific relations of specialization. For example, municipalities are prohibited from assisting people without a RUN (*registro único nacional*), which no person in an irregular immigration status possesses. In these cases, humanitarian aid—ranging from goods to temporary shelter—can be provided through small FBOs such as FMW, PML or the Salvation Army (Edes).

Incami, SJM, WV and ADRA have had agreements with the national government and international agencies such as UNHCR and IOM, among others, which implemented large-scale humanitarian response programs during the pandemic along the northern border and in Santiago from 2020 to 2022, when there was the highest influx of people entering through unauthorized crossings. This involved contracting health services, temporary infrastructure, food supplies and professionals in psychology, social work, nursing, sanitation and other fields. These facilities were set up in Colchane, Arica, Iquique, Antofagasta, Valparaíso and Santiago—the destinations most frequently sought by migrants.

On the northern border, moreover, this involved partnerships with local churches through the Vicariate for Social Ministry in the case of the Catholic Church, and alliances with local pastors in the case of evangelical churches, as the migrant population overwhelmed the capacities of all the FBOs and CSOs. In contrast, Santiago—due to its size and the number of FBOs and partner churches—did not reach the same scale. Aid workers in the north also experienced far more problems with emotional and physical exhaustion. Epes in Santiago set up “ollas comunes” (also known as community kitchens) by organizing and training Chilean and migrant women, while also conducting workshops on gender-based violence and support networks, providing childcare and assisting civil society organizations such as the Open Assembly of Migrants and Pro-Migrants of Tarapacá in the north; smaller FBOs collaborated as affiliates of the larger ones, referring people to them based on specific situations.

FASIC and FMJ in Arica and Iquique helped alleviate some of the burden on SJM and Incami by handling potential cases of legalization, providing first aid to children and women and referring them to other civilian and government agencies for shelter and medical care. At the FBOs, humanitarian assistance screening processes were established that prioritized women and children, identified potential human traffickers and minimized contact with adult males to mitigate instances of violence and addiction that could put the most vulnerable at risk. This forced many men—whether alone, in pairs or with their families—to wander the streets more often, in precarious conditions marked by hunger and social and psychological distress, which exacerbated conflicts with residents. In Santiago, the sickest men and those with young children were cared for by government agencies and the Juan Bosco Foundation.

The gender perspective is one of the elements of the *gendered* system of migration control (Gil Araujo et al., 2023) shared by state agencies and FBOs, which has left adult men more marginalized in terms of humanitarian assistance. In shelters and humanitarian assistance programs, priority is given to mothers with minor children, due to the best interests of the child in situations of vulnerability. Some shelters accept only women in any situation and entire families. “Violence is a pattern of behavior—within a relationship and toward children. In other words, it’s a different kind of violence that doesn’t necessarily involve physical or psychological abuse” (Woman, 57 years old, María Ward Foundation).

It is important to understand that many of these people arrive in a state of severe emotional and psychological distress, and that they have likely had to lie and steal along the way just to survive. So, they haven’t quite realized yet that they are in a safe place and don’t need to lie. (Woman, 52 years old, FMJ)

The government also *gendered* migrant assistance; for example, by setting up checkpoints on buses traveling from the north to Santiago—sometimes assigning responsibility for this to the FBOs and municipalities—where single men were barred from boarding, resulting in a hierarchy in the provision of assistance.

wv had already conducted biometric registration before UNHCR requested it in 2023. Each FBO maintains a record documenting the assistance provided to sponsors and, whenever possible, safeguarding migrants' rights on their journey from the northern border to Santiago, or from Chile to Peru and Bolivia. When the government conducted a biometric registration drive between mid-2023 and early 2024, the SJM already had approximate statistics on the number of undocumented migrants. Each FBO safeguards this data. Some FBOs transferred information to IOM and UNHCR with the agreement that it would not be disclosed.

Furthermore, when funding for these FBOs comes from agencies such as UNHCR, IOM or the Chilean government, it includes clauses requiring that the funds be directed to specific populations or infrastructure, which limits the assistance these organizations can provide. Some FBOs seek to save money and use it to assist people not specified in the funding agreements. Larger organizations such as SJM, wv and ADRA, while having access to significant amounts of funding, must limit their activities to the purposes for which the funds are intended. In contrast, smaller organizations may have greater autonomy but fewer resources.

Findings: the encounter with otherness

Staff profiles

The motivations for working at an FBO tend to vary depending on one's profile: volunteers, public servants and members of religious orders. There is a methodological limitation here, as it was not possible to reach out to those who have stopped working with migrants for various reasons. Consequently, the interviews were conducted with individuals committed to their work, as evidenced by observations and conversations. With this caveat in mind, the following classification was made.

Volunteers are often drawn to humanitarian work because of their religious beliefs centered on love for their fellow human beings, to build their *résumés*, or to gain life experience. Those with more years of experience have responded to various social crises and invoke spiritual principles and calls to action:

We began as a ministry for workers in '84... and as a ministry for migrants in 1995; the bishop asked me to organize the work with the Peruvian migrant community at that time... I do it out of a calling to serve everyone. God has saved me from so many things—once even from the brink of death—so how could I not serve my neighbor? (Woman, 61 years old, Incami)

The church's mission has always been to come to the aid of the most oppressed, the dispossessed... We began our pastoral ministry in Haiti and later formalized our approach on the principle that every person has the right to migrate and possesses inherent dignity. (Male, 37 years old, PMM)

The staff members come from two backgrounds: experts in social and immigration issues with more than two years of experience and professionals who have recently graduated with degrees in the social sciences and humanities. For those for whom this is their first work experience, the emotional impact is greater: "It's very shocking to me when I register very young people—they're 20 years old and have three children—and

I'm just so shocked. I'm 24 years old and don't have children, nor do I plan to" (Woman, 24 years old, wv);

I'm really shocked by the way Chileans treat Venezuelans. A police officer took a child away from a woman—something they wouldn't do to a Chilean—and they spat on her in the street because she was working as a street vendor. (Woman, 22 years old, Edes)

Thus, they come to identify with the people they work with, despite the initial shock caused both by their different social backgrounds and by witnessing the violent treatment of their fellow compatriots.

Some officials identify with a particular branch of Christianity, while others do not; however, they generally share a belief in "something" transcendent or spiritual that drives life—a sense of wonder that inspires humility and gratitude (Otto, 1980). This type of job is for those who can see themselves reflected in others, using the gratitude they receive from migrants to cushion the emotional toll of hearing about and witnessing inhumane situations:

I don't identify with any particular religion, but I feel close to a certain belief... For someone who isn't in that situation, it's a shock when someone tells you how they crossed the borders. I developed more understanding and empathy just by seeing what they went through. (Woman, 23 years old, FASIC)

At the same time, friendships and informal support networks are formed among staff members and volunteers from various organizations during meetings held at Incami, city governments and pro-migrant foundations, thereby fostering a shared ethos among those genuinely interested in the "othered" foreigner. The way people view one another shifts from general compassion to pro-migrant advocacy.

Three factors contribute to high employee turnover: salaries, which are often low; viewing this stage as a stepping stone to building a career path that will later allow them to practice their profession elsewhere; and a lack of self-reflection in relation to others—that is, accepting others as equals rather than subordinates. If an initial sense of ethnocentrism and personal capacity for openness are not challenged by encounters with others, then classism, racism and xenophobia—embedded in one's own culture—persist: "The girl came to do her internship for just one hour; she didn't come every day, and she tried to humiliate me when I refused to sign her paperwork because she hadn't met her obligations: 'And who are you, anyway, since you don't even have a degree?'" (Woman, 61 years old, Incami). On the contrary:

A lot of the time I feel a lot of anger and have a lot of questions, but I never let that affect my work; I don't let people know that, and I help them... I have to be more grateful because these aren't things they chose—it's something that happened to their country. They had to leave. That's what fulfills me—hearing their stories from different perspectives, realizing that no one is immune to these kinds of things happening to them... It might seem like a small thing, but it really can change your life when someone treats you with dignity, listens to your story, and gives it the attention it deserves... (Woman, 24 years old, wv)

Members of religious orders have academic training in theology, and many also have training in the social sciences and humanities. Their discourse reflects a common perspective on the means and ends of the FBOs, grounded in human rights, the

biblical Exodus, and the passage from Matthew 25 that refers to Christ as the hungry, the imprisoned and the stranger. Most are Chilean, and to a lesser extent, Latin American and European. They consistently emphasize empathy for other human beings, regardless of whether a person is homeless, undocumented or in any other situation; however, gender and age are used as criteria to rank vulnerabilities, since no FBO can serve everyone and resources are insufficient: “[The Scalabrinians] prioritize dignity above all else—a dignity viewed through the lens of the Church’s social doctrine... we are all children of God... we are part of creation, and we are here to serve” (Male, 38 years old, FS).

What unites civil servants, volunteers and members of religious orders is not religion, but rather a perspective centered on rights, the sanctity of life, and human dignity above all else; a humble stance in the world, recognizing that one could be the next migrant; and gratitude for being alive in a relatively comfortable situation. This work establishes “A politics of life against the politics of indifference” (Agier, 2015, p. 52). This sometimes leads to situations that may involve personal risk:

It was two, three, four in the morning, and they were looking for us... They’d come into the church, and we were forced to give them something; sometimes they’d get more aggressive. Helping a migrant didn’t go over well with the locals... When you helped them, it meant you were helping them stay there, so I did it in secret, and the families felt ashamed. They told me, “If you put up a sign here, they’ll throw rocks at you and hurt you because we don’t want migrants here”... I carried the items hidden in my backpack; sometimes the donor feels good if you send photos, but I couldn’t take any. I’d arrive and say, “How are you? Here you go. God bless you”, and I’d open my backpack like that, all hidden away. (Male, 48 years old, Edes)

Their frustration is very intense because they’re very young professionals—they’re totally new to the job—and they have a really hard time responding. We’ve had situations where some Venezuelans have become genuinely violent, so we’ve set boundaries. I tell them, “Don’t deal with him anymore” or “We’re going to report him”, so they feel that we’re protected. Support, constant listening—we have sessions once a month... Sometimes I have to tell them, “Stop right there”. You know they’re crossing the line when they give out their personal cell phone numbers. (Woman, 52 years old, FMJ)

Due to specific circumstances, there are also shifts in opinion among those who begin to perceive a dangerous link between migration and crime once they are no longer directly involved with migrants. The lack of direct contact with the most vulnerable migrant population seems to alter their views:

We were trying to debunk the stereotype of the Colombian drug trafficker; most crimes committed by foreigners were committed by Bolivians who smuggled drugs as mules, but today I’m not sure if I could lead the same course. Now that I’m specializing in criminal statistics, the situation is different—not in terms of numbers, but in terms of the methods used. (Male, 32 years old, SEM)

An extreme case is that of a volunteer who has undergone a radical transformation, such as Álvaro Bellolio, head of the Immigration and Migration Office (2018-2022), who was once a volunteer with the *sjm* and is now one of the strongest critics of an immigration policy focused on regularization and the right to migrate. Politics and

the media have fueled hostility that has contributed to a surge in xenophobia toward migrants (Gissi & Aguilar, 2023) and has produced “collective states of unease, dread and fear” (Domenech, 2020, p. 6). In light of this situation, the Standing Committee of the Chilean Episcopal Conference reaffirms its mission:

(...) to promote a more comprehensive view of the phenomenon of migration within Chilean society... they emphasize the need for systemic changes to address the vulnerabilities faced by so many migrants and encourage people to view migration as a contribution rather than a threat. (Comité Permanente, 2024, p. 42)

A lack of empathy diminishes or negates the other's humanity, leading to humiliation. Recognition, on the other hand, implies that an individual deserves the respect inherent in their dignity as a person. Bauman refers to those who are the targets of hatred and embody the fears of the host society as “marginalized”: “All these people are tailor-made for our fears” (Bauman, 2011, p. 154). Thus, the criminalization of migrants as enemies diminishes acts of solidarity toward them or toward the organizations that support them.

Álvaro Belloio, director of Migration during Sebastián Piñera's administration (2018-2022), promoted the idea that the sjm encourages irregular migration and accused Gabriel Boric's government of being led by Jesuits. He calls this *do-gooderism*: “They'd rather not deport child traffickers because they're foreigners” (Prensa Radio Agricultura, 2021). Faced with this hostility, members of the FBO, drawing on a humanitarian and rights-based perspective, respond: “That kind of information bothers me; I have to debunk it among my close circle—my family, my cousins. ‘Hey, is this true?’ ‘No, it's not true’, because it's on the news” (Male, 35 years old, Vicaría). In the face of xenophobia:

I take it personally—there's always that one relative who says, “Oh, do you work to get rid of them all? They get more than we do”. One relative asked me, “Is it true that they get houses more easily?”. They don't have a tax ID number; they can't even sign up for internet service—things like that don't happen! I feel a personal responsibility to debunk those myths and comments I keep hearing around me. (Woman, 25 years old, FMJ)

Supporting the right to mobility does not imply idealizing migrants or the potential conflict arising from otherness:

That (population) shift is going to create tension and conflict. So we have to resolve that conflict because there's no going back—Chile isn't going to go back to the way it was before migrants arrived. We have to know how to manage and alleviate those tensions so they don't turn into an endless conflict. (Male, 35 years old, Vicaría)

The conflict between Chileans and migrants of Venezuelan, Colombian and Haitian origin—when it is clear that they are living in poverty—combined with racialization and real or imagined irregular immigration status, generates constant hostility. Low-income Black women are constantly harassed by Chilean men who, when rejected, yell “*negra culiá*” (a derogatory term) at them. Colombian men and women are treated as drug traffickers and prostitutes, while those perceived as impoverished are assumed to have crossed the border illegally and are relatively frequently despised, robbed or insulted.

Outsourcing of functions and public impact

FBOs assist people rejected by the state (Celis et al., 2022). One of their functions is to protect them during the immigration process from a state that fails to provide for the most vulnerable migrants (Tapia Ladino & Ramos Rodríguez, 2013). According to Vasconcelos, in the case of the reception of Venezuelans at FBOs in Brazil, these:

(...) non-state institutions lead to a certain degree of privatization and outsourcing of government functions... Paradoxically, the NGOs that advocate for the state's development of public policies are the very same ones that step in to fill the gap left by government policies' failure to address the emergency of providing shelter for migrants. (Vasconcelos, 2022, p. 192)

The same situation occurs in Chile, alongside asymmetrical conditions of care and support among various FBOs; therefore, "coordination with public agencies is ad hoc and limited to cases that are difficult to resolve" (Tapia Ladino & Ramos Rodríguez, 2013, p. 235). One foundation stated: "Next year we won't be able to assist undocumented people because the government is funding us. What we're going to do is assist 80% documented and 20% undocumented—how can we leave the most vulnerable with nothing?" (Anonymous). At another foundation, however, it was noted that: "They didn't include any clause prohibiting us from assisting undocumented migrants" (Anonymous). Thus, it appears that there are discretionary guidelines regarding the use of state-funded resources. While some religious leaders avoid making critical comments about one government or another, certain officials are clear in their criticism of the state's (in)action: "It's a challenge because we work with people whom nobody wants—not even the state—and whom the state doesn't want to see or hear" (Woman, 52 years old, FMJ).

Casillas R. (2021) views the relation with the State in Mexico as one of collaboration, tension and conflict, which can occur simultaneously. In Chile, they collaborate on humanitarian assistance through funding and the organization of such assistance; they have differences regarding the regularization of migrants; and tensions arise regarding the care of undocumented migrants already in Santiago when funding for this purpose is denied. FBOs operate and represent social, political and economic savings for state resources; the state subsidizes solidarity as a disincentive that places migrants in a precarious position, violating their rights and reducing chaotic social situations that are detrimental to the image of the current government. Because FBOs adopt a rights-based approach, they strive to avoid creating a position of dependency among migrants, recognizing that humanitarianism can lead to subordination and disempowerment. In the workshops offered by FMJ, WV, Epes and PMM—which are designed for women and focus on emotional support and coping with the grief of migration—participants are encouraged to build mutual support networks, propose ways to generate income and create life plans for the near future, to ensure they do not remain permanently dependent on humanitarian aid.

It is important to remember that humanitarian assistance presents an asymmetrical, potentially dangerous and humiliating situation for migrants as they face an unknown entity that could abuse its power (Langner, 2022). At the same time, FBOs pose a daily, political and cultural challenge to restrictive and criminalizing policies toward migrants and prevent the migration debate from becoming homogeneous (Coutinho, 2022).

FBOS in solidarity with human mobility

Responding to a humanitarian crisis can foster solidarity, but it does not eliminate everyday tensions and “compassion fatigue” (Banulescu-Bogdan et al., 2024). The surge in support for Venezuelan migrants in Chile’s evangelical churches between 2019 and early 2020 (Church World Service, 2020) waned during the pandemic. Nevertheless, churches such as the Methodist and Lutheran churches shifted their relief efforts toward a rights-based approach through a pastoral ministry with relative autonomy, which sought financial resources from abroad. Meanwhile, the SEM, which relied on volunteers, was never able to establish an institutional structure or secure ongoing funding—one of the reasons it ceased operations in 2020.

Solidarity is not static; it is encouraged or discouraged depending on the political and economic climate and on the FBO itself:

In [Evangelical] churches, it was easier to empathize with Haitians because they were “poor things—look, they don’t speak Spanish, they come wearing just a T-shirt, and it’s cold”. So there was a whole culture of charity, and they felt super spiritual because they were welcoming foreigners, but they didn’t feel the same way about Venezuelans. I think a big part of the SEM’s inability to reinvent itself was that people didn’t empathize with Colombians and Venezuelans in the same way. (Woman, 32 years old, SEM)

Migration history as an intersectional condition influences solidarity. If a Haitian was viewed as completely helpless but a good person, he was more readily assisted. In contrast, those who were seen as bad and who responded as equals—Venezuelans and Colombians—did not elicit the same level of assistance among the evangelicals who sponsored SEM’s actions. Professionalization ensures consistency and universality in treatment and prevents authoritarian decisions—though this is limited to sponsorship—and issues such as abortion are restricted in almost all FBOS.

Pope Francis and theologians of migration place the marginalized at the center, above considerations of gender, religion, nationality, ethnicity and race; they revisit the idea of going beyond physical proximity to encounter the other in whom Christ is seen (Martínez Cruz, 2024). The horizon of the Kingdom of God is embodied in vulnerable migrants. Christians are strangers on earth and do not own the land where they live; therefore, the pontiff implores: “Help us never to stop walking alongside our migrant brothers and sisters toward the eternal home you have prepared for us” (Francisco, 2024).

In contrast, evangelicals do not typically have a formal theology of migration, but rather a fragmented and spontaneous one, although they reach similar conclusions (Church World Service, 2020; Rayos García, 2020). Their churches are more closely tied to the dynamics of the participating families and the immediate environment (Mosqueira & Algranti, 2019), so phenomena such as migration—unless “it knocks on their door” (Man, 36 years old, PML)—are something to be overlooked and receive little local theological-social reflection (Rayos García, 2020; Soto Reyes, 2016). While Catholics tend to choose their mission, Evangelicals consider themselves chosen for this mission. Despite the differences between the two groups, those who have more intentional contact with migrants stop viewing them as “the other” and come to see them as equals—as people who could be *themselves*.

FBOS, as institutions tasked with upholding protocols and safeguarding resources, find themselves caught between human dynamics driven by solidarity—which go beyond “the immediacy of their triumph” (Levinas, 2000, p. 55)—and the results they

must present to their sponsors. Each FBO must demonstrate results, which also involves a certain amount of publicity; at the same time, they must avoid appearing insincere:

When you help, you have power over the other person, so the idea of “I’m helping” is very appealing. There are plenty of people who can’t even give away a loaf of bread without taking a selfie or doing something like that. But when you approach it in a way that treats the other person as a subject and not just an object, then it no longer works for you. At some point, helping took on the role of turning the person into an object rather than treating them as a subject in order to help, and that’s when helping stopped being appealing to a lot of people. (Male, 36 years old, PML)

Those who work in FBOs may also objectify others as objects rather than subjects. The humanization of otherness—caring for the other—is framed by religious figures through the image of the Good Samaritan, which, according to Dussel (2003), offers a decolonizing reflection on solidarity in contrast to the legal and prestige-driven practices represented by the institutional order. Enmity is the essential moment of political tension, but solidarity is a “critical emotionality directed toward the suffering exteriority of the victim” (Dussel, 2003, p. 209). Responsibility lies with the pre-existing Other; “it is not a Stoic therapy of desires... but simply and directly the ‘public-political therapy of the Other’, in which the life of the one who takes a dangerous risk by committing to the Other is at stake” (Dussel, 2003, p. 210). Parrini Roses et al. (2021, p. 200) note that “humanitarianism intervenes at moments when life cannot be guaranteed and is at the mercy of those who hold power over it... a politics of precarious life”.

Encounter with the Other

For Buber, solidarity exists in relationship rather than in communication; from this arises a loving responsibility between the *I* and the *You* (Bolaños, 2010). Human encounter occurs where the act and word of the singular confront otherness, whose condition is plurality. There is no such thing as a migrant in the abstract, but rather a heterogeneous multiplicity of migrants who take on a human face through and beyond the characteristics of nationality, class, race or gender: “I see that the authorities, because they aren’t close to the people, don’t hear stories like these; for them, migrants are just a number” (Woman, 49 years old, PML).

These FBOs go beyond a welfare-based approach and view migrants as social agents (Moreno Mena & Niño Contreras, 2013). Nonetheless, it is challenging to address their own ethnocentrism, which can lead them to view others as underdeveloped and in need of being “colonized” with the knowledge of the dominant culture. It is difficult, for example, to address machismo and culture without making judgments from a position of power:

We try to explain to them that we’re going to value them for who they are, not for their physical appearance. And they have a really hard time understanding that... they end up in highly sexualized relationships because they sexualize everything; but it’s just the culture... that’s why they always fall prey to sexual harassment—because their way of interacting with others is misunderstood—because here in Chile, if you’re even a little flirty, you’re considered “over the top”. (Anonymized)

In Chile, in recent years, the process of recognizing violence against women has accelerated, driven by feminist protests and achievements. Gender-based violence is addressed at the FBO based on the experiences of Chilean volunteers and staff members; as a result, immigrants may perceive such violence differently, although it is true that spaces for mutual recognition are being created. When migrant women recognize that they are at risk of violence, they are supported in becoming independent from their partners and, in some cases, in filing a report. The line between respecting gender differences and eradicating violence can create confusion for women who see themselves as both victims and agents of change. For example, two undocumented women were observed discussing cosmetic surgery as a way to achieve a desired standard of beauty, thereby increasing their appeal in the workplace and in romantic relationships. There is a tension between embracing a culturally validated standard—which implies embracing hegemonic beauty—and, on the other hand, acquiring capital to secure a better life as active agents. Chilean women view this as a life defined by male approval, but it is a more complex phenomenon that requires further exploration.

Social workers, psychologists and professionals in other humanities-based fields chose their careers to help improve social well-being. This starting point already places them on a path toward openness and understanding of what others are going through. Some recall their own childhoods marked by financial hardship—difficult situations that they draw upon when putting themselves in others' shoes. These are emotionally draining activities. Nevertheless, there is also a giving and receiving involved. What is expected of the recipient? At least three things are expected: gratitude, reciprocity toward others and self-sufficiency.

Gratitude is the sentiment most often expressed as filling the hearts of those who care for migrants, because, at the very least, they were treated with humanity—they were seen as people and listened to—and the interaction moved from mere cordiality to genuine warmth. Those who are grateful to life or to God expect something in return, whether it be words of gratitude or that those who benefited from the care will, in turn, extend it to others in need. The hope is that these others will extend this spirit of reciprocity and gain greater self-confidence (Levinas, 2000).

The ultimate goal is for people to achieve autonomy or self-sufficiency so they can live with dignity. Unfortunately, in many cases, this aspiration is thwarted by restrictive immigration policies that dampen hope. Assistance is therefore necessary. At times, despair prevails because there are families who try time and again to achieve a life of dignity but are unable to do so. Some end up emigrating again to another country under precarious conditions.

The most experienced staff members have typically worked with other populations, such as people experiencing homelessness, people living in extreme poverty and women experiencing violence, among others. In making this transition to working with migrants, they identify a situational parallel:

My calling really comes to life in the face of an emergency like that, even though I have a health condition that puts me at risk—and it changes the whole meaning of what it means to support others. Did you know they needed you? It was intense! That moment when you know you have to do your part. I set out without knowing anything about migration; I worked with people with disabilities and older adults. It was a complete shift in perspective. Sometimes

we overlook all the hardships these people endure during the migration process; we have no idea what they went through while crossing Peru and Ecuador... I'm Catholic; I don't know if I'm very devout, but I'm a strong believer and was educated by the sisters—a group with a strong sense of community... I work with the most vulnerable people. When I see parishioners who go to the sisters and beat their chests, I tell them that Jesus was a migrant; for many years, he was persecuted. If you reject a migrant, you're also rejecting God because that's where vulnerability lies. If a Venezuelan child arrives and I reject him, I'm rejecting God. (Woman, 42 years old, FMJ)

Traumatic experiences of migration are heard; attitudes such as desperation, demands for attention and verbal aggression are learned to understand. They are explained—no longer through the immediate reaction of taking migrants' negative characteristics for granted, but rather through an ongoing connection with others. Solidarity fosters networking and mutual support among various FBOs, CSOs, and government entities across different municipalities and regional agencies. The encounter transforms those who listen to, get to know, and live alongside others—not merely as vulnerable individuals, but as human beings—and fosters humility in the face of our inability to solve the problems of others' lives. For Christians, the migrant is an image of Christ, while for non-believers, they are people with the same dignity as any Chilean: "We must treat them like everyone else" (Woman, 32 years old, SEM).

Conclusions

FBOs did not emerge solely to serve Latin American migrants; rather, they often stem from previous experiences assisting homeless people, women who have suffered violence and impoverished communities, among others. Assistance to migrants is an extension of a compassionate approach toward a group that emerged as in need of help amid a political context in which the state tightened regulations against them. The Chilean government did not create the problem, but it did contribute to the increase in irregular crossings by making legal entry more difficult, while also facing political and economic challenges in maintaining the humanitarian response required by the situation, especially during the pandemic.

This irregularization also gave rise to a series of needs stemming from the inability to access formal employment and the intensification of the stigmatization of migrants as agents of a decline in the quality of life in Chile. The FBOs have collaborated on both fronts—migration management and humanitarian assistance—across related activities at the border—providing food and shelter—and inland—addressing rights, offering emotional support and providing assistance.

Within the FBOs, interactions span a spectrum of emotions. Classifying staff as volunteers, employees and religious figures reveals that FBOs are spaces of ideological diversity that nonetheless converge on humanitarian interests grounded in human rights and the sanctity of life. They also demonstrate a certain autonomy from dogmatic orthodoxies by incorporating a gender perspective and providing universal non-proselytizing care.

Encounters with migrants are not without tensions, contradictions, limitations and suffering. At first, sociocultural clashes arise between us and them, but through ongoing contact, these give way to understanding, active listening, humanization and

mediation with the host society. Professionalization encourages the use of protocols to prevent the asymmetries inherent in these encounters from leading to abusive practices. For migrants who use these FBOs, they are a vital resource for survival—physically, socially, professionally, culturally, emotionally and spiritually. This is a limited, precarious form of shelter, but one that shows a human face to people who are not welcome and have very fragile support networks. There, the ever-changing meaning of solidarity leads to a focus on and prioritization of the vulnerable—individuals who cannot remain in a state of perpetual victimhood—thereby encouraging their autonomy.

FBOs serve as spaces that foster connection and cohesion—qualities not necessarily shared by the parent churches. Encountering the other breaks down the barriers to mutual recognition and sparks a quest to understand the speaker and the context from which their voice, actions and emotions emerge. This action stems from the Christian teaching that the face of Christ is found in the despised, the marginalized and those who, at first glance, seem to have nothing to offer. Those who welcome migrants also feel enriched and grateful for having been more fortunate; at the same time, their words and gestures of gratitude fuel this act of solidarity.

At the same time, social instability and xenophobia in Chilean society prevent broad support for these humanitarian efforts, as they are viewed as contrary to national security interests. The FBOs face funding challenges because many rely on international aid, while domestic donations are scarce. This work is criticized by some politicians, social sectors, neighbors and fellow party members who prefer to “take care of our own” rather than let “just anyone” in. The FBOs are criticized for helping migrants rather than Chileans, but their work is simply an extension of their previous efforts with Chileans.

The tension between Chileans and migrants, exploited by politicians and the media, fuels a process of otherization that undermines the humanity of the newcomer as someone who should not be in Chile, which in turn causes the most vulnerable migrants to withdraw into communities of foreigners. In this hostile context, the FBOs act as mediators, though their options are always limited. It is estimated that there are 336 000 undocumented migrants (Servicio Nacional de Migraciones, 2025). The demanding and insufficiently supported work is exhausting and poorly compensated, both financially and socially; despite this, migrant workers become mediators both within and outside FBOs. The relationships between individuals and institutions, migrants and Chileans and the State and FBOs interact dynamically through collaboration, contradiction and opposition. The presence of individuals and institutions that seek to connect rather than divide is necessary in the face of the social fragmentation and precariousness affecting the national population; it mitigates the fears between one group and another, creating spaces of fragile hope for future coexistence in which those who give also receive, and those who receive also give. Victims are transformed into agents, and otherness into a responsible encounter—a differentiated and tense incorporation of what is different, yet free from suspicion of malice, based on the humanizing experiences of encountering the other.

References

- Agier, M. (2015). *Zonas de frontera. La antropología frente a la trampa identitaria*. UNR editora. <https://rephip.unr.edu.ar/items/f2743db0-d299-469a-ae12-2202f80166d2>
- Aranda Bustamente, G. (2005). Migraciones internacionales contemporáneas e iglesia católica romana. *Si Somos Americanos*, 7(1), 11-36. <https://doi.org/10.61303/07190948.v7i1.476>
- Araujo, K. (2018). Los anclajes socio-existenciales: el caso de las expectativas de futuro. *Dados*, 61(2), 341-371. <https://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=21858215003>
- Bahamondes González, L., Marín Alarcón, N., Aránguiz Kahn, L. & Diestre de la Barra, F. (2020). *Religión y juventud. El impacto de los cambios en los procesos de transmisión de la fe*. Ediciones Universidad Alberto Hurtado. <https://repositorio.uahurtado.cl/handle/11242/26471>
- Banulescu-Bogdan, N., Erdoğan, M. M. & Salgado, L. (2024). *Confronting compassion fatigue. Understanding the arc of public support for displaced populations in Turkey, Colombia, and Europe*. Migration Policy Institute Europe. https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/mpie_compassion-fatigue-2024_final.pdf
- Bauman, Z. (2011). *Daños colaterales. Desigualdades sociales en la era global*. FCE.
- Bauman, Z. & Donskis, L. (2015). *Ceguera moral. La pérdida de sensibilidad en la modernidad líquida*. Paidós.
- Bolaños, R. F. (2010). Elementos de alteridad y convivencia social a partir de la filosofía dialógica de Martin Buber. *Sophia*, (8), 11-31. <https://doi.org/10.17163/soph.n8.2010.01>
- Bolívar, D., Grau, O., González, M. & Dufraix, R. (2023). Delitos de odio en contextos de movilidad humana en Chile: una propuesta territorial para su prevención. In *Propuestas para Chile* (Concurso Políticas Públicas 2022; pp. 130-166). Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile. <https://politicaspUBLICAS.uc.cl/publicacion/propuestas-para-chile-2022/>
- Casillas R., R. (2021). Migración internacional y solidaridad: los albergues y casas de migrantes en México. *Migración y Desarrollo*, 19(37), 65-92. <https://doi.org/10.35533/myd.1937.rcr>
- Celis, A. M., Neckelmann, M. & Imbarack, P. (2022). ¿Cuánto aporta la religión a la sociedad civil? Una mirada institucional. *Revista Latinoamericana de Derecho y Religión*, 8(1), 1-22. <https://doi.org/10.7764/RLDR.13.153>
- Church World Service. (2020, September). *Respuestas de las iglesias cristianas locales de América Latina ante la migración venezolana*. https://cwsglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/CWS_LA_Respuestas_Mig_Venezolana.pdf
- Comisión UC para el análisis de la crisis de la Iglesia Católica en Chile. (2022). *Comprendiendo la crisis de la iglesia en Chile* (Documento de análisis). Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile (PUC). <https://teologia.uc.cl/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/documento-de-analisis-comprendiendo-la-crisis-de-la-iglesia-en-chile.pdf>
- Comité Permanente. (2024, May). *“Fui forastero y me recibieron” (Mt 25 35). Una mirada cristiana a la migración*. Conferencia Episcopal de Chile. https://www.iglesia.cl/documentos_sac/12062024_750pm_666a264ad6473.pdf

- Coutinho, S. R. (2022). Perspectivas teóricas sobre mobilidade e religião. *REVER: Revista de Estudos da Religião*, 22(1), 11-24. <https://doi.org/10.23925/1677-1222.2021vol22i1a2>
- Derrida, J. (2008). *La hospitalidad*. Ediciones de la Flor.
- Dockendorff, C., Román Brugnoli, J. A. & Energici Sprovera, M. A. (2010). La neoliberalización de la solidaridad en el Chile democrático. Una mirada comparativa sobre discursos solidarios en 1991 y 2006. *Latin American Research Review*, 45(1), 189-202. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/latin-american-research-review/article/la-neoliberalizacion-de-la-solidaridad-en-el-chile-democratico-una-mirada-comparativa-sobre-discursos-solidarios-en-1991-y-2006/DCF0F848F01BF26967EFD1027E9AC943>
- Domenech, E. (2020). La “política de hostilidad” en Argentina: detención, expulsión y rechazo en frontera. *Estudios Fronterizos*, 21, Article e057. <https://doi.org/10.21670/ref.2015057>
- Dussel, E. (2003). De la fraternidad a la solidaridad (Hacia una *política de la liberación*). *Brocar. Cuadernos de Investigación Histórica*, (27), 193-222. <https://doi.org/10.18172/brocar.1875>
- Francisco. (2024, June 3). *Dios camina con su pueblo* [Mensaje del Santo Padre Francisco para la 110ª Jornada Mundial del Migrante y del Refugiado 2024; Síntesis del Boletín]. Oficina de Prensa de la Santa Sede. <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/es/bollettino/pubblico/2024/06/03/030624d.html>
- Gil Araujo, S., Rosas, C. & Baiocchi, M. L. (2023). Deportabilidad, género y violencia legal: una revisión bibliográfica sobre deportaciones y política antitrata. *Revista CIDOB d'Afers Internacionals*, (133), 17-39. <https://doi.org/10.24241/rcai.2023.133.1.17>
- Gissi, N. & Aguilar, H. (2023). Entre el miedo y la xenofobia: política migratoria, vulnerabilidad social y emergencia de un Estado penal en Chile (2018-2023). *Revista Pueblos y Fronteras digital*, 18. <https://doi.org/10.22201/cimsur.18704115e.2023.v18.680>
- Gissi, N., Pinto Baleisan, C. & Rodríguez, F. (2019). Inmigración reciente de colombianos y colombianas en Chile. Sociedades plurales, imaginarios sociales y estereotipos. *Estudios Atacameños*, (62), 127-141. <http://dx.doi.org/10.22199/issn.0718-1043-2019-0011>
- Groos, M. (2023). La criminalización de la solidaridad. Un nuevo instrumento hacia un crimmigration control en Chile. *Revista Crítica Penal y Poder (Nueva Época)*, (24), Article e-680. <https://doi.org/10.1344/cryp.2023.24.41871>
- Groser, M. (2014). Los principios de solidaridad y subsidiariedad. In H. Sánchez de la Barquera y Arroyo (Ed.), *Fundamentos, teoría e ideas políticas* (v. 1; pp. 167-182). Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. <https://archivos.juridicas.unam.mx/www/bjv/libros/8/3710/1.pdf>
- Hall, S. (2014). *Sin garantías: trayectorias y problemáticas en estudios culturales* (2nd ed.). Universidad del Cauca / Envión editores.
- Hiernaux, J. P. (2008). Análisis estructural de contenidos y de modelos culturales. Aplicación a materiales voluminosos. In H. J. Suárez (Coord.), *El sentido y el método. Sociología de la cultura y análisis de contenido* (pp. 67-118). El Colegio de Michoacán / Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México.

- Kang, S. (2004). Modernity, postmodernity, and social solidarity (S. Kang, Trans.). *Korean Journal of Sociology*, 38(5), 1-29. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/355680734_Modernity_Post-Modernity_and_Social_Solidarity
- Komter, A. (2007). Gifts and social relations: the mechanisms of reciprocity. *International Sociology*, 22(1), 93-107. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0268580907070127>
- Langner, A. (2022, December 19). *Miedo a ser detenidas y deportadas: los impedimentos de las personas migrantes a la ayuda humanitaria*. Comité Internacional de la Cruz Roja. <https://www.icrc.org/es/document/miedo-ser-detenidas-y-deportadas-los-impedimentos-de-las-personas-migrantes-la-ayuda>
- Levinas, E. (2000). *La huella del otro*. Taurus.
- Liberona Concha, N., Romero Quezada, M., Salinas, S.-G. & Veloso, K. (2022). Tráfico de migrantes en las fronteras del norte de Chile: irregularización migratoria y sus resistencias. *Derecho PUCP*, (89), 9-36. <https://doi.org/10.18800/derechopucp.202202.001>
- López Reyes, E. A. & París Pombo, M. D. (2023). Infraestructuras humanitarias en las ciudades fronterizas de Ciudad Juárez y Tijuana. *Estudios Fronterizos*, 24, Article e130. <https://doi.org/10.21670/ref.2319130>
- Marchetto, A. (2003, March 10-14). *La evolución de la Pastoral de la Movilidad Humana y sus perspectivas para el futuro* [Conference]. Congreso Nacional sobre la Pastoral de la Movilidad Humana, Veracruz, México. https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/migrants/documents/rc_pc_migrants_doc_2003036_evolucion_marchetto_sp.html
- Martínez Cruz, A. O. J. (2024). Teología de la migración: sistematización teórica de un campo en construcción. *Cuadernos de Teología*, 16, Article e6484. <https://doi.org/10.22199/issn.0719-8175-6484>
- Mascareño, A. (2007). Sociología de la solidaridad. La diferenciación de un sistema global de cooperación. *MAD*, (2), 35-67. <https://revistamad.uchile.cl/index.php/RMAD/article/view/28426>
- Mezzadra, S. & Neilson, B. (2016). *La frontera como método. O la multiplicación del trabajo*. Tinta Limón.
- Moreno Mena, J. A. & Niño Contreras, L. (2013). Una mirada hacia las organizaciones civiles de apoyo al migrante en Baja California y Sonora. *Región y Sociedad*, 25(57), 61-96. https://www.scielo.org.mx/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1870-39252013000200003
- Mosqueira, M. & Algranti, J. (2019). Pastor, ¿usted en qué cree? Sociología de los procesos de liderazgo e institucionalización en iglesias evangélicas de pequeña y mediana escala. *Cultura y Religión*, 13(1), 85-103. <https://doi.org/10.4067/S0718-47272019000100085>
- Navarro-Conticello, J. (2024). Un otro horroroso: imaginarios sociales sobre el inmigrante venezolano en las audiencias de la prensa online chilena. *Estudios Fronterizos*, 25, Article 150. <https://doi.org/10.21670/ref.2414150>
- Organización Internacional para las Migraciones & Foro Especializado Migratorio del Mercosur y Estados Asociados. (2022). *Movimientos migratorios recientes en América del Sur. Informe Anual 2022*. <https://chile.iom.int/es/movimientos-migratorios-recientes-en-america-del-sur-informe-anual-2022>
- Otto, R. (1980). *Lo santo. Lo racional y lo irracional en la idea de Dios*. Alianza Editorial.

- Parrini Roses, R., Alquisiras Terrones, L. & Nocedal Rojas, E. (2021). Forasteros, prójimos y víctimas. Figuras discursivas de la solidaridad y migración centroamericana en México. *Andamios*, 18(45), 195-221. <https://doi.org/10.29092/uacm.v18i45.816>
- Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile (PUC). (2024). Resultados 2023. In *Encuesta Bicentenario*. <https://encuestabicentenario.uc.cl/resultados/>
- Prensa Radio Agricultura. (2021, June 8). *Jefe del Departamento de Extranjería critica al Servicio Jesuita a Migrantes: “Ellos prefieren que no se expulse a traficantes de niños porque son extranjeros”*. Radio Agricultura. <https://www.radioagricultura.cl/nacional/2021/06/08/jefe-del-departamento-de-extranjeria-critica-al-servicio-jesuita-de-migrantes-ellos-prefieren-que-no-se-expulse-a-trafficante-de-ninos-porque-son-extranjeros/>
- Programa de las Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo. (2023, May 2). *Ser migrante en América Latina y el Caribe*. <https://www.undp.org/es/latin-america/historias/ser-migrante-en-america-latina-y-el-caribe>
- Pujadas, J. J. (2000). El método biográfico y los géneros de la memoria. *Revista de Antropología Social*, 9, 127-158. <https://revistas.ucm.es/index.php/RASO/es/article/view/RASO0000110127A>
- Quinteros Rojas, D., Dufraix Tapia, R. & Ramos Rodríguez, R. (2019). Human trafficking cases in Chile: challenges for reducing the “dark figure”. In J. Winterdyk & J. Jones (Eds.), *The Palgrave international handbook of human trafficking* (pp. 1-14). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-63058-8_105
- Ramos Rodríguez, R. (2013). Las redes migratorias y la inserción de los migrantes: el caso de la Pastoral de Migraciones Incami-Iquique. *Theoria*, 22(1), 47-62. <https://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=29936198005>
- Rayos García, G. (2020, January-March). ¡Amarás a tu prójimo como a ti mismo! Participación y ausencia de las iglesias evangélicas al momento de brindar ayuda a los integrantes de las caravanas migrantes en Ciudad Juárez, Chih. *Pacarina del Sur*, 11(42), 119-154. https://lapacarinadelsur.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/pacarina-del-sur_042-b.pdf
- Restrepo, E. (2018). *Etnografía. Alcances, técnicas y éticas*. Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos. <http://bdjc.iaa.unam.mx/items/show/210#lg=1&slide=0>
- Román, J. A., Ibarra, S. & Energici, A. (2014). Caracterización de la solidaridad en Chile. Opiniones y percepciones de los habitantes de Santiago de Chile. *Latin American Research Review*, 49(2), 197-220. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/551982>
- Román, J. A., Tomicic, A. & Avendaño, C. (2007). Solidaridad como problema. *MAD*, (2), 151-183. <https://revistamad.uchile.cl/index.php/RMAD/article/view/28430>
- Servicio Nacional de Migraciones. (2025). *Estadísticas generales registro administrativo Cifras de enero 2015 a diciembre 2024* (Reporte 4). <https://serviciomigraciones.cl/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Reporte-4-Estadisticas-SERMIG-010725.pdf>
- Soto Reyes, M. G. (2016). Comunidades pentecostales y migración. Dinámicas de cambio y continuidad en el campo pentecostal chileno y presencia de la migración latinoamericana. *Religión e Incidencia Pública*, (4), 83-111. https://www.academia.edu/33039801/Comunidades_pentecostales_y_migraci%C3%B3n_Din%C3%A1micas_de_cambio_y_continuidad_en_el_campo_pentecostal_chileno_y_presencia_de_la_migraci%C3%B3n_latinoamericana

- Staszak, J.-F. (2009). Other, Otherness. *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography* (pp. 43-47). Elsevier. <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-008044910-4.00980-9>
- Stefoni, C., Jaramillo, M., Bravo, A. & Macaya-Aguirre, G. (2023). Colchane. La construcción de una crisis humanitaria en la zona fronteriza del norte de Chile. *Estudios Fronterizos*, 24, Article e113. <https://doi.org/10.21670/ref.2302113>
- Tapia Ladino, M. & Quinteros Rojas, D. (2023). Colchane e Iquique en tiempos de pandemia: del margen a la centralidad de la crisis humanitaria venezolana (2020-2022). *Si Somos Americanos*, 23, 1-30. <https://doi.org/10.4067/s0719-09482023000100203>
- Tapia Ladino, M. & Ramos Rodríguez, R. (2013). Mujeres migrantes fronterizas en Tarapacá a principios del siglo XXI. El cruce de las fronteras y las redes de apoyo. *Polis*, 12(35), 229-257. <https://polis.ulagos.cl/es/article/view/1419>
- Thayer Correa, L. E., Stang Alva, F. & Dilla Rodríguez, C. (2020). La política del estado de ánimo. La debilidad de las políticas migratorias locales en Santiago de Chile. *Perfiles Latinoamericanos*, 28(55), 171-201. <https://doi.org/10.18504/pl2855-007-2020>
- Trotta, S. & Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, E. (2022). Religions and forced migration. In *The state of the evidence in religions and development* (pp. 61-68). Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities. https://jliflc.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/FINAL-State-of-the-Evidence_30062022_highres.pdf
- Vasconcelos, I. S. (2022). Las iglesias le dan continente al migrante: igrejas, religiosidades e venezuelanos/as no norte do Brasil. *Religião e Sociedade*, 42(1), 177-199. <https://doi.org/10.1590/0100-85872021v42n1cap08>
- Veit Strassner, M. A. (2006). La iglesia chilena desde 1973 a 1993: De buenossamaritanos, antiguos contrahentes y nuevos aliados. Un análisis politológico. *Teología y Vida*, 47(1), 76-94. <https://dx.doi.org/10.4067/S0049-34492006000100004>
- Zamudio Grave, P. E. (2019). De misión por los migrantes: valores cristianos y acogida al extranjero. *Relaciones y Estudios de Historia y Sociedad*, 40(157), 53-84. <https://doi.org/10.24901/rehs.v40i157.341>

Edilberto Aguilar

Mexican. Ph.D. in Latin American studies from the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. Faculty member at the Institute of Cultural and Territorial Studies at Universidad Arturo Prat. Research lines: international migration in Chile, the political culture of evangelicals, and urban indigenous peoples. Recent publication: Gissi Barbieri, N. & Aguilar de la Cruz, H. (2026). Ciudadanía incierta y el declive del 'sueño chileno': migración, residencia y organización social de migrantes haitianos/as en Santiago de Chile (2006-2025). *Sociedade e Estado*, 41(2), Article e59146. <https://periodicos.unb.br/index.php/sociedade/article/view/59146>

Miguel Mansilla

Chilean. Ph.D. in anthropology from the Universidad de Tarapacá. Faculty member at the Institute for Cultural and Territorial Studies at Universidad Arturo Prat. Research lines: cross-border Pentecostalism along the Chile-Peru-Bolivia border, the religious politics of evangelicals, and the history of Chilean Pentecostalism. Recent publication: Mansilla, M. A., Agurto Calderón, A. & Chain Cafure, R. (2026). El alcohólico como campo misionero del pentecostalismo chileno. *Intus-Legere Historia*, 20(1), 218-250. <https://intushistoria.uai.cl/index.php/intushistoria/article/view/751>