



MISSIONARIES IN ACTION

DOMINICAN MISSION FOUNDATION

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Missionary Spirit: The Real Thing



Dear Mission Friends:

Upon his ordination, Fr. Gonzalo Ituarte Verduzco, O.P. requested to be assigned to Mexico's poorest state, Chiapas, to minister to its most persecuted and oppressed communities, and there he has remained, again by his own request, for 40 years. In his overarching passion to champion the rights of the indigenous, following in the footsteps of his beloved mentor and ordainer, Bishop Samuel Ruiz García, Fr. Gonzalo has had to confront formidable obstacles, but while his efforts for justice have never wavered during these four decades, he was showing signs of uncharacteristic weariness in a letter he wrote last June to our director, Fr. Martin Walsh, O.P., his colleague and old friend:

Dear Martin,

Life absorbs us and our tasks are multiple, both of us wearing many hats over the years of our ministries. Indeed, we friars here are moving more slowly as we age, with no sign of assistance or replacement, yet our responsibilities only grow.



Left, Fr. Gonzalo Ituarte Verduzco, O.P., inside the church in Zinacantan, stunned by the earthquake's effect; far left, a group of Father's beloved parishioners in their beautiful native dress, paying homage to their church that "No Pueden Entrar."

Besides our ministries at the parish of Santo Domingo, including celebrating weddings, quinceañeras, and funerals, we minister to parishes of over 140 outlying communities, the number growing continuously and the work multiplying accordingly. We also serve in various positions of the diocese: Fray Pablo is, at 84 years old, Episcopal Vicar of the Central Zone; Fray Rafael, 77, and Fray Gilberto, our youngest (but soon to be assigned elsewhere), minister at the parishes in Zinacantan and San Juan Diego and teach classes at the seminary; and I at 67 serve as Vicar of Justice and Peace as well as Provincial Counselor.

I had hoped to be able to assist you occasionally with your preaching responsibilities as director of the Mission Foundation, but with the constantly growing complexity of the situation in Chiapas, spare time has always been rare.

Nevertheless, I still dare to appeal to your generosity, because the economy of my community of Santo Domingo in San Cristóbal has entered into crisis mode: our revenues have been greatly reduced coinciding with the state's economic conditions; and we have incurred unforeseen expenses for health care for our friars and repairs and maintenance of both the church and rectory. I think this has never happened to me before, but today I have to admit that circumstances have exceeded us.

Just a month later, however, Father bounced back with a lively, joyful memoir entitled, "I Left My Heart in...OCOSINGO," in which he describes how his first encounter with the indigenous, who were full of smiles and hope in spite of having so little to smile about or hope for, changed him forever. "To love God in the land of Indians has been the great blessing of my life."



Far left, a man carrying his remaining belongings through the rubble; left, family members carry the coffin of a 15-year-old who died in the quake along with her brother and mother; below, families lining up for hours to request water and temporary shelter.

Then on Sept. 7, less than three months after sending that article, a magnitude-8.1 earthquake hit Mexico, the most powerful one to hit the country in almost one hundred years, killing 102 and injuring another 304. The brunt of its damage was suffered by the states of Oaxaca and Chiapas, the areas closest to the quake's epicenter off the Pacific Coast, but the damage was far greater overall in Chiapas. A civil protection officer in the state capital said the quake was the strongest he had ever felt. Well over 270,000 buildings were damaged or destroyed, including 800 schools and 100 healthcare facilities. Nearly 1.5 million people were affected throughout 97 cities. Most of the 54,000 homes that were damaged either collapsed or were rendered uninhabitable, resulting in 460,000 displaced people, adding to the already hundreds of thousands without water service. **As always, it is the poorest who have been most affected, still having to sleep outdoors because their flimsily constructed homes had been razed to the ground.**

Fr. Gonzalo's next letter describes the earthquake's damage to their two churches:

Both churches are closed due to the serious structural damage to their steeples and roofs. The community in Zinacantán transported all their images of the saints to a large temporary chapel with tin roofing that they helped build, and we are able to serve the people there. It will take an especially long time and a lot of money to restore our Santo Domingo church in San Cristobal de Las Casas. The roof, which is already in danger of collapsing, has been covered with huge tarps to keep rainwater from leaking in. We are blessed to be able to say Mass and hold services in a nearby church, Our Lady of Charity, but it does not have the capacity or the extra facilities of Santo Domingo, and so with fewer Masses, irregular hours, and the absence of tourists who are no longer allowed inside, our income has been severely reduced—currently by 40%.

As you know, we were already feeling the need to strengthen our own economy in order to keep our missionary presence here active, but our primary goal now must be to assist with the reconstruction of houses and the normalization of family and community life.



Any aid we have received has been channeled according to the degree of need among the parishioners, with the homeless and displaced being first in line.

Father was surely disheartened, but still not beaten down by yet another of the countless setbacks that are the way of life in Chiapas. He had not forgotten the great lesson the people taught him—the reason he came there and the reason he has remained: that they who always had much less than he did (and now have practically nothing) remain filled with Christian hope nevertheless. In his recent memoir, he attributes their ability to remain joyful in the midst of adversity to a “thirst for living that is concretized and strengthened, growing from the greatest clarity in the way of faith.”



he has been able to witness this beautiful mystery for 40 years.

Continuing to recall his first transformative experience in the Lacandon jungle outside Ocosingo, under the tutelage of Don Samuel and accompanied by our Fr. Eugene Souza, Fr. Gonzalo describes vividly the gathering of 800 or so people who had walked all day to welcome the friars and be able to attend Mass: “Children with parasitosis that stretched their stomachs; women with discolored skin or diseased eyes due to contamination of the water; men who weren’t even 60 but looked 80; people of such extraordinary poverty that every day was a struggle to snatch a bit of food from the earth; people in shackles, still in the service of the bosses on large estates and subjected to daily violence and oppression—*people who had no apparent reason to be happy...were joyful and smiling, strewing flower petals, playing simple instruments, and singing.*”

Fr. Gonzalo credits the friars of the Western Dominican Province, particularly those of our Dominican Mission Foundation, with inspiring him to the missionary life by which

In the summer of 1977, I decided I needed to venture out of the modern, urban setting of Mexico City where I had been serving as a Dominican deacon and experience the reality of Mexico’s poorest state, Chiapas. And what an experience! I hadn’t even left the country but it seemed like another world. Having previously studied at the Western Province’s college of St. Albert’s in Oakland and made lasting friendships with fellow Dominicans, including Paul Scanlon, who was Prior Provincial at the time, Jose Asturias, who had been one of the original missionaries, and



my dearest Fray Martin de Porres Walsh; such professors as Antoninus Wall, Yanko Sagar, Antonio Moreno; and the fellow students, beloved companions of my generation, I included in my trip to Chiapas a visit to their very first mission, established in 1963 in Ocosingo-Altamirano. I was welcomed by friars Vicente Foerster and Ramón Bertheaux with a natural hospitality and unlimited generosity. They shared their knowledge, wisdom, experience, convictions, and spirituality, opening my eyes to a new horizon: the missionary life.

After returning to Mexico City and being ordained, I asked my provincial to send me back to Ocosingo, where I initially served for ten years, and after assignments in nearby cities, returned for another four, honored to carry on the ministry begun by the friars of the Western Province. Our collaboration in all the Chiapas missions, made possible by your generous community of donors, has been a gift from God for the indigenous people here, one full of grace and vitality that have spilled over to all of us involved throughout these more than 50 years.

Peace in the Lord to all the co-missionaries of the Mission Foundation!

In gratitude, Gonzalo

Top, Fr. Gonzalo and a volunteer discussing the Zinacantán church’s exterior damage, while inside (to the right), the pews are seen to have born their share; bottom left, the precarious condition inside the centuries-old church of Santo Domingo.



Far left, a mother trying to keep her children warm and protected after losing their home in San Cristobal the night of the earthquake; left, bearing an uncanny resemblance to the young mother is Our Lady of Sorrows, with her Child, held together with ropes, against the backdrop of scaffolding supporting the main arch of their home, the church of Santo Domingo.

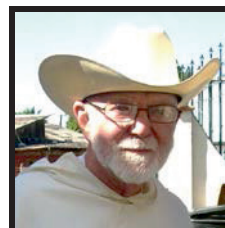
Like our Fr. Anthony Leo Hofstee, O.P., who requested to be assigned to the dreadful, abandoned Tala Leper Colony in the Philippines, serving there 40 years till he died; and like our Fr. Timothy Conlan, O.P., who has served among the poor and persecuted in the corrupt and perpetually volatile city of Rabinal, Guatemala for 20 years, choosing to re-up whenever the opportunity to be reassigned or retire has arisen, **Fr. Gonzalo is an authentic missionary: one who, as recently defined by Pope Francis, brings the gift of hope, "like regenerative cells capable of restoring vigor to those who seem lost forever...[they] are convinced by the strength of the resurrection, that no evil is infinite, no night without end, no man is definitively in the wrong, no hate is invincible from love... [They have] not abandoned their people in times of persecution. They have stayed there...hoping in God, proving that injustice does not have the final word in life."**

With prayers for peace and justice in the new year,

Lesley Warnshuis

"For me, the earthquake is [an act of nature], not an act of God.
The act of God is the courage of people to rebuild their lives
after the earthquake, and the rush of others to help them
in whatever way they can."

~Rabbi Harold S. Kushner,
When Bad Things Happen to Good People



I happened upon some sentiments written by Fr. Gonzalo about Fr. Martin, the two having first met when Fr. Gonzalo was a student at St. Albert's and Fr. Martin was serving as Master of Novices.

On behalf of all of us who know and admire and love him, I include them here in honor of his

80th Birthday

on February 11.

*"My dearest Fray Martin de Porres Walsh,
who transmitted to the young the missionary spirit,
I greet you with great appreciation and with the desire that
God may continue to bless you with the evangelical joy
and missionary enthusiasm that characterize you."*

**!FELIZ CUMPLEAÑOS,
PADRE MARTÍN!**