

# MISSIONARIES IN ACTION

## DOMINICAN MISSION FOUNDATION

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March 2017

Vol. 54 No. 3

*They tried to bury us,  
not knowing we were seeds.*

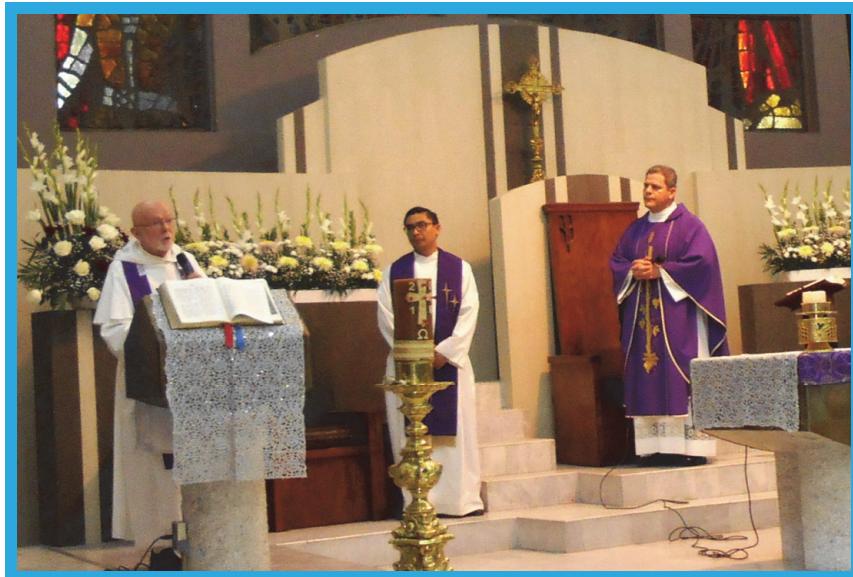
*~Mexican Proverb*

Dear Mission Friends:

Though much of my time is spent in San Francisco at the mission office or on the road preaching mission appeals, my home is Mexicali, where I minister at Santa Maria de Guadalupe Parish. Mexicali began this year with a new mayor, Gustavo Sanchez, whose jurisdiction encompasses not only the city itself with its million and a half inhabitants, but also the city of San Felipe to the south as well as the vast agricultural valley reaching to the border states of Arizona and Sonora.

I have known Gustavo, his wife Margarita, and their sons Gustavo, Jr. and Alejandro for several years, and their love for each other as well as their genuine loving concern for the dignity and rights of others have always been an inspiration to me.

And so I was delighted that Gustavo and his family invited me and two friends, Frs. Adrian Torres and Yoshio Chao, to concelebrate Mass for them on the eve of the inauguration to ask God's blessing on the new administration.



The next day the three of us accompanied our bishop, Don Jose Isidro Guerrero, to the joyful inauguration ceremony. Being a guest at the festivities was a great privilege for me as Mexicali's new leadership signifies an important milestone for the whole country in terms of mutual acceptance and respect between church and state.

**Mexico's history has been blotted by corruption and persecution, much of it aimed specifically at Catholics.** Indeed it wasn't that long ago that church doors would be guarded by soldiers to keep parishioners from attending Mass or receiving the sacraments; and that government officials would have lost their jobs if they were seen at Mass.

But in Mexicali this last December over 500 government officials and their families attended the mayor's inaugural Mass without reservation.

Ironically, Mexico's first constitution after gaining its independence from Spain held that the religion of the nation was and always would be Roman Catholic. Only 30 years later, though, a rebel group overthrew the government and imposed a series of reforms attacking the Church's property rights and possessions. This would be the first of many successful revolts by rebel forces; each new administration remained anti-clerical but varied in the degree with which they enforced the rules against the Church.

*Frs. Martin Walsh, O.P., Yoshio Chao, & Adrian Torres concelebrating Mass in honor of the Mayor-elect of Mexicali on the eve of his inauguration.*

In 1917, however, all the government officials were passionate Church-haters and drafted a new constitution declaring complete control over the Church: its property would now be in the hands of the government; priests were forbidden to vote or hold office, wear clerical garb in public, hold any services, such as processions, outside of church buildings, or distribute Church publications; religious orders would no longer be acknowledged; and foreign priests would be exiled.

It was increasingly difficult to be Catholic, but the worst was still to come. In 1924 Plutarco Elias Calles came to power as president and ordered strict enforcement and unflinching consequences, which ignited the worst persecution of Catholics in Mexico's history. **Hundreds of priests and sisters who exercised their ministry, and lay people who practiced their faith, were tortured and executed without a trial.**

To safeguard the remaining priests, the Mexican bishops suspended all ministry, leaving vast swaths of the country, encompassing seventeen states, without any priest at all. Essentially, fifteen million people were left with no one to minister to their faith.

In Mexicali years ago, I met elderly parishioners who were able to recall when the old parish church was locked up and guarded by soldiers. Indeed, countless churches in the country were desecrated, turned into garages, or simply padlocked.



*The government of President Calles hanged Catholics along railroad tracks for all to see.*

These same parishioners also remembered Mexicali Catholics having to cross the border to the church in Calexico, California to have their babies and young children baptized, made possible by the U.S. border patrol who would open the gate for them for a few hours on Saturdays.

It was a desperate time for devout Catholics determined to practice their faith, and factions organized a rebellion against the brutal anti-Church government. Fighting in the name of Christ, they called themselves the Cristeros and the civil war became known as the Cristiada, which lasted from 1926 to 1929. It was ended by diplomatic means but not before it had claimed the lives of 57,000 government sympathizers and 30,000 Cristeros, including many loyal Knights of Columbus.

A recent movie, *For Greater Glory*, excellently depicts the Cristiada and how so many gave their lives as martyrs for their faith. In fact, in the year 2000, Pope John Paul II canonized twenty-five priests killed in the war because they refused to take up arms or abandon their folds. Thirteen lay people who took up arms only in self-defense were also declared martyrs.

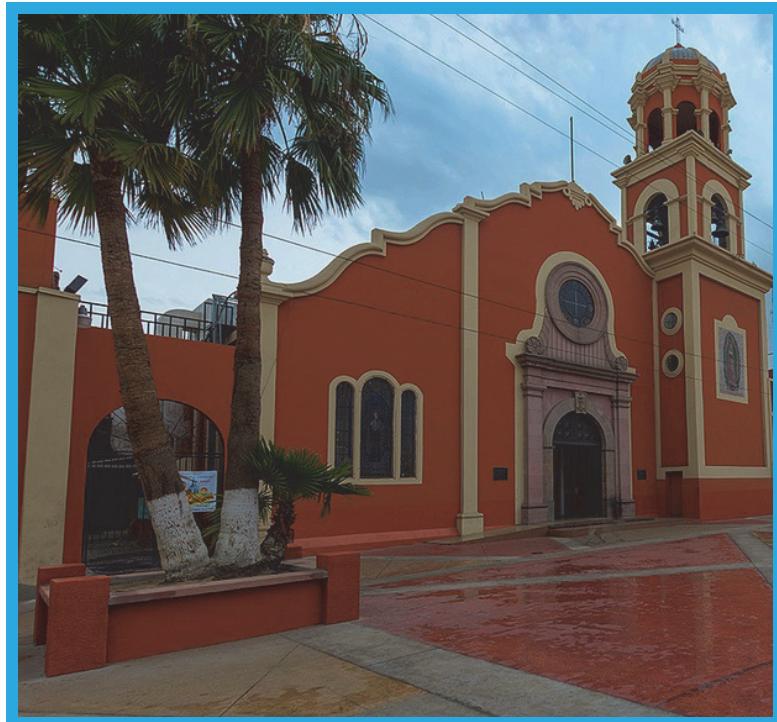
By the 1940s, the violence perpetrated by both the enforcing of and the rebelling against the anti-Church laws had mostly subsided, but the laws were still on the books and the Church was still as constricted.

As recently as 1979, when Pope John Paul II visited Mexico, the laws were still in effect. It was a historic trip, not only because it

*In a strange and ironic twist of history, when the especially brutal Church-hater, President Calles, left office, he enrolled his two sons in St. Catherine's Military School in Anaheim, CA. Besides being a Catholic institution, the school was under the direction of the Dominican Sisters of Mission San Jose, one of the congregations that he had so fiercely persecuted in Mexico while in office...*

was his first time there, but also because he represented the Church which had undergone decades of oppression and persecution because of those laws. It is said though that Mexico's president at the time, Lopez Portillo, paid the fine himself that the Pope incurred for wearing his papal cassock. Portillo must have had to look the other way for much of the Pope's visit, signifying the end of strict enforcement and the beginning of a marked relaxing of the laws.

Fr. Paul Scanlon, Fr. Carlos Dávalos, and I arrived in Mexicali that same year to establish a mission there, aware that the Church and all its property were still under state control, that priests were still forbidden to vote or hold office, and that government officials and employees still feared for their jobs if they were seen at Mass.



*The newly restored Cathedral of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexicali, previously a parish church locked up and guarded for years by soldiers commanded to keep the faithful out.*

But people were beginning to notice that the regulations were not always being strictly enforced and that a quiet disregard for them had begun to permeate. The bishop began to appear in clerical garb and we wore our Dominican habits more often than not.

The Mexican people had such love for this Pope, love that they could finally speak of and publically demonstrate, that in 1992 the government approved the proposal of the president at that time, Salinas, to finally revoke most of the anti-Church laws.

Exactly 100 years after the adoption of the constitution of 1917, which led to the horrific persecution of the Church and its members, we in Mexicali welcomed 2017 by giving thanks that the old parish church, once guarded by soldiers, is now the newly restored cathedral, the vibrant center of the city's religious life; that we priests

can openly and joyfully celebrate Mass there, that babies can be baptized there, and that government officials—and all Catholics—can freely walk in its doors without fearing repercussions; that sisters can freely teach catechism and children can learn it and seminarians can study it; that all the faithful can walk in the annual procession in honor of Our Lady of Guadalupe, led by the religious in their habits and vestments.

Finally we give thanks for the new administration of the Municipality of Mexicali under the guidance of Gustavo Sanchez. A believer in the importance of family, he speaks often of lessons learned from his beloved father, especially that, "The man who does what he can, does what he must." Gustavo feels a strong sense of responsibility to do what he can to improve the quality of life for all in his region.

He is a man of intelligence and common sense, sincerity and integrity—and he's Catholic!

Interviewed just after his election by the *Beyond Borders Gazette*, he said that at the end of his three-year term, his only hope is to hear an inner voice (perhaps his father?) telling him, "Gustavo, you did the right thing!"

**Felicitaciones y bendiciones a Sr. Gustavo Sanchez y su familia, y tambien a toda la gente de Mexicali.**

In Christ's peace,  
Fr. Martin de Porres Walsh, O.P.



*After Mass (left to right), the mayor's sons Gustavo, Jr. and Alejandro, his wife Margarita, Fr. Martin, Fr. Adrian, el Presidente Municipal (mayor) Gustavo Sanchez, and Fr. Yoshio.*

### A Good Read for Lent: *The Power and the Glory*

Lent, the period before Easter beginning with Ash Wednesday, recalls the forty days Jesus stayed in the desert to pray and fast before he began his public ministry. School-age Catholics typically give up something they enjoy for Lent, like chocolate or Facebook or new shoes, in order to share in Christ's suffering. While it may take some effort to say no to a chocolate chip cookie or to taking a peek on Facebook or to trying on those shoes, it is not so difficult as to be impossible—no one wants to set themselves up for failure—no, it's just difficult enough, and besides, they get a break on Sundays! Moreover, they realize that if they choose right, there is an added personal benefit, like eating fewer calories or having more time, or saving money, so it's a win-win...

Even some of us adults still approach Lent in that manner, perhaps out of old habit, but we know we should delve deeper: to focus beyond ourselves to more clearly see and assist those with heavier burdens; and to try to follow the example of Christ in the desert by making exacting sacrifices that call for a constant struggle against temptation. We are not Christ though, so we will give in to temptation and we will fail, and then it is ours to repent and reflect and begin the struggle again.

Lent is the perfect time to read, or re-read, the classic novel, *The Power and the Glory*. It is with raw and unforgiving authenticity that Graham Greene depicts the period of persecution against Catholics in Mexico. But the novel's connection to Lent is found in Greene's equally raw and unforgiving depiction of his main character. He is perhaps the only priest left in his region who hasn't renounced his faith or been executed or fled the country, and so he feels compelled to continue his priestly duties. On the run, he travels from village to village, offering Mass and the sacraments, but he is agonizingly conflicted because he knows his failures and sins—past and ongoing—are much more reprehensible than those whose confessions he is hearing. Nevertheless he trods on, risking his life to bring grace to those he encounters while considering himself useless and a disgrace to the Church.

The novel is filled with such thought-provoking paradoxes. If you can make some time to read it, preferably during Lent, it will add a more deeply spiritual dimension—perhaps a new tradition—to preparing for the most important day in the liturgical year.

Blessed are they  
who suffer persecution  
for justice's sake,  
for theirs is the  
kingdom of heaven  
(Matthew 5:10).

"How many  
of our brothers and sisters  
in the faith  
suffer abuses and violence,  
and are hated,  
because of Jesus...  
because He brought  
the light of God,  
and [the abusive and the  
violent] prefer shadows in  
order to hide  
their wicked works."  
~Pope Francis, 12-16