

# MISSIONARIES IN ACTION

## DOMINICAN MISSION FOUNDATION

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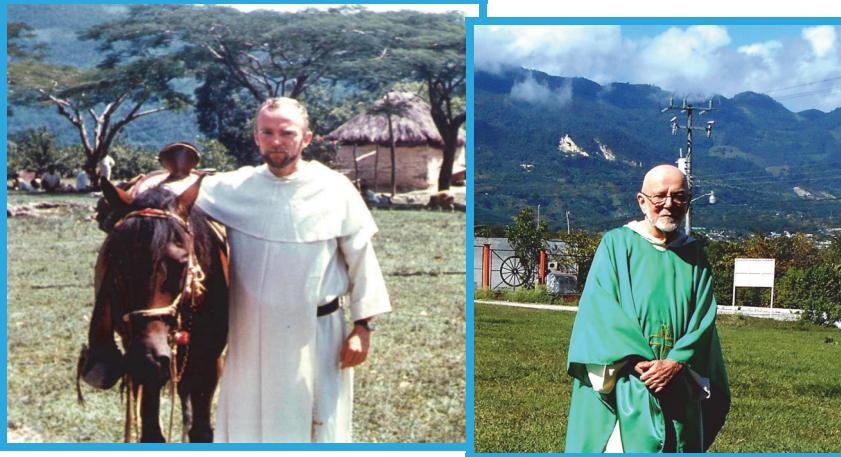
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### *Greetings from Ocosingo, Chiapas*

Dear Mission Friends:

This month I am writing from the city of Ocosingo in the southern-most Mexican state of Chiapas, where I've come to visit the various ministries we support in the region. I've made this trip numerous times over the years, but yesterday a knock on the door of our Dominican *convento* here brought back detailed memories of my very first trip in 1968. At the door were two local historians who had come to check out a rumor that I was the same Friar Walsh who had been in a plane crash on the mountain above Ocosingo 49 years ago. When I confirmed, they proceeded to record an interview with me.

While I was surprised that the 1968 event was still a part of the town's narrative, I was not surprised that I so clearly recalled the details of that entire first visit. I had just been ordained a deacon at the old St. Francis de Sales Cathedral in downtown Oakland, and early the next morning I was on a bus bound for Ocosingo, my first assignment as a deacon.



*Fr. Martin Walsh, O.P.,  
in 1968  
and again  
in 2017,  
with  
the mountains  
of  
Ocosingo  
in the  
background.*

Just a couple weeks later, a few of us had to attend a meeting in nearby Altamirano. Although it would have been less than an hour's drive, it was the rainy season and the unpaved "roads" in between the towns were passable only when dry, so we took a small plane.

On our return, I could hear the plane's motor failing and I saw out the window that we were headed inescapably into the mountain. Scenes from my short life actually did pass before my eyes and I remember saying the prayer repeatedly, **"Into your hands, Lord, I commend my spirit."** Just before crashing I saw what seemed like the whole town of Ocosingo looking up at us from below. I learned later that they immediately sent up a search party on horseback, expecting to recover our remains.

But while the pilot did have serious injuries (from which he later recovered), the other two passengers and I suffered only minor ones. And that was the story of the plane crash.

But if you know me, you know I wasn't going to let the historians get away without telling them some of the *truly* significant Dominican-related facts about their city. I described how the parish church that still stands today, the Church of *San Jacinto de Polonia* (St. Hyacinth of Poland), was built in 1569 by the first Dominican friars to come into this region to serve the native Tzeltal people.

After two hundred years, I continued, the Dominicans were forced to abandon the area, but in another two hundred years,



in 1963, friars from our Western Dominican Province arrived in Ocosingo to serve the poorest and most oppressed people of Mexico in what was believed to be the largest parish in the world. **I elaborated on how it was also to be the first of our many missions, paving the way for the establishment of our Dominican Mission Foundation (which you, our Mission Friends, continue to faithfully support.)**

When I finally released the two historians, I couldn't help but continue to recall the troubled history of the area, much of it centered here in Ocosingo.

Chiapas itself has always been isolated from and largely ignored by the rest of the country. In the 1990s, only one third of the population had sewage service and electricity and less than half had potable water. Many schools only went up to the third grade and most pupils dropped out by the end of first grade. Today 48% of the adults remain illiterate.

It wasn't until 1980 that a road leading to Ocosingo was paved, and the village of fewer than 10,000 people grew to today's 46,000. But its already ailing economy could not begin to keep up with the population growth, and Ocosingo remains one of the poorest cities in one of Mexico's poorest states. It was here that the Zapatista revolutionary movement took hold, becoming front page news early in 1994 when the rebels staged an uprising in defense of such human rights as land ownership, health care, and education. Scores of Zapatistas, government soldiers, and innocent civilians were massacred in the public market just a few blocks from the church.

Today, though, while there was a lot of activity in the church courtyard, it was in an ambience of peace. It is Sunday. The day began at 6:30 a.m. with the church bells calling parishioners to the first Mass at 7:00. In the late morning I attended a Tzeltel Mass, one of the most solemn Masses of the day into

*Far left, the Church of San Jacinto de Polonia, built almost 4½ centuries ago; left, Fr. Martin posing with the Dominican mission team in Chiapas; bottom, Sr. Bertha Rios, Sr. Estela Tabares, Sr. Esperanza Rodriguez; top, Fr. Fernando Beltran, Fr. Raymundo Tamayo, Fr. Carlos Amado, Fr. Joel Vega (Pastor), Fr. Juan Jose Vasquez.*

*(Missing, Sr. Paula Gonzalez)*

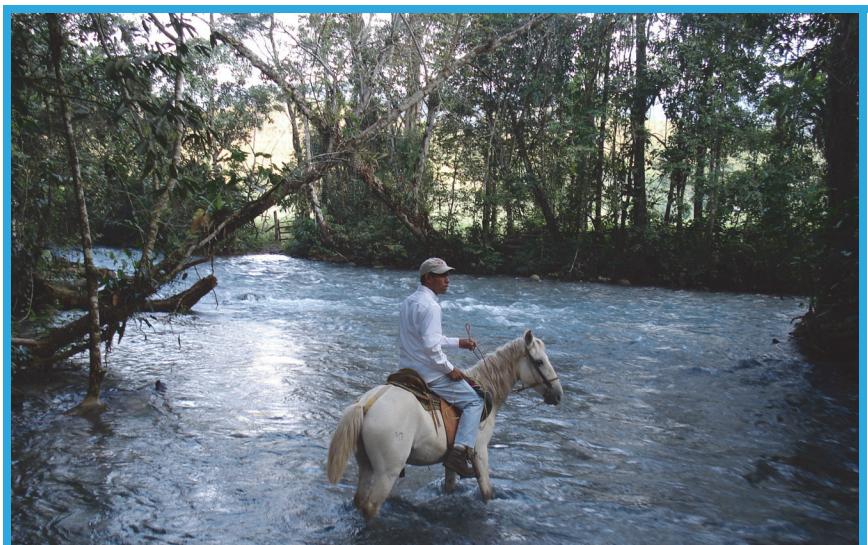
which many Indian traditions are incorporated. It is also the longest Mass—after the proclamation of the Gospel, the congregation is divided into small groups to discuss the day's readings and share individual thoughts and questions. The groups then reassemble for the Liturgy of the Eucharist.

The bustling courtyard activity included more than just Mass-goers. From the first bells, the square gradually filled with groups of youth, both Indian and non-Indian, participating in conferences and spiritual activities. There were the non-stop comings and goings of friars, sisters, and catechists who minister at outlying chapels. Serving over 400 villages and settlements scattered throughout the mountains and into the jungles—many of which are still only reached on horseback or by foot—the parish boasts 41 deacons, 90 pre-deacons, and about 1,000 catechists, ensuring that each community has at least one resident catechist who

can conduct a Liturgy of the Word on Sundays. There were also delegations of catechists from these remote villages arriving for consultations with the parish mission team.

Now as I watch the sun set behind the mountain where my plane crashed 49 years ago, it is calm and I pray, giving thanks to God for the ministry of the Dominican missionaries in Ocosingo who help to improve the quality of life—both material and spiritual—of its impoverished people. I also give thanks to you, our friends, who make it all possible.

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



*Top, group leader guiding a discussion on the day's Scripture readings; middle, Fr. Joel Vega crossing the Jataíte River to bring the Gospel to isolated villages; bottom, parish youth eagerly engaged in spiritual activities (except for one, who promised me he was listening even though his eyes were closed...); left, Eduardo proudly caring for his new little brother Fernando while their older siblings are at the youth conference.*



*Above, cosmic and symbolic elements of creation and human culture, incorporated in the Tzeltel Mass, are sanctified by the Church as "Signs of Grace." Top right, the devoted choir and musicians after Mass; bottom, Fr. Martin after celebrating Mass in an outlying chapel.*

### Upcoming Mission Appeals

*If you are in the area,  
please come and say hello to our preacher.*

**July 8-9:** St. Anthony Claret, Fresno  
*Fr. Martin Walsh*

**July 8-9:** St. Patrick, Kerman  
*Fr. James Moore*

**July 15-16:** St. Dominic, San Francisco  
*Fr. Martin Walsh*

**July 29-30:** St. Bernard, Oakland  
*Frs. Martin Walsh and Peter Rogers*

**Aug. 5-6:** Old Mission, San Luis Obispo  
*Fr. Martin Walsh*

**Aug. 12-13:** St. Matthew Korean Center, Tujunga  
*Fr. Martin Walsh*

**Sept. 2-3:** Our Lady of the Rosary, Union City  
*Fr. Martin Walsh*



*St. Dominic is often pictured with a dog at his feet. It is said that when his mother was pregnant with him, she had a dream in which she gave birth to a dog that carried a torch in its mouth. In light of this symbol of the Dominican charism of preaching to spread the light of truth throughout the world, weavers from Fr. Timothy Conlan's mission in Rabinal, Guatemala have produced doggie sweaters. Similar to the popular Dominican bags—sturdy, black and white, with the Dominican shield—the sweaters are woven with the phrase *domini cano*, which is Latin for "the Lord's dogs," as well as a play on "Dominicano." They can be used for any small dog and come in 3 sizes—9, 10 or 11 inches (from the base of the neck to the tail.) If you would like one for your dog or a gift, please send in \$45.00 (includes U.S. shipping) with your donation envelope or alone, or call with your credit card, and we will send your order out immediately.*