

# MISSIONARIES IN ACTION

## DOMINICAN MISSION FOUNDATION

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### *Our Newest Mission: Island of Enchantment?*



*Fr. Mark Francis Manzano, O.P.*

Dear Mission Friends:

#### *Then*

In November of 1493, explorer Christopher Columbus was sailing in the Caribbean Sea and happened upon the island of Puerto Rico, roughly a thousand miles southeast of the land that is now Florida, and claimed this "New World" territory for the Spanish Crown. Columbus and his crew captured some of the indigenous people of the island, who called themselves the *Taino*, and brought them back to Spain. When Ponce de León arrived in the early 1500s in search of rumored gold and the mythical Fountain of Youth, he brought with him the Cross and the Crown, founding a Spanish colony near what is now the capital city of San Juan. He did find gold, became wealthy, and was appointed the first governor. After his death, his remains would be—and are still—enshrined in a tomb in the Cathedral of San Juan.



*A typical poor Puerto Rican street rarely seen by tourists.*

Puerto Rico remained a key conquest of the Spanish Empire in the "New World" through the end of the Spanish-American War in 1898 when United States' troops invaded it and raised the U.S. flag. The early 1900s were marked by the struggle to obtain democratic freedom from the U.S., which was largely successful: The United States pulled out its military rule and the island established its own government within the boundaries of the U.S. Constitution; its people were declared U.S. citizens in 1917; and their own constitution was drafted and approved in 1952 when the territory was formally recognized as a commonwealth of the United States.

So as not to be seen as another "Catholic Colonizer" of the island, the U.S. government intentionally invited Protestant church leaders to Puerto Rico, and today numerous Protestant churches are alive and well. Nevertheless, Dominican friars from Spain, the Netherlands, and most recently Colombia have contributed to sustaining the strong Catholic faith there. Over the centuries they founded numerous churches, chapels, and schools. Recently, parishioners celebrated the 250th anniversary of the founding of the parish of *La Invección de la Santa Cruz*, which makes that church older than the United States itself as a country!



**Now** Today the Dominican missionaries in Puerto Rico, who are based in Bayamón, are stretched in an impossible number of directions, striving doggedly to maintain their commitments.

These include teaching apostolates at the *Universidad Central de Bayamón* as well as several parochial grade and high schools; and the pastoral needs of the members of the three parish churches, *Nuestra Señora del Perpetuo Socorro*, *Santo Domingo*, and *La Invención de la Santa Cruz*, as well as the mission site in Yauco, *Santísimo Rosario*, which also serves the many who live in the surrounding rugged foothills of that area, including eleven chapels (yes, eleven!), each of which is visited at least once a week by the Dominican Friars, the Dominican Sisters of Fátima, or one of four permanent deacons of the parish. Another major responsibility is the repair and maintenance of buildings under Dominican care, including housing and churches damaged or destroyed by hurricanes and earthquakes.

In September of 2017, Hurricane María left a horrendous wake of destruction in her path, and in January of 2020, in the middle of Puerto Rico's recovery from that disaster, a series of earthquakes rocked the southwestern region of the island. In the city of Yauco alone, more than 3200 homes were severely damaged, including 60 that collapsed completely and some 240 buildings that are still considered unsafe to occupy. For the past two years, the Dominican Friars of *Santísimo Rosario*, for example, have lived in temporary housing and said Mass outside in all weather.

Recently, due in large part to dwindling resources as well as politics, the Dominicans from Colombia withdrew their presence from Puerto Rico, and our Order's Master General, Fr. Gerard Timoner, O.P., urged friars from the various provinces in the United States to take their place. The Central Province of St. Albert the Great answered the request. "We are most grateful for the work of those who have gone before us," their prior provincial Fr. James Marchionda said, making it clear that he wants to build upon the years of progress and the existing momentum.

***Left, Dominican Church of Santísimo Rosario in Yauco, still under repair, sitting at one end of the city's main plaza.***

***Middle, inside the main church, the pews moved to allow clean up in stages.***

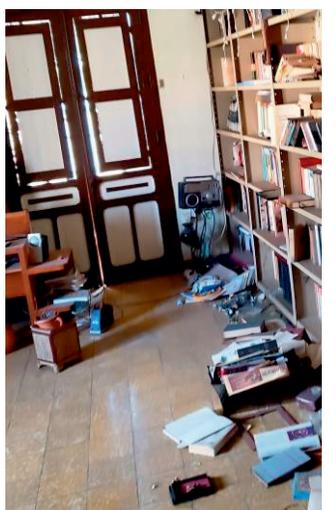
***Right, one of the 11 chapels in the hills surrounding Yauco.***

But finding the area's needs overwhelming, they, in turn, asked the remaining U.S. Provinces (the Southern, Eastern, and Western) to help form a collaborative mission, each assigning at least one missionary friar to serve there. And that's where I enter the picture!

### **A New Mission**

My name is Fr. Mark Francis Manzano, O.P. and I've been a member of the Western Province of the Most Holy Name of Jesus since 2003 and an ordained priest since 2010. The Dominican Mission Foundation sponsored two of my Spanish immersion programs early on in my formation and now I am happy to pay that back with interest by volunteering to be our province's representative in the new collaborative mission in Puerto Rico. As of the end of July, I am now in permanent residence here, after having made several trips to Bayamón and Yauco this past year to learn first-hand about the living conditions and needs of the parishioners.

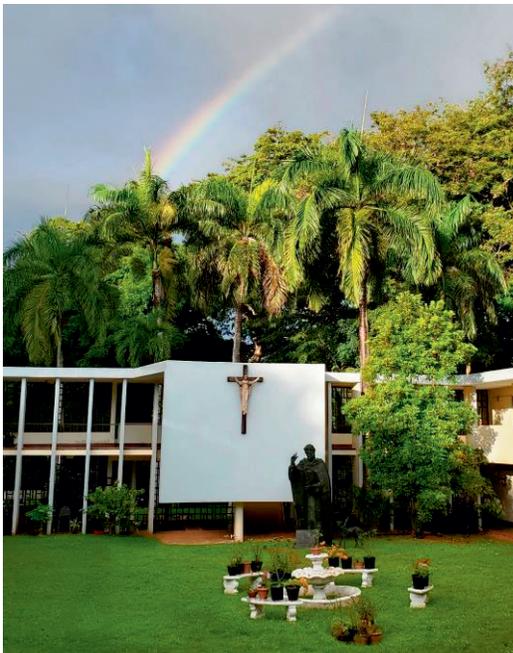
Various recent shots of hurricane and earthquake damage on the island, from the top down: an all-too-typical neighborhood; a grade school; the refectory of our priory in Yauco; our library in Yauco; all that's left of his house; the front door and facade of our priory (The banner reads, "CUIDADO AL PASAR DESPRENDIMIENTO POR TERREMOTO," which basically means, "Be careful when passing by; things may fall because of the earthquake." ); an office inside; Mass outside. Structural cracks reveal themselves throughout the priory, which had to be evacuated immediately. It will need a lot of attention and repair/maintenance. The 2020 earthquakes so severely damaged the priory and church of Santisimo Rosario in Yauco that we must have Mass outside underneath the tents until they are rebuilt/retrofitted. We are still waiting for the repairs to BEGIN on the priory, and until they are finished, we must live about two miles away in temporary housing. Padre Rafael Gonzalez, O.P., the pastor, says that the parish should be ready to use again by the end of the year, but with all the rebuilding activity in Puerto Rico, it will probably take twice as long for repairs to be completed.





Left, for the last several summers, young friars from the United States have enrolled in a Spanish Immersion Program at the university we founded in Bayamón. Tour guide Padre Yamil, (framed in doorway), a native Puerto Rican friar, teaches at a nearby university and helps with our parishes on the weekend.

Below, it rains almost every day in Bayamón, located just south of San Juan in the northeastern part of the island. This is a view of the refectory at the Convento del Santo Rosario. The trees come alive whenever there is rain with the sound of the Coquí tree frog, so-called because the sound it makes is literally "ko-kee ko-kee." And the frequent rainbows overlooking the crucifix help keep hope in our hearts.



Even before the hurricanes, 43.5 percent of Puerto Ricans were living below the poverty line. In 2018 their median household income was \$20,296, less than half of West Virginia (\$44,047) and Mississippi (\$44,717), the states with the lowest US income.

Roughly 640,000 Puerto Ricans on the island receive food stamps. Puerto Rico's Medicaid and Medicare rates are about half of what U.S. states receive. Their drinking water system serving 70 percent of the island has been tested and found to have elevated levels of bacteria, chemicals, and lead. The child poverty rate is currently at 58 percent, nearly triple the 18 percent average for the rest of the United States' children. Puerto Rican youth from the ages of 16-24 have higher rates of non-participation in school and in work as opposed to other ethnic groups living in the United States. Enrollment in schools has declined by 40 percent over the last decade and they have had to close 184 public schools due to the economic crisis.

My main ministry with the Dominican Friars on the island will be the Vocations Director, with the goal of inspiring and inviting the next generation of native Puerto Ricans to join the Dominican Order. Currently, there are just fourteen of us Dominican friars on the whole island of about three million, so the job facing me is in need of some serious prayer and support!



Left, Fr. James Marchionda, O.P. visiting with the Dominican Sisters of Fátima who minister with us in Yauco and are an invaluable addition to our staff, helping out with the liturgical music, visiting parishioners, etc.

We cannot do this alone. As expressed by Fr. Marchionda, "We will depend on our many friends and benefactors, as we always do, to keep us in prayer and to help us address the needs of our brothers and sisters in Puerto Rico. We invite you to join us in this transformational mission ministry." Several of the friars here, including me, have established a social media presence to help highlight our ministries and to give some answers to how our time and resources will be spent in this corner of the world. Please follow me on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. **And thank you for your continued support of the Dominican Mission Foundation, the life-giving source of the missions and missionaries of our Western Province for almost 60 years.**

God bless you all,  
Fr. Mark Francis Manzano, O.P.

### Upcoming Mission Appeals

**July 30-31: St. Joseph, Lincoln (Fr. Jordan Bradshaw)**

**Aug. 6-7: San Clemente, Bakersfield (Fr. Jordan Bradshaw)**

**Aug. 27-28: St. William, Atascadero (Fr. Jordan Bradshaw)**

**Date pending: St. Christopher, Las Vegas (Fr. Miguel Rolland)**