

An Ever-Safer Haven

Fr. Roberto Corral, O.P.



Dear Dominican Mission Friends,

Greetings from Baja California, Mexico. I am very quickly approaching my third year at our mission in Mexicali and I am happy to be here as I learn and implement what it is to be a missionary. I especially enjoy gathering more and more each day about the area and the people we serve, and I look forward to discovering more of what God has in store for me here.

As some of you already know, our current mission in Mexicali began in 1995 when we answered the Mexican bishop's request to establish a parish in the poorest, most spiritually-neglected settlement in the far eastern outskirts of Mexicali. Located in the desert and extending about 30 miles along the U.S.-Mexico border, the area encompassed crowded, impoverished neighborhoods and small, struggling ranches.



*Fr. Roberto celebrating
Easter Sunday Mass
at the current
Chapel of St. Juan Diego
in Villa Zapata.*

Its climate extremes—up to 125 degrees in the summer months and down to 43 degrees in the winter—cause much difficulty for the already destitute inhabitants. Fr. David Bello, O.P., the first to answer the bishop's call, found one small chapel upon arrival and did his best to minister to the expansive area. Within a few months, he was joined by other friars and over the next few years they were able to build—through the generosity of you, our mission friends—a beautiful main church for our new parish mission of Santa Maria de Guadalupe and three smaller chapels: About one mile west of us is the Chapel of Our Lady of the Incarnation; another mile west is the Chapel of St. Martin de Porres and St. Juan Macias, Dominican saints from Peru;

and 12 miles east of us is our smallest and most humble chapel, named after St. Juan Diego, the indigenous Mexican who was visited by Our Lady of Guadalupe in 1531.

Thankfully, improved trade practices, technologically advanced communication, and increased opportunities for education have resulted in somewhat raising the standard of living for many in Mexico, but for those who have been unable to escape their cycle of poverty in the ongoing struggle to support their families, the disparity has only grown. In this article, I would like to share with you a little about this last chapel, including the town in which it sits and the people we serve there who make up the neediest, most destitute community in our parish, epitomizing that phenomenon of growing disparity.



Left, Victor washing chapel walls; center, Juanita, Jasmine, Victor, and Manuelito at chapel entrance; right, parishioners cleaning the terrain.

The Chapel of St. Juan Diego is located in a windswept desert village (*ejido* in Spanish) called Villa Zapata, named after Emiliano Zapata, the famous Mexican revolutionary who was assassinated in 1919. Data from 2020 had the population of Villa Zapata at 779, divided among 234 homes, but while it is growing steadily, it remains a poor area with unpaved roads of dirt and sand. **Until quite recently there was no running water and one-third of the homes still have no indoor bathroom;** basic electricity is also a new addition but 85% are still without Internet access or any kind of computers.

I am continually heartened, however, by the poor but generous and faith-filled parishioners I meet. Among the inhabitants of Villa Zapata are the members of the Elizondo Chavez family. Juanita, the wife and mother, arrived in Villa Zapata in 1997 when she was not quite 13, and almost immediately she volunteered to become a catechist for the Catholic children in the area. She has been teaching them ever since! In 2003, when she was 19, she was asked to be the caretaker of the Chapel of St. Juan Diego along with being a catechist, and she said yes.

And today, in addition to being a catechist and the chapel's caretaker, cleaning and maintaining the chapel and its grounds, she enlists the help of her husband Victor and their two high school-age children, Manuelito and Jasmine, who are also altar servers. Juanita's other volunteer roles include sacristan, coordinator, and public relations person for all events at the chapel. They are a very dedicated family without whom it would not be possible to keep our chapel open or safe.

Victor is the sacristan of our main parish church of Santa Maria de Guadalupe, and as such, is a paid employee. His job includes opening up the church and compound every morning and closing up in the afternoons or evenings; preparing for all liturgies in the church; manually ringing the bell at 30, 15 and 5 minutes before every Mass; cleaning and maintaining the church and the grounds; and making sure the other chapels have the liturgical supplies they need. In order to supplement their income, the family operates a small store out of their home, selling groceries and their handmade *piñatas*.

Recently I was able to catch Juanita and ask her about the history of Villa Zapata, founded in 1984. The village's first chapel was built in 1989 by a diocesan priest, Fr. Juan Manuel Molina, a well-known and beloved pastor of San Juan de los Lagos Parish in Mexicali, who would celebrate Mass in Villa Zapata whenever he could. Unfortunately, that adobe chapel was ruined when high winds lifted the roof off the two-room public school next door and caused it to land on top of the chapel, which collapsed. After that, Fr. Molina celebrated Mass outside under a *ramada* (an open-sided, roofed structure) for a couple more years, people sitting on chairs that they brought from home.

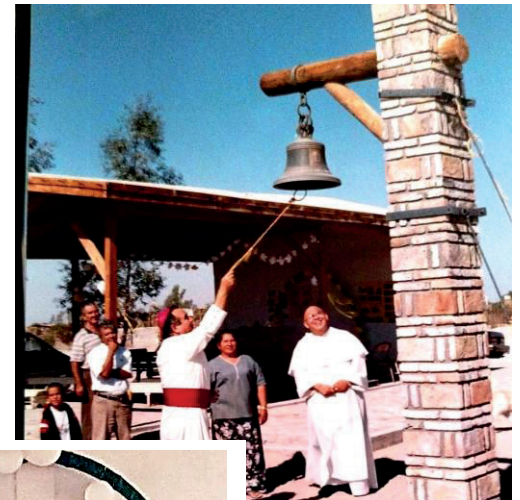
In 1995, the Dominicans arrived in Mexicali: first, Fr. David Bello, who was soon joined by Fr. Tom Kraft and later Fr. Vincent Foerstler. With three energetic priests and financial support from the Dominican Mission Foundation, the Dominicans began to oversee the construction of a new, simple chapel that had just one wall, a brick floor and a thatched roof. That chapel humbly served Villa Zapata for several years.



Its Catholic population was outgrowing it, however, and because our funds were limited, we had to get creative. We discovered an affordable type of construction being employed in the desert areas of the southwest by which buildings were formed out of bales of hay, covered in chicken wire, and then plastered to look like adobe. You may remember the May 2012 newsletter dedicated to our new, larger, more enclosed chapel. (Always necessarily frugal in our mission areas, we have been utilizing our previous chapel for religious education classes for children and adults.)



Left, building the 2nd chapel in 1995; above, completed chapel; right, Fr. David Bello celebrating with the bishop.



Left, Fr. Tom Kraft saying Mass in front of the chapel's only wall; below, summertime Mass.



Above left, Sr. Maria de Los Angeles Gomez verifying that they really are using bales of hay; above, the completed chapel in 2012; left, Fr. Bart de La Torre celebrating Mass with more walls!



Unfortunately, the current chapel is still not a completely enclosed building. Three of the walls do not go all the way to the ceiling, and the intervening space had to be covered by mesh to keep the birds out. There is lighting, but no air conditioning or heat. And because the church property is isolated, anything of value like fans or heaters would probably be stolen. Thus it is a real challenge for both the priest and the parishioners to enjoy or even sit through Mass in the inevitably stifling summertime heat and the bitter wintertime cold.

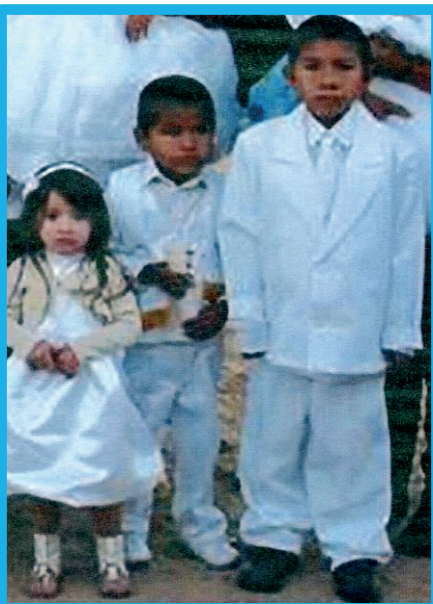
In addition to the weather concerns from the open air, we also have to deal with the loud noises made by nearby dune buggy riders from both Mexico and the U.S. as well as the children playing at the local public school right next door.

Given the probability that Villa Zapata will continue to grow in size and become more developed in the future, we are envisioning an even larger and, *this time*, fully enclosed chapel with air conditioning and heating. Thankfully, the 1.2 acres we own around the current chapel and other buildings is large enough to allow for this expansion. With help from you, our friends and benefactors, we are hoping to begin as soon as possible.

Thank you for your prayers and generous support for all of our Dominican missions and especially for our efforts here in Mexicali. May the Lord reward your generosity and goodness.

God bless you,
Fr. Roberto Corral, O.P.

Please visit our website at www.dominicanmission.org to watch our new video on the Mexicali mission and see some familiar faces and buildings come alive!



Top center, Fr. Martin de Porres Walsh celebrating Mass; top right, Fr. Roberto with some little saints; above, Villa Zapatanos picking up food and supplies; left, first communicants in borrowed outfits.

Excerpt from Fr. Roberto's biography: His favorite aspects of priesthood are preaching and presiding at Mass; trying to explain the faith to someone who is spiritually hungry; hearing a sincere penitent in confession; walking over to the parish school and giving and receiving hugs from the kids; and singing and dancing at parish social events. He also enjoys exercise, chess, reading and listening to audiobooks (especially murder mysteries and spy thrillers), watching movies and sports, and listening to music. And now here in Mexicali he is blessed to be deepening his understanding of his Mexican heritage.

Upcoming Mission Appeals

If you are in the area, come and hear our preacher.

- Aug. 9-10** St. Joseph, Redding, *Fr. Joshua Gatus, O.P.*
- Aug. 30-31** Sacred Heart, Anderson, *Fr. Joshua Gatus, O.P.*
- Oct. 11-12** SF (parish TBA), *Fr. Jordan Bradshaw, O.P.*
- Oct. 25-26** St. Thomas More, Cottonwood Heights, UT;
Fr. Dominic Briese, O.P.
- Oct. 25-26** St. Anthony of Padua, Helper, UT,
Fr. Joshua Gatus, O.P.