



MISSIONARIES IN ACTION

DOMINICAN MISSION FOUNDATION

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A Fine Way to Serve God



Dear Mission Friends:

This year marks the 60th anniversary of our Mission Office's first newsletter in 1964, having been sent out quite regularly to an ever-growing list of supporters ever since! It was in 1963 that our Western Dominican Province, responding to the request of Pope John XXIII for the Church to more actively promote human dignity and social justice in Latin America, took on the responsibility of the world's largest parish—San Jacinto de Polonia in Ocosingo-Altamirano, Chiapas, the southern-most state in Mexico. While our missionaries, Fr. Vincent Foerstler, O.P., Br. Raymond Bertheaux, O.P., and Fr. Joseph Asturias, O.P. (as seen on the right) began their service early in 1963, the first newsletter was not sent out until the next year when the Dominican Mission Foundation was established, with Fr. Mark McPhee, O.P. as its first director.

This month's newsletter and those of the rest of this jubilee year will include excerpts from some of the oldest newsletters to give you an idea of the early needs of our San Jacinto parishioners and the accomplishments of our first missionaries, thanks to some of you who have been with us from the start, indeed who have been reading these newsletters and supporting our work for lo these 60 years!

EXCERPTS

*(with minimal editing for conciseness)
from our earliest newsletters by
Director Fr. Mark McPhee, O.P.*

January 1964

Our first missionaries left San Francisco for Mexico on January 16, 1963. There is much work to be done and their days do not leave time for writing to all their friends as they would like; however, perhaps this newsletter will help to keep you abreast of their work and their progress.

Theirs is the largest parish mission, as well as the poorest and most oppressed, in all of Mexico with its 200,000 souls and its 6,200 square miles of jungles and remote mountain villages, often reaching 7,000 feet and only accessible by winding, rugged trails. With two priests and one brother, it will take approximately one and one half years to visit every village in their mission. The people of this land are poor and suffer from all kinds of sicknesses, but not all is sad. They are lovable, laugh easily, and have a real trust in the goodness of the friars.

In the evenings after the Rosary, Br. Raymond wanders around the Indian huts, visiting the children and sometimes helping them with their homework, for most of their parents cannot read or write. He plays his harmonica or lets them play it and they always respond to his winning smile....



Whenever one of the Fathers goes to a village for Mass, word travels ahead that he is coming, and the Indians of the village meet him with palms and bouquets of flowers and escort him to the Church with songs. The priest ...will lead them in prayers, followed by confessions, baptisms, marriages, and Mass. The Faith is kept alive in the villages by the catechists when the priest is not present...

If you have any particular questions you would like answered in a future newsletter, please write and let us know. We are always happy to hear from you and appreciate the wonderful way you have supported this, our first mission, during the past year. God will bless you for your generosity and you will always have a warm place in our prayers.

April 1964

Much has happened since you received our last newsletter. On the morning of Feb. 27 Miss Patricia Arca left San Francisco to join our missionaries to give one year of her life to the physical care of these almost-forgotten people. She is a graduate of the Providence School of Nursing, Oakland. She writes that she will be leaving Ocosingo to live at the Indian village of San Carlos where the diseases are more prevalent and there is much work to do. The village is quite isolated and has no running water or electricity. “Fr. Asturias and I visited the village to see a sick lady, perform a marriage, and buy some potatoes. Father had brought the sick lady to Ocosingo last month to see a doctor. By then it was too late since they diagnosed her as having cancer of the stomach. When we later visited her, I went into the straw hut with Father. The room was dark and morbid. She was thin and weak, probably starving...there was nothing I could do. Father gave her the last sacraments and we went on to the church for the marriage.

“There was an elderly, toothless woman waiting for us in front of the church. She was smiling and approached Father with an embrace. She brought us orange juice while we waited for the young bride and bridegroom to arrive, which they did, dressed up but barefoot.”

Fr. Asturias writes that he has been away most of the time visiting outlying villages. “During January, I visited a number of villages we had not yet seen. This section has the densest jungles in the whole state. The growth is so heavy, leaving the ground like a marsh. It is also mountainous and the trails are often slippery and steep. The poor horses wear themselves out walking through the mud and climbing the steep and slippery trails.



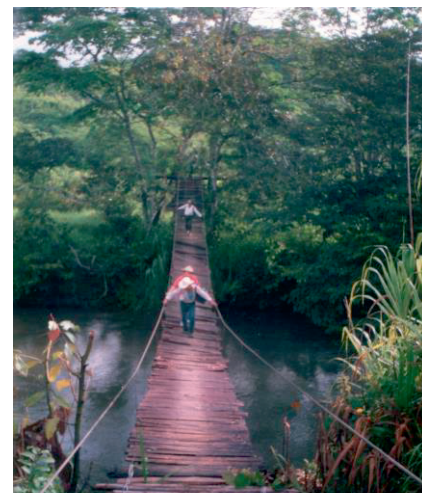
“In one place my horse slipped and fell backwards, but I jumped clear to avoid being crushed. I was lucky not to have gotten anything worse than a sprained knee and a mud bath. But these jungles are some of the most beautiful places on earth. The variety of vegetation and the gracefulness of the plants and trees make it a most delightful place.”

Fr. Foerstler [whose phrase used for the title of this newsletter was how he described his missionary years] *writes that learning how to ride a horse was the most painful experience in his life. On his first trip,* “We were able to visit fifteen colonies, mainly because they were fairly close together, some no more than five miles apart. The first day we were nine hours in the saddle. The four places I had originally intended to visit stretched out to fifteen because groups from other colonies off the trail would come and ask us to stop at theirs. I could have included more except that I began running out of supplies, especially bread and wine. The food...was the best they had and we were grateful. Each place had a fair number of baptisms and marriages, and confessions were always plentiful...it sometimes meant late hours for the people but they didn't seem to mind. The little children would simply stretch themselves out on the dirt floor of the church and go to sleep while waiting for their mothers who were off in one corner kneeling in the dim candlelight, mumbling something before a seated white-clad figure.



“I am usually accompanied by ten or fifteen companions, several catechists, others just to help. Some come on horseback, others on foot...At one point I counted a troop of fifteen horsemen. I felt a bit like a revolutionary with his troops! I saw streams gushing out of hillsides and sunsets that illuminated entire valleys. Nature has given us many beautiful experiences, but we have also learned to respect it. The weather determines when and where we travel, and there is always the threat of hungry wild animals such as wild pigs, jaguars, and venomous snakes. ...All in all I enjoyed the trip and am thankful for the opportunity to serve.”

Br. Raymond writes, “I go around to the various homes and make sure that the families mix soybean powder in their cornmeal for protein. Then I visit the bedridden and mix it in myself. With the Sunday collections, I buy chickens and teach the people how to cook them and make a rich broth.” *Back in Ocosingo, he prepares supplies for trips and takes care of the house and Church.*





Would you like to help clothe or feed a family in this distant land? \$1.00 will provide food for a family for one day. \$25.00 will provide clothing for a family for one year.

July 1964

Nurse Patricia Arca writes, "I wish there were something I could do for them (Fr. Asturias, Fr. Foerstler, and Br. Raymond) to make their work easier. They go constantly from sun up to sun down. Their work is never finished...but only they could bring the Living Christ to these people, make holy the Sacrament of Matrimony, and forgive sins. So here I am with three tremendous individuals. Two priests working very hard and resting merely to prepare to work harder, and a brother also, doing many things for what he calls 'The Cause,' deep in the mountains in the parish of San Jacinto. It is a privilege to be here and to be part of the family, to be part of the giving and the sharing, and to bear Witness to the Truth."

February 1965

Nurse Patricia writes again: "...I'm beginning to understand a little, only a little, of the way of life of our people here. I come from a land of plenty. I never knew this poverty. Perhaps one day I will be able to genuinely express what it is like to live from day to day. Perhaps I'm not worthy of knowing yet; my love for them is still superficial. And yet in my wanderings, I can see their isolation, their destitution, their desire to try and overcome this way of life. We give what we have and they appreciate it. This is a unique relationship. It's not nurse-patient; it is Family.

"It is God bringing us together and it is very beautiful. God exists in the diseased mothers and fathers, in the old people who are withering away, in their simple joys and laughter. They are bringing God to us and helping us to love him more."

April 1965

Your generosity has built a shelter for the Indians (above: before/ building/ built) next to the Church of San Jacinto...It will sleep 160 on floor mats and it includes a cooking pit, a fountain, two rooms for the sick, toilets, and showers, and it is wired for electricity (for when power becomes available). Now the Indians have a home when they come to Ocosingo, because you have shared with them your gifts from God.

July 1965

Our mission strives to provide spiritual, medical, material, and social care for the natives. These provisions are so interrelated that one is rendered deficient without the other. It is our desire that the natives become autonomous, ...eventually becoming teachers and leaders of their own people. They should be assisted in developing their own culture rather than the culture of the missionaries with whom they are working.

Fall 1965

Beans and corn, corn and beans. Corn gruel for breakfast; stewed corn or mashed beans for dinner. This endless singular diet is responsible for the Indians' short life span (40 years average) and the malnutrition and diseases which their poor, weak bodies cannot fight.

Lay missionary Sacha Jones started experimental farms at the mission and the Indians are amazed at the size of the vegetables that grow in her garden. They are anxious to learn her secret. And she writes, "An average family may have 20-30 chickens running about the house or scratching in the dirt outside. Everyone knows the age of each chicken and exactly which are theirs and which are their neighbors'. Since a great part of the Indians' income is derived from going house to house in Ocosingo or Altamirano selling these chickens for a good profit—15-18 pesos each (about \$1.25)—they can never eat their own chickens. The profit is relatively high because the chicken death rate is high, due to common contagious diseases, worms, poor diets, and lack of water. So the ones that survive, while skin and bones, are luxuries. We plan to begin a project to buy good quality chickens from Mexico City, distribute them to the villagers along with pasture seed, vaccines, fencing, and instructions. We will hold some chickens back to keep growing the foundation flock. We hope to develop a similar program with hogs and cattle, eventually resulting in meat, eggs, and milk for their own tables."

March 1966

*Nurse Patricia Arca... returned to the Bay Area...after serving the mission well for more than two years. Besides nursing the sick and distributing medication, she pioneered the medical program, encouraging the building of dispensaries in outlying areas and training native infirmarians how to minister to their own village, including how to give shots and recognize and treat the more common diseases. Pat worked diligently for the Indians and revered them as Christ's brothers and sisters. She gave them hope. Sincerely yours in Christ,
Mark McPhee, O.P.*

Our industrial technology, agricultural science, and medical wisdom can be shared with them to ease their lives. This can be our gift. But when you walk through their forests and their fields and no one passes by without saluting you as 'brother' and stopping to chat, you know they have a respect for life, a concern for one another, and an awareness of God that is missing in our comfort-laden, but lonely, society. We ought not pity them; rather we ought to learn from them and then share our knowledge and love in return.

~Prior Provincial Fr. Paul Scanlon, O.P. after visiting our mission in Chiapas in 1974



You may have detected from these writings from the '60s a seemingly patronistic attitude or some terminology that could be called offensive in today's world. But it was not today's world. **And those missionaries were truly doing God's work, never mind semantics.** When they arrived, the Church had already come to know how a foundation of genuine respect for others and their authentic culture, traditions, and beliefs has a positive impact on well-being. They had seen how the beloved Chiapas Bishop Samuel Ruiz was laying the foundation for an indigenous Church in the footsteps of his 16th century predecessor, Bartolome de las Casas, O.P., the beloved first bishop of Chiapas and one of the first advocates for indigenous rights and *against* oppressive colonialism. And so our missionaries, then as now, carried on that legacy, honoring, embracing, and incorporating the ancient rituals and symbols that the parishioners held so dear.

We were able to accomplish much in 60 years besides the handful of initial projects described herein, the most monumental early addition being a small medical center which eventually evolved into Hospital San Carlos in Altamirano, all thanks to the support and prayers of many of you and others no longer with us.

But there is much that we could not change. In the region of the parish, 80% of the families are on the poverty line, earning less than \$245 a month, 70% have no electricity, 48% of adults are illiterate, and the average number of years spent in school is 3.8. Chiapas still has the highest mortality rate in all of Mexico, due directly to poor nutrition and communicable diseases and indirectly to the difficulty in navigating the rugged roads fast enough or often enough to obtain the requisite care. I asked our director, Fr. Jordan Bradshaw, O.P., who visited the parish mission in 2022, why the levels of poverty, mortality, education, and technology had not improved much over the decades, and he answered, "I'm not sure, but I do know that everywhere I went, there was pride and joy."

Chiapas has long been torn apart by corrupt government policies, greedy landowners, and religious persecution, but its indigenous have always been able to resist assimilation and hold tight to their ancient cultures and customs. They've somehow managed to avoid the control, corruption, and quashing of pride that comes with government programs. May they continue to resist the tide of change toward globalization and conformity and to hold fast to their values of family and traditions,

and to their own village's unique cultural identity. Certainly their lives are still full of struggle without electricity, cars, and other modern conveniences, and **we, with your generous help as always, will continue to ease their lives, but we must not presume that we have the power to make them happy or proud. They have done that all on their own.**

Thank you for journeying with us as we commemorate six decades of documented mission memories.

Peace,

Lesley Warnshuis

The first step in the work of being a missionary is not to preach a message to those who have not heard of it, but rather to investigate the cultures in order to discover what God is doing and speaking already in the hearts of these men and women.

~Don Samuel Ruiz

Mission Appeals

Fr. Jordan Bradshaw will be preaching at the following parishes. Watch for more to come!

St. Patrick, San Francisco July 13-14
Christ the King, Salinas Oct. 5-6