

# Commission Helps Mexican Diocese

By Michael Groden

Major discoveries of oil in Mexico, although they boost the country's Gross National Product, have not been a Godsend to many citizens. So states a report which three members of the diocesan International Justice and Peace Commission helped compile recently.

Lourdes Perez, Justice and Peace Commission coordinator; Dr. Jose Betancourt, Commission president; and Paul Tomasso, task force member for Operation Breadbox, visited the diocese of Tabasco this past summer at the request of Bishop Rafael Garcia, ordinary of Tabasco.

A city in Tabasco will receive some of the Operation Breadbox money collected here next year.

Tabasco, a poor agrarian region in the southeast part of Mexico, is also one of the most oil-rich areas in the country. Hundreds of exploratory oil rigs are being constructed, new roads are being built and there has been a great influx of people from outside the region. That is where the problems begin, according to the soon-to-be-published report.

The oil company, PEMEX, a government owned operation, is expropriating land from the local resident farmers and paying them predetermined amounts of cash. The peasants, who do not own the land but have farmed it for years, usually mismanage these funds through lack of experience.

"The people have little knowledge of how to handle the money, which seems, to them, to be a very large amount," Betancourt said.

Many of the farmers move to nearby cities to find work in the oil industry. Their money is soon used up by spiraling rents and food costs in the cities. Most of the jobs that are available are temporary, and soon the farmer has lost all that he owned.

In addition to the oil industry in Tabasco, a large cement factory, APASCO, has been built. Tabasco is also rich in limestone, a basic component in cement. The combination of these two large industries has greatly



Lourdes Perez and Dr. Jose Betancourt sharing laugh during recent Tabasco interview.

changed the lifestyle of the people living in Tabasco and the residents are having difficulty in adjusting.

The population in the cities has risen dramatically. Housing conditions are very bad, according to the report, and serious health hazards have resulted from overpopulation.

Lourdes Perez explained that Bishop Garcia was aware of the problems caused by the sudden influx of industry and wanted to formulate a long-range program that would help his people adjust.

To do this Bishop Garcia "drew upon resources available to him (including the Justice and Peace Commission and other concerned agencies throughout the U.S. and Mexico) to form an investigative team that would document and clarify these problems," Perez said. The bishop also asked for recommendations on how best to deal with changes in Tabascan life.

The team, headed by Mexican economist Adalberto Savinon, selected five urban areas in Tabasco and conducted a study that included information on demographics, housing, health problems and religious attitudes in the diocese.

The report was completed and sent to all diocesan priests. Bishop Garcia included the study in his Ad Limina report which he recently presented to Pope John Paul II. The report will be formally published in February, 1980.

While Betancourt and Perez were involved primarily

in providing technical assistance in the study of the cities, Paul Tomasso, a fourth year student at St. Bernard's Seminary, dealt with people in the remote Rancherias (small villages) in Tabasco. Tomasso concentrated on the religious aspects of the study. His job was to work with the people as a missionary.

Infant mortality is very high in the villages and one reason for this is the lack of formal health education, he said.

The St. Bernard's Mission Society sponsored the seminarian's trip. Perez and Betancourt were funded by the diocese of Tabasco and four parishes of the Rochester diocese: St. Paul's, Webster, and St. Charles Borromeo, Holy Name and Our Lady of Mercy in Greece.

In a related story Operation Breadbox, 1980 has begun. The Justice and Peace Commission has sent out letters to all parishes asking for their support in a special collection during Lent.

Money raised from Breadbox will go towards the funding of self-help agricultural programs in three different areas.

This year's collection will benefit Zambia, Africa; the Sayangan Mission in the Philippines and Macuspana, Mexico. Macuspana is a city located in the diocese of Tabasco.

Perez stressed that all money from Operation Breadbox will be used for the agricultural projects, no Breadbox money was used in the recent study in Tabasco.

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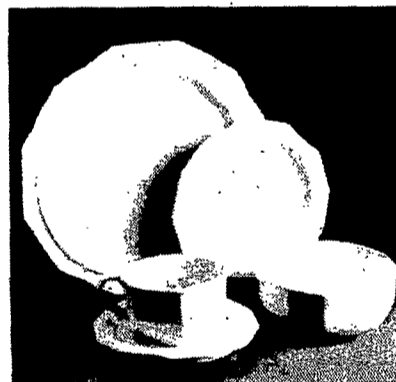
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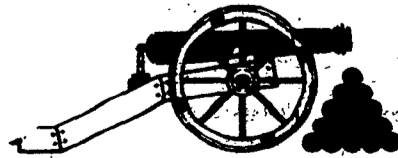
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