

Tabasco

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to a program initiated the year before, concerned the prevention and treatment of tuberculosis. Two others were general health classes, one incorporated into the children's program on certain days, and the other given as a class for adults. In the case of the children, this often involved such basic activities as washing hands and brushing teeth.

The other major aspect of health care that the mission dealt with was a dispensary, set up the year before as a place where the people of Tamulte could come for medicines and medical attention, and now run by Sister Rosalva, one of the Mexican nuns who works year-round in Tamulte.

Mary Elizabeth found much work to be done there. It seemed that whenever she was not eating, sleeping, or running a class, she was in the dispensary. At the dispensary many of us were able to see some of the pain and suffering that is actually hidden behind the happiness and good will that flow from these hardworking people.

On two occasions children were brought in who were on the verge of death from starvation. In the case of young Manuel, he had been dying in a hammock for two months, too weak to move. Lourdes said of him, "I didn't think he



Valerie Smith demonstrates handwashing for one of the Tamulte children. The site was the missionaries' laundry facility.

Gabriel

*Advice to the thin:
Don't eat fast!
Advice to the fat:
Don't eat, fast!*



They Work

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release of prisoners of conscience, and to oppose the death penalty and torture, cruel, inhuman or otherwise degrading treatment of anyone imprisoned, detained or restricted in violation of the provisions of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

AI, worldwide, has more than 1,000 groups in 31 countries. The organization holds advisory status with the United Nations, UNESCO, the Council of European States, the Organization of African Unity and the Organization of American States.

In the diocese, Sylvia Thompson, parish service coordinator for the International Justice and Peace Commission, has been a leading promoter of AI's Urgent Action Network. She said that there is now a doctors network and a Sisters network here as well as the priests.

would make it to the hospital in Villahermosa (the capital of Tabasco). I didn't think he would survive the trip." As it turned out, the ride in was the least of the problems they encountered.

The new hospital in Villahermosa turned out to be so ill-equipped that the doctor who examined Manuel had to ask to use Mary Elizabeth's stethoscope. As with the other child, Arquilino, a blood transfusion was necessary. Since the price of blood is far beyond the means of anyone in Tamulte, if it is available at all, Father John Firpo offered to donate a pint as had David Young the time before. The incident left no doubt in our minds that these children would have died had no one been able to help. The tragedy is that, no doubt, most of the time this is the case.

To me, the incident spoke vividly of the changes that must come about if the people of Tamulte are ever to gain the freedom to control their own destiny that Americans take so much for granted. A child like Manuel can almost starve to death simply because his parents do not know what's wrong or where to turn for help. The incident also underlined for me how relatively helpless we were to bring about any large scale change. Yet the fact that Manuel is alive today is in one sense enough justification for the effort.

However, not all of the events that touched our hearts did so because of their tragedy. This year we also found ourselves directing some of our energies into programs, similar to those we were running in Tamulte, in the small town of Buena Vista, a 15-minute drive down the Tamulte Trail. This experience proved to be especially enlightening for a number of reasons. The church in Buena Vista is still run by the old system of "patrones" that developed after the expulsion of the priests from Tabasco in the 1930s. Whereas Father Lucas has been in Tamulte for five years now and has the responsibility for St. Francis parish, he only says Sunday Mass at St. Antonio parish in Buena Vista. All other duties such as opening the church and cleaning it fell to the "patrones." This involvement with the church had developed into a business proposition, and we were met by the usual resistance in Buena Vista since we were seen as taking their business away. A few times when we arrived for a regularly scheduled class there would be no one there to open up the church for us.

There was another side to Buena Vista, however. That was the overwhelming welcome these ministry-starved people extended to us. Perhaps the most touched by this was Father John, the first priest from our diocese to be part of a Tabasco mission team. The first time he said Mass at Buena Vista, no one received Communion. After inquiring, he found out that nobody had heard confessions in Buena Vista for a long time. Instead, after Mass the people swarmed around Father John and asked simply to be given a blessing. It took him half an hour before all had been blessed.

After this, it seemed almost as if he temporarily adopted the parish. He said Mass there often and provided them with the opportunity for confession and thus Eucharist. Their feelings toward him were especially evident during his last Mass there. At it, eight screaming babies were baptized in the presence of a filled church. For the three additional weeks the second team remained in Tabasco, the people of Buena Vista would often ask about "Padre Juan."

In addition to the successes of the mission, there were also many discouragements and failures. Many times a sudden afternoon downpour would unexpectedly cancel classes for the day. Often programs had to be redesigned and new goals set when complications would arise because the reality of Tamulte did not match the expectations of the class coordinator. In at least two cases, adult literacy and vegetable gardens, though progress seemed tantalizingly close to being made, the programs themselves never really got off the ground. With adult literacy it was because we were trying to facilitate the start of classes under the auspices of an existing government alphabetization program. Every time we seemed about ready to begin, the coordinator of the Mexican government program would advise us of another criterion that had to be met. With the vegetable garden program the reasons were more complex, but the frustration borne of uncertainty existed.



Grateful Tithes

Donald Brooks, president of the parish council of St. Joseph's Church in Weedsport, presents a check to Sister Jane Schar, RSM, for work done at Melita House. The women's refuge received ten percent of the parish "overage" gathered in last year's Thanks Giving Appeal. Father George Wiant, pastor, said, "The Thanks Giving Appeal was a blessing to St. Joseph's. Our parishioners responded to the bishop in a way that far exceeded our expectations."

Yet in a way every member of the team was forced to deal with that same question: Of what lasting value was any of our work? The people of Tamulte were so warm, so grateful for our presence, and yet we received so much more from them in return than we could ever give.

This experience taught me that it's necessary to remain flexible so that you don't become frustrated when people find it difficult to understand your stumbling Spanish; or when you find a program must be totally redesigned or even scrapped. But the most important lesson was that the way one deals with all these hardships is through love. Despite their material poverty, the people of Tamulte are rich in a more important way. The presence of Christ is very much alive in their community.

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