

Along The Way

With Bishop Matthew H. Clark



Lourdes Perez-Albuerne and I spent the days between Jan. 25 and Feb. 2 visiting our mission team in the Diocese of Tabasco, Mexico.

They were rich and very busy days which impressed me very deeply. I am still thinking about them and expect that I will for some time.

During the days there, I tried to keep a record of our activities and to jot down some impressions of the experience. I offer the following words very much aware that they do not come near expressing the fullness of the days but with the hope that they will spark your interest in the great mission venture.

Wednesday, Jan. 25 -- Our departure from the Monroe County Airport was delayed for an hour and a half -- an after-effect of the fog which blanketed the northeast the night before.

That delay left us with no time to spare between arrival and departure from Atlanta. Lourdes and I made the plane but found out when we arrived in Mexico City that our bags did not. We did the usual paper work and began to pray for the arrival of, not only our own belongings, but of the many gifts we were carrying for our mission team from their friends. We saw Helen Hayes speaking with the same agent about the same kind of problem!

Bishop Rafael and our missionaries met us at the airport at Villahermosa which is the See City of the Diocese of Tabasco.

Thursday, Jan. 26 -- We arrived in Oxolotan today. Hundreds of the community met us at the edge of town and led us in procession to the 500-year-old parish church of Santo Domingo.

The procession took life in music and song and special spirit from the very young who always take delight in festive events. The children here like to cling to others and are generous in their friendship.

At Santo Domingo, Bishop Rafael led the assembly in prayer. Greetings were offered by Father Albino Hernandez, the pastor of Tacotalpa, of which Oxolotan is a mission, and by Senor Alejandro who is the lay leader of the Catholic community in the town. Father Neil Miller and Senor Melesio, another lay leader also offered kind words of welcome.

Next, we had a dinner prepared by some women of the village. Chicken and beef, bananas, rice, tortillas, soup, coconut milk and coconut candies were among the foods placed before us. We were treated, as well, by a marimba concert by a group who took a position on the street just outside the dining room window.

In the afternoon, we gathered in the church with 150 children who sang several songs and for whom we had some cookies.

Father Neil and I walked home together and visited some people who are so ill that they are unable to leave their home. The formal activities of the day ended with Mass at 8 p.m.

Friday, Jan. 27 -- 5:30 a.m. About 20 attend morning prayer in the church. Crickets and roosters sang a morning praise much louder than our own. It is a peaceful time as we join the Church at prayer.

The less peaceful time was getting organized earlier. Six of us did well managing the bathrooms and shared facilities. We made it just in time because when we returned from morning prayers, we discovered that we no longer had running water.

10 a.m. to 4 p.m. -- Cuilahuac is a rancharia, or small village, within the parish. We went there today to celebrate the Eucharist and to confirm 70 members of the community.

There is no bridge or ferry across the river, so we crossed in a dugout canoe called a cayuco and then walked for an hour and 20 minutes along a path through the hills. It was a walk affording a magnificent view of the countryside, but it was also a demanding one because of the mud.

Many villagers came to meet us along the way. They walked through heavy mud -- many without shoes. They are warm, hospitable people but they know harshness and suffering in their lives.

4 to 8 p.m. We snooze (at least I do), write letters, read, shower, drink some coffee, eat M&Ms and chili-spiced peanuts, clean the mud from our boots, say evening prayer.

Mass is at 8 o.m. again this evening. Neil is generous in asking me to preside and preach again. I am glad to do it and understand when he says that it gives him a break.

One of the projects for the team during these hours is writing evaluations of their efforts. When Lourdes reminds them they are due, they shout in protest. But they do them in good spirit. It is a good thing to reflect on the experience of ministry. Their writing serves that purpose and helps us in the development and planning of our efforts. During this time we unpack our bags which finally catch up to us.

Saturday, Jan., 28 -- 5:30 a.m. We pray especially this morning for a son and daughter of a widow in the village. She cried as she shared her worry about them last night. Both drink too much and she is worried in particular about the safety of her son. He is absent for periods of time and she doesn't know where she is.

The church was not open when we arrived this morning so Neil invited me to ring the 400-year-old church bells which are now hanging on a pole in front of the church. It's the first time I ever woke a whole town at 5:30 in the morning!

During morning prayers, rain pounded on the roof of the church. At this hour it is lulling sound. But it must be difficult to preach in the church during a rainstorm.

8 a.m. to noon Val Smith and I took a 20-minute run through the town and then joined the others for breakfast. After breakfast and the morning round of showering, bed-making, reading, etc., we had a meeting about the mission.



Spending the night in a hammock "is one of those minor adventures that make life interesting."

It was an exciting couple of hours. Our four friends were willing to share, with a moving kind of directness, their experience of mission life. They spoke of successful events and disappointing ones, of joys and sorrows, laughter and tears. We spent a good part of the time reflecting on their experience of community life. It is no easier for them than it is for you or me. It may be even more difficult because of the dramatic cultural adjustments they have had to make. But they work on it and it is encouraging to be with them as they do.

12 to 3 p.m. We literally ride into the clouds to enjoy a vista whose beauty cannot be adequately described, at least by me. The hills of Tabasco are rich and green and run as far as the eye can see in all directions. The clouds which hovered over the hilltops diminished the beauty in one but lent a remarkable mystery to the scene in another.

3 to 6 p.m. Our visit to the rancharia of Mexiquito was similar to those of other communities.

One memory which stays with me is the poor state of health of the people, especially the young. That is not surprising since there are no inside toilets, children rarely have shoes, medical services are at a minimum and their is no sewerage.

Lack of proper nutrition, sanitation and basic medical services leave the people here in a circle of poverty impossible for them to break on their own. I know that our missionaries can't do it either. But I am so grateful that they are here expressing the concern of our diocese and reminding us of where our commitments in faith should be sending us.

8 to 10 p.m. After Mass tonight there was a delightful entertainment in the auditorium of the primary school. There were dances, a clown, poetry recital and a short play in honor of Our Lady of Guadalupe. There must have been 300 people -- children totally delighted with the event and parents obviously proud of the large contribution the young people made to it.

10:30 p.m. Did you ever spend the night in a hammock? I never did before I came here. It's one of those minor adventures that make life interesting. When I finally got settled, it wasn't bad, but I went through progressive stages of awkwardness before that happened.

Sunday, Jan. 29 -- 8 a.m. No morning prayer in the church today. Liver and tamales for breakfast. Lourdes and I walked over to church to greet the women who have been working so hard on today's festive meal. They started with a whole cow; when we saw them they were hand-shredding the meat which will be served with a hot sauce on tortillas. They were in high spirits even though they had spent long, hard hours in preparation.

We packed so that we'll be able to do most of our traveling before dark. We return to Villahermosa this afternoon and the roads are not the best.

The gathering in church today included delegates from all of the rancharias served by our team. There must have been 1,000 people present. Many came long distances -- and all came through the mud on foot.

The community of Oxolotan, represented by a young girl, whose father provided the wood, presented me with a crozier. "We present to you this shepherd's staff as a token of our appreciation to you and the Diocese of Rochester for giving us a missionary team to work with us," she said, "We also want you to know that you are also 'our bishop.'"

It was a moving experience for me to be with our four and the one thousand and to realize that in some mysterious way God's loving providence had brought us all together.

For all of the fragility of this or any early mission effort I am confident that we're meant to be here. I am convinced also that the pioneer work of our team will be seen as increasingly important as the years go by.

2 to 8 p.m. We return to Villahermosa by way of Tapijulapa and Tacotalpa. The former is an attractive town made so by a government effort to develop it as a tourist center. The latter is the center of the parish in which our missionaries serve. Another thousand people come out in a driving rain to welcome us. The church is a joyful place to be -- song and prayer and a few words from each of us.

Monday, Jan. 30 -- We celebrate Eucharist with the

community at the minor seminary. It is joyful and festive and, although he doesn't say so, I think it fills Bishop Rafael with hope.

In the 1930s, all priests were expelled and it has taken many hard years of sacrifice to reach this stage. I know he remembers this as we celebrate. I do, too, and pray especially that God will bless our seminarians and grace with many vocations to the priesthood.

10 a.m. to noon. Another seminary stop -- this time to a philosophy class who host us very kindly with music and poetry. This stop is between Villahermosa and Comalcalco, our destination today.

1 to 6 p.m. Comalcalco. This parish is staffed by Fathers of the Holy Spirit. They are a young, vibrant community founded especially for spiritual development.

They bring that rich tradition to this place and translate into practice the realization that spiritual development is not easily separated from human development.

Among their impressive works are 1. training programs for catechists of health, 2. a garden project which gives hands-on training helping people to grow their own food and 3. a cooperative which allows the poor of the area to buy food and supplies at reasonable cost.

Operation Breadbox supports much of this work. These lines are meant to convey the thanks of the people of the region. They can never do that adequately. Only the faces of the people can do that. I assure you that the gratitude is there in great measure.

9 to 11 p.m. Lourdes, the team and I go out to supper. It's our last evening together and it is a happy one for me. I have the realization that I am sitting with some people who are very special in our lives. Each is so attractive and good and yet so different from the others. They're a good meditation on the truth that though many, we are one.

For all of their hard work, our missionaries have not lost their capacity to relax and laugh and enjoy one another.

That's most encouraging -- and a good sign -- because we discovered that they can be hard on themselves. If Lourdes and I contributed anything to them, I hope we reminded them how much the people love them.

Tuesday, Jan. 31 -- We have a morning or prayer and conversation with the team.

After morning prayer and breakfast, I meet with each member of the team and Lourdes does the same in another room. I try as best I can do to share my impressions of the mission with each one and to offer my encouragement and whatever counsel I have to each. They make it an enjoyable venture because they are humble and very open people.

They share their trials as easily as they share their joys and I know myself deeply graced to be with them.

The Lord will prosper the work of their hands, I am sure, but just how that will happen remains to be seen.

When we have finished the single interviews we gather for a wrapup session and conclude the morning with the Eucharist.

The trip to the airport is quiet and so are the moments we spend waiting for our flight to be announced. There are many things I would like to say but somehow I cannot find the words. Right now, I think that is all right.

Wednesday, Feb. 1 -- Mexico City. We offer the Eucharist at the Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe for the people of the Diocese of Tabasco and the people of the Diocese of Rochester.

I pray that Our Lady, the Queen of the Americas, will bless us all as we continue to develop our relationship as sister dioceses. We have much to offer one another -- something I am convinced will become much clearer as we continue to reshape our world.

Only the Lord knows what changes the future will bring the peoples of Central and South America. But whatever they are, those changes will have a powerful impact on us. Please pray that our missionaries and people like them will be instruments of peace and justice and mutual understanding.

If we are so graced, the future, which will draw us every closer to the nations to the South, will be a blessed one.

Please pray daily for Yolanda Ramos, Mark Kavanaugh, Father Neil Miller and Valerie Smith.

Peace.



Ann Hasby Feted

Mrs. Ann Hasby, administrative assistant at Our Lady of Lourdes School, Brighton, was honored for 25 years of service to diocesan schools at a surprise party last Wednesday following a special evening Mass celebrating Catholic Schools Week. Mrs. Hasby was presented with a commemorative plaque.

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