

Signs of life in the Rio Grande Valley

By Katharine Bird
NC News Service

Sister Angela Murdaugh is a nurse-midwife, who has delivered 800 babies. She calls healing "my personal charisma," adding it gives her "a sense of doing something purposeful for people."

She entered the Sisters of St. Mary because it is an order devoted to health care. Fourteen years ago, Sister Murdaugh became a certified nurse-midwife, earning a master's degree from Columbia University because she wanted "hands-on care of patients."

Sister Murdaugh is a pioneer in establishing a new kind of maternity care to serve migrant workers in the Rio Grande Valley. Her first birth center was opened in Raymondville, Texas. The second is in Weslaco, Texas, where she is director of Holy Family Services.

The clinics are sponsored by Catholic Charities.

Within three years after opening the first clinic, Sister Murdaugh said, the number of babies born prematurely in Willacy County was cut in half.

The rate of infant mortality also dropped.

Subsequently the birth center concept "set a precedent" for people in other migrant communities across the United States.

Sister Murdaugh defines birth centers as "a place for women having normal pregnancies" to deliver their babies under the watchful attendance of certified nurse-midwives. Several physicians serve as consultants.

The idea for the birth centers was "born out of necessity" when she moved to South Texas in 1972, Sister Murdaugh said. She found that many Mexican-American women in the Rio Grande Valley had "no entrance to medical care." They couldn't afford to go to hospitals and "the indigenous midwives were not well-trained," she commented.

Typically, Sister Murdaugh's patients are between 15 and 42 years of age and "either have large families themselves or come from large families" of six to 10 children.

Breadwinners are seasonal farmers or laborers. More than half the population lives below the poverty level, according to Sister Murdaugh.

At the clinics, the emphasis is on "keeping people healthy," Sister Murdaugh said. Her staff provides prenatal and postnatal care to mothers and offers educational programs, such as teaching expectant mothers about exercise, child birth and nutrition.

Each of the four birth units in the Weslaco birth center has a living room, kitchen and bedroom where delivery occurs. The clinics expect to serve 300 families annually, Sister Murdaugh said.

One concern of the clinics is to keep costs low. So cooperation between medical personnel and families is encouraged.

Families can pay part of their bills by working at the center.

In addition, pregnant women are encouraged to bring two companions with them to four classes toward the end of pregnancy.

The companions — occasionally a husband, but more frequently a mother and a sister who has given birth herself — come to the birth center to help the new mother during labor and during the 12 to 24 hours after birth. This helps the mother — and the clinic staff.

How do people who have had their babies at the birth centers feel about Sister Murdaugh's work? The nurse-midwife remarked that the people she serves are "very warm but not vocal." She judges their response "by the way they treat me."

It is common for people to "return favors" to Sister Murdaugh, like the mechanic who spent hours fixing her car and charging her next to nothing. When she remonstrated about the small fee, she says, he replied: "You delivered all my daughter's children. For you it's \$8."

Sister Murdaugh has only one complaint about her work: "There's more than I can handle."

(Ms. Bird is associate editor of Faith Today.)



Sister Murdaugh with mother and child.

Compassion's role in the healing

By Father David K. O'Rourke, OP
NC News Service

A parish in my local community feeds 200 poor and hungry people every day. Once a month — the second Sunday of the month, to be exact — I help out.

Someone asked why the parish keeps at this demanding work. I think he was looking for a profound spiritual or theological reason.

I thought for a while, but I couldn't come up with anything special or theological. "Because they're hungry," I responded.

Images of Jesus healing are found throughout the Gospels. The crippled, the blind, the deaf and some people whose ailments are described in such ancient terms that it is hard to know just what was wrong with them, all are brought to Jesus to be healed.

He heals them. The circumstances all are different, the people are different and the illnesses are as varied as the diseases that plague a poor and primitive land. But these

people have one thing in common. They are healed.

Another element links these cures in the Gospels: a comment almost lost in the drama of the eye-catching miracle that accompanies most of the cures. It tells us Jesus feels sorry for the afflicted person. Throughout the Gospels, it is said that Jesus acts out of compassion.

Events of major importance — a restoration of the dead to life, of sight to the blind, of strength to the crippled, of good conscience to the sinful — come about for the most simple of human reasons: Jesus feels sorry for people.

Down through the centuries the church's theologians have pondered the meaning of these gospel cures. They have noted that, in acts of healing, Jesus fulfills prophecies about the Messiah. They have added that the divinity of Christ is manifested by the power to heal.

And theologians have noted that these acts of healing are both physical and spiritual: Jesus

The sad state of medical art

By Father John Castelot
NC News Service

The practice of medicine was dimly primitive in the days of Jesus. Some of the bizarre remedies prescribed in ancient texts bring a sad smile to the lips of the modern reader.

Moreover, there was a great deal of superstition connected with illness and a woeful lack of knowledge about the causes of disease.

There was no organized medical profession as we know it today. Doctors were, in the main, well-intentioned but hampered by ignorance. This situation is reflected by the story in Mark's Gospel about the woman with an uncontrollable flow of blood:

"There was a woman in the area who had been afflicted with a hemorrhage for a dozen years. She had received treatment at the hands of doctors of every sort and exhausted her savings in the process, yet she got no relief; on the contrary, she only grew worse" (5:25-26).

Diseases which medical science today have identified were simply mystifying then. "Leprosy," for instance, was not our classic

Hansen's Disease, but any sort of persistent and communicable skin affliction. The only defense people had was to control its spread by isolating those afflicted from all social contact.

This reduced lepers to a pitiable, almost subhuman condition. As far as society was concerned, they were as good as dead.

Another phenomenon of the

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day were the "professional healers." Many were no better than quacks.

The Gospels make crystal clear that Jesus was no run-of-the-mill professional healer. Not only did he wield power over diseases of all sorts, but he was interested in the well-being of the whole