

Along The Way

With Bishop Matthew H. Clark



As I mentioned last week in "Along the Way," I kept some notes on the days I spent in our sister diocese of Tabasco. With affection I share them with you in the following paragraphs.

SUNDAY

It was a day of great weather contrasts. I left Rochester with its 15° temperature and fresh snow and arrived in Mexico to find sunshine and temperatures nearly 80°.

Lourdes Perez-Albuerne and three sisters from Misioneras del Espritu Santo de Guadalupe met me at the plane. The sisters offered us the hospitality of their home where we celebrated the Eucharist and shared a wonderful meal.

At seven o'clock, Lourdes and I went to the Center for Social Ministry of the Mexican Bishops' Conference. Seven persons offered reactions to the first draft of our pastoral letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy. They were strongly supportive of the effort and offered several suggestions for the improvement of our work.

In comments similar to those offered by our friends in Brazil and Chile, our Mexican friends regard this as an effort of great importance not only in our country but in theirs as well.

It was a long day but a beautiful one. I am glad to be here -- in large part because absence of this kind draws me to a deeper appreciation of the realities of our own local Church.

MONDAY

After Mass and breakfast, the sisters kindly took us on a morning tour of Mexico City. We visited the shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe, the Cathedral of the Assumption of Our Lady and the Plaza of the Three Cultures.

The air was spectacularly and unusually clear. It was the same yesterday so we had a perfect view of the twin volcanos which dominate the region but which are rarely so clearly visible.

P.J. Ryan met us at the airport and flew with us to Villahermosa. On time. Good flight.

Val, Mark, Paul Tomasso, Socorro and Rafael Lopez, vicar general of the diocese, met us at the airport. Paul (who looked great and seemed to enjoy his time here) boarded the plane back to Mexico City and the rest of us came into Villahermosa.

Mark, Val and I took a run together around a large sports complex. P.J. watched a softball game and made some new friends while we were running.

In the evening the five of us from Rochester went out for supper. It was good to be together. Many laughs, joyful anticipation of a new phase in our life here in Mexico.

TUESDAY

We spent a peaceful morning. Val went out to run; Mark and Rafael Lopez took the Wagoneer out for repairs.

After breakfast I packed and spent the next 45 minutes in the quiet of my room. I tried to slide past whatever cares I brought with me from home so that I can be as much present to the people and events of these days as I can possibly be. That is more a gift than an achievement, I think, so I prayed for that grace.

We left for Oxolotan shortly before 12. Lourdes drove. I sat in the front with her; Mark, Val and P.J. took the second seat. Our gear filled the rear section.

Our one stop on the way was at Tacotalpa, the town in which the central parish of the region is located. Father Benito is pastor of 45 villages or rancherias in this region. Our team serves Oxolotan and 10 other rancherias. We enjoyed pineapple juice and cookies with the four Madames of the Sacred Heart who serve in the parish and some of the beautiful young people of the parish who stop by each day at refreshment time.

That far the road was smoothly paved. The remainder of the journey or most of it was over rough dirt or gravel roads with a river crossing on a hand-propelled barge called a panga.

At the edge of town we were met by a delegation from the parish and led in procession to the Church of San Domingo. Two drummers and a pipe player provided rhythm and song.



Bishop Clark stands inside the cathedral in Oxolotan. Hanging over the altar is the 16-by-20 foot banner the Bishop presented as a gift to the Mexican people.

After we prayed an "Our Father," "Hail Mary" and "Glory be," the parish lay leader welcomed us in the name of the community. I responded by thanking him for his kind greeting and the community for the affection and support they have shown our mission team. It was a special joy to communicate your loving and prayerful solidarity with the people of Tabasco. I only wish you could be here to appreciate how much your interest and support mean to the people.

After the gathering in the church, we were offered a fine meal back at our team's home. We enjoyed chicken, fish, tortillas, refried beans and french fried potato slices. All great. I'm still not sure if P.J. was kidding or not, but at one point (before he tasted them) he asked if the refried beans were chocolate mousse!

Siesta, a run, a shower, evening prayer and some writing before our Eucharistic Liturgy at 8. Father Benito joined us for that.

The feast today is of San Felipe de Jesus, protomartyr of Mexico who died in Japan with Paul Miki and his companions. Rochester, Tabasco, Japan. It's a great day to meditate on the reality of the Church.

WEDNESDAY

The rooster woke the neighborhood at 5:30 this morning. We gathered at 8 for morning prayer and breakfast. Lourdes prepared some french toast on which we used fresh honey from the local cooperative.

Two visits filled the day: to Caridad Guerrero and Buenor Aires. Each followed the pattern we have become accustomed to on these visits to rancherias -- the procession with music, greetings by the leader of the community, Eucharistic Liturgy with First Communions and Confirmation and a meal.

Buenos Aires is located among the hills which are startlingly beautiful. We parked the Wagoneer and walked down a steep path to the village. There is no running water here, no electrical power and no toilet facilities -- indoor or out. One is told when inquiring about such things, "just walk into the woods until no one is around."

The people are very poor. Nutrition, housing, sanitation, health care, good education and so many basic human needs are lacking. Some flee harsh reality in alcohol and occasional violence.

THURSDAY

We woke to the noise of three turkeys who were parading up and down in front of the house we stayed in. We slept in five hammocks strung from the roof supports. Hammock sleeping is quite comfortable but the damp cold last night was unpleasant.

The climb back up the hill was difficult but we all made it even though the rain which fell through the night made it a little slippery. The fact that little girls make the climb in rubber shower thongs and grown-ups often do it carrying heavy loads gave us all greater heart for the challenge.

A tragic note on the ride home. We came across a group of villagers just outside Oxolotan. They were standing watch over a dead man until the judge from Tacotalpa arrived to take care of formalities. The dead person was smashed in the head with a rock and robbed sometime during the night and was discovered early in the morning. He was murdered near the school on the road Val uses for her runs. Had we not spent the night in Buenos Aires, she might have found the poor man. He leaves a wife and a five-year-old daughter.

A visit to the community at Mexiquito took us most of the morning. Our primary purpose was to visit the honey cooperative made possible by your generous support of Operation Bread Box. We watched them remove the honey-laden combs from one of the 52 hives and shared some of the fresh honey with many of the villagers. This effort has done a lot to advance the life of the village; it's another of the fruits being born of this effort with our sister diocese of Tabasco.

We took extra time during and after lunch today just to sit around the table and talk. The conversation ranged over the events of the last year and touched on the hopes of the future. It was good and optimistic and nourished us as much as the good food in front of us.

The evening belonged to the young people of Oxolotan. They had charge of the liturgy, of the delightful entertainment which followed and of the food they prepared and served to all who shared the evening.

It was all part of their observance of the International Year of Youth promoted by our Holy Father. I told them of our youth gathering on March 3 and asked them to pray that God will bless our gathering at Kearney.

After the evening's events, P.J. and Mark left for Villahermosa. P.J. will go on to Cuernavaca to study Spanish for another month. Mark will return tomorrow with Marilyn Pray SSJ, and Father Jim Callan, pastor of Corpus Christi. Jim will be here until P.J. returns on March 8.

FRIDAY

Lourdes spent time in the church hanging the huge banner which is your gift to the people of Oxolotan. While she was gone I had a chance to speak with Val about her experience of mission-life during this year and a half. It is always a grace for me when another person shares his or her human journey. What I have observed of Val's spiritual growth, she confirms in the simplicity of her words and in her continuing search for the best way to respond to God's goodness. Without saying it she tells me that ministry has opened new avenues of understanding, freedom and challenge for her.



Bishop Clark with the Tabasco mission team -- from left, Mark Kavanaugh, Father P.J. Ryan and Valerie Smith.

A second grace of the morning was the report given to me by the leaders of the honey and food cooperatives now established in the community. The written report was interesting enough, but the vitality of it all came when each of the five spoke with obvious satisfaction about the new skills they have acquired and the greater capacity of the community to work together for the common good.

Heavy rain was a big factor in the day. It began around midnight and continued through most of the day. Bishop Rafael, Jim Callan, Marilyn Pray, Brother Benjamin (the brother of Bishop Rafael) and Mark were late joining us for Mass because their travel from Villahermosa was slowed by roads growing more and more muddy.

The celebration was a joyous one. In the morning some workers had hung the huge banner from Rochester. Now, as people assembled for the liturgy, they reacted with great pleasure at the gift you sent. It is for them another concrete symbol of our relationship.

We confirmed 51 persons of all ages. Mark had done a great deal of work to prepare the candidates and took special delight in presenting them to the assembly.

After Mass we left Oxolotan. The memory of the ride back is one which I shall treasure and laugh about for years. But I was sure glad when it ended today. Mark, Jim, Marilyn and Val were in the Wagoneer. Bishop Rafael, Brother Benjamin, Lourdes and I were in the smaller jeep. Mark and Bishop Rafael were driving.

Although both vehicles had front wheel drive, the travel was slow because of the thick mud. That was tedious. It was downright dangerous when we came to washouts or narrow bridges without rails. At one point our right rear tire spun out over the edge of a washout and we ended up cross wise across a narrow road. I haven't gasped so deeply since the last time I took my niece out for a driving lesson. A corporate push freed us and we continued on safely, if very slowly. Early in the trip I commended our safety to the intercession of St. John Fisher. It won't be the last time I ask for our patron saint's help.

Our small caravan stopped at the seminary for Mass and supper. It seemed a notably peaceful celebration to me. That may have been because I was tired. More likely it was that I was especially grateful for the experience of the week and very much wanted to participate in our great act of thanksgiving.

SATURDAY

Lourdes and I were scheduled to leave Villahermosa on a four o'clock plane for Mexico City. Our crowd did some rough scheduling last night to line up what we wanted to do.

My track through the day was as follows: Morning prayer followed by breakfast with Bishop Rafael, Lourdes, Francisco and Estela Herreras, friends of the bishop who were visiting from Mexico City; a visit to the cathedral and conversation with Bishop Rafael about our mission; a talk with Mark in whom I find a remarkable honesty and a willingness to grow; a run and conversation with Val; Mass with the group; a luncheon for all of us hosted by Francisco and Estela; goodbyes all around at the airport and departure.

Lourdes and I walked for an hour and had some supper. We talked a lot about the week.

SUNDAY

We left Mexico City on an 8:50 a.m. flight, stopped at San Antonio where we cleared customs, flew to Atlanta and on to Rochester. We arrived at 6 p.m.

It always takes a while for me to absorb an experience such as the one I just had. I can not tell you exactly why but there are some fundamental streams I can mention: 1) the experience of dependence on others is very strong; 2) one has a concentrated awareness of how generous the poor can be in sharing of their substance; 3) there is an awareness of the Church's life in different cultures which is precious in itself and which helps me to understand better the reality of our own local church; 4) the sense of service, affection and real companionship among the missionaries and between the missionaries and community.

Thank you for taking the time to read these words. I hope they give you some small sense of what you are doing in Tabasco. Please pray daily that God will continue to bless our efforts and bring even greater growth and peace of heart to our wonderful team.

Peace to all!