

Avon woman 'extends the hand of God to poor' in Mexico

By Teresa A. Parsons

"Do you have a lot of poor here?" For the past 28 years, Margaret and Dan Whalen allowed their lives to be guided by the answer to that question.

In the process, they founded five dispensaries in Mexico to treat the poor and sick by feeding them, supplying their medicine and arranging for hospital testing and surgery.

Their perpetual question was always asked of the parish priest. If he said yes — as he invariably did — they requested an unused corner of his church or rectory. There, at no cost to him, they set up a clinic.

A doctor would be recruited and a local woman trained to serve him as a nurse. Patients would only be charged for services if they could afford to pay.

"We always encouraged the rich to come in too — that pays for the poor," Margaret said. "To the poor we'd say, 'That's free — I'm your servant.' Our purpose was always to extend the hand of God to all."

For nearly three decades, the Whalens spent the winter months traveling between clinics in Mexico. In the summer, they returned to their home in East Avon, N.Y., and traveled throughout New England selling Mexican arts and crafts. With the proceeds from their summer sales and donations from supporters and friends, the Whalens kept the clinics operating.

"I don't know why we did it really. Once we began, we could just never stop," Margaret said. "I don't think of God when I do it. I see myself in them — the prostitutes and alcoholics. We are brothers and sisters if you believe God created all of us."

"I'm going down there to meet myself again," she added.

But when she left for Mexico early this month, she went alone for the first time. Last March, her husband, Dan, died of cancer. And although she believed his spirit was still with her, the prospect of what she faced — alone in Mexico at the age of 56 — was a daunting one, even to her.

"Dan was the pole that held up the tent. We did everything together, and that's what makes it hard now. But he's still there. That's what keeps me going," Margaret said shortly before she left. With characteristic determination, she was preparing for her journey by making a list of all her weaknesses and of the things Dan used to do.

The Whalens were unlikely candidates for mission work. Margaret, a Geneva native, studied French, art and music at the Genesee Normal School where she met Dan, a Lima native and painter who had graduated from St. Agnes Art Institute. The couple married in 1943.

During World War II, Dan worked at the University of Rochester, doing genetics research for the government's top-secret Manhattan Project. After the war, he

became an embalmer at the university's Medical Center. Margaret, meanwhile, worked in Strong Memorial Hospital's outpatient department.

In 1951, both Dan and Margaret quit their jobs to open a small gift shop, wholesaling Mexican art. They began their gypsy existence, traveling in the southwestern United States on buying trips during the winter and selling their merchandise in New England during the summer. Working their way into Mexico, they were appalled by the living conditions of the poor.

During a trip in 1961, they began teaching art, English, sewing and crocheting to teenagers in Monterrey, Mexico, calling themselves the Blessed Martin de Porres Youth Society. The same year, they opened their first dispensary at the Parish of the Holy Family in Monterrey, dedicating it to then-Blessed Martin de Porres as well.

"We were trying to get the kids to realize the beauty of Martin's work for the poor," Margaret explained. "A nun in Monterrey called me up one time to tell me that he wasn't even a saint yet. I said, 'Yes, I know.'" When he was canonized by Pope John XXIII in 1962, Margaret called the nun back.

The Whalens founded another clinic in Guadalajara at the Church of St. Martin de Porres in 1968. So many poor Indians came down from the remote hill country surrounding Guadalajara that in 1972, the Whalens opened still another St. Martin de Porres medical mission and food program at Santa Ana Tepetitlan.

Santa Ana, Margaret said, was known in Guadalajara as "el pueblo de los asesinos y ladrones," a village of killers and robbers. "You're crazy to go in there," friends told them. "No one comes out of there."

Instead of crazed killers, the Whalens found desperately poor people suffering from epilepsy, rheumatic fever, diabetes and the infamous "amoeba," a parasite that attacks the digestive system and causes severe bloating and dysentery. Alcoholism was common among the men, while the women suffered from rampant vaginal infections. Infants were commonly fed rice water since most mothers had little breast milk.

The epilepsy and diabetes Margaret attributed to the poor diet of the village people — mostly corn. "They don't eat any wheat products, so they don't get any vitamin B," she explained. "They don't have cancer, though."

Amoeba is contracted by eating or drinking food or water contaminated by the parasite. "If you don't cook it or peel it, you don't eat it," Margaret explained.

But the primitive village conditions transform even the simplest tasks — like boiling water — into an ordeal. The village people had no stoves; they cooked over open fires. Because of the high altitude, it took



Teresa A. Parsons/Courier-Journal
Margaret Whalen.

Meanwhile, the Whalens had given up the Monterrey clinic to Holy Family Parish and the Guadalajara clinic to a local doctor. Five years later, they founded their latest clinic at El Zapote, an impoverished slum area in Guadalajara.

Over the years Mexico's rampant inflation made buying medicine and paying staff increasingly difficult. When they began, Margaret said, doctors would volunteer to work in the clinics. In 1972, the Whalens began to pay the doctor at Santa Ana 1,000 pesos a month or \$80 for working several hours a day. This year, they will pay the same doctor 18,000 pesos for the same hours. But now, that's equal to only \$72.

Without Dan, Margaret is not sure how she will raise the money to continue supporting the clinics. This summer, she sold produce from her garden at a roadside stand and, sponsored by the Propagation of the Faith Center, appealed to the congregations of several diocesan parishes. As always, she's operating on a combination of faith and good sense.

"All the blessings and credit go to the people who gave us the money or prayed for us," she said.

Despite all she and Dan have accomplished, Margaret's life has not been without occasional regrets. In all the winters she has spent near Guadalajara, she has never seen the Pacific Ocean, only 100 miles away. Margaret recalled mentioning her complaint to a friend who visited the mission on the way home from a vacation at the ocean. Her friend replied: "You made your own choice, didn't you?" And Margaret agreed that indeed she had.

Margaret Whalen would welcome letters of support and donations. Mail sent to 1549 Rochester Road, East Avon, N.Y., 14414, will be forwarded to her in Mexico.

25-30 minutes over a hot fire to boil water. Meanwhile, wood was scarce and therefore, precious.

"Sometimes I wondered what they were getting up for in the morning," Margaret said. "But there they were at the door every morning, bright and cheerful. And we never have turned away one hand empty."

In January 1978, Dan and Margaret operated a dispensary one day a week in Toluquilla, another poor village near Santa Ana. Also that year, Dan was ordained to the permanent diaconate by the bishop of the Diocese of Guadalajara.

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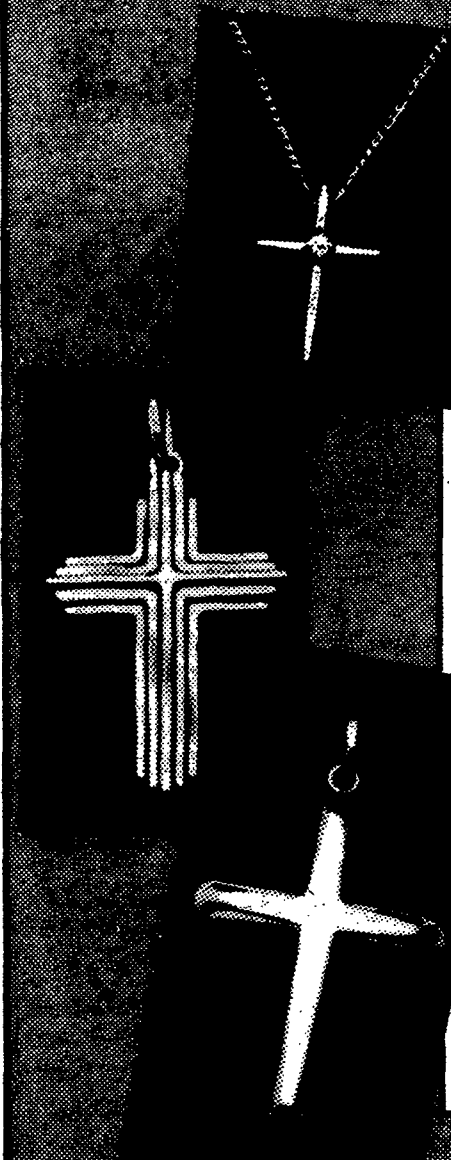
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