



To the residents of Bosques de Saloya, Bishop Matthew H. Clark was a central attraction during a visit last January. The area, described as a "shantytown," is populated by rural people who have been uprooted in their search for jobs.

Diocese prepares to return missionary team to Tabasco

By Teresa A. Parsons

In the Diocese of Tabasco, Mexico's deepening economic crisis wears the face of 102 percent inflation, rising unemployment, and the possibility of new austerity measures on top of old, if international bankers and the Reagan administration have their way.

Meanwhile, the historic friction between the Mexican Church and government, one of the pressures to which the last mission team from the Diocese of Rochester fell victim, is beginning to ignite a blaze in some regions of the country.

This month, two bishops from the north-central state of Durango have stepped into a fray over a proposed thermo-electric nuclear plant which they say threatens to contaminate water sources.

Other bishops from the northern region last month asserted their much-disputed right to comment on politics, issuing a pastoral statement denouncing "one-party" rule and corruption in recent mid-term elections.

Despite the country's turmoil, the Diocese of Rochester is preparing to send a mission team back to the Diocese of Tabasco. Why?

Because the need for a team is greater than ever, according to a diocesan delegation which in January, 1986, spent a week in the Diocese of Tabasco.

Traveling to Tabasco last January to discuss the future character of the diocesan mission were Bishop Matthew H. Clark; Father John A. Firpo, director of the Division of Social Ministry; Father Richard Farrell, associate at St. Charles Borromeo Parish; and Lourdes Perez-Albuern, issues specialist for the diocesan department of justice and peace.

In meetings with Tabasco's bishop, Rafael Garcia Gonzalez, and other officials, the Rochester delegation agreed to extend its commitment for three more years. The mission team will be evaluated annually and at the end of three years, a complete evaluation will determine the course of the mission team's future.

On his second trip to Tabasco, Father Firpo observed evidence of harsher economic conditions, but said the spirit of the people was the same.

"With the little they have, they're so generous that when you come away you feel you've received more than you've given. I think it's because they have nothing but their presence to offer -- they share their hearts," he said.

"I was more sensitive to the poverty of the people this time, and it seemed to me that poverty was more widespread," he added. "The resources of the Church there also seemed far more limited."

That's one of the reasons a team has not yet been sent. "The Diocese of Tabasco is in financial straits," Father Firpo said. "There are no funds for suitable housing."

Nor has a permanent mission team been chosen as yet. A committee has been appointed to interview applicants for the mission team and make recommendations to Bishop Clark. In addition to Father Paul J. Ryan, who returned to Mexico last November, three or four other permanent team members are being sought, as are an unlimited number of summer team members.

To date, two applicants have been interviewed for the permanent team and six for the summer team.

When they do return to Tabasco, members of Rochester's mission team will work at a new site as part of a Mexican pastoral team. From the mountainous, rural town of Oxolotan in the parish of Tacoltpa, the mission will relocate northwest about 30 miles to the Parish of the Holy Spirit in Villahermosa, where a single priest is currently serving 75,000 to 80,000 parishioners.

The diocesan team will take on three rancherías with an estimated total population of roughly 10,000. The rancherías are: Gran Poder, a somewhat rural area; Bosques de Saloya, a "marginal shantytown" populated by people uprooted from rural areas by oil exploration; and San Rafael, a lower middle-class area of apartment complexes.

Changing locations will alter the focus of the diocesan team's ministry. Instead of organizing agricultural cooperatives, they will concentrate on youth ministry, rehabilitating housing and literacy training for adults -- all priorities identified in Holy Spirit Parish's overall pastoral plan.

Particularly in Bosques de Saloya, the team will be challenged by a community that's more like a neighborhood of transient strangers. Hunger is expected to be more common since, unlike their rural counterparts, the urban and suburban poor don't grow their own food.

Within the parish, new team members will work alongside members of Holy Spirit's experienced pastoral team until they become well-oriented. Once they are fluent in Spanish, familiar with the cultural demands of ministry in Mexico and accustomed to harsher living conditions, a secondary mission site will be established.

"We are acknowledging that we are in the formative years of our mission experience," Father Firpo explained. "We are trying to



Conditions are harsh in some of the areas where the diocesan mission team will work. The church above is in Bosques de Saloya, one of three rancherías the team will serve.

develop ourselves in the the concept of team ministry. Before, we were working in cooperation with a parish. Now we will be in collaboration, part of a Mexican pastoral team. We need a place where we can be tended to as we learn."

With hindsight, diocesan officials agree that lack of such tending and experience was at least partly to blame for the arrests of members of the last mission team, Father Paul J. Ryan, Valerie Smith and Mark Kavanaugh. They returned to the U.S. last September after they were detained several times by Mexican immigration officials in May and June, 1985.

Charges brought against the team illustrate the difficult position of the Church in Mexico. They were accused of violating constitutional laws which require that only Mexican natives act as Church ministers and which prohibit ministers of any nationality from intervening in political affairs. Once they were in custody, immigration officials also claimed that team members had the wrong kind of visas required for foreigners to work in Mexico.

Those laws were apparently selectively

enforced. Hundreds of foreign-born missionaries have continued to work in Mexico, most with the same type of visa as the Rochester team.

A conflict between two landowners and the former mission team, led by Father Neil Miller, is cited as the underlying reason for the team's problems. In attempting to intervene on behalf of a group of peasants claiming rights guaranteed them by land reform, members of the original permanent mission offended several prominent landowners. The landowners pressured government connections, who in turn reacted by harassing the team.

"We didn't know how to deal with all of that -- we didn't have a Mexican mindset," Father Firpo said.

Because Kavanaugh and Smith had only two months left to serve with the team, diocesan officials decided to close the Oxolotan mission until the situation could be resolved. In September, Bishop Rafael visited Rochester to arrange the closing of the mission at Oxolotan later that month, to evaluate the work of the mission thus far.

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Northern Mexican bishops criticize 'one-party' rule

By Michael Tangeman

Mexico City (NC) — Six northern Mexican bishops have denounced corruption and criticized what they called one-party rule in Mexico.

In a pastoral letter, titled "Christian Involvement in Politics," and released March 23, they also said the Church has a right to comment on political issues. Mexico's constitution bars clergy from criticizing the government.

"The lack of democracy in one-party (rule) reveals the decided will to exercise power in an uninterrupted and absolute manner," the document said. "Absolute power in human hands leads ultimately to corruption."

The letter cited abuses such as pressuring government bureaucrats to vote for a certain party, forcing votes by withholding public services and siphoning government funds for political campaigns. It also criticized official ties between trade unions, small farmer groups and similar organizations and political parties seeking to control large blocs of voters.

The document was signed by Archbishop Adalberto Almeida Merino of Chihuahua; Bishop Manuel Talamas Camandari of Ciudad Juarez; Bishop Hilario Chavez Joya of the Territorial Prelature of Nuevo Casas Grandes; Bishop Fernando Romo Gutierrez and Coadjutor Bishop Luis Morales Reyes of Torreón; and Bishop Jose A. Laguno Farias of the Apostolic Vicariate of Tarahumara.

In the past, the northern bishops have been criticized by leaders of the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party, which has not lost a presidential, gubernatorial or senatorial election to an opposition party since its founding in 1929.

Mexico's constitution expressly forbids clergy from criticizing "the fundamental laws of the country, particular authorities or the government in general."

Critics said that the northern bishops have consistently violated that precept. They said that the bishops are making political statements to aid election prospects for the opposition conservative National Action Party.

But the bishops said the Church has a duty and a right to comment on political matters. They said their statements are designed to counsel Catholics who are active in party politics "because the direction which democracy and social justice take depend on the position which they adopt."

Citing documents of the Second Vatican Council, the 1978 meeting of Latin American bishops at Puebla, Mexico, and the Second Vatican Council's Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, the bishops denounced "the intolerance and absolutism" of political rule by one party or person.

They condemned as "a greater form of corruption" electoral fraud, of which the ruling party has been accused in recent years.

"These corrupt practices should not be tolerated by any Christian conscience," the bishops said. "Catholics who are active in parties should be the critical conscience of those political organizations, even though such a position presupposes serious consequences."