

'In Tabasco, the tropical state of river and swamp and banana grove, every church was believed to have been destroyed by the local dictator, Garrido Canabal, before he fled to Costa Rica — there wasn't a priest in the state ... (Garrido) had organized a militia of Red Shirts, even leading them across the border into Chiapas in his hunt for a church or a priest. Private houses were searched for religious emblems, and prison was the penalty for possessing them. A young man I met in Mexico City ... was imprisoned three days for wearing a cross under his shirt ...'

Another Mexico, Graham Greene



Relationships central to Church's survival in a 'Godless'

By Lee Strong

In *Another Mexico*, the story of his 1938 journey through that country, Graham Greene called the province of Tabasco "The Godless State." His experiences in Tabasco became the basis for his highly acclaimed novel, *The Power and the Glory*, the fact-based story of the last priest in Tabasco after the revolution of 1914. The priest was eventually captured and executed.

"You can read that book (*The Power and the Glory*), and it hasn't changed today," said Father Paul J. Ryan, coordinator of the Diocese of Rochester's Tabasco Mission. "The Church in Mexico doesn't have any rights. Priests lose all rights as citizens the moment they're ordained."

Father Ryan spoke from experience. In his three years in Tabasco, he's been arrested three times. Government spies regularly show up at Masses he's celebrating — armed with cameras and tape recorders.

And priests aren't the only ones who've noticed the government's attention. "I got the feeling the government was tense," observed Glenn McGlure, who served as a summer volunteer in Tabasco in 1986 and is now a member of the Tabasco Recruitment Task Force. "There seemed to be a real fear of community action of any kind."

Part of the nervousness about Church activities, Father Ryan explained, is that the original Mexican Revolution was started in 1810 by a priest, Father Miguel Hidalgo. That's a fact that every government official has read in history books from grade school on. "They're obsessed with the power priests have with the people," he said.

Tensions, however, have eased so much since Father Ryan's last arrest in February, 1986, that the priest felt free to return to Rochester to form the Tabasco Recruitment Task Force and enlist a team of volunteers to join the mission next year. "I wouldn't recruit if I felt there was any imminent danger," he said. "We have developed a working relationship with the government."

The task force is a result of Bishop Matthew H. Clark's visit earlier this year to Tabasco, Rochester's sister diocese. Since his return in June, Father Ryan has spoken in churches and schools throughout the diocese. As a result of his efforts, 56 individuals have applied to serve on either the summer or permanent mission teams. Six people have already agreed to become members of the permanent team next year — two in March, two in June, two in September.

Originally, Father Ryan had hoped the team members would all go to Tabasco at one time, but now he saw an advantage to the staggering. "It's better this way. It will enable people to become active in the parish, the community and

especially the language," he said. "They can help the latter (arrivals) get initiated into the work."

Permanent team members will serve for two years, with the option to renew. They will constitute Rochester's second permanent mission team, preceded only by a group — Father Neil Miller, Mark Kavanaugh, Valerie Smith and Yolanda Ramos — that served from 1983 to 1985. No Rochesterians have been permanently stationed there since 1985 because the diocese had no way to consistently recruit until the task force was created.

With the help of summer teams, the members of the permanent team will work with catechists, develop youth leadership training programs, rehabilitate housing, assist with health education and training, and form literacy programs.

While this work is important, the most important task will be just being with the people, according to McGlure. "The first few weeks you feel as if you should be accomplishing something, but then you realize that it's sometimes more important just to sit down and talk," he remarked. "The real mission is to develop relationships, to relate to each other as people of the same faith."

In conjunction with the recruitment efforts, Bishop Rafael Garcia Gonzalez of Tabasco visited Rochester from November 1 to November 5, when he will return to Mexico with Father Ryan. Bishop Garcia's trip had several purposes — to assist with planning and working out practical details for the mission team, to learn more of the life of the Church of Rochester, to strengthen ties between Rochester and Tabasco and to renew friendships, according to Father Ryan. During his stay, he traveled to different parts of the diocese to meet people and to see diocesan ministries in action.

On Sunday, Nov. 1, Bishop Garcia celebrated Mass with the Hispanic community in Brockport, visited a migrant camp just outside the town, and took part in a prayer service and slide show at St. Catherine of Siena Church in Mendon. In his homily at Brockport's Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary Church, he stated a theme that he would come back to throughout the day — we are all called to be brothers and sisters in the community of saints.

He picked up on the community theme again in his remarks at St. Catherine's, acknowledging that the people of Rochester and the people of Tabasco have different cultures and customs, but that our faith in Jesus makes us one. The value of his visits here, Bishop Clark's visit to Tabasco, and the mission team itself is that we come to realize we are one Church, one faith," he said, adding, "You need us and we need you."

One way Tabasco needs Rochester is in terms

of economic and technical help. Tabasco produces 65 percent of Mexico's oil, but the people do not share in the resulting wealth. The discovery of oil produced a sudden influx of oil workers — plus inflation, prostitution and alcoholism.

In addition, oil exploration caused the displacement of many of the original inhabitants. Bosques de Saloya, for example, one of the towns where the Tabasco team works, is a shantytown of 15,000 people who were forced to leave their homes during the last decade. The oil glut of the last decade has made conditions even worse, Father Ryan noted. "The combination of inflation and foreign debt and government corruption is disabling," he said.

In addition to the mission, the Diocese of Rochester has provided assistance to Tabasco

through Operation Breadbox. The program has supplied the people with a truck, started two food co-ops, a honey co-op, a coffee co-op, and supported schools of ceramics and agronomy. On Saturday, Oct. 31, a group of people from Auburn who have worked with Operation Breadbox left for Tabasco to see how the projects are faring. The group — Mary Jean and Robert Muhlneckel, Jeanette Berretta, Sister Chris Lloyd and Debbie Patrick — took with them a donation of \$324 raised for Tabasco through a car wash held at St. Mary's in Auburn on Sunday, Sept. 20. They will meet with Father Ryan in Mexico City, go with him to Tabasco on November 10 and return to Rochester November 19.

Despite their poverty, the people of Tabasco remain generous and loving, McGlure and Father Ryan agreed.

