

Features



Therese Kaniecki exchanges the sign of peace with her daughter Madalyn during the Mass commissioning Madalyn to the diocesan mission team in Tabasco, Mexico.

Mission team anticipates life in spiritual community

By Lee Strong

For the last two-and-a-half years, Father Paul J. Ryan has been the only Rochesterian permanently stationed in Tabasco, Mexico, the Diocese of Rochester's sister diocese.

He won't be alone much longer.

Madalyn Kaniecki and Lisa Kowalewski are scheduled to leave today (Feb. 11) for three months of language training at Guernavaca, in preparation for joining Father Ryan at the Tabasco Mission this June. Two other missionaries, Mark VanDerwater and Mary Jane Brennan, are scheduled to begin their language training in July. All four have committed to two years of service.

Kaniecki and Kowalewski were officially commissioned during a Mass celebrated at the diocesan Pastoral Center, Wednesday, Feb. 3. As part of the Rite of Commissioning, the two pledged to "serve the people of Tabasco by promoting justice, love and forgiveness." Bishop Matthew H. Clark, who presided at the Mass and the rite, then presented them with crosses sent from St. Anthony of Padua Parish in the town of Cardenas, where they will serve.

In his homily, Bishop Clark said the two women represent the "great dynamism and energy that the Lord grants to the Church."

The fact that all four missionaries are willing to commit two years of their lives to serving in a foreign land is also a tribute to the dynamism and energy of Father Ryan.

During a visit to Tabasco early last year, Bishop Clark requested that the priest return to Rochester temporarily to recruit members for the Tabasco Mission Team. Father Ryan did return home, and in a few months criss-crossed central New York speaking in churches and schools throughout the diocese.

Kaniecki heard him speak at St. Catherine of Sienna Parish in Ithaca. He contacted her after she expressed interest in becoming a member of the mission team, and she began the long process of application, interviews and testing. Finally, Father Ryan called her December 31 to say that she'd been accepted.

Kaniecki's desire to become a missionary in Latin America predates her contact with Father Ryan, however. "I've always been really fascinated with Latin America," she explained. "The Church seems to be so alive there."

Her interest in Latin America can be traced in part to her upbringing. Her mother was a Maryknoll novice at the same time as Sister Maura Clarke, M.M., who — with three other churchwomen — was murdered in El Salvador in 1980. Although Kaniecki never met Sister Clarke, her mother had kept in touch with the nun and followed her activities.

Kaniecki later went to Washington to attend the congressional hearings about the killings. Listening to the testimony and descriptions of the four women, she was "impressed with how committed a faith experience really is."

She also noted a sense of community that had developed among the future team members as they met for workshops, discussions



Parishioners of St. Anthony of Padua Church in Cardenas, Mexico, made these crosses for the Rochester missionaries.

and a retreat. She looks forward to the time that they will all be together in Tabasco because "it very much excites me to be part of a faith community."

Lisa Kowalewski also came to the team through Father Ryan — but she made the contact, not he.

"I stopped by the Pastoral Center to visit a friend who knew I was interested in mission work," Kowalewski explained, "and she said, 'Father Ryan is just across the hall; go see him!'"

Kowalewski's conversation with the priest led to her decision to apply. "He made the whole mission experience real to me," she recalled.

She was particularly impressed that Father Ryan "saw women in the Church as having a vocation — being called to the work by God and being able to use their gifts." He also made it clear that "it would be a team effort all the way, not just the priest telling us what to do."

Kowalewski originally came to Rochester from California as a Jesuit Volunteer. She remained to work at Action for a Better Community's A.B.C. Headstart program and as a volunteer at St. Joseph's House of Hospitality — where she has coordinated the night shelter program.

"I've been working towards mission work for a long time," she noted, and when the chance to go to Tabasco arose she decided to take advantage of it. Like Kaniecki, she is also looking forward to living and working with a faith community.

"I think we all feel that community will be our lifeline," Kowalewski noted. "We want to be supportive of each other, and we've started with having basic trust." The process of developing community has already begun, she added, noting that "every time we've gotten together, we've prayed together."

Mark VanDerwater, a senior at SUNY Geneseo, met Father Ryan through the Newman Community at the college. VanDerwater found himself surrounded by discussion of the Tabasco mission while he lived with Wes Kennison, the chaplain, and his family. Kennison is chairman of the Tabasco Recruitment Task Force. Another member of the community — and a personal friend of VanDerwater's — is



New members of the Tabasco mission team are: (front row, from left) Lisa Kowalewski, Madalyn Kaniecki, (back row, from left) Mary Jane Brennan and Mark VanDerwater.



Bishop Clark presents a Mexican cross to Lisa Kowalewski, as a sign of her commission with the Tabasco mission team.

Glenn McClure, who served as a summer volunteer in Tabasco in 1986.

VanDerwater explained that his decision to go to Tabasco was "more of an evolutionary process than a process of application." He has also found a way to combine his studies with his commitment. A geography major, he is currently working on a directed study of the geography of Tabasco, which will "encapsulate the state — economics, history and why things are the way they are." He plans to turn the study over to the Tabasco Task Force to use as a resource.

The trip to Mexico will not be VanDerwater's first taste of foreign cultures. During the 1984/85 school year, he toured Europe and Mexico with UpWith People. The experience of that tour taught him to avoid traveling with expectations of what he would do or find. "I learned that to look for anything in particular is to limit yourself," he observed.

Thus VanDerwater will leave for Tabasco with no specific notion of what he will offer

to the mission or to the people of Tabasco. "I'm going with the faith that I'll be shown where the needs are and what I can do," he remarked.

Faith was also one of the factors that helped convince Mary Jane Brennan to apply for the Tabasco mission. Having read and heard about the mission, she had been thinking about applying for several months. Father Ryan's address at a meeting of the Commission on Young Adult Ministry last summer convinced her that the time was right.

A special-education teacher at St. Joseph's Villa and an adjunct at Nazareth College, Brennan emphasized the mission's "spiritual aspect — the idea of a mission centered around the Church and spirituality." She had considered the Peace Corps at one time, but decided she couldn't work in another country unless the effort incorporated a faith aspect.

"The key is the community and the fact that we'll share spiritual community," Brennan concluded.