

Editorial & Opinion

Tour of Tabasco: A journey of faith through friendship

By Bishop Matthew H. Clark

Mexico City — March 15: I wish you could have been with us this week in Mexico. You would have had a marvelous experience of the Church's life in a different land. You would have shared in the happiness of our sisters and brothers in Tabasco as they welcomed Lisa Marie Kowalewski and Madalyn Kaniecki, the first arrivals among the four new members of our pastoral team.

Tonight during our travel to Rochester via Chicago, I shall write about our visit to Tabasco. I'll be working from the notes I tried to put together at the end of each day. My hope is that I can communicate to you some sense of the vitality of the Church in Tabasco and remind you that this venture must finally take its life from the prayer of the people of both places if it is to succeed.

Monday, March 7: Father John Firpo, director of our Division of Social Ministry, and I left for an all-night flight to Tabasco via Chicago and Mexico City. All was routine. I was cold on the plane even though I wore a sweater. I asked the attendant for a blanket, but they had run out. Later I walked back to say hello to John who was several rows behind me. I kidded him later because he was stretched across three seats with two blankets on him and I had one seat and no blanket. But I did sleep a little and was grateful for that.

I read the *The Icarus Agenda* by Robert Ludlum for awhile, but spent most of the time remembering past visits to Tabasco, our people who have served there and the friends we have made over the years. Although the venture is only a few years old, the story of it is a strong one in terms of lessons learned, relationships formed and commitment deepened. I am convinced that the relationship of prayer, service and shared faith we are developing with Tabasco will only grow in importance as the years go by. I believe that the life of the Church in Latin America and the rapidly growing proportion of Hispanics among the Catholics of North America are facts too important for that not to occur.

Our scheduled two-hour layover in Mexico City stretched into a three and one-half hour wait because a ground fog in Villahermosa, our final destination, delayed our take off.

Tuesday, March 8: Bishop Rafael Garcia Gonzales and Lourdes Perez-Albuerno met us at the airport. After these years, arriving there it is much like coming home. The weather was pleasant, not as hot as in past years, but much warmer than the weather we had left. Right away I was struck, as I always am in Tabasco, by the shades of green and the profusion of flowers all around us.

From the airport, we drove to Santa Cruz where Bishop Rafael lives. Father John Di Socio and Martha Gomez-Anciukaitis, who were also visiting from Rochester, met us there. John is a chaplain at Ithaca College and is interested in serving on our mission team. Martha, who is a member of our Personnel Division, is interested in the mission and decided to spend some of her vacation there this year.

Today was an easy day of resting, unpacking and some visiting. We went for a swim late in the afternoon. I had a chance to run before that. The swim was great. Mosquitoes were out in abundance and, I suspect, had targeted us for special abuse. We all held on to heavy objects lest we be carried away by them.

Martha, Lourdes, John DeSocio, John Firpo and I ate supper together at Leo's, a popular fast-order place just a short drive from Santa Cruz.

Bishop Rafael was not with us tonight and several other times during our visit because he was busy with meetings for their diocesan synod and a pastoral-visitation program. A special meeting of Mexican bishops the week before had jammed up even more his normally busy schedule.

Wednesday, March 9: Today, John DeSocio, John Firpo, Lourdes and I went back to Oxolotan, the small village in the mountains where our first team settled. Our team is no longer there, but we keep close contact with that community, not only because of past friendships but because of the cooperative enterprises the team started through your help with Operation Breadbox. There are four cooperatives: one each for honey and coffee production, a third that operates a food store and a fourth that operates a truck serving the other three.

Representatives of the several communities participating in the cooperatives came together to give us a report on the year's activities. It was a story of both success and struggle. They advanced in their ability to work together and

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rejoiced in the good services their revenues had allowed them to offer. And they — like all of us — realized through the experience that participation and communication are essential to the success of all cooperative ventures.

In the evening, we celebrated the Eucharist at the new, beautiful major seminary there. We had seen it under construction for a few years, and it was a joy to be with the students in their new location and to pray with them.

Thursday, March 10: We left for Cardenas at 12:30 p.m. arriving in time for a meal with the parish staff at 2 p.m. The parish of San Antonio in Cardenas is the center of the parish in which our mission team will be working. Father Ruben is the pastor of the parish, which he estimates numbers nearly 200,000 people. Our team will be headquartered in the town of Santa Rosalia and from that center will serve 15 neighboring communities. The team's members will be charged with the pastoral care of that region, but will do so in relationship to Father Ruben, who is pastor of the whole territory.

I suppose a rough equivalent of that arrangement would be a pastoral team of 10 being assigned to serve all of the Catholics in the city of Rochester and suburbs. Five priests serve the Mexican region, and their goal is to celebrate the Eucharist in each community once a month.

We went for a run and a quick swim late in the afternoon, and then visited Our Lady of the Light in Santa Rosalia for Mass and later for a marvelous fiesta with the whole community in the union hall of the sugar workers. Both events were festive. Both filled to overflowing. At both — as in all such gatherings here — the people's music is powerful, joyful and very moving.

Friday, March 11: Our team will live in Santa Rosalia in two identical houses set side by side on one plot of land. We went there last night after the party in the union hall. Each house has three roomy bedrooms, a dining/living room, small kitchen and a bathroom.

We spent some time over breakfast. Lisa and Madalyn took the opportunity to write some letters to friends and family, and I did a little reading.

Bishop Rafael joined us for a trip to Monte Grande, which may be the poorest of the communities to be served by our friends. If they are materially poor, they are certainly rich in spirit, judging by the warmth of their hospitality and the care they show to their visitors. It was a first visit for all of us, save for Father P.J. Ryan, and I am sure we'll all be going back.

We have the custom of presenting a crucifix to the communities in which we serve when we visit them for the first time. This gift is meant to be a symbol of the journey of faith which we share, and a reminder that our first commitment is to pray for one another.

We returned to Cardenas for the 2 p.m. meal and had some time for rest and recreation in the late afternoon. A run and a quick swim were most welcome.

In the evening, about 250 young people gathered in the church for an evening of song, silent and vocal prayer, and sharing. I was invited to be present during the faith testimony given by the teens. It was most impressive to be present while six or seven of them stood at the microphone to speak about their search for or growth in faith and how they had helped on another to accomplish such growth. When they finished, I also had the privilege of saying a few words to them and of introducing Lisa and Madalyn.

I should mention that the physical arrangement of the church was interesting. All pews were moved away to the walls, and the kids sat on the floor in the nave. The Blessed Sacrament was exposed in the middle of the church, and there were candles placed at random down the center portion of the nave. It was all most impressive. I had a great sense of being on holy ground among very holy people.

After the ceremony we returned to Santa Rosalia.

Saturday, March 12: Our team toured the local sugar mill this morning. It is an important presence in the community. Two thousand people work at the mill and many others — growers, cutters, transporters — participate in the sugar industry.

The mill brings some stability to the local economy; it also brings the problem of ashes to Santa Rosalia and environs! The smoke pours out of the mill 24 hours a day in high season.

In the afternoon we visited another community at Our Lady of Lourdes. We followed the format of other visits and enjoyed it as much as we did the others.

While the format is usually very much the same, each community has its own personality and style. That is true in our own diocese, too. Although we are joined by common bonds of faith and charity, each parish has its own way of living out those bonds. That, I believe, is a strength, especially when parishes are willing and able to share their experiences, resources and sufferings with one another. Such interrelationships, I believe, keep us healthy. I believe that a diocese isolated from other local churches is not a healthy diocese. I think the same of parishes. If we don't have a mission-view outward, we'll die.

Sunday, March 13: On this hot Sabbath, we joined two communities for the Eucharistic liturgy. The first was 11 a.m. at the cathedral in Villahermosa; the second was at 6 p.m. with the youth of San Antonio in Cardenas.

Bishop Rafael graciously invited me to preach and preside at the cathedral liturgy and to assist him with the scrutinies now occurring in the catechumenate process. Two dozen young people were involved in this process.

I would have to name the liturgy with the young people that evening as the high point of this particular visit. The church was filled to capacity, which I would guess to be about 1,000 people. It was a grace I shall long remember to stand at the edge of the sanctuary and share my faith with them. Even deeper, I think, was the sense I had of being strengthened and encouraged by their faith and goodness. I often speak of God's presence in the assembly of believers, but only on a few occasions have I felt it as strongly as I did that night.

After Mass, a smaller group gathered in a room just off the church for music, dancing, poetry and other entertainment. At one point in the proceedings, they got all of us Rochesterians up to dance. There were several good dancers among us, although I must say that I am not one of them!

The evening's events led me to think often of our own diocesan Youth Day to be held at Rochester's Riverside Convention Center on April 24. This year's theme is vocation. These have always been blessed days for us, and I am praying that this year's will be especially so.

Monday, March 14: Departure day. Our Tabasco friends saw us off at the airport. We left on the 8 a.m. flight for Mexico City. Francisco Herrerias (Pancho), who is a native of Villahermosa and a longtime friend of Bishop Rafael, met us at the airport. He very kindly took us to the Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe, where we celebrated Mass for the people of our two dioceses. Later we went to the National Palace, the cathedral and to a nearby shopping area.

After a late-afternoon rest we went to the Herrerias' home for a lovely dinner with Pancho, his wife, Teresa, and their three beautiful teenaged children.

We left on the 2 a.m. flight from Mexico City and arrived home via Chicago at 11 a.m. on Tuesday.

Monday, March 21: It's a week now since we left Tabasco. I am due to hand this account of our trip to the *Courier-Journal* this morning. As I sit here re-reading these notes and remembering the events of this week in our own local church, I am doubly and triply glad for the relationship we have with our sisters and brothers to the south. I know that it will enrich both of our churches in significant ways in the years to come.

I am also deeply grateful to you who make all of this possible by your contribution to our annual Diocesan Mission Collection.

I ask you to pray daily for the Church in Tabasco — for our sisters and brothers there — that God will bless our journey together and help us to come closer to God because of our friendship with one another.

Peace to all.

