



MISSIONARIES IN ACTION

DOMINICAN MISSION FOUNDATION

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Less Sadness



“Our first Christmas in Ocosingo was beautiful. The Indians brought Jesus in from the hills with drum and flute music along with rockets shooting up into the sky, and I rang the bells like no one’s business...We have a pine tree covered with frosted cookies and gingerbread men and the children love them. Fr. Vincent spent his Christmas at one of the Indian villages in the mountains so couldn’t be with us, but I did give him a large box of cookies and fruitcake to take. This was the first fruitcake I ever made and I must say it was good!”

Dear Mission Friends:

Br. Raymond Bertheaux, O.P. wrote this Christmas report from Chiapas in one of our earliest newsletters, January 1964. Br. Raymond (along with Frs. Vincent Foerstler and Joseph Asturias) had only been at his post a year, and after close reading of all the earliest newsletters filled with disease, desolation, and death, much of which I have shared with you, I am astonished at how positive and happy and ‘full of the ol’ St. Nick’ he was.



Far left, “Merry Christmas” card in Tzeltal; left, ever-smiling Br. Raymond.

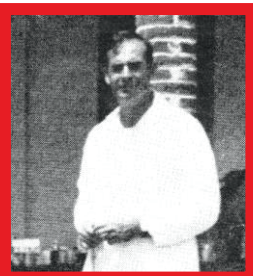


Above, Fr. Cassidy visiting Pedi. ward; left, native doctor Tony Marcos.

I never met Br. Raymond but maybe it was the secret ingredient that Fr. Felix Cassidy, O.P., who served later at the mission, remembered him adding to his fruitcakes, making them quite popular. Or maybe he was a lot like Fr. Cassidy who loved everybody and was always happy to be wherever he happened to be. But in honor of Br. Raymond and all the friars and sisters, doctors and nurses and assistants, lay volunteers, construction workers, benefactors, fundraisers—indeed anyone who had a hand in serving in or supporting our mission in Chiapas—as well as all those who called Chiapas their home, especially, at this time of year, the children then and now—while I can’t totally ‘eliminate the negative,’ I will attempt to ‘accentuate the positive.’

*“One day all will be well again and disease will no longer be a fact of each day. **One day we will have our hospital for the sick** ...and all because you have understood the charity which is Christ...and that these are his children.”*

Fr. Mark McPhee, O.P., the first Director of the Dominican Mission Office established in 1964, wrote this wildly naïve prediction upon visiting our first mission, in Chiapas, Mexico. In earlier issues this year, we shared how corn and beans were the only food, the water was full of worms and parasites, and the infant mortality rate was 80%. Disease was rampant among all ages and largely unsuccessful treatment was attempted by our staff with whatever was at hand—saws, fire, mud, and prayer. Most of the indigenous—certainly the poorest and most vulnerable—lived miles and mountains away and were superstitious and mistrusting of the missionary staff and modern medicine. A hospital? Impossible! Fr. John Flannery, O.P., M.D., who served both the soul and the body in the early years, remembered numerous people saying that *“the construction of a hospital in so remote and primitive an area could never be done.”*



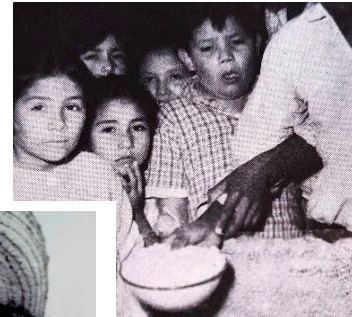
Fr. Flannery

But **alleluia!** While it was a rough road, Fr. McPhee's prediction came true! What began as a small dispensary in Ocosingo in 1964 grew into a fully operational hospital in Altamirano by March of '69 (above left), seeing an average of 700 patients a month. "Our hospital for the sick" has been growing and modernizing ever since, thanks to so many determined and selfless people who freely gave of their many and varied talents.

In this the last issue celebrating 60 years of newsletters, we will again share with you a few excerpts (with minimal editing) from some of our oldest ones, including memories of the inception and evolution of what is surely **our proudest achievement in Chiapas—Hospital San Carlos in Altamirano--one that made the greatest, most positive difference in the precious lives of its people.**

1964, Director Fr. Mark McPhee
What is our mission trying to do?...The program in each area should be organized in such a way that local personnel are incorporated as an integral part...Our personnel...must be able and willing to devote their services to the welfare of the poor without any thought of recompense...Any material benefits accruing from our service must be re-invested....It is our desire...that the natives may become autonomous, capable of continuing what we have begun...They should be assisted in discovering and developing their own culture...We wish only to aid them in sustaining their lives and easing their loads, including offering modern medical care and education in efficient methods of farming and building.

1966, Fr. McPhee
Family is central to the natives' values and children are given responsibilities almost as soon as they can walk. In the early mornings before school in Ocosingo and Altamirano, a myriad of activities begins with young bread sellers, from 6 to 12 years old, shouting, "Compras de pan?" At lunch time and also after school, they pick up their baskets of warm bread again and continue shouting and selling. Other children are put to work making candies that are sold from door to door. They also do washing and ironing, housework and childcare. Young boys are often seen at local airports begging to carry luggage, usually huge bundles they put on their heads and take into town. They make just pennies for any of these jobs, which they save for months to buy a pair of plastic shoes or a small toy. Children in the remote villages also have jobs to do, including carting wood and water up the mountain to their houses and sowing corn in the fields. There are no pennies for them but they learn early that they play an important role in their family.



1968, Fr. Martin Walsh
The Sisters strive to provide quality service to the patients at a cost affordable to them, welcoming all with a sliding scale of costs, often accepting chickens or corn as barter. Indeed, the Indians dislike taking charity. Once a young mother walked two days with her sick child to get an antibiotic, and back at home with the child better, the mother was so grateful that she walked all the way back to the clinic to pay with the most precious item she had—a single egg!



1969, Fr. Flannery

It's been a wonderful experience dealing with our people—both as priest and as physician. In the mornings, I hear confessions, say the 7:00 Mass, have breakfast, and head to the hospital, often followed by the same people I had just given Communion to. Fulfilling both roles is not a problem, but during a brief interval when I had a leg injury, our Fr. Louis Robinson, O.P., pastor in Altamirano, came to take care of many of the sick. Though he is not a physician, his treatments were accepted without question. In fact, much to my chagrin, I discovered his 'cure rate' was as high as mine.



1973, Fr. H.F. Ward, O.P., Director

Great pain, much planning, and many frustrations plagued their dream, but slowly and through the efforts of many wonderful, generous people, it became a reality. Some interesting frustrations in planning included compensating for the Indians' common fear of long corridors and, because most had never seen a two story building, their potential fear of stairs. But architect George Dueker, volunteering his design services as he had at several overseas missions, designed a beautiful but practical one-level structure with lots of windows and doors. Today it has 16 beds and several cribs, a misting tent, a blood bank and lab, surgical suite, Xray equipment, labor and delivery unit, intensive care unit with oxygen, heart monitor, etc., pediatric and isolation units, record and supply rooms, and a pharmacy. There is also a separate building with beds, showers, and cooking facilities for families who have walked for several days to get care for their loved one.



1972, Fr. Paul Scanlon, O.P., Prior Provincial
The hospital in Altamirano has seen 17,000 patients in the last two years...It is reputed to be the best-equipped one south of Mexico City. The water project, under the direction of Tom Sullivan, was built as a preventative to diseases caused by drinking contaminated water, and is credited with saving many lives.

2007, Fr. John Adams, O.P.

They have built a new hospital to replace the older, more cramped and primitive one. Hospital San Carlos is not merely a new hospital with state-of-the-art equipment and more beds. It is a hospital designed to be familiar and welcoming to the patients and their families. When the sick first enter through its doors, they are greeted by a lovely statue of Our Lady of Guadalupe, whose maternal care is personified by the Daughters of Charity. The interior walkways are shaped to look like natural paths through the forest or jungle. The courtyard includes a garden containing a lagoon with various plants that commonly grow in the mountains of Chiapas. The buildings' signs are printed in both Tzeltal and Spanish, with illustrations of characters in native dress.

2013, Fr. Martin Walsh, Director
*Hospital San Carlos has been under the direction of the Mexican Province of the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul since 1976. Just like 60 years ago, the sick still come from long distances on foot or horseback, having passed over mountains and rivers or through roadless valleys and jungles, arriving at all hours of the night. I have personally witnessed the moving scene of entire families arriving bearing a sick child or a grandmother who has fallen and broken a bone. The families are still welcomed with a place to stay and are included in decisions about their loved one's treatment, but now the patients have learned to trust the staff and to seek care at earlier stages in their illness. **Today there are many more success stories than sad endings.***



2022, Fr. Jordan Bradshaw, O.P., current director, visiting Chiapas

How much good work has been achieved through your generosity! The establishment of the hospital, its continual upgrading of equipment and supplies and procedures, and its implementation of novel programs would never have been possible without it. While the needs in Chiapas and all of our mission areas often seem overwhelming and never-ending, indeed while suffering is still very present in so many parts of the world, I wish to acknowledge to all of you, our Mission Friends, that countless lives around the world are a little happier thanks to you. As this Jubilee Year comes to an end, let us rejoice in the wondrous works that have come about because of your loving support of all our missions these past 60 years. During this season of joy, continue to help us in our missionary endeavors if you can, for as the good Pope John XXIII said about missions, ***"Perhaps no undertaking pleases God more."***

Fr. Jordan, Nancy Keating and I wish you all a happy Christmas with bells and fruitcake and the contagious smiles of children wherever you go. In peace and gratitude, Lesley Warnshuis



The birth of the baby Jesus stands as the most significant event in all history, because it has meant the pouring into a sick world of the healing medicine of love which has transformed all manner of hearts for [over] two thousand years...
Underneath all the bulging bundles is this beating Christmas heart.

~George Matthew Adams

