



# MISSIONARIES IN ACTION

## DOMINICAN MISSION FOUNDATION

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## *Why Pave Paradise?*

Dear Mission Friends:

During the 59 years since the establishment of the Dominican Mission Foundation, we have founded missions in, sent missionaries to, and/or directly supported those living in countless pockets of destitution, danger, or discrimination throughout the world. We have also answered numerous pleas for emergency help from foreign Dominican missions desperately trying to alleviate the suffering of those they serve who are enduring horrendous natural disasters or atrocities of war.

Our objective has always been to “work ourselves out of a job,” and indeed, we have packed up and left or ceased our support of many of these areas because our presence was no longer needed, for various, mostly positive reasons: the Tala Leper Colony in the Philippines gradually dissolved after the development of a cure for leprosy; in Vilnius, Lithuania, we succeeded in helping to bring Christianity back out into the open after the KGB years; in Ciudad Juarez, the Mexican province pulled out of *Casa del Migrante* since, as the cartel numbers were growing, fewer deportees and refugees were heading there; and in various places where the number of diocesan priests increased and extra assistance was no longer needed.



*Our director, Fr. Jordan Bradshaw, O.P., in front of Our Lady of Guadalupe church in San Cristóbal surrounded by little ones in their Sunday best, all proud to be standing with Padre (except the one in the middle who appears worried he stepped in something he shouldn't have).*

Ironically, however, support for our very first mission, the one that prompted the establishment of our foundation in 1964, has not waned after all these decades. In 1963, responding to the request of Pope John XXIII for religious communities to establish missions in Latin America, our Western Dominican Province took on the responsibility of the world's largest parish, San Jacinto de Polonia in Ocosingo-Altamirano, Chiapas, the southernmost state of Mexico.

Encompassing 8,000 square miles of jungles and mountains, the parish was and still is made up of 200,000 of the poorest and most oppressed people of Mexico, divided into

varied ethnic groups once living in 1,000 different communities. Many having been wiped out over the years, Dominicans today serve about 120 of those remote mountain villages, which often reach 7,000 feet and are accessible only by winding, rugged trails.

Director of our office in the early '70s, Fr. Hubert Ward, O.P. wrote, **“The work in every mission is primarily spiritual, but there must also be the care of material elements of man. The material needs in Chiapas are overwhelming—they are visible, awesome, and sometimes horrifying.”**



In Ocosingo and Altamirano today, 80% of the families are on the poverty line, earning less than \$245 a month, 70% have no electricity, 48% of the adults are illiterate, and the average number of years spent in school is 3.8. The country has the highest mortality rate in all of Mexico, due directly to poor nutrition and communicable diseases, and indirectly to the difficulty in navigating the unpaved roads fast enough or often enough to obtain the requisite care.

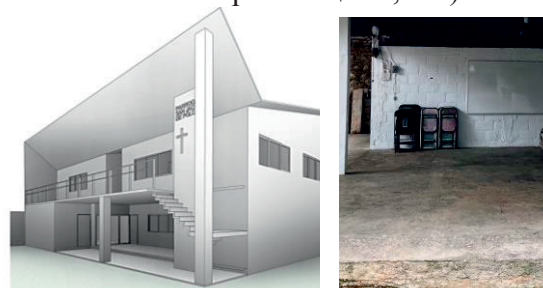
Pope Francis once preached that “the goal of economics and politics is to *serve humanity*, beginning with the poorest and most vulnerable ...Every economic and political theory or action must set about providing each inhabitant of the planet with the minimum wherewithal to live in dignity and freedom...” But fortunately, since ‘public service’ has become a misnomer, its original goals all too often overshadowed by bureaucracy and vacation days, there are faith-based organizations for whom helping the poor is a central tenet. They are in the trenches doing the crucial work of protecting the vulnerable, alleviating suffering, and delivering essential services. Most missionaries today uphold respect for the equality of all humankind and recognize that faith, a constant source of strength for many, can help to preserve one’s human dignity.

Our missionaries in particular hold that by spreading Christ’s values and providing a structure for Catholic faith expression, indigenous peoples can come to embrace their human dignity and equal place in this world, which in turn leads to self-respect, positive contributions to their families and their communities, and improved living conditions. **So why don’t living conditions in Chiapas seem to have improved? Why have statistics stagnated or worsened?**

Last October, our current director, Fr. Jordan Bradshaw, O.P., visited our friars in Chiapas to see firsthand the needs of the parishioners and how they might more effectively be met. Father saw that the friars in Ocosingo are stretched to the max. On average, they offer 14 Masses each Sunday in the parish church and nearby chapels. He learned about the parish’s “Visiting Rural Communities” Program which seeks to bring the Gospel to the 120 remote villages, and to keep it alive on a rotating schedule. The friars travel throughout the mountains, staying a week or two in each area to celebrate Mass and sacraments and to provide religious education. At the main church, they supervise Faith Education classes and provide counseling; evaluate the techniques of established catechists and train new ones; meet with community representatives to problem-solve;

and search for ways to bring villages together to widen their faith community and make more efficient use of the friars’ and catechists’ limited time and resources.

Fr. Jordan traveled the rugged roads extensively to meet the destitute parishioners and see their crude chapels and dilapidated houses. He celebrated Masses himself in Ocosingo and San Cristóbal to give the appreciative friars a chance to take a breath. He also attended a confirmation Mass and visited with youth groups. He lamented the absence of indoor resources at the parish, watching the friars hear confessions, provide counseling, and lead religious ed. classes in carpports (*below*) and in the churchyard. In a routine meeting with the friars—outside—Father learned about their plans to build a catechetical center with a classroom, a hall with a kitchen, and rooms to house leaders who come from the jungle chapels to attend meetings. (Proposed rendition below, estimated to cost an almost impossible \$100,000.)



But surprisingly, Father smiled from ear to ear when he reported on his trip, and every one of his three dozen or more photos was full of smiles and camaraderie, colorful clothes, fresh food, or a rainbow of banners. **When I asked him why in his opinion the levels of poverty, mortality, education, technology, and assimilation had not improved much over the decades, he answered, “I’m not sure, but I do know that everywhere I went, there was pride and joy.”**

Chiapas has long been a state torn apart by political and cultural conflicts and religious persecution, but its indigenous have always been able to hold tight to their ancient cultures and customs. While indigenous groups of other Mexican states surrendered to their exploitation, cultural demise, and eventual assimilation, many of Chiapas' ethnic groups have successfully resisted, even when subjected to the Spanish *encomendero* system which extorted an impossible payment from them twice a year, and even when their land and homes were violently or illegally stolen from them by greedy landowners or corrupt government policies. The beloved Don Samuel Ruiz, bishop of the Chiapas diocese of San Cristóbal from 1959-2000, took on the struggle to help the native people demand that their rights be respected by laying the foundation for an indigenous Church. Like his 16<sup>th</sup> century predecessor, Bartolome de las Casas, O.P., the first bishop of Chiapas and one of the first advocates *for* indigenous rights and *against* colonialism, Don Samuel recognized that while the word of God is important, it must be combined with a people's culture, traditions, and beliefs—their identity.

Now, as then, each village boasts its own social and cultural identity with its own dialect, leaders, customs, colors, religious rites, and even its unique patron saint who protects it. The Church has come to know that a foundation of genuine respect for others and their authentic culture has a positive impact on well-being. Thus every effort is made to incorporate their rich indigenous customs with Catholicism. Chapel floors, for example, are covered with soft greenery and altars are strewn with piles of produce, all from their own land and their own hand. The Bible and liturgies have been translated into the native Tzeltal and Tzotzil.



*Typical village chapel during cold spell, warmed with candlelight, sunlight, and song.*

***Principales* or village elders, venerated for their wisdom and charged with transmitting faith, culture, and history to the newer generations, are welcomed as special guests to community and Church meetings.**

In concluding his homily on politics and economics, the Pope warned that unless its vision is to help develop one's human potential, "all economic activity is meaningless ... **Money ... must serve, not rule.**" Indeed, over the past three decades, the U.S. alone has spent \$60 billion in poverty programs in Chiapas, and its poverty has only gotten worse. One of countless studies on Chiapas from one of countless international groups concluded, "The contrasts between investments and poverty clearly show a gross failure...both in relative and absolute terms." That's it? Two Harvard professors opened their working research project somewhat more directly: "No matter which way you look at it, Chiapas is the most backward of any state in Mexico." It seems the rest of the world is anxious for the indigenous of Chiapas to assume their rightful role in the political and economic mainstream of their state and their country. But perhaps that's exactly what they don't want—to be beholden to the government for a place at the table.

They've known long before the Pope articulated it that money must serve and not rule and they've managed to avoid the control and corruption and quashing of pride that come with it. They must also see that the world is hoping to get its hands on the state's relatively new-found rich natural resources. And so maybe they like having rugged, unpaved roads that render them difficult to access...

We, with your generous help as always, will continue to "ease their lives" as Fr. Scanlon once advised (p.4)—certainly their lives are full of struggle without electricity, cars, and other modern conveniences, and the proposed new hall, for example, would be a welcome addition to their parish as well as provide jobs—but we must not presume that we have the power to make them happy or proud. They have done that all on their own. The challenge for the indigenous of Chiapas, especially for upcoming generations, will be to continue to resist the tide of change toward globalization and conformity and to hold fast to their values of family and traditions and to their own village's unique cultural identity. They must *listen to their elders*, the *principales*, who have somehow preserved the social structures that have endured since 1526.

In the love of the Holy Family,  
*Lesley Warnshuis*

As Prior Provincial, Fr. Paul Scanlon, O.P. visited our mission in Chiapas in 1974, and wrote of the wonderful people he encountered: *“Our industrial technology, agricultural science, and medical wisdom can be shared with them to ease their lives. This can be our gift. But when you walk through their forests and their fields and no one passes by without saluting you as ‘brother’ and stopping to chat, you know they have a respect for life, a concern for one another, and an awareness of God that is missing in our comfort-laden, but lonely, society. We ought not pity them; rather we ought to learn from them, and then share our knowledge and love in return.”*



Please dear Jesus,  
ease the  
compounding  
troubles of  
those suffering  
through  
unimaginable  
horrors in Syria  
and Turkey.