



# MISSIONARIES IN ACTION

## DOMINICAN MISSION FOUNDATION

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### *'The Bello-esque' Way: Taking the Hard Road*



Dear Mission Friends:

In March of 2021, the parish community in Mexicali was gathered with a great sense of joy and thanksgiving to honor the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the ordination of Fr. David Bello, O.P., and in his homily, Fr. David mentioned how it was the wish of all three elderly Dominican missionaries in Mexicali at the time, Fr. David, Fr. Bart de la Torre, and Fr. Martin de Porres Walsh, to serve there until their deaths. Three years later Fr. David's wish for himself was fulfilled. He died rather suddenly but peacefully on April 21 of this year. His cancer remained undiagnosed until the very end and so no one anticipated such a rapid passing. But the day after he died, his parishioners and fellow Dominican friars and sisters at our mission parish of *Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe* were somehow able to organize a marathon of eight Masses in celebration of his life—every hour on the hour! His official funeral Mass was held on May 3 at St. Dominic Church in Benicia, where the first several pews were filled with some of those same parishioners and sisters who had driven up from Mexicali to pay further tribute to their beloved pastor Padre David.



And of course the rest of the church was filled with friars from all over, parishioners from his Antioch years, his dear sister Teresa and her family, and so many more whose lives he touched with his faith, love, and characteristic wit.

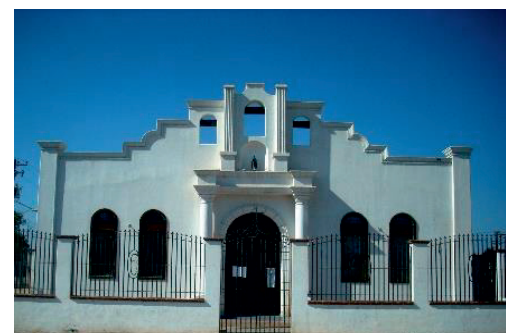


Fr. David was born in Sacramento on January 14, 1946 to his Filipino father and Mexican mother, migrant farmworkers who moved their family all around the San Joaquin Delta until his father's long-time dream of being a homeowner finally came true when they were able to buy a house in Stockton. Father went to public school and so attended CCD classes, taught by the Maryknoll Sisters who were known for their ministry to the poor and their great missionary spirit.

After a great deal of searching in high school and junior college, **Father decided he wanted to become a foreign missionary—not a common choice**—and so he was recruited by several different orders. But when Fr. Mark McPhee, O.P. came to call and left him a holy card of St. Jude Thaddeus, to whom his parents always had a great devotion, he deduced that the Lord was calling him to be a Dominican. He remembers his father asking if he would be able to continue his education, which was very important to him. *"I told him that I didn't know, that I might be put to sweeping floors like St. Martin de Porres. My dear father, who'd seen to it that I could read even before starting kindergarten, let me know that sweeping would be fine as long as I was happy. So I applied and received an acceptance letter from Brother Norbert Fihn, O.P., vocation director and a great Dominican friar. One month later, on the 31st of October 1964, I entered the Dominican Order. To my father's great delight, I was able to attend the University of San Francisco, receiving my Bachelor's degree in English. And then while teaching in various Catholic high schools, I studied for my Master of Arts degree in counseling from Loyola-Marymount and my Master of Divinity degree from DSPT in Berkeley. I studied for the priesthood in Mexico City alongside Fr. Daniel Syverstad, O.P., spending summers at our mission in Chiapas."*

According to an old newsletter from 1964, Mission Office Director Fr. McPhee had indeed been organizing a student group to travel to the Chiapas mission during the summer months to help the missionaries with teaching the indigenous catechism, personal sanitation, methods of agriculture, digging of wells, building of roads, etc. He wrote, *“All who join this project must have a speaking knowledge of Spanish and the will and desire to serve. .. It won’t be easy...but there is no doubt that the ones who participate ...will receive even more good than the people they help.”*

Such intensive training during the summers paved the way for Fr. David’s first post after being ordained in 1981: serving in Mexicali for four years at our mission parish *Nuestra Señora del Rosario*, fulfilling his dream of being a foreign missionary. Fr. David’s next assignment was prior at St. Albert’s and later student master. In the meantime, we had brought our successful Mexicali mission to a close. Just three years later, however, the bishop of Mexicali invited us to return to establish another parish in a poor neglected settlement on the far eastern outskirts of the diocese. Extending about 30 miles along the U.S./Mexican border, the harsh desert was crowded with impoverished neighborhoods and small, destitute farms, some locations without electricity. But our Fr. David answered the bishop’s call to found a new parish—and a new mission of our province—and in October of 1995 he left for Mexicali once again. This time, however, he would be starting from scratch and he would be alone.



*La iglesia de Santa Maria de Guadalupe*

There was one small chapel in the region, but with such an expansive area to serve, most of Fr. David’s Santa Maria de Guadalupe parishioners had to celebrate the Eucharist in the open air which, in Mexicali, can mean up to 129 °F in the summer and down to 43°F in the winter. In light of their sacrifices, **Father refused to have a house built for himself.** Rather, he rented a small house in a depressed neighborhood, several miles from the parish church., as he described in the following report:

*“For the last two months, I have been living in a rented house...[It] was a mess! The electrical wiring had been stolen—it is melted down for the copper, which is sold to buy drugs; the kitchen sink was stolen and the toilet bowls were beyond repair; there were no doors; the fence in the front of the house was falling down... Did I mention it was a mess? But in place of rent for a couple months, and with the support of the Mission Office, I fixed up the house myself. Many parishioners helped too, cleaning, making new doors, and donating used plates, pots, towels, blankets, a stove, and a sofa. When I offered them some money, poor as they are, they refused...Some friends were opposed to my living there because of the neighborhood’s frequent burglaries and gang and drug violence. But I told them it is important to live among the people to whom we minister.”*

Father’s genuine compassion and selflessness never wavered, as made clear in a later report: *“I have so many on whom I can depend for my material needs. But what of the poor, who can only depend on us? I can get in the car and ‘escape’ across the border to friends for rest and relaxation...but the poor must stay here in Mexicali, working tirelessly every moment of daylight in temperatures that can reach 129°F? No, I want to be here. I need to be here. I only ask that the Lord will give me a grateful heart when I experience the helplessness and invisibility of the poor. We must follow the example of the Master and care for the sick and the elderly among the poor whom we serve, who depend on us, who have no other recourse for food and basic home supplies. **Being a missionary means, I think, being with our people and standing by them, even—especially—in difficult situations.”***

During one visit, Fr. Daniel Syverstad, O.P., our Dominican provincial at the time, asked Fr. David if it bothered him to be alone. *“In my own proud ‘Bello-esque way,’ I said, ‘No.’ Yet in moments when there is no one with whom to share the story, I had been feeling alone. My illusion of power I’d always felt as a Dominican had been broken, and I was feeling quite vulnerable. However, having been by myself for five months, Fr. Tom Kraft, O.P. arrived after studying Spanish in Columbia, and at last we are two!”*





One of Father's stories from those early years reveals his pure, often agonizing empathy: *"I just finished celebrating the funeral of an elderly woman where I learned about a terrifying ordeal she experienced last summer.. Loretto lived with her daughter and small grandchildren, and while her daughter worked her night job, Loretto, who could no longer walk and was bedridden, somehow took care of the little ones. Her house was typical—a simple one-room home with a dirt floor and glassless windows open to the elements. It was one of our horribly hot nights and a couple of thieves broke in to steal the fan from her room. When they saw that she was unable to get up, they were in no rush to leave. While she and the children were huddled in terror on her bed, the thieves took food from the ice box and ate it teasingly in front of them. Finally they took the fan and left, and her prayer that they would not be harmed was answered. When I heard the story though, I couldn't help thinking that for many here, death is the only escape from fear and misery....I pray that I don't abandon those who are suffering their own crosses...All I can give to this poor woman's family and others who live in fear and poverty is my own weak and imperfect faith."*

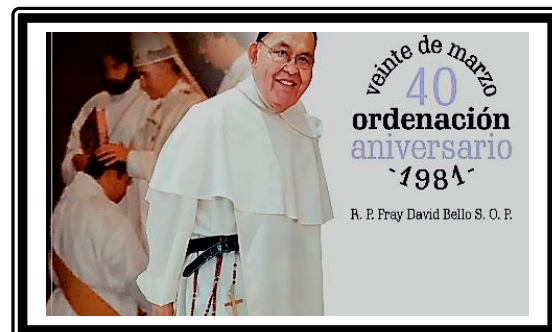
Far from abandoning his suffering flock, **Fr. David remained in Mexicali, this time for 14 years.** Certainly his "weak and imperfect" faith proved stronger than he humbly perceived.

Under his dedicated leadership, the enthusiasm and inclusive spirit of his Mexicali parishioners grew. They regularly held raffles and sold countless tacos and tamales to raise funds for their more impoverished neighbors. A vibrant parish community developed, resulting in the building of three chapels and a beautiful parish church, a catechetical center, and later, a much-needed house for the friars. According to one-time pastor Fr. Miguel Rolland, *"It is a parish that was forged into being by the Holy Spirit through the talent and tenacity of Fr. David Bello."*

In 2009, after Father had achieved or set into motion most of what he had planned, he was assigned to Holy Rosary Parish in Antioch, CA as parochial vicar. *"I was blessed to minister to a wonderful parish, including many poor and Spanish-speaking, alongside a great Dominican friar and model of priesthood and missionary life, Father Francisco Vicente, O.P."* In July 2016, however, **Fr. David was asked to rejoin the staff in Mexicali**, this time as parochial vicar, transitioning in 2018 to his old job as pastor. **Of course he said yes.**

*"All these life experiences—from the loving guidance of my dear parents and the Maryknoll sisters through that of the wonderful Dominican friars—have helped me to continue to grow in love for the Dominican life and the missionary apostolate."*

But while the parish is active and dedicated, thanks in large part to Fr. David's lone and courageous commitment made 29 years ago, the city remains fraught with economic and political ills. Indeed, those evils that are ever-present, that we have always worked to alleviate—deprivation and hunger, loneliness and fear—were all only amplified in that grim moment in time that was the pandemic. And the more recent chaos caused by the border town's **deportations and illegal crossings combined with the deeply embedded conditions of poverty and hunger, drug use and related violence, and disintegration of the family and its values**, have created a vicious cycle that is rarely escapable.



So why did Frs. David, Bart, and Martin say they wanted to spend the rest of their lives serving the Church in the troubled city of Mexicali? Missionaries are by nature optimistic and tenacious. And according to Blessed Charles de Foucault, a favorite of Fr. David's, *"It is not necessary to teach others, to cure them, or to improve them; it is only necessary to live among them, sharing the human condition and being present to them in love."* Our Mission Office Director Emeritus Fr. Martin Walsh, who spent many years in Mexicali, put it even more simply: *"Our small Dominican community ... is dwarfed by the demands and needs of this expansive parish and troubled city, but we serve with love, and our service is received with love."* Of course this simple job description belies the actual job, one which is freely chosen only by a special sort of person. Fr. David was that sort of person—always seeking the hard road. Pray for us here, Father, that we may have such strength and fortitude to take the hard road at least now and then. Everlasting peace to you, Father,  
*Lesley Warnshuis*



**Thoughts for Fathers' Day**  
 The just man walks in integrity; blessed are his children after him (Proverbs 20:7).

Grandchildren are the crown of the aged, and the glory of children is their father (Proverbs 17:6).

**Mission Appeals**

*Our director, Fr. Jordan Bradshaw, O.P., will be preaching at the weekend Masses of the following parishes. Come see him if you're in the area.*

St. John, Laughlin, NV	June 29-30
St. Patrick, San Francisco	July 13-14
St. Jude Thaddeus, Earlimart	July 20-21
St. Vincent de Paul, Petaluma	July 27-28
St. Aloysius, Tulare	Aug. 3-4
St. Rita, Tulare	Aug. 10-11
St. Dominic, Benicia	Aug. 17-18
St. Therese, Isleton	Aug. 24-25
Christ the King, Salinas	Oct. 5-6
TBA, San Francisco	Oct. 19-20
St. Sebastian, Sebastopol	Nov. 16-17

*Besides various parishioners of all ages, Father David is pictured with the Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, Sisters of the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, and Friars Vincent Foerstler, Thomas Kraft, Roberto Corral, Elias Ford, Bart de la Torre, Martin Walsh, Stephen Maria Lopez, and Anthony Rosevear.*