



MISSIONARIES IN ACTION

DOMINICAN MISSION FOUNDATION

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More Mission Memories and a miracle or two



Dear Mission Friends:

Along with the establishment of our Dominican Mission Foundation in 1964, with Fr. Mark McPhee, O.P. as director, came the first newsletter, originally called *Dominicans On Mission*. It had been a year since our pioneer missionaries, Friars Joseph Asturias, Vincent Foerstler, and Raymond Bertheaux, embarked on their first mission—to Chiapas, Mexico—and there was much to tell.

To continue our celebration of 60 years of newsletters, we will, like last month, print excerpts from some of the oldest, this month focusing on the dreadful, often unspeakable illnesses and injuries that our hard-working but inexperienced, under-staffed, and under-supplied religious and lay people were faced with in those early years. While their days were filled with adversity and never-ending heartbreaking pleas for impossible cures, they were also blessed with a sprinkling of random miracles, giving them the strength and hope to keep going. And thanks to our generous, caring donors (including some of you reading this today), who provided for more basic supplies and medications with each newsletter they read, our staff achieved more and more medically-based healing, cures, and happy endings.

EXCERPTS...

(with minimal editing for conciseness)

...from the earliest newsletters of first Mission Office Dir. Fr. Mark McPhee



March 1964

Last November, in the company of six doctors from the Sonoma County Medical Society, I flew to Ocosingo to spend ...the most extraordinary days of my life...We found a country of warm, friendly people but also of sick, undernourished people who seldom live past the age of forty...And we found Marcus (below), a 16 year-old Mayan boy weighing only 53 pounds, who has been paralyzed with polio and almost entirely dependent upon others since he was four ...His village has no schools, no doctors, no medicine. The Sonoma doctors flew him to Santa Rosa Memorial Hospital for the first of five operations. We are now working, with the doctors' guidance, toward the goal of building a medical clinic and hospital at our Mission so that others as poor and helpless as Marcus may find the care they so desperately need.



February 1965

Miss Patricia Arca, our Mission nurse, writes, "Two days ago, Armando (above) was brought to us in Altamirano thanks to those in his remote village who had pooled their meager funds. We found him lying on the ground, his weak head raised and looking at us with hope in his big eyes. After getting him to the Indian shelter to be examined, it was determined he had very advanced tuberculosis.

"Fr. Vincent (Foerstler) came to hear his confession and give him the last sacraments. After a few hours of searching and negotiating, I was able to start an IV. I stayed with him all night and into the next morning, seeing for the first time the effect of TB on the human body. I have never seen such suffering, such agony. Armando's father said, 'We came here because Padre Vicente is here if he dies.' All the next day we tried to get him to eat just jello, but he pounded his chest and cried...In the afternoon he said he felt a little better...and I became preoccupied with the idea that God just might permit him to live. He was such a thoughtful boy, telling me that I should sleep, that he would be alright.

“Two days later Armando seemed to stop spitting up blood and was sleeping more. That night his pulse was weak but he had taken a bit of jello...Please dear Lord. Early the next morning, I heard a gentle voice, his father’s, call to me. ‘Senorita, I keep calling him but he doesn’t answer.’ It was still dark and I stumbled around for a candle. Fr. Vincent came right away, blessed the body and comforted his father, and me too. I told his father that I knew how much he wanted him to live but that there was nothing we could have done and that he had accepted his suffering. I know there will be many more Armandos but I also know that we can treat these diseases if caught in the early stages and even prevent them from occurring with tests and vaccines.”

With your support for the first clinic of our planned hospital, the St. Martin de Porres Center in Altamirano, we will be able to prevent such raw suffering in the future.

May 1966 (Newsletter debuts new name: *Los Compañeros*)

Nurse Arca’s leaving has been greatly eased by the arrival of the Presentation Sisters. The property is in our name, plans for the hospital and center buildings are on the drawing board, and we are moving! And Thomas Sullivan, 27, has left his current position as a San Francisco accountant to join the staff of our clinic-in-progress. A graduate of Riordan High School and USF, a veteran of Mexican student missionary work and later a medic trained in the National Guard, Tom became familiar with our Mission in Chiapas while keeping the books for our Province in Oakland, and the pull to return to missionary work being too great, he recently quit, traveling to Altamirano to set up cooperatives for the natives of our villages and to help where he can.

Our lay volunteer Tom Sullivan in San Francisco just before he begins his 3500 mile drive to Ocosingo with a truckload of desperately-needed medical supplies. [Tom is a generous monthly donor to this day!]



He has already set up, in the village of Morelia, a medical cooperative which allows villagers to buy vitamins and medications for a few cents.

June 1966

*I am once again on my way to our Mission in Chiapas, this time accompanied by Fr. John Flannery, O.P., following his graduation from medical school. Eager to begin giving professional care to our people, he will return permanently after two years of internship and residency in Sacramento. **While Father Flannery, that rare combination of priest and physician, is working toward his end, we must work toward ours—building him a hospital.***



**O.P.,
M.D.**

July 1966

Fr. Flannery’s initial visit to Chiapas plunged him straight into the affairs which are expected to occupy his lifetime once he finishes his medical training. He was deeply moved by the needs there: “It seems to me that if there are 30,000 inhabitants of our area, then there are 30,000 sick people...with everything from amoebic infestation and worms to TB...and an uncommon number of severe eye disease cases...” Father’s visit was only ten days but he saw dozens of patients every day who had walked for days to see him.



Removing lice eggs while waiting to see Fr. Flannery.

“The mountain grapevine is a marvel. We did the best we could, but it was really frustrating not to have even basic hospital facilities available...It will take many years of work and a great deal of money to leave something permanent.”

November 1966

This week, a young mother came into our primitive dispensary with her critically ill baby. The sisters worked day and night to bring down her fever but she died during the night and the mother left right away to take the lifeless little body back home for burial. She was the third newborn in a month that the helpless Sisters watched die. Another day a sick woman was brought to them strapped to her husband’s back. They tried medicines but without a doctor, they couldn’t tell what she had and there was nothing more they could do. The husband carefully wrapped her in soft blankets, strapped her on again and walked the several miles uphill to his mud house where she soon died quietly.



March 1967

Short-term missionary from Oregon, Fr. Charles Young, writes, “One day an Indian woman (above) with a badly damaged liver arrives with her husband. There was no hope and Fr. Asturias gave her the Last Rites, after which she was taken back to her devastated village for a chapel service and burial. She was 42 and left five children.”

Sister Laurence writes about losing a young patient with scarlet fever and another with both typhoid fever and meningitis, “whom, in spite of being in convulsions most of the time, we kept going for a week with the few antibiotics I had left. We were heartbroken. These are just a few of so many who come to us with hope. It is a sight indeed as they stand there in their raggedy clothes, eyes cast down, listening as the translator tells them in their Tzeltal dialect that nothing can be done.” *Children’s diseases here, because they are so prevalent, are especially heartbreaking. For every 10 babies born, only two survive infancy, malnutrition being the principal culprit.*



May 1967

It is encouraging to our poor that we care, and it is encouraging to us that you care. Sr. Laurence writes, “Last week, Fr. Joe (Asturias) asked me to see an old lady (*above center*) to whom he had given the Last Sacraments. I visited her twice and gave her medicine but she was getting worse. The house she shared with her brother was made of sticks with a thatched roof and it was filled with bugs, so we eventually brought her down to the shelter in Ocosingo. I began to bathe her and bugs just fell off—big ones, little ones, whole families of them. It took hours to bathe her, wash her hair, and rub ointment on her eyelids and bed sores. Then with vitamins and antibiotics for her intestinal parasites, she improved a little, but was still so weak and only half alive. Now a week later, she is eating, sometimes feeding herself, her sores are almost gone, her pain is not so sharp, and her eyes are open and sparkling. She calls me her *patrona* (godmother). There are many things to do these days, but what little time I have to spend with *Jesus* (her name!) is the most pleasant part of the day.”

“Jesus”!



June 1967

Sister Laurence writes this month, “An Indian woman had been brought into the clinic who had been bitten by one of the many wild dogs that roam the streets of Ocosingo. She had lost a piece of her lower leg the size of a grapefruit. I cleaned and stitched the awful wound and gave her a local anesthetic—my first primitive attempt at surgery. All the next week I gave her heavy doses of vitamins and watched. Since, thank the Lord, she got better and had no infection, I knew it was time for a skin graft.

“My heart was in my mouth but the Sisters and Fr. Joe were beside me with words of encouragement. So we moved two tables together for an operating table, I immersed the instruments I could find in alcohol, readied some clean cloths by cooking them in the oven, scrubbed my hands till they were raw, put on a set of sterile gloves (a gift from our donors), gave the woman a Phenobarbitol (the only sedative we had), and began. Thank God for soap and water. We scrubbed the bitten area and the thigh, from which we would take the good skin. As Alonso, our Indian infirmarian, kept taking her blood pressure and her husband held her other hand, I took a razor blade, scraped away all the outside skin of the wound, lifted a piece of skin from her thigh, and placed it on the wound. It had been 2 hours and I was drenched in sweat. Lastly we put a cast on her leg. Thank God, the next morning she was doing well, and after two more weeks of prayerful watching, it was clear that the skin graft had taken and I have a friend for life.

“Much credit goes to those donors from the States who contributed any of the medical supplies we have.



Most of our patients, however, are not so lucky. A 14 year-old girl just arrived alone with an advanced stage of TB and we began treating her with what we had, but her father came to say he needed her at home to help with the chores, and because she will only be given dry tortillas and an occasional egg at home, she will not last long.

“We recently received a newborn just under three pounds and we surrounded him with hot water bottles, our make-shift incubator, which the Sisters took turns changing all night, but he needed oxygen, and two days later, he entered heaven.”

February 1968 (Fr. Gerard Ehler, O.P. is new director.)

Fr. Vincent Foerstler writes, “Pedro, 17 (*below*), unable to walk due to a swollen leg, was carried for miles to the clinic by his parents. We did all we could to help him—gave him medicine and kept him clean and fed. An Xray in San Cristobal showed he had cancer of the bone, but his parents refused permission to amputate. They clung desperately to the hope that his leg would somehow heal. They returned home but of course he got worse and he knew he was dying. I visited, gave him the Sacraments, and tried to comfort him as best I could. It was a beautiful thing to witness the inner strength of this young boy who accepted his affliction.



“As a final resort, his father brought him to the witch doctor. He didn’t want this of course, but he let his father have the satisfaction of knowing he was doing all he could. In the midst of his suffering, he was being considerate of his parents, permitting them to believe that they were helping him get better. I anointed him and gave him Holy Communion, and he seemed content, promising me he would stay close to God. All of us were very much impressed by brave Pedro who died with such love.”

November 1968

Br. Martin de Porres Walsh, O.P. has been visiting our mission and he writes in his journal, “Today an Indian asked me if I could have Fr. Flannery look at his son who could not swallow. His parents brought in a dried-up, shriveled, unconscious three year-old whose face and body was plastered with eggs—his parents thought he could absorb the food through his skin! We began immediately to feed him through an IV.” Three days later, “after pumping medicine and nourishment into him every 15 minutes, he is no longer dehydrated but he moans for hours and is still unconscious.” After another three days, “his lungs are filling up and he is slipping fast. It is determined that he has meningitis, is filled with parasites, and has brain damage. Fr. Flannery promised the distraught parents that he would keep trying, but there is a constant line of desperately sick Indians just outside the clinic door who have walked or been carried great distances over many days.”

December 1968

The boy died during the night. Br. Walsh continues, “This week, an abnormally tiny eight-year-old boy arrived with intestinal parasites after being carried for days. As Fr. Flannery held him the worms were actually coming out of his weakened body. Jorge is unconscious, dehydrated, starved, and has meningitis.

“His grandmother who raised him is very skeptical of us and the IV needle. She was beside herself with fright when she saw us begin to catheterize him, but when the swelling in his belly went down, she cried with gratitude.” The next day, as with the other child, “we are pumping Jorge with medicine and nourishment but he is still unconscious. A large group of tribesmen from his village arrived today with machetes drawn like swords. After a while, the father was able to convince them that we were doing our best, but Fr. Flannery is nervous about how they will react if he dies, which is probable.” Three days later, “Jorge’s lungs are filling up and his heart is failing. His father arrives with a new outfit for his son to be buried in. We removed all the tubes and, with the family’s permission, Fr. Flannery baptized him. Crying all the time, his father dressed him in his new clothes, the tribesmen carefully placed his limp body on his father’s back, and they all began the long procession back to their village with the dying Jorge. It takes tough and dedicated people to face this daily challenge of death and dying.”

Sr. Mathilde also writes this month:

“When her father first arrived at our clinic with a look of terrible desperation, little Maria was about four, but she appeared to be considerably younger, with protruding ribs but swollen all over due to a kidney ailment. She also had scurvy, beri-beri and rickets, but her veins were too fragile for an IV. So all the Sisters took turns around the clock feeding her by tube directly into her stomach. After some gentle ministering from Sr. Noel, Maria softly murmured ‘lek’ (‘good’ in Tzeltal). She gradually gained her appetite, joyfully-welcomed progress continued with the first time her face softened into a smile; the first time she sang a song; the first time she walked well enough to follow Sr. Janice all around the courtyard.

After a few months, she was well enough to go home and we sent her elated father with canned fish, powdered milk, and vitamins.”



Little Maria, 4, before, and several months later, with Sr. Mathilde.



As Fr. McPhee wrote in June '67, *“Without your intercessions on our behalf, I’m afraid that the future of the Missions would look bleak indeed. The remoteness of the area, the lack of even adequate facilities, ...the constant sight of sickness and death—all this...can take its toll on the spirits of our missionaries. Your support and the Indians’ deep and unfaltering trust in Our Lord spur us on. Please God, that this spiritual growth may ever continue.” And it has, for over 60 years!* With loving gratitude for all of those who have supported us in any way along the way,



Lesley Warnshuis

Mission Appeals

Our director, Fr. Jordan Bradshaw, O.P., will be preaching at the weekend Masses of the following parishes.

Come hear him and say ‘Hello’ if you’re in the area.

St. Patrick, San Francisco	July 13-14
St. Jude, Earlimart	July 20-21
St. Vincent, 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
St. Sebastian, Sebastopol	Nov. 16-17

Dates pending:

Mother of Sorrows, Los Angeles
St. Gertrude, Bell Gardens