



# MISSIONARIES IN ACTION

## DOMINICAN MISSION FOUNDATION

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## School of Life



Dear Mission Friends:

To continue our celebration of the 60th Anniversary of our first newsletter, we will once again print excerpts from some of the oldest ones. During our Back-to-School month, this newsletter will focus on the state of education in Chiapas, then and now. It should give you an idea of the early educational needs of our San Jacinto school-age parishioners and of the hard-earned accomplishments of our first missionaries, thanks to some of you who have been with us from the start.

### EXCERPTS

*from our earliest newsletters  
(with minimal editing for conciseness)*

#### November 1967

Fr. Mark McPhee, O.P.

*Knowing that development of any area depends on its youth, the Mexican government is trying to improve their education system, hoping to provide schools for the young throughout all its lands. But progress has been slow—always there are too many children, too few teachers, and never enough funds to provide ample books and a suitable school building. These obstacles are typical of our Mission areas surrounding Ocosingo and Altamirano.*



#### *Back-to-School in Chiapas, 1968. (End of year pic on next page...)*

*Moreover, the children here are indifferent to classwork, and homework is impossible. When it's time to harvest the corn or prepare the sugar from the cane fields, children must miss school to help in the fields; or if a child has lost a parent, which is almost the norm, they must help at home all day, every day. Progress depends on a positive relationship between existence and education, but here they compete, with education invariably losing its foothold.*

*The method of providing the rural school with a teacher is to draft him from one of the large cities. He is dropped off and left alone in a primitive setting, rarely knowing the local dialect and so has no one to talk to. Not only are there huge cultural and language barriers between the Mexicans and the Indians to overcome, but very few of these "teachers" have been able to afford to go to college and have no resources or strategies for classroom organization and curriculum. They usually quit as soon as they can.*

*But now and again one finds in the remote mountains or jungle areas an individual who tries desperately to work within these limited boundaries. There is an excellent teacher living in the mountains about five hours from Altamirano (I timed it on horseback.) He rides his horse an hour from his modest farm to a nearby village where he teaches 50 or more children. His is a one-room wooden classroom but it is large, has natural lighting, tables and chairs, and even a sturdy blackboard. [Remember those?] Unfortunately this maestro, whose students attend class more often and in greater numbers than in most schools, is the exception.*

#### October 1969

Sr. Mari

*Not too long ago, during "back-to-school" time, we were visited by some friends from California who were overwhelmed by the number of children everywhere in the streets of our pueblo.*



School hours don't bring a drastic decrease in their numbers because children here have other things to do besides go to school. They sell bread, eggs, and oranges; herd cows, drive mules, shine shoes, cut wood, and take care of younger brothers and sisters. Children are all around us and their presence is impressive to visitors because they are actively participating in their family's struggle for survival. *It's not that their parents wouldn't like to see their children in school, but when it comes to a choice between being educated and eating, education loses every time.* The choice is that clear and the situation is that serious. Sadly, those of us ministering here in southern rural Mexico have become accustomed to the fact that education is necessarily a low priority. We must do what we can to change that rather than simply watch generation after generation sentenced to utter poverty.

### October 1969

Br. Raymond Bertheaux, O.P. Every Sunday after the 7:00 p.m. Mass, weather permitting, the Indian teenagers of Altamirano have begun gathering to play games. It's amazing to watch, for they make up their own games and are forever changing their rules.



They play among themselves or sometimes compete with teens from the surrounding villages. The games help build up the lads' sense of sportsmanship and community spirit. One of the most liked and commonly played games is basketball and it warms my heart to ride through a colony of mud huts and see a group of boys engaging with each other so positively, laughing and enjoying themselves as they learn to cooperate with each other. Without the games, the teens would end up drinking and fighting, thus ending the Lord's Day in the town jail.

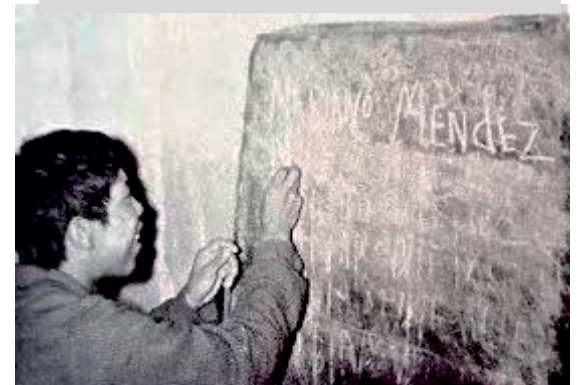
We have been building up a little fund for them so that after every game, we distribute bars of soap to bathe with in the nearby creeks and then cold drinks to enjoy. We are really grateful to Mr. Ernest Busk of San Francisco for driving a truck down to the Mission to deliver, among other supplies, several basketballs as well as three sets of Warriors' uniforms. He promised to bring more on the next trip and I can't wait to see our "team" looking sharp in their matching outfits.

*If your plan is for one year, plant corn;  
for 10 years, plant trees;  
for 100 years, build a school.*

*Br. Raymond teaching some happy boys of Altamirano how to bake a cake.*



**Education,  
not  
indoctrination.**



Mario (above) learned to write his name while recovering from TB at our Indian shelter. *While one nurse cared for his healing, another one cared for his learning.* He was a boy who wanted to learn but had never been given the opportunity. Others do not fare so well. Francisco, who had been a TB patient at the Indian shelter for about two years, died of a hemorrhage last month. We have some of his water colors he painted here. He had become a special friend to all of us and his quiet presence will be missed.



*Just left, a typical classroom crammed with up to 50 children, warped tables, wobbly benches, and one frustrated teacher. Each child is given paper, a pencil, and a primer to last the year.*

*Far left, middle, the rural school in the small village of Sivaca near our Mission headquarters in Ocosingo.*

*All others, Tzeltal school boys who miss a lot of school days and usually stop going at all after third grade, having to help their parents in the fields or at home.*



*C'un, c'un.*  
(Little by little.)

~Tzeltal phrase

*ranching or construction skills, much more useful for their future. As it is, it is hard for these people to look to the future—their daily survival doesn't give them much time to stop and think.*

**January 1972**

Br. Raymond Bertheaux, O.P.  
*Here in Altamirano, school children aren't any different from those all over the world—some are studious, others mischievous, but all are special. Here though, there are a few unique aspects of the school day: there is no such thing as a teacher on yard duty or a janitor (students clean their own classrooms and yards); tuition is free as are books, which they take to and from school, rain or shine; classes go from 9 am to 1 pm and again from 4 pm to 5 pm, allowing for a long break to work in the fields. The Indian children rarely finish their schooling, most of them dropping out after third grade. A parent believes that if their child knows how to write his name, that is enough.*

*Then begins the royal battle between the teacher and the parent, who comes running to us at the Mission for support. To their surprise we generally encourage them to keep their child in school if possible; we even offer to help financially if that would make a difference. We know full well that in the long run it will be education that slows down the cycle of poverty.*

*If the child completes sixth grade, he is ready for his three years of high school, if family circumstances permit. In a family of eight, which is average, the father might have to sell his few skinny cows or pigs or buy and sell coffee or corn. And unfortunately, the high schools in Chiapas are liberal arts-based rather than technical, which could teach*

*However there is always hope. In the hall of our Mission house is a lending library with magazines, paperback encyclopedias, Bible history books, etc., which many enjoy and return, even the teachers. And last June, not only did the first-ever Indian boy of the parish graduate from sixth grade, he also had the highest grades! Because we had set aside some donations for such an occasion, he will be able to attend the Spanish Dominican High School in Oaxaca.*

The following is taken from one of many online articles on the current state of education in Chiapas, articles that sound good and have well-researched statistics, but whose recommendations are meaningless—there are too many impossible obstacles to overcome, all sustained by government corruption.

**February 2024**

Elizabeth Sanchez

from "Lack of Access to Quality Education for Rural Indigenous Communities in Chiapas, Mexico,"  
*Ballard Brief*

"The Mexican state of Chiapas has the highest indigenous population in the country and the least educated population of any state. 55.24% are illiterate, compared to the state's overall illiteracy rate of 13.6%. Only 43% of its rural indigenous peoples will complete primary school, 5% will complete secondary school, and 0.7% will attend university. A history of indigenous marginalization and government unwillingness to recognize and remedy this creates a serious roadblock to any permanent change in indigenous education levels.

Multidimensional poverty in Chiapas encompasses the various deprivations experienced by poor individuals in their daily lives, including consumption, income, educational attainment and enrollment, drinking water, sanitation, and electricity. Half of Chiapas' indigenous population 'reports no income at all, and another 42% make less than \$5 a day.' About three-fourths of their households lack electricity, and two-thirds lack potable water. Farmers must use nearly all crops or livestock raised to maintain their survival, leaving little, if any, surplus for sale or trade. The rich soil brings more large-scale agricultural exporters who overrun the small indigenous farmers. Government spending on education is often allocated inefficiently, resulting in excessive expenditures in executing substandard or failed projects. Often, families must pay fraudulent 'fees' for education services, such as enrollment or supplies, that should be free.

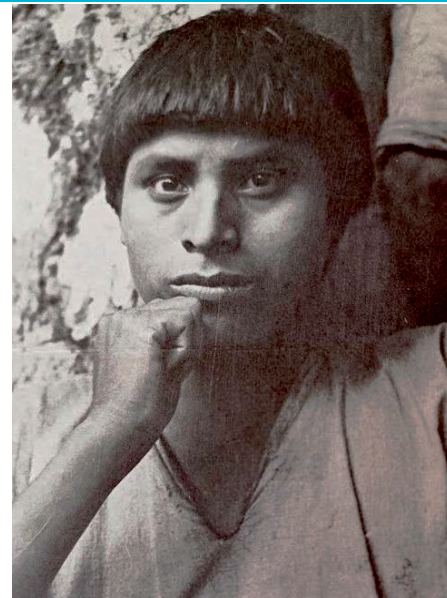
Further, quality education must be accessible, with convenient and safe transportation options to and from school, but 12,000 rural communities in Chiapas are only accessible by mountain trails. For many indigenous children, a school may be relatively close by, but a road may not exist to connect them, and an incomplete road system impedes the development of all other public works, such as electricity, water, and sewage facilities.

*The confluence of historical government neglect, gender inequality, language barriers, and low family income seriously hinders the indigenous of Chiapas from receiving a high-quality education—if any education at all.*

*One practice to begin remedying this issue is to implement Bilingual-Intercultural Education in Intercultural Universities to give indigenous communities greater access to an education that values their cultural background. Indigenous-centered education programs help students achieve higher education in a way that values their unique cultural heritage, helps preserve culture and language, and promotes development. The New Educational Model (Nuevo Modelo Educativo), introduced in 2017, restructured the education system 'to provide quality education with equity and prepare all students for the 21st century' giving schools more autonomy over curriculum."*

Do the solutions offered in that last paragraph sound at all feasible? **We can only help continue the work of our early, selfless, hopeful missionaries by being realistic—doing what we can do, as they did, little by little.** It seems to me that other than the addition of junk food in the picture from 2024, (right), more progress was made between 1967 and 1972 than in the last decades. The Zapatistas made demands and the government made promises, but not much has changed. The Mission Office does not directly support schools in Chiapas, but we do support the youth of our Dominican parishes there, in ministries from music to mentoring, retreats, counseling, and financial aid. **In all our mission areas, our primary focus has always been on the children**, especially those who have been orphaned or abused or, as in Chiapas, those whose parents are unable to provide them with adequate care or education. Indeed, they are the hope of the Church and the world!

Peace,  
*Lesley Warnswuis*



*A good boy, alert, intelligent, curious, with potential far outreaching what his environment can offer. In this pensive moment, is he thinking what the future holds for him? Unlike the youth of our own country, his destiny is most likely limited to the bounds of his remote community. Our constant question is, "How can we best assist him in achieving his potential, in arriving at his goal of happiness?" ~Br. Raymond Bertheaux, O.P. January 1972*

**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.*

|                           |            |
|---------------------------|------------|
| Christ the King, Salinas  | Oct. 5-6   |
| TBA, San Francisco        | Oct. 19-20 |
| St. Sebastian, Sebastopol | Nov. 16-17 |

**If you'd like to remember us in your will, our legal name is:**  
Province of the Holy Name, Inc.  
Dominican Mission Foundation  
We are qualified as a tax-exempt, non-profit under IRS section 501(c)3.