

## HOLY WEEK MISSIONS IN MEXICO

### Brother Stephen Caplice

"The mission is a school for leaders, a school for catechists, a school for agents of human development, a school of prayer, a school of liturgy, a school for Catholics committed to Christ, the Church and the People of God. It is, finally, a school for vocations. These are not just words. These are facts." This explanation of the Holy Week mission appeared in the most recent issue of the Newsletter of the District of Mexico North. It was my pleasure during Holy Week to accompany one group of missionaries in the sierra of Durango and to observe the development of the mission by participating in it.

Durango is a state of the US of Mexico. Large and sparsely populated, it is made up of dry plateaus covered with lava rock and deeply fissured by ravines. It extends west-ward to the Sierra Madre Occidental and it is in that sierra in the town of El Salto that the District maintains a community whose mission is the formation of catechists. However, the District's association with the Prelature of El Salto goes back much further. For the past fourteen years the students of the Brothers' schools have gone to the Prelature several times during the year, but most importantly during Holy Week, to conduct missions of evangelization. In the first mission about forty boys and girls served four pueblos. In 1995 one thousand two hundred students served eighty-four pueblos. (Most Brothers in the District of Mexico North were on mission with their students during Holy Week.) In addition, there were similar missions in Chihuahua, Tamaulipas, Sonora, Baja California and other points throughout Mexico. Also a large number of other persons who are not students of the Brothers, for example students of the Jesuit university and others from the private Technological Institute of Monterrey, either joined the Lasallian missions or carried out their own missions according to the Lasallian plan. The District of Mexico South conducts missions within its territory as well. In all, about five thousand "Lasallistas" and their moderators carried out missions in all of Mexico this year.

For Durango '95 we needed thirty-four interurban buses to transport the students from their homebase to the town of El Salto, center of the Prelature of El Salto, Durango. I joined the students of the Instituto Frances de la Laguna of Gomez Palacio, Durango. At 4:00 AM on 8 April 250 students boarded six buses for the six-hour trip to El Salto. We arrived in time for the Missioning Mass celebrated by the Bishop of the Prelature. By midday all twelve hundred missionaries had climbed into seventy-five vehicles to continue their journey to their missions. My own destination, the

village of Corralitos, was six hours away over a logging road, no pavement and clouds of dust. My thirty companions and I, under the leadership of Prof. Miguel Angel Carillo, made the trip in the buckets of two huge dump trucks and happy we were to have such fine accommodations. Some miles further on, the road came to an end! Those whose missions were beyond that point continued on mule. One scholastic, a "mulero" missioned in Tierra Blanca, told me that he had a twelve-hour ride on the back of a mule (after the seven-hour ride to the end of the road in a truck) and arrived at his mission at about 4:00 AM on Palm Sunday morning. A quick recap of the travel arrangements: thirty-four buses to El Salto; seventy-five vehicles (pick-ups, school buses, and dump trucks) to the missions or to the end of the road; and four hundred mules to the most inaccessible missions. (And one plane which delivered me from Tijuana to Torreon/Gomez Palacio!) One can imagine the amount of preparation necessary to arrange all this.

In our mission fraternity we were fortunate to have a priest with us and so we actually had Mass each day. In most other fraternities, which ranged in number from five members to forty-five, the missionaries themselves conducted paraliturgies. Each fraternity had with them hosts consecrated by the Bishop at the Missioning Mass. Each group had undergone extensive training in paraliturgical celebrations and had received specific instructions first from their moderators and then from the Bishop as to what they could or could not do.

The plan of each day was similar. The missionaries rose at 7:00 AM and soon after joined for Morning Prayer. Their style of prayer called for different kinds of activities, gathering symbols of death and life, for example, or giving a little gift to a new or special friend, or speaking about who in the fraternity represented Christ the day before and why. The young men and women shared their successes and their failures very honestly and openly, with a level of confidence in each other that came from their participation in prayer services all year long. Trained as I am—we are!—in the use of the Holy Office, this style of prayer is not mine, but these young people prayed intensely. One could not help but join them in their prayer. On some mornings prayer lasted for an hour and a half and the evening prayer tended to be even longer. (It is worth remarking too that one day's prayer was devoted especially to the theme of vocation in the Church and particularly to our Institute.) Between 10:00 and 11:00 AM the missionaries, divided into triads, began visiting the homes of Catholics who live in a specified area of the pueblo. My triad consisted of a university student (Carlos also provided most of the music during the week, both in the fraternity and in the liturgies), a high school girl and myself. Each triad visited an average of ten households each day. The villagers were genuinely glad to see the missionaries and on many occasions inquired about individuals who had been missionaries in years gone by, a clear indication of the impact these young men and women have.

During the first visit a census was taken and lists prepared for first communions, baptisms, marriages and other pastoral needs. During each visit the scripture was read and discussed briefly with the family and notice was given concerning the activities that were to take place later that afternoon. By 3:00 PM the missionaries returned to the school where we made our home base and with admirable enthusiasm and in spite of their fatigue, they began the activities appropriate to each age group. For the little children there were games of tag and such things. For the teenagers there were basketball, football and volleyball games. For the young adults, for the women and for the men there were other activities designed to attract

them into the school. After the activities there was a catechism lesson for each group, each talk prepared for the specific target group. Mass was celebrated at an appropriate time each day. Activities and lessons continued on into the evening until about 9:30 PM. At 10:00 PM the missionaries ate supper and gathered for Night Prayer. The prayer could last an hour and a half or longer. Very honestly I told these young men and women that they taught me a great deal about community prayer.

The schedule differed a bit each day because of the hour of Mass and because there were special activities planned, such as the Family Day picnic and the Noche Alegre when the missionaries presented a musical and comedy show they had prepared, complete with costumes and elaborate props. Most notable because of the widespread participation of the villagers was the living Way of the Cross presented by the missionaries on Good Friday.

Close by our village, about a half hour away by truck, there was a smaller fraternity—eighteen youngsters, mostly high schoolers—and several times Father Rogelio Carillo and I went to visit them and minister to the people of La Puerta. For example, on Holy Saturday we began the Vigil in La Puerta at 6:00 PM, planning on finishing by 8:15 or so and returning to Corralitos by 9:00 for the Vigil in that pueblo. Our driver refused to make the trip in spite of his agreement with us and we had to make other arrangements, so that we actually arrived in Corralitos at about 10:30 PM. The people were waiting patiently and Fr Rogelio got the Vigil under way quickly. In the two pueblos Father Rogelio blessed about fifteen marriages and heard numerous confessions. I baptized about twenty children, and about fifty children received first communion.

On Easter Sunday morning at 5:00 AM our fraternity left Corralitos and returned in our trucks to the Cathedral of El Salto for the Closing Mass. A happier Mass was never celebrated! The missionaries were almost all present. Only a few fraternities, the most distant ones, had not arrived by the time Mass began. The atmosphere was already electric with the joy of Easter, with the knowledge of a mission well conducted, with the pleasure of seeing friends again, with the anticipated pleasure of spending the night in one's own bed after a hot supper (Mom's cooking!) and the ultimate pleasure after a long dusty week, a hot shower. The student musicians from our school in Monclova are just terrific and provided the music for our Easter Sunday Mass. Their arrangements are not what we might play in our retirement homes, but they sure do light up the young people. There were lots of "spontaneous" demonstrations of Easter joy and youthful exuberance, all encouraged by the student musicians and all patiently permitted by a Bishop who obviously loves La Salle and Lasallian youth.

But by 12:00 Noon my fraternity had begun their six-hour return trip and I began a week-long visit with the novices of the two Mexican districts in nearby Parmenia, a retreat house owned by the District of Mexico North.

The quote with which this report starts is absolutely true. These young people cannot participate in the Holy Week mission if they have not been faithful to a well-planned pro-

gram of training during the entire year. There are regular weekly meetings during which they study the material they will be teaching on the mission. They work at least once a week at a predetermined ministry in their own towns. They meet regularly for prayer. In fact, in October I participated in a three-day workshop in Instituto La Salle, Ciudad Obregon, Sonora, in which the Lasallian youth from three schools were taught the method of mental prayer devised by our Holy Founder, a workshop that was conducted in each of three regions of Mexico Norte at the same time. More than anything else, I believe, the mission is an experience of prayer: personal and community prayer, and prayer in action with the people who receive the mission.

What made the mission special for me is the same thing that makes it special for the young people themselves. I asked a number of them and a number of Brothers what part of the mission was most important—Faith (prayer, liturgy), Service (ministry to the people) or Community (life in the fraternity). All except one told me that life in the fraternity was the most important part of the experience. The one who told me otherwise is Brother Lorenzo Gonzalez Kipper, who designed the whole process, who understands its dynamism and who would emphasize that the whole thing hangs together like the **Rule** tells us we vowed Brothers should hang together in community. The community sends the missionary to his assigned task and it is to the community that the missionary returns. It is from the community that the missionary draws strength and courage to carry out his mission; it is in the community that the missionary learns to face God in prayer, shares the Word with his companions and is nourished by the Word made Flesh. It is to the community that the missionary brings his success or failure at the end of the day and it is the community that heals and encourages, builds and strengthens, nourishes and forms. And it is in the community that the missionary learns and shares his devotion to Mary, the Virgin Mother of God, an important element in the spirituality of the missionary.

For the missionaries participation in the mission is without doubt the most powerful religion lesson they have had. They are indeed catechists and agents of change. They spend a good proportion of their time in prayer and lead others to prayer. The liturgy is for them the central point of the day. By their faith and their zeal they demonstrate their commitment to Christ, to the Church, to their people and to each other. How can they fail to develop leadership skills for the Church of the future? That one novice spoke to me about his participation in fourteen missions prior to casting his lot with us indicates that the mission is indeed "a school for vocations".

I met young people in these two fraternities who are incredibly good. They let their light shine, but I think they don't know how bright that light is. What a privilege it is to have known these young people, even for so short a time!

In these few words I cannot hope to give more than a hint of what happened on this mission. However, it is truly a most important event in my own life and a clear demonstration that the Spirit is at work in the District of Mexico North. •