

Courage, Mexico, you do not walk alone!

Demetria Martinez | May. 21, 2009 NCR Today

"Religion," said Franciscan Fr. Richard Rohr, "has been much better at creating boundaries than creating bridges. It seems to me that the primary work of religion should be to build bridges across the boundaries."

Rohr is the founder of the Center for Action and Contemplation in Albuquerque, N.M., where he is based. He made his comments at a May 17 prayer vigil, sponsored by the center at Holy Family parish in Albuquerque. The event, titled "Courage, Mexico, You Do Not Walk Alone!" was organized as a response to the troubles plaguing Mexico -- from maldistribution of wealth to drug cartel violence.

Rohr called upon people of faith to stand united with their brothers and sisters in Mexico -- and to stand against the spiritual and political borders that religion and government have historically reinforced. The presence of the U.S.-Mexico border, he explained, presents Christians with an opportunity to practice solidarity -- a mandate of faith present not only in the New Testament, but in the Hebrew and Muslim scriptures. "The border is what makes us one -- not our politics and our nationality," he said.

Now more than ever, Mexico needs prayer -- and action -- on its behalf, according to Fr. Rafael Garcia. Based in Albuquerque at Immaculate Conception parish, Garcia has served parishes in Tijuana, Mexico, and El Paso, Texas. He outlined the current situation in Mexico:

- The North American Free Trade Agreement, or NAFTA, Garcia explained, has displaced millions of Mexican farmers, whose means of earning a living was decimated after the country was flooded by cheap corn from the United States. "NAFTA did not create a level playing field" for the poor as political leaders had promised, Garcia said.
- Whole villages throughout Mexico have been emptied of young men -- and growing numbers of women -- who have come to the U.S. to work and send money home. "A person can earn more in one day in El Paso-- as a day laborer or house cleaner -- than he or she can earn in one week in Juarez," Garcia said. This exodus has meant that women, the elderly and children in the home villages have been left to fend for themselves.
- Draconian immigration laws make it nearly impossible for Mexicans working illegally in the U.S. to go back home -- for fear of being deported upon return to the U.S. to continue work. This has further eroded family unity.
- Massive deportations have resulted in the break up of families in the U.S. (Immigration authorities will, for example, deport a parent, leaving U.S.-citizen children or spouses behind, often without warning.)
- The demand for drugs on the part of U.S. citizens has fueled drug cartel violence; and corruption throughout the Mexican government has made prosecution of drug cartels almost impossible. "You're more afraid to call the police than any one else," Garcia said.
- The swine flu has wrecked the tourist industry in Mexico. "Cities are paralyzed," said Garcia, as the economic situation goes from bad to worse.

Garcia praised the work of religious orders in Mexico who are standing with the poor. He pointed in particular to the work of Centro Santa Catalina in Ciudad Juarez. Founded by two Dominican Sisters of Adrian, Mich. the

center works for the spiritual, education and economic empowerment of women. (Participants at the vigil brought food and clothing to donate to the center.)

Towards the end of the vigil, Rohr offered a prayer he composed for the occasion:

"Oh God, how unfair you are!
You clearly show favorites,
You take the side of the poor, the oppressed
And the forgotten!
And leave us to our self-created comforts.
But we can pray, join hearts, mend minds,
And stand united with these favorites of yours,
These indispensable ones who show us
That things are not as they seem,
And Your mercies are new every morning?"

Rohr's inspiration from the prayer came from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, 12:22-23: "It is precisely the parts of the Body that seem to be the weakest which are the indispensable ones?and we must clothe them with the greatest care."

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