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Pioneering priests lead way for U.S.-Latin America ties

by Zoe Ryan



Fr. Marti Colom, current priest serving at Sagrada Familia Parish, blesses the congregation on Palm Sunday in 2009. (Courtesy of the Mission Office of the Milwaukee archdiocese)

Fr. Greg Schaffer didn't jump at the chance to be the first priest from the New Ulm, Minn., diocese to do mission work in Guatemala, but now it's difficult not to think of him at the mention of the mission of San Lucas Tolimán.

When he first became a priest, he enjoyed working at the high school and parish in southern Minnesota. When the bishop requested volunteers to go to the Sololá diocese in Guatemala, Schaffer didn't volunteer -- he didn't know Spanish and he didn't have any missionary training. But it seems that no other diocesan priest had the language skills or training, because not too many offered to go, he said.

And so, Schaffer was sent down in 1962.

Schaffer was part of a wave of diocesan priests sent to Latin America in the 1960s, many as a response to the Second Vatican Council's call for human and economic resources to Latin America. Over years, they would weave human bonds between places like St. Cloud, Minn., and Maracay, Venezuela; and Jefferson

City, Mo., and Ica, Peru.

As the years have passed and the number of priests who could serve in the missions diminished, religious and laypeople followed. Mission trips and immersion programs were introduced. Projects took on new names, like sister dioceses or sister parishes, twinning or global solidarity, but the human bonds remain strong.

Learning from the people

In 1962, Schaffer had three months of Spanish language training and then became pastor of San Lucas Tolimán, a parish founded by Franciscans in the late 16th century. "It took me about three years [to get used to the mission work] because at first of course I didn't know what I was doing there," Schaffer said.

"But the people were so kind and so good. They could've run me out of town on a rail if they wanted to. I was such a strange object there. But they were so patient and they went about trying to teach me."

The object of the whole relationship, he said, was to come to know, appreciate and support the Mayan people living there.

"So I had to learn from the people there who are living the process of poverty and how to deal with that, and ways of going about it, so I tried to follow as best I could what they told me I should be doing," he said. "They put up with all of my mistakes and errors. I've tried to learn from them and be of any service I could."

Two more priests would follow Schaffer to San Lucas Tolimán; one, Fr. John Goggin, is still there. San Lucas became just like any other parish in the New Ulm diocese and Schaffer, in charge of parish finances, made regular trips to Minnesota for fundraising.

The School Sisters of Notre Dame came in 1964, started a school and got involved with the clinic, both running today. "[The sisters] did a lot of marvelous work in primary education," and the people moved on very well from that school, Schaffer said.

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And that's part of mission, so the people aren't just passive recipients. "We'll build them the school but they're going to have to be the teachers," he said.

Other projects respond to the people's needs. For example, an apprenticeship program pays young people to learn skills, like stonecutting, and deters them from gangs or drugs.

Today, mission trips to San Lucas Tolimán are popular among people in and outside of New Ulm.

Walking with the people

The relationship between the Milwaukee archdiocese and the Dominican Republic's Sagrada Familia Parish started in 1981, said Franciscan Sr. Frances Cunningham, director of World Mission Ministries for the archdiocese. Two priests went down initially and served about three years as pastors. Cunningham described those priests as "good at meeting people." It took time to get to know the people, but in time they trusted the priests, she said.

?I say, ?They walked with the people? and built that trust,? she said.



The archdiocese has sent more than 14 priests, Cunningham said. The 30th anniversary of the relationship was in May and all attended, save one deceased priest, she said.

Her office stresses that this is a ?relationship? and that everyone in the archdiocese should feel that they are in this relationship, she said, whether they join an immersion trip or not. The point of the relationship, she said, is ?how can we serve each other??

A ministry that demonstrates the trust gained over the years is prison ministry, which at first had priests only ministering to the prisoners from across the cell bars. But due to the strength and constancy of the ministry, priests now are allowed to go into the cells to minister, she said.

The relationship, Cunningham said, emphasizes changing injustice together. People understand the emphasis on justice versus one solely on charity, she said.

The Milwaukee archdiocese once had a relationship with the Asunción archdiocese in Paraguay. Priests and religious sisters traveled there and the work was mainly pastoral. From 1966 to 1975, six priests served, each completing a two-and-a-half-year stint.

The commitment ended when it became difficult to get replacements for the priests and sisters, said Elizabeth Howayeck, the associate director/international mission coordinator for the Milwaukee archdiocese.

The Jefferson City, Mo., diocese began staffing parishes in the Peruvian dioceses of Ica and Puno in 1962 because Joseph Marling, Jefferson City's first bishop, knew the nuncio of Peru. Its priests and religious would stay for 40 years. The diocese aided with the ministry of missionary priests and sisters, financial support, and social and economic assistance programs.

The diocese stopped sending full-time personnel for two reasons, according to Mark Saucier, mission director of Jefferson City diocese. As the missionaries aged, no one was there to replace them. Also, the people in those dioceses reached a certain level of self-sufficiency.

The Jefferson City diocese recently developed mission trips, he said, which he hopes are transformative experiences for the young people who participate, but also transformative experiences in their involvement in the church back home.

?Solidarity relationship?

The St. Cloud, Minn., diocese emphasizes that transformative question to people who participate in its mission trips to Maracay, Venezuela, said Kateri Mancini, the diocese's coordinator of mission education.

The partnership -- a ?mutual walking in solidarity relationship,? Kateri said -- started in 1965 with some help from Maryknoll, the U.S. mission society.



A diocesan brochure describes the relationship as “not just two separate dioceses working toward the same goal; our history is so intertwined, we’re really one diocese spread out over two countries.”

The dioceses show that intertwined history by delegation trips, which is the main thrust of the relationship, Mancini said. Some years a Maracay group visits St. Cloud, and some years a group from St. Cloud goes to Maracay. The dioceses alternate the two-week visits every three years.

Between 1965 and 2000, 17 priests, 11 religious sisters and nine laypeople served as long-term missionaries.

In Maracay, priestly vocations abound, Mancini said, but little funding exists to support the seminary. The Catholics of St. Cloud send some money to the seminary. Maracay even sends priests to St. Cloud for temporary assignments.

The partnership is so strong, Mancini said, because the focus is on relationships. There’s not too heavy an emphasis on material or monetary assistance, she said.

“It’s about people — [and] recognizing the body of Christ in other people.”

Such partnerships are one aspect of mission, said Missionaries of Jesus Fr. Michael Montoya, executive director for the United States Catholic Mission Association. He notes that all the faithful are missionaries “by virtue of our baptism.” This is in *Ad Gentes*, the decree on mission activity from the Second Vatican Council, he said.

Although the number of religious and priests in long-term mission work has fallen since the 1960s and ’70s, there is an increase in short-term mission work, he said, and mission trips are more common now, especially among young people.

Another trend is religious communities promoting their charisms among laypeople through mission trips, he said.

Although he doesn’t have hard data, Montoya said he believes that there’s a growing trend of dioceses and parishes twinning with others in the world. His association is preparing a survey to determine the extent of this trend.

Though mission personnel may be changing, the purpose of mission hasn’t changed, said Fr. Kevin Hays, director of the Missionary Society of St. James the Apostle, based in Boston. Cardinal Richard Cushing founded the society in 1958, as response to the call from Pope Pius XII for a renewed missionary effort in Latin America.

“When you think about the work that we do and the areas that we work in, I don’t think that’s really changed,” Hays said. “We’re in the poorest areas — and the work pretty much has remained the same: the works of evangelization and then also along with that, human development, in response to the situations of extreme poverty.”

The society has priests from English-speaking parts of the world going to Peru, Bolivia and Ecuador. Much of what the society does is set up small Christian communities, Hays said.

He spent 10 years in southern Peru. There was no church structure, he said, so much of his work was door-to-door visiting. An 8.4 earthquake hit, taking down 80 percent of the structures. As he saw the people rebuilding their lives, Hays became more motivated to build a church, wanting also to raise spirits. Along with helping with recovery, he and local community builders constructed a church.

Some may view stories of good works at missions as only sentimental, but mission life can be dangerous. Living among people in extreme poverty and living with the violence that comes with it is part of the missionary vocation, Hays said. (See related story.)

Mission life in Latin America is changing internally. Hays said that at its 2007 assembly in Aparecida, Brazil, the Latin American Bishops' Conference decided that each diocese should implement plans of permanent mission activity. Similar to what the Society of St. James has done, the idea is to build up small Christian communities in all the areas where the church is present, Hays said.

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