

1998-4

Holy Cross in Mexico

by

Br. William Dunn, CSC

Paper presented at the 1998 Conference of the
Congregations of Holy Cross

June 11-14, 1998

Stonehill College
North Easton, Massachusetts

To Porfirio Diaz, president of Mexico 1877-1910, is attributed the lament, "Poor Mexico! So far from God and so near to the United States." But this paper means to show that members of the Congregation of Holy Cross have been helping Mexicans for over a century. The congregation took up work in the old Spanish Borderlands in 1870 when it accepted the invitation of Bishop Dubuis of Galveston to staff St. Mary's College in the island city. Four years later, priests, brothers, and sisters of Holy Cross went to Austin where they took charge of St. Mary's Academy, and by the early 1880's had founded St. Mary's Church and St. Edward's College. Both the college and the academy had boarding departments attended by many youngsters from Mexico. An early bulletin of the college even carried a section in Spanish for Mexican parents to read.

Well before 1890 priests of Holy Cross were working in Central Texas with Mexican immigrants, mostly farm workers. Over the years, the "Texas missions" turned out to be a major Holy Cross apostolate. Today there are three mainly Hispanic parishes in the diocese of Austin conducted by priests of Holy Cross. It would seem that Mexico should have been one of the earliest foreign countries that Holy Cross took up work in. A question frequently mulled over in the South-West Province is why Holy Cross undertook work in far-away Brazil years ago. That work became the responsibility

of the South-West Province when it first was formed as a via-province in 1956. The beginnings in Brazil do need to be recounted, but are not our business here.

Father Frederick Schmidt, CSC, recalls clearly a stage of the process by which the community did finally go to Mexico. He had taken the vow to go to the missions and as a seminarian had studied at the Foreign Mission Seminary. However, instead of being given an assignment to Bangladesh when he was ordained in 1937, he was sent to Texas. There he taught Spanish at St. Edward's University and began doing pastoral work on the Mexican missions around Austin. Eventually he served at St. Helen's in Georgetown and for a longer time at St. Williams in Round Rock. In the course of his pastoral work, he made pilgrimages to shrines of Our Lady in the United States and Mexico. One of the favorite shrines of Texas Mexicans was San Juan de los lagos near Brownsville, a replica of a shrine of the same name in Mexico. He also went with groups to Mexico and visited shrines there, including that of Our Lady of Guadalupe at Mexico City. Father said he probably made around thirty trips to Guadalupe.

All of this increased his desire to serve in Mexico. Then the first Provincial of the Southern Province, Father Christopher J. O'Toule, in his visitation of Father Schmidt in 1971, asked Father if he had any suggestions as to how Holy Cross could be more apostolic. "Yes," Father said, "we ought to have CSC's working in Mexico." The Provincial put

the suggestion to his council, but they vetoed it on the grounds that CSC didn't have enough people to do it. Then Father Schmidt asked for a sabbatical and was told he could have it if he found a substitute for himself. He made a visit to the shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe, praying for the intention. As a result, he got a substitute.

The next thing was to find a place in Mexico where the bishop would welcome him. He wanted a place that was known for having vocations. He tried to get into Guanajuato, but the bishop was not interested. The same thing with the bishop of San Luis Potosi. Then someone suggested that he talk to the bishop of Valles. The bishop accepted Father Schmidt and he wound up at Ahuacatlan, a Mestizo village in the rainforest on the eastern slope of the Sierra Madre Oriental, not far from Victoria, in eastern San Luis Potosi State. He was warmly accepted by the people there. With the help of benefactors in the United States and using local labor, the parish built a church, El Padre Jesus, which the bishop blessed in ceremonies on July 16, 1977. Present for the occasion was a team of volunteers, including Holy Cross Brothers, from Austin. The volunteers were mostly young people from Dolores and San Jose parishes in Austin. Franciscan sisters from Dolores were also present. They had taken the lead in organizing a summer catechetical program for the children of Padre Jesus.

As Father Schmidt at the age of ninety looks back at the years he has spent in Mexico, he

4

satisfaction in the opportunity to be "just an instrument," he insists "of Jesus and Mary." In addition to his pastoral work he has been able to get cloistered nuns, Augustinian recollets, for whom he has built a convent on the church grounds. Since he retired as pastor, he has continued to work with the sisters and with the parish Legion of Mary.

Father is happy to see that Holy Cross is expanding in Mexico and he wants more CSCs to help meet the needs there and to get to know the wonderful Mexican people

Another CSC with a great record in Mexico is Father Allison Mahoney of the Anglo Canadian Province. This paper is deficient on his work in Chiapas after going there in 1974. But he obviously was a champion of the poor and a secker of social justice. In this quest he became, like Bishop Samuel Ruiz of Cristobal de las Casas, persona non grata to the civil authorities and was denied a visa for further work in Mexico. An important enterprise he was involved in at this time was an ecumenical translation of the Bible into the indigenous language of the Tzotil Indians.

Another C.S.C. worthy of a better narrative than this is Father Jaime Erwin. Father Erwin's field has been the marginalized Colonia Verde of Ciudad Obregon, Sonora. The Circle Valle Verde provides many services to the people. Father Erwin has recently been trying to get enough pesos together to build a new church. He speaks of the distinction between "Catholics of the Family," who are

regular and supportive and "Visiting Catholics" who are not around that much except for Baptisms, First Communions, Marriages, the last rites, and Christian burial. He tries to find ways to challenge the Visitors.

The preceding have been solo apostolates of Holy Cross in Mexico. The first CSC team effort there began when the Southern Province, in September of 1987, took over the administration of the parish of Santo Tomas Moro in Colonia 21 de Enero in the city of Guadalupe, Nuevo Leon, near Monterrey. Clear reasons for the move of Holy Cross to Mexico were:

1. to help understand the background of Mexican immigrants to the United States;
2. to participate in the Mexican Church;
3. to provide a milieu that would facilitate the learning of Spanish;
4. to form lay people in the context of culture of northern Mexico;
5. to discover and nurture vocations to Holy Cross in Mexico.

Father John Keefe was named the first CSC pastor of Santo Tomas Moro, a post he held for about nine years. The parish provided social services as well as pastoral services. Soup kitchens were operated at the chapel of San Matias in Colonia Valle Hermosa and at the chapel of San

Miguel Arcangel in Colonia Zaragoza. During Holy week, missions were given, in which the people participated with enthusiasm, in the ranchos of Carranza and Nogales. During the missions, the pastoral staff sought to form the people in biblical spirituality, to involve them in "comunidades de base" and to hold youth activities.

About this time Father Daniel Panchot, who had been working in Chile arrived to do vocation work at Guadalupe. By 1987, candidates were arriving. In time it was necessary to build a larger house of formation, in the Colonia "21 de Enero." A novitiate for all Spanish speaking of Holy Cross was established in Chile in February 1996. The first Mexican was professed there. In May Brother Jose Tomei of the South-West Province and Father John Korscmar of the vocations offices respectively of the South-West and Southern Provinces visited missions where they studied the CSC formation program.

An important development for the congregation in Mexico was the creation in 1996 of a new parish, Nuestra Senora, de la Luz, out of Santo Tomas Moro. Holy Cross, by agreement with the bishop, then turned the Santo Tomas over to diocesan priests, and took La Luz. It was an emotional moment when Father Keefe was installed as pastor there by auxiliary Bishop Jose Ligares of Monterrey. However Father Keefe, just installed at La Luz and after years at Guadalupe, was soon reassigned to the United States. After dealing with the shock of the people and complaints

religious life sometimes requires such changes, he moved out early on August 7, 1996. People were glad to see him when he returned the next year for a pastoral workshop at Saltillo and was able to celebrate a special mass at San Matias.

To replace Father Keefe, Father Peter Logsdon, CSC, was installed as pastor at La Luz at an afternoon Mass presided over by the pro-vicar general of the Archdiocese of Monterrey. This was followed by a fiesta at which the people waved multi-colored flags, sang "Las Mananitas" and shouted vivas for Christ the King and the Virgin.

For lack of personnel, the Holy Cross Brothers have not been able to send men to Mexico for a long time. However, Brother Roberto Jimenez Ortega was there for a while.

The Holy Cross Sisters went to Monterrey in 1994 at the invitations of the Holy Cross Fathers. Pioneers were Sister Jacinta Millian, CSC, and Sister Charlotte Le Boeuf, MSC, who established a house and began a ministry. Two additional CSCs joined the community in the following January. In the parish they would especially prepare women for leadership in basic Christian Communities, in catechetics, and in teaching English. They also aided marginalized women and prepared young women for Quinceaneras, along with youth groups and children.

In August 1996, the sisters chose to join Holy Cross priests in serving at the new parish of La Luz. Sister Michelle formed a "Wider

sisters Charlotte and Joan have worked with Bible study groups. Sister Jacinta helps with retreats for married couples, First Communions for handicapped children, and alphabetization for women. All have worked on full-day retreats where women who have been tied up with housework and children have an opportunity to be with adults. The sisters also have regular parish duties such as visiting the sick, being present with chapel communities, and catechizing. "Life is challenging and ever-changing," writes Sister Joan, "in this very different world so near the border."

But before the sisters went to Monterrey, Sister Barbara Korem, CSC, in 1983 began a study of health care needs in the Brownsville-Matamoros area. For this she interviewed twenty-four female heads of houses. After working part time at trying to meet medical needs in the area, she moved to Matamoros in 1987 and she began to work full-time at her medical mission. This ministry expanded some to meet spiritual needs. Women began to organize as Guadalupanas and catechists. In 1994 a chapel was completed at Cinco de Mayo. Classes in English as a foreign language were held.

In fine, Holy Cross in Mexico is no longer a dream. What is needed, as our religious say, is to get native vocations and strengthen our presence down there.

Sources

1. Santa Cruz en Mexico, newsletter 1994-1998.
2. Father Fred Schmidt, CSC, tape recordings of his reminiscences, 1998.
3. Sister Joan Mader, CSC, letter to me May 15, 1998.
4. Sisters Joan Mader, CSC, and Michelle Toepp, MSC, "Mujeres de Santa Cruz en Mexico."
5. (Sister Joan Mader), "Update on Sisters' Activity."