

**A DREAM WITHOUT BORDERS: SISTERS OF THE HOLY CROSS IN MEXICO**

**Presented at**

**43<sup>rd</sup> Annual Holy Cross History Association Conference**

**June 15<sup>th</sup>, 2024**

There are different types of borders, and any of those borders create distance between people. There is the physical one that doesn't allow us to cross over to the other side, country, or land, but there are others like stereotypes, language, communication, values, and beliefs that make it hard to relate with people different than us. These types of borders are the ones the family of Holy Cross overcame when it began its new mission in Mexico. Their willingness to be vulnerable in a land that wasn't theirs, a country that even if welcomed with open arms, was a space where they were challenged to learn from the people who claimed ownership of the space and place.

Holy Cross women and men were exposed to a culture with deeply ingrained habits, some difficult to understand like unpunctuality, which was a constant reality they faced while trying to do their ministry. Other habits were good like the hospitality of the traditional Mexican culture expressed in hugs, smiles, and family celebrations, which in the end, were some of the high points that helped Holy Cross persevere in a country so different than theirs. There are many stories to tell about the many women and men who joined the mission in Mexico, but this time, the memories shared will highlight two Holy Cross sisters whose lives were impacted when they willingly crossed both types of borders.

The Area of North America, particularly in the southern part, required that the sisters had some knowledge of Spanish to be able to understand the reality of the people who lived there. Hospitals, schools and parishes were the favored places occupied by the Hispanics other than their own homes. In 1973 Sister Barbara Korem, a Sister of the Holy Cross, was given a special assignment in Midwifery at the Clinica Familiar in Raymondville Texas. As a nurse practitioner, she opened the first home health clinic in

Rio Grande Valley to give service to the poor in the area. The Hispanics were most of her clients.

Sister Joan Mader, a Sister of the Holy Cross, had been teaching Adult Education in East Chicago when she was assigned to parish ministry in various parishes in Texas from 1976 to 1981. She said, "I was fascinated by the possibility of using my Spanish instead of just teaching it." The ability to speak and understand Spanish was the reason the Sisters were able to identify the needs of the poor so readily as they walked among the people and spent time with them in their towns and homes.

Each Sister in her own assignment, in her own time, knew she needed to be in Texas designing, directing, and monitoring programs, facilities, and funds to make life better for the people. The new experiences of helping those people helped the sisters to understand that God's call was to serve in this way and eventually to extend themselves even further. Each sister, with her way of approaching people, of animating others to collaborate in projects with the same conviction and passion for service, contributed greatly to the dreams of other sisters. Sisters who had or would have the opportunity to go to Mexico for a short or long ministry experience. Some of those were Sisters Jacinta Millan, Charlotte LeBoeuf (Marianites of Holy Cross), Michelle Toepp, Patricia Anne Clossey, Eleanor Synder, Patricia Mary Crane. Sisters Jacinta and Patricia Crane died in 2020.

Today, through this paper and presentation, I wish to honor all the Sisters of the Holy Cross who have served the poor in Texas and across the border into Mexico. But this paper was researched and written especially to pay tribute, to honor two women for their faith, hope, love, courage and determination to make life better for others: Sisters

Barbara Korem and Sister Joan Mader.

While living and offering health care in Raymondville, Texas, occasionally Sister Barbara would cross the border to go to the city of Matamoros, Mexico, to explore the area. She wanted to know the needs of the people there. She had something in mind for them. That was to go once a week to see some patients and return to her local community in Texas. Some days she would spend a night or two in Mexico to be able to see more patients until, finally, she opened her first clinic in Matamoros. Persistent, passionate and quiet, are only a few words to describe how little by little Barbara won the acceptance and trust of the people.

At first, Sister Barbara did not intend to persuade other sisters to come and help her, nor did she do anything to convince the congregation to establish a mission there. Her only intention was to help the needy. Although her time in Mexico, at this point, was never considered the first mission of the Sisters of the Holy Cross in the country of Mexico, the congregation considered Barbara ministry an extension of what she was doing in Texas.

In 1987, with the permission of her superiors, Barbara moved full-time to Matamoros to be able to attend her clinic and explore other rural areas. The first small clinic later became two clinics in two different rural areas.

In addition to attending to the sick at the clinics, she would continue her visits to other villages to assist those who couldn't travel to any of the clinics. Barbara was convinced of the importance of wellness of body and spirit. Nursing wasn't her only ministry. With the help of many Holy Cross sisters, who agreed to visit and accompany her for a specific time, each one of them in their own time, like Sr Nancy Pewterbaugh, Joan Mader, and

Eleanor Snyder (who later became a local community member in 2007), it was possible to teach catechesis to children and adults and train some volunteers for this ministry.

While she had the support of some volunteers teaching sacraments, she would train volunteers to visit families and help with health awareness. With the assistance of friends, family, benefactors, and her religious community, she was able to bring good to many families, who benefited in many areas. Barbara also built the Santa Cruz chapel which was a space much needed for the community there.

Sister Barbara was a warrior doing her best for the people in Matamoros. She was the one promoting the mission, contacting benefactors, inviting volunteers, making visits to different towns to attend to the sick, and listening to the needs of the people. In addition to all that she continued to fulfill her responsibilities in the congregation: participating in area assemblies, theological reflection groups, contacting friends in the community, and studying for a master's degree. Her family was very supportive; her blood sister, Lois Wold, was an important element in the process of fulfilling her mission. Anytime Barbara needed an extra hand or accompaniment to visit certain places for research for her master, Lois was always there, she was a great volunteer and a faithful sister.

Doctors, parishioners, and parish friends from many cities in the United States came to Matamoros to help on different occasions. The parishes of St. Matthews in Houston, TX, Saint Francis Xavier in Birmingham, St. Anthony's in Raymondville, TX, and St. Pious X in North Carolina provided funds, food, and clothing, and assisted her every step of the way. Some priests from the States would go and celebrate mass in some of the villages of Matamoros. Also, students from different universities in the United States came to her mission to support the cause. Two steady volunteers often came to

Matamoros: Janet Harrod and Brandy Stronczek. Barbara's mission was also theirs. Barbara seemed unstoppable, even during some long hours of work, sometimes ending her time at the clinic at 2 am, and on one occasion at 4 am. People knew she would always be there for them.

The time Barbara was in Matamoros was filled with moments of joy, but also some difficulties. The joy always came from the people, the gratefulness they showed, even in their poverty. Paying the consultation with eggs, chickens, fruits, or vegetables, was a sign of how much they valued the attention received. The difficulties, on the contrary, didn't come from her clients. There was a priest who was not happy with the influence that Barbara had on the people. He did everything possible to remove her from the ministry she was doing. There were false accusations and threats from the local government that, after careful investigation, were disqualified by the state government. Barbara had the support of the people of the town. They recognized her authority, and they knew her and her work.

While living and doing her ministry in Matamoros, Barbara was studying for a master's in Tropical epidemiology at Tulane University in New Orleans. She recognized that where she lived in northern Mexico the climate was not tropical. Her dream to do more was in process. When her sister Lois came to visit her, the two took a short vacation to the south of Mexico, they visited Campeche, Tabasco, and Chiapas, all of them with tropical weather. Yes, after 20 years of ministry in the border city of Matamoros, Sister Barb saw the need to move to the south. As soon as she graduated, in 2006, with a master's degree in science, Public Health and Tropical Medicine, she presented to the

Congregation a proposal to open a mission in a region where her skills could also be well appreciated.

After careful discernment, the community accepted the new adventure that sisters Barbara and Eleanor Snyder would begin. Frontera, Tabasco, a place located in the south of Mexico, with a tropical climate and in great need of health care was the new mission of the sisters. Barbara didn't waste her time trying to offer her resources as a nurse. She immediately reached out to the people in need. In just a few weeks she established a clinic and would visit two villages divided by a river. To go to those communities traveling on a precarious boat was the challenging part of the ministry.

After some months of ministry, Barbara took some time for a vacation to visit her family in Greensboro, North Carolina. She also took advantage of a regular check-up with doctors; it was then she found out she was very ill. "I come from a long line of strong women!", said Barbara when was told the news. She decided to fight as she did when facing difficulties in Mexico. Sadly, time and her illness were against her. Barbara moved to South Bend to begin an intense treatment that unfortunately didn't allow her to go back to Mexico. Two Mexican novices (Sisters Areli Cruz and Esperanza Jacobo) had the chance to see Barbara in the hospital, they were very appreciative and proud of meeting her. They thanked her for all she did for the good of Mexico. Barbara seemed happy to see them, sisters from the country that she cherished in her heart. Her desire to continue her ministry in Tabasco was stopped. She fought hard to overcome her illness, but God had a different plan for her. On May 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2010, sister Barbara fulfilled her mission in life. Barbara's quick way of responding to the needs she saw in Matamoros was a part of her personality. Even if she just followed her heart in a way that, maybe, any congregation

would consider risky and, in some way, disobedient, Sister Barbara's mission in Mexico was an invitation from the Holy Spirit. On Sr. Joan Mader's process to go to Mexico, things were handled differently. Changes in procedures, leadership styles, and personalities were noted.

From 1981 to 1987, due to the absence of a pastor, Sister Joan Mader, with the help of Sr. Patricia Clossey, became the administrator of Saint Mary's Parish in San Saba, Texas. Usually, they would have the visit of priests to celebrate the Sacraments. When Fr Pete Logsdon, CSC, a provincial of the Southern Province (from 1980-1986) would visit the Sisters they would dream about the idea of doing a mission, as a family of Holy Cross, that would connect the two borders, Mexico and the United States. In the same year, 1987, when Sr. Barbara moved to Matamoros, Holy Cross men started a mission in Guadalupe City, close to Monterrey, Mexico, which is located about two hours from the border to the city of Laredo, Texas.

In 1987 when Sr Joan Mader was a member of the general leadership team in the Congregation, she did her official visitation to sister Barbara in Matamoros. It was during that week that Joan's dream of going to Mexico became clearer. She began a plan of visiting Mexico and getting to know the reality of the people. Along with sisters Jacinta Millan and Nancy Pewterbaugh, she went to the mission in Monterrey to meet the Holy Cross men. The priests welcomed the sisters, showed them the reality of the parish, and finally extended an invitation to join the mission.

In 1992, the leadership of the Sisters of the Holy Cross approved a proposal to establish the first mission in Mexico. The proposal stated: to establish a ministry of the Sisters of the Holy Cross in the Monterrey area, to establish a local community of Holy



Cross women, to collaborate with the Holy Cross Priests, to increase the number of sisters of the Holy Cross involved in Hispanic ministry, to assist in the process of lay leadership development, to promote human development efforts as they relate to women, to attract women to our way of life.

Between the two branches of Sisters, of The Holy Cross and Marianites, there was an agreement of collaboration. Both communities of sisters would live in the same house and their ministry would be in the parish. Sisters Jacinta and Marianite Sister Charlotte LeBoeuf were the first to arrive at the mission in Guadalupe in 1994. Months later, Sisters Joan Mader and Michelle Toepp joined the group. The reality that those sisters faced was different from what Sr. Barbara had encountered in the neighboring state of Tamaulipas. The sisters, invited by Fr Jack Keefe, Daniel Panchot, and later Fr. Peter Logsdon, were a big help to a parish that was formed by five chapels in 10 different neighborhoods with 25,000 Catholics by that time. Sisters would visit the different chapels to see the needs of the people. There was a need for evangelization, but also to teach values to children and adolescents, and a necessity to help women learn how to find their voice. Right away, they started teaching sacraments, visiting the sick, forming leaders, preparing reflections for mass, helping to organize a soup kitchen, bible studies, visiting the jail, and preparing an afterschool program for kids. These were some of the activities that those four sisters accomplished in Santo Tomas Moro Parish.

Because of the increasing population in the parish, the archdiocese decided to divide it into two. The Holy Cross community chose to take the poorest area of it. The new parish was called Nuestra Madre Santísima de la Luz (Our Lady of the Light), which had 30,000 members in the year 1998. Some of the leaders from Santo Tomás Moro

came to La Luz Parish to help train new leaders. With more people to lead the ministries in the parish: eucharistic ministers, catechesis group, youth, soup kitchen, and others, sisters were able to focus their energy on helping in specific ministries. After some years of ministry in Santo Tomas, Fr. Jack Keefe, sisters Jacinta and Charlotte, MSC returned to the United States to accept new ministry assignments.

Juanita, as Sister Joan Mader was called, chose to work with the women, and offered bible classes, and mini-retreats. The formation of women leaders, under her leadership, was one of the ministries that brought life to the women in the parish. Those women studied the bible as an opportunity to learn about themselves and a loving God. At the same time, the classes allowed the ladies to learn about their own dignity as women and ways to express it to others. That group, now 30 years old, is still steady and strong. The Sisters were well known. They would walk everywhere, take public transportation to go to meetings, accept invitations to visit family homes and visit the sick and the elderly. They also were part of the council of the parish. Father Pete Logsdon was a pastor aware of the importance of working as a family, where women's ideas were as welcomed as men's ideas were. The parishioners learned in the faith the value of working in teams and the importance of hearing ideas from men and women. On different occasions, some members of the parish expressed the blessing of having a family religious community accompanying them in the faith. With that encouragement, the Sisters decided to begin an associate group to invite those who wanted to see the charism of the Holy Cross closer and to contribute to the mission.

Almost at the same time, the Sisters of the Holy Cross community began a group for young adult women discerning their vocation. When the sisters decided to accompany

young women in their vocational discernment, they never thought about the challenges they would encounter. One thing was to visit the people in the parish and try food in their homes; another reality was to have Mexican food, often, in their local community. Having Mexican discerners was not an easy process, even though the first young women arrived after the sisters had been living there for 10 years. Some things needed to be learned with an open heart and mind.

Sr. Juanita (Joan) was asked to be the candidate director. Ministering with the poor, and living in a difficult area, was nothing compared with the challenge of formation ministry, which, after prayerful discernment, Joan accepted. Those Mexican discerners were aware of their advantage: language, knowledge of the culture, and the government system. They wanted to be convinced the congregation was really what was written on paper: Constitutions, Statutes, Direction statements, values. Some of the candidates were from the area, and some came from the south of Mexico. Their traditions and customs were different. It was a time of paying attention, of listening to understand, and a time of blessings.

Conflicts were part of daily life; the sisters would be questioned about different things. One time Sr Joan was confronted by one of the candidates about the way authority was shared in the community, Joan was clear she also was learning and her response to the situation was "Let's start again". Her willingness to be open and her intention to always see the value of everybody allowed her to be the sister that those candidates expected to have as a mentor. She served as the candidate director of the present 6 Mexican sisters.

On one occasion the sisters decided to promote the Congregation in a monthly missalette from the Jesuits. It was free, and it was a good opportunity to show the Congregation to people in different areas of the country. As a surprise, there was a phone call from a person from the city of Miguel Aleman in the neighboring state of Tamaulipas. The lady who called wasn't young or interested in religious life. She was interested in bringing the Sisters to her parish. She was convinced through the pictures of the Sisters (the smiles she said, specifically Juanita) and the description of the Congregation that Holy Cross was the community they needed. After trying to convince her that the sisters weren't looking to move at that moment, she persuaded them to go and visit the place, which they did.

Before accepting anything, the sisters met with the Bishop in the diocese and explained the fear of going to a border city, special in the year, 2010, when the violence was taking the lives of many people because of the war of cartels. Bishop understood the concern and couldn't promise anything, just reminded the sisters that God would never leave them alone and that the work of the sisters in that place was very needed, especially in a time of great chaos. Finally, and after several conversations, the sisters decided to make a proposal to the Leadership of the Congregation for their advice. With that input in mind, the Congregation agreed to begin a pilot mission of two years.

Sisters Joan Mader and Pat Crane were assigned in 2014 to go to this new place. While doing ministry, Sisters understood it was necessary to go to the rural areas, so they visited two chapels to observe their needs, and soon with the help of two Mexican Sisters, who months later were assigned to the mission, Patricia Rodríguez-Leal and Nieves Lidia-

Ortiz Galvan (a candidate for Holy Cross), the sisters began workshops on health, bible, and a culture of peace.

On one occasion, during a session of the Children for Peace group, the Sisters witnessed a confrontation between the army and a cartel group. Because the workshop was held in a public school, none of the groups in conflict entered the building, nevertheless, there was a risk to being there, and after safeguarding the children for some time in one of the buildings, and returning them to their parents, when was possible, the sisters went home with this first experiencing of witnessing of the violence the people from the town were exposed to. There was no time for fear, there was a certainty of continuing to promote a culture of peace in a place with so much need.

After some months of working with the children, the sisters saw the need to work with the parents. It was through the sharing of two programs, one called ES.PE.RE. (Schools of Padron and Reconciliation) and the other from the Peace Education Foundation. The ministry with children and adults was an opportunity for the people in the villa to see another way of living, different from the violence they were experiencing. The sisters were also responding to the need for English classes. The closeness of the city of Miguel Aleman to the border city of Roma, TX, invited the people to join a class with two experts in the subject. People from the parish and others who didn't belong to it benefited from those resources.

After three years of sharing with the people from Miguel Aleman, training them in bible classes, forgiveness and reconciliation, health, and culture of peace workshops, the pilot mission in that place ended. The people in the parish were grateful for the time of the sisters there but understood the community of sisters had other needs to attend to,

one of them being the illness of Sr. Pat Crane and the other Sr. Nieves going to the novitiate. The sisters were grateful for the opportunity to do a mission in that place and were happy that in a short time had the chance to have some associates who right away took over the ministries that were left and it is hoped contributed, in some way, to the good of the little town of Miguel Aleman.

After that time, Sisters Joan, Pat, and Paty went back to Monterrey. Juanita was there for three years and during that time, with all her experiences of 25 years in Mexico, she decided to go back to Texas, and eventually do ministry with the Hispanics. Her time in Austin was short. When she went on vacation to Saint Mary's she also went to see her doctor for a regular check-up. After some lab tests, the results showed she had a type of cancer in her blood. Sr. Joan never returned to Texas.

Even in her sickness, Joan wanted to continue doing some ministry. She said one time, "My body is weak but my mind still working". She was determined to begin an associate group for Hispanics, as she shared her desire with Sr. Paty. While dreaming with that associate group, her last ministry at Saint Mary's was the planning of a celebration of The Day of the Death as it is celebrated in Mexico, with an Altar. She, along with a team, carefully planned the details, and everything was ready for that day, which would take place on November 4th.

Although she was struggling with her illness, her death was unexpected. The day before she died October 24, 2022, she said she was sorry she could not be present for the celebration of The Altar of the Dead, but that she would be present to the team in spirit. Sister Joan Mader's funeral was on November 3<sup>rd</sup>. On the next day, when the event of *Dia de los Muertos* took place, the sisters knew she was truly present, and as it is

customary in the Mexican tradition, she was honored with her picture on the top of the altar.

### **Gratefulness**

Sisters Barbara Korem and Joan Mader showed us two ways to fulfill their dreams, that fit their personalities. Barbara's passion for helping others as a nurse, sharing her love through consultation, and the ability to encourage others, especially her blood sister Lois, to participate in the project, are some of the many gifts the people she ministered to will always remember about this loving sister. Mision de Sanidad, as she called the project in Matamoros, and her short, but intense time, in the city of Frontera, Tabasco, were a huge blessing for the people there.

Sr. Joan's legacy is still felt in Mexico. Several friends from the bible centers, associates, mini-retreats, Children for Peace, people in Monterrey and Miguel Aleman, and 6 Mexican sisters, from the 9 who were her candidates, are grateful for her perseverance in building the dream to go to Mexico. Her way of approaching the mission was slow and carefully designed yet full of hope and desire to share God's love in the ways she was sharing it with the Hispanics in Texas.

Barbara and Joan's memories live in the hearts of many. Their openness to leave aside the fear of difference, their willingness to learn from the other culture, and the respect in the way they approached the people; their smiles for everybody. They brought hope to the Mexicans whose lives were touched by their presence. And to their Sisters of the Holy Cross community, the witness of these two courageous women brought them an example of how God's love knows no borders.

## REFERENCES

Obituaries of Sisters:

Sister Barbara Korem (1941-2010)

Sister Jacinta Millan (1929-2020)

Sister Patricia Crane (1946-2020)

Sister Joan Mader (1941-2022)

Archives from Matamoros 1987-2008

Archives from Monterrey 1992-2020

Congregation of Holy Cross. History of the Southern Province. 1968-2006. Compiled by

Fr. Pete Logsdon, CSC.