



“Go where the Spirit is sending you!”

These incredible words led the North American provinces of the Sisters of St. Francis on a journey to plant a seed of their ministry in Chiapas, one of the most vulnerable states in Mexico. With tender care, the ministry has flourished and I would like to share the story of this incredible journey, which is in its 25th year.

Early “scouts,” Sisters Marilyn Archer (Holy Name Province), Antonia Anthony (Sacred Heart Province), and Consuelo Arana (St. Francis Province), followed the prophetic vision and voice of Bishop Don Samuel Ruiz to accompany the indigenous (native) people in the journey toward liberation. His goal for the church of Chiapas was to see his people develop as a strong Christian people who would become creators of their own history.

Beginning in 1992, the sisters settled in Palenque, Chiapas and began their work with scriptural reflection groups and the development of group leaders. This was not a simple task as the indigenous peoples of the area are Mayan and include four, distinct native (and language) groups (Tseltal; C’hol; Tsotzil; and Tojolabal). Spanish, the official language of Mexico, is foreign to the indigenous. The sisters also needed to reach the 140 villages in the parish, some several hours away by car and most requiring long walks over primitive trails.

External forces, such as the North American Free Trade Agreement of 1993/94, made reaching the people even more difficult. When the Mexican government lured multi-national corporations with a promise offering raw materials and inexpensive labor while at the same time, dropping import tariffs on coffee, bananas, and other cash crops, the result forced families from the small plots of land they had farmed for generations. Thus the poorest, least educated people lost their means of survival.

Much injustice existed, and continues, in other ways: Chiapas holds the largest hydroelectric production, and the second largest oil reserves in Mexico, but only 30% of the indigenous people have access to this power. Amnesty International has repeatedly cited Mexico for “consistent and flagrant human rights abuses of the indigenous peoples.”

In response, the Zapatista War broke out in January 1994 signaling the end of 500 years of silence about the oppression of the native people of Mexico. The poorly-armed group didn’t want to overturn the government, but wanted land reform and respect of



Sisters Beth Brosmer (Holy Name Province), Consuelo Arana (St. Francis Province), and Gloria Shuffer (Sacred Heart Province).

the civil rights of the indigenous people. The resulting San Andres Accords were not honored by the Mexican government and pockets of Zapatista resistance continue to this day.

Even worse were the actions of militant groups paid by these foreign corporations to keep the indigenous people off their land, which led to catastrophes such as the massacre at Acteal on December 22, 1997. Forty-five Roman Catholic indigenous people attending a prayer meeting were murdered, including children and pregnant women. Soldiers at a nearby military outpost did not intervene during the attack, which lasted for hours.

These dire situations solidified the sisters’ desire to be present to the people.



Zapatista demonstrators march for justice.



Like a seed planted in fertile soil, the mission flourished despite the obstacles. Before long local young women found themselves attracted to religious life as they saw it expressed in the lives of the sisters. They asked to be a part of this life of prayer and service. The sisters responded enthusiastically with the wisdom of Magdalen Damen, the foundress of the order, “*Let us try to serve the good God together.*” And so, construction on a novitiate house began in 1995 – providing a sign of great hope to the surrounding communities. The first candidate, Leticia, began her life with the Sisters in 1995 and made final vows in February 2005.



Sister Leticia Perez Hernandez.

The initial emphasis on religious education, including the preparation of catechists, education for adults, and the preparation for religious ceremonies continues to be the main focus of the ministry of the sisters, as is the development of groups of women for reflection and mutual support.

A core group of women were taught the ability to read Spanish on a simple level and soon it became possible to begin the formation of co-operatives for baking bread, growing chili, and raising chickens and rabbits.

After being at the mission for many months, Sister Maura Fortkort returned to the US in 1996. She shared her observation of the overwhelming health needs of the people: access to health care for the indigenous people is obstructed by their language, lack of money, distance from medical services and their mistrust of institutional health care; lack of immunizations and sanitation causes public health threats such as malaria, typhoid, and dengue fever. Sister Maura committed herself to finding resources for the people, especially in the area of health care. Doctor Robert Bull, a physician from Lewiston, NY, was quick to volunteer and began annual trips to the mission later that year. From his initial visits, the medical mission program has become a bi-annual program serving as many as 700 patients during each of the weeks.



Dr. Bull with young patients.

Following a visit to Chiapas in January 2000, Sr. Mary McCarrick, then provincial of Holy Name Province wrote:

We support our Sisters and the people of Chiapas materially, emotionally and spiritually. Bishop Samuel Ruiz Garcia noted, “We are each called to be faithful to God in our time and place in history.” This requires us:

- to stay close to the poor, the margined, using our ministry not to tell them what they need to do but to empower them to speak in their own voice. ***These are a people “particularly God’s own.”***
- to study our own economic and political reality so we understand the forces that oppress people and push them to the margins of society. ***Only with understanding can we create change.***
- to reflect constantly on the gospels, ***that Jesus’ choices and behaviors may become our own.***
- from our understandings of the needs of the poor, **to act of the mind and heart of Jesus.**

I ask that you look into your heart to find how you may be faithful to God in our current time and place in history. Please join us in supporting our sisters and the indigenous of Mexico, and celebrating the 25 years of accompanying the people of Chiapas.

Peace and all good,

Barbara Johnson

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Yes, I'd like to support the 25th anniversary of ministry to the people of Chiapas!

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