



contemplatives -n Action

The Lord's Ranch in Vado, New Mexico.

By Rev. Jack Vessels, S.J.

Two years ago, because of my fluency in Spanish and my experience in the formation of ecclesial communities in Brazil, I was assigned to Sacred Heart Parish in El Paso to assist in the work of Our Lady's Youth Center and at The Lord's Ranch which is in Vado, New Mexico, just across the state line from El Paso. It serves as residence for several volunteers who have dedicated their lives to feeding and serving the poor on the border. It also serves as a guest house for volunteers who occasionally return to assist in the community's ministries or to spend time in restful reflection.

Truly ecclesial and international, the Our Lady's Youth Center (OLYC) community – now known as *Las Alas* or "The Wings" – is a community of contemplatives in action: by faith, united in prayer and action; no prayer without action, and no action without prayer! Through service to the poor, both volunteer residents and visitors contribute to the life of the universal Church in the three particular churches where it serves: El Paso, Texas; Juarez, Mexico; and Las Cruces, New Mexico. It all began under the charismatic leadership of two Jesuits, Frs. Harold Rahm and Richard Thomas.

Fr. Rahm founded OLYC in 1952 during his first assignment as a priest at Sacred Heart Parish in downtown El Paso, in the poorest part of the city just across the bridge from Ciudad Juarez, Mexico. But in 1964, he was assigned to Brazil to begin the New Orleans Province mission there – where at 92, he is still active – and Fr. Thomas was sent to El Paso to replace him at OLYC.

Fr. Thomas was 37 when he took over OLYC. "Go to the poor," Christ told the OLYC community in its group discernment of scripture. It was across the Rio Grande in Juarez that the cry of the poor was most demanding, where well over a million people lived in poverty worse than any experienced in El Paso. Many of the members of the community were bi-lingual, with friends and relatives living in Juarez. They went "to see," confident the Holy Spirit would enlighten their vision. Visiting the city's municipal garbage dump, they found the poorest of the poor, feeding themselves and their children, sleeping in shelters made from trash, collecting whatever might be usable and sellable on the streets. Praying and discerning Christ's words, "...when you have a banquet, invite the poor..." (Luke 14:13) the community did just that at the dump on Christmas Day of





Volunteers deliver groceries weekly to this family.

Local children celebrate their First Holy Eucharist.

1972, often remembered as “the miracle of Juarez” because of the inexplicable multiplication of food that day, and they have been going back weekly ever since.

For years at The Lord’s Ranch, crops were grown and livestock were raised to provide food for the poor of Juarez, but eventually it was discerned in prayer by its resident volunteers that such was not as practical as accepting contributions from local wholesalers and purchasing whatever else was needed at the markets in Juarez for weekly distribution. In this way the volunteers living at the ranch are available for ministries that were developing in both El Paso and Juarez.

Over the years, four centers have developed for the weekly food distribution and other services to meet the spiritual and material needs in different areas of Juarez. The first began at the garbage dump itself. When the dump was moved to another site, the people of the neighborhood began to build on the old site, concrete block by concrete block, a center for the services

provided: not just food distribution, but volunteer medical and dental care, a pharmacy, nursery for the children, and religious and spiritual formation for those of all ages. Volunteers now come from both Juarez and El Paso, and no service is rendered or received without prayer and the desire to fulfill God’s will. *Misión Espiritu Santo* is the fitting name of the old dump, with true new life abundantly available. As the *Misión* matured with its own volunteers and patrons, a new center called *The Lord’s Food Bank* was opened in the expanding western periphery of Juarez. A large vacant area was made available, and the now-experienced community of volunteers shifted their time and energies to this new challenge, where storehouse, clinic, pharmacy, chapel, classroom, nursery and prayer now provide for the spiritual and urgent needs of the poorest. Another newer center, *Las Alitas*, has recently been initiated on the southeastern extension of Juarez in an area where electricity has arrived, but not yet water – only the Living Water of the Word, with Love. And, the fourth location for prayer and food distribution has been established at a parish church, *Nuestra Señora de Los Angeles*.

Las Alas – still officially OLYC – is a prayer center with its own weekly schedule of spiritual training, prayer

for healing, occasional workshops, seminars and conferences. It also serves as home base for the volunteers’ almost daily visit to Juarez, the storage area for supplies, and the offices coordinating the ever-expanding number of ministries. Of particular importance is the pro-life prayer at the abortion clinics, where useful alternative information is offered to concerned women. This includes the offer of prenatal care and housing for women waiting to give birth, assistance with the adoption process for unexpected children, as well as post-abortion counseling.

My own work as a member of this faith community is saying Mass weekly with all the Juarez communities served, hearing confessions before and after Mass, visiting the sick and incarcerated prisoners with the volunteers and doing all I can to encourage, strengthen and console the volunteers themselves. The most enriching part of my experience is being immersed in the goodness and faith of simple, poor people who draw their strength purely from their love of God and His for them. All they have is their faith, and because the Word of God congregates people around it, we don’t “give out” to the poor. We *share* with them. And, it is good to think that, God willing, I will spend the rest of my priestly ministry among them.

Top left, Fr. Jack Vessels

Middle left, a victim of Juarez gang violence pictured with his family.

Left, volunteers visit a local family.