

# A 25 Year Journey of Faith

- brother John



*Casa Guadalupe, a guest house of Weston Priory, minutes from the main monastery buildings, rests quietly at the base of Terrible Mountain just off Vermont Route 100. Outside the Casa window a flower bed glows bright and colorful. Fish swim peacefully in the pond fronting the Casa. Kale, mint, and other perennials sprout in the garden. The workshop and garage are tidy with a few tools and a silent loom. The verdant woodlot covering the mountainside casts a protective shadow over the landscape.*

*Inside the house all is still, but not really empty. The aroma of Guatemalan tortillas and refried beans penetrates the woodwork. The cheerful sound of children's play and laughter and the melody of marimba and drums hang in the air. The house and surrounding nature wait patiently again the arrival of unknown guests – ever surprising bearers of the amazing gift of God's presence.*

*For twenty-five years, Felipe and Elena and their five children, refugees from violence in Guatemala, made their home in the Sanctuary of Weston Priory called Casa Guadalupe. The blessing of their presence remains a faithful gift within this house.*



brother John and Juanita: March 24, 1984,



Juanita and brother John: June 26, 2009

**I**N THE 1970S, THE WESTON MONKS CONVERTED THE PRIORY'S ample barn and cider mill off Route 100 into a comfortable dwelling for new brothers entering the Community. Vocations to the Priory Community were numerous at that time. The renovated barn served well to house the expanding Benedictine Community.

Responding to the signs of the times in that era of liturgical renewal and social upheaval, the Weston brothers engaged in days of recollection, retreats, workshops, demonstrations and protests. These demanding activities drew the Community often to places far beyond Weston. They took a toll on the energies of the brothers and the normal rhythm of life within the monastery. In the short span of five years, the Community suffered the departure of five committed brothers including the death of Abbot Leo. Brothers continued to search for alternative ways to respond to the spiritual and social issues of the day expressive of their monastic lifestyle and values.

In 1983 the Mexican Benedictine Sisters accompanied brothers to the Guatemalan refugee camps on the Mexican border. Stories of terror and persecution recounted by simple peasant families cried out for attention and response. The first response came in an essay by brother John, "Tell Your People." Following distribution at the Priory, it was reprinted in *Sojourner's Magazine*. A question remained, how else might the Community respond to this pressing problem?

On a fresh spring day, while the Weston monks still basked in the glow of Easter celebrations, two unusual guests arrived on the doorstep of the Priory. Michael Colonese, a priest dedicated to work with refugees from Central America and his little adopted son, asked for a few days lodging in the Priory guest house. At an evening conversation in the chapel, Michael held the brothers spellbound as he described the new-born Sanctuary Movement in the United States. He gently suggested that from early on hospitable monastic communities offered sanctuary to those fleeing from persecution. The



Weston brothers needed little persuasion. Sanctuary and monastic hospitality might be an answer to the question facing the brothers. Soon after Michael's departure, the Weston brothers contacted the Religious Task Force in Chicago. The Community expressed the wish to declare Weston Priory a Sanctuary for Refugees. A guest house at the monastery was available. The Task Force agreed gladly to facilitate the reception of refugees into the new Sanctuary.

Even as the Weston brothers were making their decision to become a Sanctuary, Felipe and Elena Ixcot and their five young children were making their way from Guatemala, through Mexico, to Chicago, with the aid of friends in the Sanctuary Movement. The Ixcot family was recognized as the perfect partner for the Weston Monks. In a few days, the Task Force notified the brothers of the match. The Community rushed enthusiastically to ready the barn-dwelling on Route 100 to receive the family. The new brothers living there willingly moved to Romero Guest House on Old County Road. The name of the Sanctuary house became Casa Guadalupe in honor of the Mexican Benedictine Sisters who introduced the brothers to refugees on their border.

The journey of the Ixcot family from Chicago to Weston in a caravan of several vehicles was dramatic and highly publicized. Leaders of the Sanctuary Movement, with the consent of Felipe and Elena and the brothers, seized the occasion to bring national attention to the plight of refugees from all over Central America. News media followed the caravan on the weeklong trip. Nightly television news highlighted their progress. Newspapers from the Chicago Tribune to the New York Times



followed the story with interest. Helicopters with camera crews flew overhead. Helpful State Police in the larger cities directed traffic as the caravan wended its way to Vermont.

A festive celebration marked the arrival in Weston on a cold wintry day in March. A large crowd joined to receive the family at a prayer service in the barn chapel. TV cameras and a flock of reporters covered the event. To the dismay of some skeptical townsfolk, one TV contingent arrived on the Priory grounds by helicopter. The presence of refugees who were considered illegal aliens was enough to disturb the peace of this quiet village. A petition with one hundred names, including the chairman of the Board of Selectmen, protesting the presence of the refugees in Weston was already posted in the local town garage. But the Vermont Governor and Congressional Representatives offered their encouraging support to the Weston Sanctuary.

It was with this background that the monks of Weston and their friends began a twenty-five year journey of faith with a simple Guatemalan couple and their children. With the faith and trust of Abraham and Sarah, Felipe and Elena had set out from Guatemala. That faith blossomed into a gift for the Priory Community and the numerous friends who surrounded them with their love and support.

Friends and neighbors of the monks rallied to become active partners and participants in that journey and that gift. Groups organized into committees to assist and accompany the refugee family as they entered this alien land. No need of the family was neglected. Persons volunteered to stay in the Casa with the family as a protecting presence



2004, with Tojil, Sonia's son

for fear that immigration authorities might intervene. Some assisted Elena in shopping for groceries. Many donated clothing. A generous dentist offered his services for the whole family. Drivers provided transportation for medical appointments or other errands. Volunteer teachers helped with home tutoring for the children.

Elena discovered that the ice cold stream that flowed by Casa Guadalupe was not a realistic place to do the family laundry. Friends assisted, showing methods of household tasks more adapted to the place and climate. With grace, she and all the family entered into new ways and new surroundings. Felipe found rewarding work gardening and caring for the apple orchard of a friendly couple nearby. Soon, two excellent schools in the area opened their doors to the children so no tax burden would be visited on the local people.

The family slowly settled into their adopted home. They joined the brothers in the monastery for a recreational visit one evening each week. With laughter, tears, and much translation, Felipe and Elena shared the painful reality of life back in Guatemala, while Maya, who was still a toddler, entertained with her antics and pranks. On some weekdays, Felipe and Elena prepared tasty meals for the brothers in the kitchen. On Sundays and feast days, the family participated in Eucharist and lunch at the Priory. New worlds of language and culture enriched the exchanges. What had begun as a caravan of a few brave persons journeying to a safe haven became a community of faithful brothers and sisters mutually enjoying the gift of hospitality.

The giftedness of all the members of this refugee family soon emerged and was shared with the surrounding community. As the children grew, they became proficient playing the marimba together while their father accompanied them on the drums. Gatherings at the Priory and elsewhere were enhanced by the beauty of this expression of their culture, deeply imbedded in their youthful persons. Responding to



1997, processing apples in the Priory kitchen

an invitation from teachers at the Flood Brook School and clad in her colorful Mayan dress, Elena introduced students to Mayan culture with demonstrations of cooking and weaving. She cheerfully taught brothers and friends her elegant craft of back-strap weaving in the meeting room below the monastery Gallery Shop. Felipe, always ready at hand, enlightened gatherings of interested listeners with the cultural, political, and social situation of his people in Guatemala. On occasion he wore the traditional clothes of the Mayan peasant. Often he and Julio gathered wood in the mountain forest to heat the house in the long winters. In traditional Mayan fashion they returned to the Casa with neat bundles of firewood on their backs.

Over a period of twenty-five years the Ixcot family shared life with the Weston brothers and numerous others from their Sanctuary home. At the Eucharist and in public gatherings they frequently addressed the oppression, violence, and injustice rampant in Central America. In time, they accepted the role of U.S. representatives in the International Mayan League. And they widened the reach of their concerns to include Native Americans. They never lost their desire to return home to serve and be with their people and in time they were able to re-establish contact with their family in Guatemala.

Finally in this past year, Felipe and Elena found it possible to return to Guatemala. With enthusiasm and love they reunited with their people and have built a home and planted a garden in their native village. Their son, Julio, has joined them and finds joy in cultivating the garden and crops. With the aid of friends from the United States they established a midwife center in their town to care for the medical needs of the indigenous women of the area. Sonia, Alicia, Juanita, and Maya have all graduated from college. As U.S. citizens in Florida and Washington, D.C., they pursue their careers committed to the values instilled by their parents. They are a witness to the love and generosity of so many.



It is with heartfelt gratitude that the Weston brothers bid farewell to the Guatemalan family—to Felipe, Elena, Sonia, Julio, Alicia, Juanita and Maya. This journey of trust and faith together has been just so rich! They were a gift that came at just the right moment. Back in 1984 this Guatemalan family seemed to drop from heaven to answer a burning question—could the simple monastic value of hospitality be a response to a crucial issue of our times? Their presence helped the Weston brothers to hold their focus on the things that really matter—the concrete challenges to peace and justice and the joy of life in community. The experience of sanctuary demonstrates that hospitality does not narrow the monastic vision but enriches it with depth and meaning.



*Casa Guadalupe, just off Route 100, will never be quite the same. It sits quietly, serenely, in its special beauty. It holds gently the added quality of holiness. As a Sanctuary it welcomed God, imaged in our Guatemalan family. As a holy place it patiently awaits the next gifting presence of God who is faithful. ■*