

Flower and Song In the City of Eternal Spring

brother John

THE GUADALUPE CENTER IN CUERNAVACA, HOME OF A small community of Mexican Benedictine Sisters, is both picturesque and welcoming. Constructed in 1983, its simple, handsome *casitas* rest peacefully on a sloping terrain. Colorful bougainvilleas and blossoming fruit trees line the paved paths leading to an attractive central building which houses a chapel, dining room, kitchen and assembly hall. At night the lights of Cuernavaca sparkle like gems illuminating the distant sky.

The legal title of the Center is *Flor y Canto*, translated to mean Flower and Song. For more than 25 years the Sisters have welcomed numerous groups of North American guests, inviting them into a spirit of prayer, offering nourishing native meals and warm hospitality. The focus of the Sisters is to introduce their guests to the rich abounding Mexican culture, their deep rooted spirituality and the harsh reality of life south of the U.S. border.

The Center in Cuernavaca stands as a vibrant sign of the friendship and commitment between the Mexican Sisters and the Community of Benedictine Monks of Weston Priory. This friendship is the realization of a dream often recounted by the Sisters. Mother Placida, who guided the Mexican Community in its early days, dreamt that the day would come when a Community of Benedictine men would truly become brothers to her Sisters.

For the brothers of Weston, the path to the Guadalupe Center and friendship with the Mexican Sisters is lined with a series of unlikely stories and gifting persons. To recall that path is like putting together the many pieces of a living puzzle—or perhaps, a living mystery. Among these stories, the visits of the brothers to Mexico, since first meeting the Sisters in 1976, have held a significant place in the life of the Weston Community that may aptly be described as an experience of conversion.



Eucharist celebration in El Ojite Chapel



Festive gathering after the Eucharist

Groups of Sisters and brothers journeyed from the dazzling tropical coast of the Pacific to the damp and drizzly coast of the Gulf of Mexico, from the refugee camps on the border with Guatemala to the torturous migrant border with Texas. In between they visited remote indigenous villages and Latino hamlets among the mountains and by the running rivers of the central regions. Everywhere they encountered the mystery of splendor in the midst of crushing poverty.

Visits to Mexican villages where the Sisters served the poor endeared the brothers to the Mexican people. Each visit unveiled a new adventure. The brothers received the incredible gift of the hospitality of the poor—to share in their simple food, to sleep in the safe shelter of their dwellings, and to hear their constant words of gratitude. Brothers could bring only their presence and prayer. In every place, the Sisters asked of the brothers but one gift: Let us pray and celebrate Eucharist!

Sometimes the people gathered for Eucharist in a rustic chapel, sometimes under the open sky, often in the evening under the stars. Brothers clad in their monastic cowls stood behind a simple table with bread and wine. Crowded around and before them, mothers nursed their infants and playful children mingled freely among the attentive and respectful adults. Chickens, turkeys, pigs, and scavenging dogs had free range and made their presence felt. The men in the community stood quietly in rows at the back, framing a colorful, pulsing scene. The Eucharist became a cosmic gathering of oneness amidst the chaos of the peoples' world. The celebrations concluded with music from native instruments, dance and a mutual celebration of life and solidarity among persons from different cultures but who shared the common language of love, an endearing love.

The joyful, bountiful, vulnerable, playful God became tangibly present in the grace, the gratefulness—the gift of the poor. Was this perhaps the meaning of that mysterious expression, “reverse mission”? Who was being evangelized, converted—the simple peasant folk with limited resources and education or their North American brothers?

The transforming power of Eucharist was familiar to the brothers. For years, they celebrated daily in their quiet peaceful chapel in Vermont.



The Guadalupe Center, central building, front



The Guadalupe Center, central building, back



Casitas (houses) for retreatants



Prayer in the chapel

They knew the rubrics which were to be studiously observed and professionally practiced. They knew what was expected from conferences and lectures by learned theologians. But after the celebrations with the simple people of Mexico in remote, indigenous and Latino villages, the brothers' Eucharist, Liturgy and Common Prayer would be forever changed. It was a renewed personification of the Bread of the Holy One's life, celebrated in areas where theologians rarely traveled, but where the body of Jesus was present in the faces and spirit of a welcoming, impoverished people.

Several years later, the Sisters considered enlarging their retreat house in Cuernavaca, the City of Eternal Spring. They welcomed the brothers to join the project. It would provide the monks a home base for their future visits to Mexico. The idea of a shared retreat center emerged and flowered. A center of prayer and hospitality was dreamed into being—a place of welcome for guests from north and south, a sign of the friendship, care, sisterhood and brotherhood of the Mexican Benedictine Sisters and the Weston monks. It was to be a visible and vibrant sign of the living covenant between the Communities of Sisters in Mexico and the brothers of Weston. The Guadalupe Center was born of the *Arco Iris* Covenant, the colorful rainbow of faith and friendship that joined the two communities into one family. It continues today as a sign of hope, for the unity of the Americas and of the world. "That all may be one, one with our God and with each other." ■

A more extended version of this essay is posted on the Weston Priory website: www.westonpriory.org

Dreaming Together

Sister Fabiola

WOVEN BY A DEEP BOND OF FRIENDSHIP between our two Benedictine Communities, the brothers of Weston and the Sisters in Mexico, two dreams became a reality with the creation of the Guadalupe Center in the beautiful, flower-adorned city of Cuernavaca, Mexico. Here this Center provides a favorable space for prayer, reflection, and the encounter with God in the context of our shared Benedictine spirituality. The Prologue of the Rule of St. Benedict calls us to truly form "a school for the Lord's Service." The mutual endeavor to establish the Guadalupe Center has been an inspiration and a gift of God for me, for our two communities, for the Church, and I believe, for many in our world.



There is an expression: "The pilgrim does not have a way, but finds the way by walking it." What truth there is in these words! Our two communities have walked together with a common vision for the Reign of God. We have shared the quest to understand the reality in which our peoples live and have committed ourselves to a vision of peace, justice, freedom, and respect for human rights. Through the simple service of hospitality, prayer, and reflection in our home at the Guadalupe Center, we have tried to offer people a taste of community life and an opportunity to discover God in the faces of the poor.

It is always with joy and enthusiasm that we have received groups of North Americans in our simplicity and with our limitations; and somehow the spirit always brings us to a deep encounter in the gift and uniqueness of each participant. There always remains the challenge of communication because we Sisters lack a good command of English; but ultimately we are able to go beyond mere words and touch a communion of hearts. The challenge of language can be recounted in stories that have always elicited good, hearty laughter. Sisters Reyna and Hilaria and I will share some of these incidents with you later on in this reflection.

There has been such richness in the plurality of the persons and groups who have come to the Guadalupe Center: women and men of different spiritualities, religious backgrounds, cultures, ideologies, age, sexual orientation, etc. Yet we have discovered a common thread that