

A Friendship Beyond Words

- *brother John*



Sisters and brothers folkdancing.

IN FEBRUARY OF 1976 THE BROTHERS OF WESTON PRIORY WERE INVITED TO PROVIDE music for a liturgical workshop at the Franciscan Renewal Center in Scottsdale, Arizona.

Just two years previously, Raymond and Gabriella Plankey paid a surprise visit with an invitation to the community at Weston Priory. Raymond was born in Vergennes, Vermont, and went to Chile as a lay missionary. While there he met and married Gabriela, a Chilean church worker. They worked together as lay missionaries until they were expelled from the country during the Allende coup. Bishop Sergio Mendez Arceo of Cuernavaca, Mexico, accepted them to serve in his diocese.

For their new mission among the poor in Mexico, the Plankey's were seeking a sponsor in Vermont. Included in their invitation was the hope for 'reverse mission'—the hope that the sponsoring party might receive the 'gift of conversion' from the mission they agreed to sponsor.

The Weston brothers enthusiastically accepted the invitation from the young missionary couple. The first gesture of the brothers was to donate the community Ford van to assist Gabriella and Ray in their work in Mexico. Gratefully, Raymond drove the van cross country from Weston to Cuernavaca where the van served their mission work with the poor. As he set out from Weston for Mexico, Raymond expressed the hope that the brothers would someday visit their mission in Mexico.

When, two years later, the brothers were invited to participate in the Arizona workshop, they learned that an international flight by way of Mexico would be the most economical way to travel. It gave an opportunity to visit their friends on mission in Mexico. The brothers also had in mind the suggestion from Abbot Primate Rembert Weakland that they visit a community of Benedictine sisters in Mexico City if they ever had the opportunity to go there. Rembert remarked that the Mexican community and the Weston brothers shared a similar spirit, in spite of the distance, language, and culture that separated them.

When the brothers arrived for their first visit to Mexico in 1976 they stayed at the Benedictine Monks' Monastery of Holy Angels near Cuernavaca. While there, they heard of a meeting of leaders of the Union of Benedictine Monasteries nearby.

The brothers went to greet their Benedictine sisters and brothers at the meeting. While there, they met Sister Fidelina, the sub-prioress of the Misioneras Guadalupanas de Cristo

Rey. She invited them to visit the motherhouse of her community in Mexico City. The invitation resonated with Rembert Weakland's earlier suggestion. Enthusiastically, the brothers accepted.

The sisters opened wide the doors of their monastery a few blocks from the beautiful shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe. There was little exchange of spoken words. Most of the brothers could speak few words in Spanish and the sisters were equally lacking in English. The first encounter between the Weston Priory brothers and the Mexican Benedictine Sisters in Mexico City was more musical than verbal.

The sisters happily showed the brothers their dwelling place. With warm smiles and gentle laughter they toured all the areas of their 'casa', their home—from chapel to dining room to library, from kitchen to laundry to parlor, it was 'open house'. The brothers sensed that they were welcomed as family!

Since verbal communication was at a minimum, the two communities chose, before parting, to sing for one another. They found in music a common language—the language of the heart. They shared songs that communicated more than words. The songs of both communities were mutually recognized as heartfelt prayers. Music, song and dance—somehow beyond words!

Perhaps the inability to communicate with words made deeper communication possible. Perhaps it is because the friendship between our two communities is in fact beyond words. The familial relationship of sisters and brothers that is the heart of the Benedictine way of life finds its source in joyful familial hospitality.

In the forty years since this first encounter, brothers of Weston and sisters of Mexico have learned to speak one another's native tongue a little more proficiently. But the language of the heart has become the treasure that goes beyond words and joyfully unites our communities across all boundaries.

By the end of this short visit, it was clear that this was just the beginning. The meeting was largely a meeting of hearts, a musical celebration of faith and trust. The deep bond of friendship of sisters and brothers would continue to grow beyond words! ■



(r to l) Sisters Rosa (Prioress), Miguelina, Teresa, Reina and Carmina, with brothers Daniel & Richard