

Xochimilco

- *brother Daniel*

LAST JANUARY WE BROTHERS, along with our Benedictine Sisters, visited Xochimilco. Today Xochimilco is one of the 16 boroughs of Mexico City. At an earlier time, from the 10th century until the Aztecs overtook it in the 14th century, it was an autonomous City-State. It has always been renowned by its *chinampas* or fertile man-made islands in the shallow lake. The mud from the bottom of the lake has been used to make the vegetable beds. The multicolored flowers in the volcanic soil give the place its name: Xochimilco means “Fields of Flowers”. It is also famous for the variety of migratory birds and native fish, particularly the axolotl, an amphibian which is now in danger of extinction because of the recent introduction of invasive species.

Our young hosts, Ernesto, Malenu and Adán, are members of Umbral Axochiatl, an enthusiastic group of people trying to foster the ancient indigenous farming techniques with well adapted local seeds. They are working towards healing the lake and its canals hoping to bring the axolotl back from the brink of extinction. They believe that Xochimilco has the potential to once again feed Mexico City. Their hope is to retrieve the farming techniques developed by their Náhuatl ancestors over hundreds of years. It is a challenge, given the pervasive allure of chemical-based agriculture and the non-environmental policies of the municipal authorities. Nevertheless they hold on to a vision of a life-giving future.

The experience was truly contemplative with Ernesto slowly propelling our *trajinera*, a flatbed boat, with a long pole. As he pushed the pole to the bottom of the canal with a graceful splash of water, we took in the chatting of the birds nearby and the majestic snow-capped volcanoes on the horizon. We were deeply engaged in conversation about the lake, the land, its fragility, and all its possibilities. I remembered Jesus speaking of the yeast quietly doing its work. Just a tiny bit enabling a whole batch of dough to rise. The Reign of God surprises us in the most unexpected places! ■



Ernesto in foreground, Malenu at right.



Adán canoeing near a *chinampa*.