

Por los caminos de América

As never before in our history, Christians in North America are being challenged to re-envision ourselves in relationship with all our brothers and sisters in the Americas.

The suffering and poverty of the majority of Latin American peoples have given rise to increased calls -- by the poor themselves, by local churches, and most recently by the synod of bishops -- to become *un solo continente*, one continent of the Americas.

For us in the North, this re-envisioning also involves a refashioning of relationship, requiring an openness to the Gospel message as it is proclaimed by the peoples of the South.

Even more, this relationship comes to be experienced as a circular flow of gifts -- a relationship of communion.

For our monastic community, this challenge was first articulated almost 30 years ago by the then-Abbot Primate, Rembert Weakland, OSB.

Responding to our interest in monastic developments in the so-called Third World, Abbot Rembert encouraged us to look to the Americas. More concretely, he suggested that, should we ever have the opportunity to meet sisters from the Mexican Benedictine congregation, *Las Misioneras Guadalupanas de Cristo Rey*, OSB, we would surely be enriched.

An opportunity presented itself during a meeting of Mexican Benedictine monastics, and a relationship spanning almost 25 years was born.

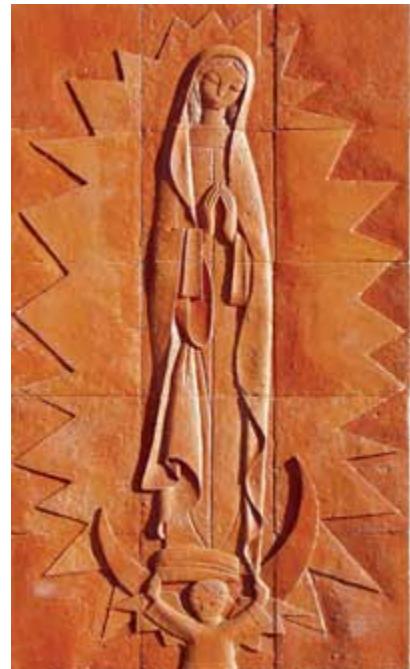
That relationship has now blossomed into a living covenant (what we mutually call our *Arco Iris Alianza*) uniting the brothers in Weston and the sisters in Mexico.

At the heart of this *alianza* has been our common choice to relate as *communities*, and to deepen the Gospel and Benedictine values that ground our friendship.

As North Americans, we also had to let go of thinking first of what we might *do or offer*, and, instead, to begin the journey of mutuality and equality from which our concrete involvements would flow.

Regularly, the Weston community spends time with the sisters in their rural and urban missions, living with their local Benedictine communities and learning from the sisters and from the people whom they serve.

Through these encounters, genuine friendship and solidarity have developed with those poor communities.



A small group of sisters comes to Weston each year to share in our monastic life, bringing the riches of their culture to us and to the many friends associated with our monastery.

The clarity of the sisters' preferential option for the poor -- and particularly for the indigenous peoples -- has become a catalyst for an experience of "reverse mission" in our life.

We have come to understand the option for the poor as an essential dimension of our *conversatio morum*, the embrace of the monastic way of life in this world of poverty and injustice.

Because our association has been so important, in 1984 we jointly inaugurated the *Centro Guadalupe* in Cuernavaca, Mexico.

There, in the context of Benedictine prayer and community life, the difficult reality of Latin America is opened to groups from North America -- groups both diverse and ecumenical. To date, more than 2,000 persons have participated in monthly 10-day experiences with the sisters and the Mexican people. The *Centro* has become an opportunity for conversion for countless persons.

Through our relationship with the *Misioneras Guadalupanas*, we have also been privileged to meet monastic women and men from other countries of the Americas, particularly from communities incarnating the Benedictine life in the world of the poor.

One such community is the small Monastery of the Annunciation of the Lord, in Goiás, Brazil. Over the past four years, monks from Goiás have come to Weston for a time of mutual exchange. And in April of 1999, four of our brothers traveled to Brazil for 12 days -- sharing the common life with the brothers and sisters, and desiring to learn from the communities of the impoverished and the landless surrounding the monastery.

The *Mosteiro da Anunciação*, a foundation of the Abbey of Tournai in France, is located on the periphery of the state of Goiania's former capital city, whose indigenous population was exterminated by European settlers. The city was also a center for the "trade" in enslaved Africans.

The indigenous and Afro-Brazilian cultures strongly mark the awareness of the monastic community in Goiás; they want their community to be inserted into the life of the common people around them.

The same values guide the growth of our friendship with the brothers and sisters in Goiás as in our long association with the sisters in Mexico. We hope to relate as communities; to discover together the ways in which we can grow in mutuality and equality; to risk encounter with the *other* (other cultures, other languages, other dreams and hopes); to listen deeply to the challenges that are found in the life of the other community; to be willing to share.

In our desire to be related to the broader reality of the Americas, we have not chosen the more traditional route of making a monastic foundation in another country. We have heard another call: to be in living, faithful relationship with other monastic communities, with whom we share a similar vision, and yet whose reality is so different from our own.

We have heard (and have tried to accept) the call to be mutually challenged -- evangelized -- by the give-and-take of our friendship, and to bring that challenge *here* to our life in the United States, where we are so in need of an evangelical word of critique, solidarity, and hope.

We have spoken very little here of specific projects in which we are involved. Over the past 25 years, we have deepened our conviction that the "one thing necessary" is the communion that we share.

Specific works of collaboration, opportunities to assist poor communities toward their own dignity, the chance to speak in defense of human rights -- all these continue to present themselves.

But each response flows from the love and communion uniting our communities and our peoples. Both in Mexico and in Brazil, they sing "*Por los caminos de América*" / "*Pelos caminhos da America?*"

By the grace of God, those "roads of the Americas" have come to link us to monastic communities in Mexico and Brazil. Perhaps this can be a contemporary example of Benedict's vision, recounted in the Dialogues, of the unifying ray of Divine Light, in which we, who were so far away, have been brought very near to one another.

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