

School Sisters of Notre Dame from Mankato Serve in Guatemala
Irene Feltz, SSND, 2003

In the late 1950's Pope John XXIII asked the North American and Western European Churches to send ten percent of their priestly and religious personnel to Latin America and other third world countries. The first response of the Mankato Province to the call to be with the poor in the foreign missions already took place in 1915 when Sister M. Timona Diedrich was appointed by Mother Commissary Marianne Haas to open the first mission in Puerto Rico. From 1957 to 1960 Sisters M. Devota and M. Gregor Burfield, responding to the call for an English teacher, taught in the Sao Paulo Province, Brazil, where they spent much energy helping the poor in the favelas and giving religious education workshops. Sister M. Alonza Schwartz was sent by Mother General Ambrosia to serve in Mi Esperanza, a colony for the children of lepers near Buenos Aires in Argentina during the 1958-1959 school year.

Then a louder call came to the Mankato Province.

COLEGIO SANTA CATARINA, NAHUALÁ, GUATEMALA 1962-1990

In 1961 Bishop Bernard J. Topel of the Spokane, Washington, Diocese asked Mother Bernardia for sisters to work with his diocesan priests stationed in Nahualá, Sololá, Guatemala, Central America. Mother Bernardia and Mother M. Ambrosia, Superior General, went to Guatemala in April 1962 to see Nahualá. They arrived in Guatemala City and then traveled northwest by jeep for three hours along the unfinished Pan American Highway. At times they traveled up steep hills that had on one side a sheer cliff and on the other unprotected drop-offs down the steep cliff.

Upon arriving in Nahualá the Sisters were welcomed in English, Spanish, and Quiché (key-chay,) the Mayan language of the area, with songs, signs and speeches. The convent was still under construction but what pleased Mother Ambrosia and Mother Bernardia most was the school, a renovated section of the rectory, waiting for the Sisters but used in the meantime for religious instructions for children and adults. The two leaders of the congregation left with deep admiration for what the priests had accomplished but also with strong impressions of what still needed to be done.

The center of Nahualá, a township whose geographic area ranged from 3,000 feet in the coastal foothills to 11,000 feet in the mountains, with a scattered population of 23,000 people (approximately 1,000 people

actually lived in the central town) was situated along the Pan American Highway at 8,000 feet above sea level. The main town of Nahualá was the center of the Spokane Mission at that time, and from there the missionaries attended an area of about 100 small villages and communities in various other townships. The inhabitants of Nahualá were completely Maya-Quiche. The people still lived in very primitive conditions. Their homes were of adobe and had only a dirt floor. The roof was made of tiles or grass. Windows and furniture were luxuries. There was no running water in the homes and only about 30 homes had electricity, meaning one or two light bulbs.

The people traveled the mountain paths mainly by foot. Few villages were accessible by jeep. A journey of an eight or ten hour walk was not at all unusual to take produce to the market. The men carried heavy burdens on their backs with the aid of a headband. The women carried burdens on their heads, their babies on their backs, and often would be holding a child by the hand.

The Catholics of the region had been without priestly presence or the sacraments for at least 60 years, but had kept a simple deep faith, a faith which now was a mixture of Mayan and Catholic devotion. The priests wanted to combat what was perceived as pagan through religious instruction and to raise the physical and cultural levels of the people as well as their standard of living. The priests looked forward to the arrival of the sisters to help them.

August 23, 1962, Sisters M. Avila Lipetzky, George Marie (Janet) Druffel, and M. Renelle Kohler arrived in Guatemala City where they were met by several Maryknoll sisters and two of the Spokane priests from Nahualá. On the 24th, the priests took them to Nahualá. On that rainy day the people warmly welcomed the sisters in the old parish "convento" where they had strewn pine needles and rose petals on the pathway and on the corridor floor. The children lined up neatly and sang songs in English, Spanish and Quiche. The English song was "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow." As was custom, the children came running up to the sisters with bowed heads for the traditional blessing of religious and elders. The adults greeted the sisters in Quiche and/or Spanish: "Sakaric, Madre," "Buenas tardes, Madre," or "Bienvenidas a Nahuala."

After coffee, the sisters toured the convent which was made of adobe like the homes of the Indians. Unlike the homes of the Indians, however, the convent had three bedrooms, a community room, kitchen, workroom, electricity, running water and a cement tile floor.

On August 27, the Sisters returned to Guatemala City to spend three months with the Maryknoll Sisters at Colegio Monte María to continue their

study of Spanish and to buy materials for the beginning of their first school year in January 1963. They also collected their trunks from the Customs Office. Mr. Raymond Fischer, the father of Sister Jerome Marie (Jane) had his company transport the trunks to Guatemala.

In November the sisters returned to Nahualá to live permanently and began to prepare for the new school year. They had to rely on translators for much of their communication, since only a tiny percentage of the people spoke Spanish, the official language of the country and of the school system.

In early January Sister Richard Marie (Patricia) Breiter and Sister Avila's sister, Patricia Lipetzky, a young lay woman, came to complete the staff. Sisters Avila, George Marie, known as Maria in Nahualá, and a native teacher, Francisco Guarchaj, began the new school year.

Because the education department of the country required that all schools teach in Spanish, Francisco Guarchaj taught more than 80 children of many ages in a pre-school class, officially called "Castellanización," to give those students who spoke only their Indian dialect the opportunity to learn Spanish.

Sister George Marie taught first and second grade, Sister Avila was the superior of the house, directed the school, and taught third and fourth grade. In the following years, grades five and six were added. Sisters Renelle and Richard Marie began working with the priests of the mission preparing the classes for the formation of the mission's catechists. In the fall of 1964, Sister M. Gregor Burfield arrived in Nahualá, founded the school band, and worked in the tiny mission dispensary. Sister left in July 1965.

Sister Avila continued her work in the school for seven years, 1962-1969. Spending much energy on teacher preparation, she established the school on a firm foundation. She also organized courses in carpentry and shoe making for the upper grade students and began a hot lunch program. Special emphasis was given from the beginning years to the education and formation of young women. A special house was built for classes for both grade school girls and married women.

Sister Roberta Winkels arrived in June of 1969 to administer Colegio Santa Catarina. She continued to develop programs for the promotion of women in the villages surrounding Nahualá and worked in on-going teacher formation. After the 1976 earthquake, Sister Roberta directed the rebuilding of the Colegio, the cost of which was donated almost totally by the SSND. She introduced personalized education for the middle grades of the colegio and organized "family days," days of on-going education for

all members of the families of the students. She also worked as a member of the National Indian Pastoral with Father James Curtin MM. Sister Roberta had a deep interest in vocation formation and worked with older girls and young women of the town, eventually founding the group "Maria Auxiliadora." Encouraged and supported by the Provincial Sister Eunice, she built a small house for vocation promotion and a community living experience. This group stopped meeting during the years of the worst violence in Guatemala when any group meetings were considered subversive.

The great distances in the mountainous territory, the extreme poverty, the lack of personnel, the language barrier, and the few means of communication led Father John Rompa, one of the Spokane Mission priests, to begin an educational radio station in November of 1962 in order to teach religion, health, and agriculture. Father Rompa had heard of other mission radios in a parish in another diocese and also in Colombia. He went to Colombia to study the educational and organizational technique of Radio Sututenza. He then returned to the mission and, with the help of donors of the Spokane Diocese and friends in other parts of Guatemala, was able to get a small transmitter and radio tower set up in Nahualá. This radio station also served as a means of sending messages both on the part of the priests to the people and on the part of the people to their families in other parts of Guatemala. Sisters Renelle and Richard Marie worked for some time with the radio. The priests, a volunteer agronomist from Oklahoma, and the sisters wrote programs in Spanish that were then translated into Quiché by two catechists. These catechists were trained to be the radio announcers. The people did not have radios, so the villagers met together in a catechist's house in their village and listened together to a radio that they purchased "on time" from the mission. The number of schools grew steadily, spread the faith, and improved the health and economic conditions of the people.

The question that bothered the priests from the beginning was, "How can one combat illiteracy among 45,000 inhabitants?" The first four priests who came to Nahualá found that 97 percent of the parishioners spoke only Quiché. The remaining three percent spoke a little Spanish. To improve their lot, the people would need to learn Spanish, the official language of the country.

Now with the arrival of the radio there was a greater hope for the mission to teach and for the people to learn how to read and write. Sister Richard Marie was given the task of developing some method of teaching reading and writing by radio. She did not know anything about poles or plugs or the working of a radio, but she did know very well the difference between vowels, consonants and such language needs and was an excellent experienced teacher. For three months she experimented with syllables and taping without success. Then she learned about the Laubach method

of alphabetization which was successful. The training courses could begin. The catechists were invited to training sessions to learn the alphabet and to follow the radio's instructions so that they could be auxiliaries in the centers, the "radio schools" where the adults would gather to learn to read and write by radio. Of the 177 men who attended the three-day courses periodically, 18 had never been able to read, write, hold a pencil or distinguish a letter. At the close of the courses, all but one of the illiterate participants passed the final tests. It was stressed that they had to do exactly as the radio said and they were drilled in the types of lines, circles, and curves. Before the end of the first session "mamá" and "papá" were boldly written on the rectory walls!

When the auxiliaries returned to their communities and took registrations of those who wanted to attend the radio schools, the numbers were staggering, totaling 1,581. Approximately one third of the radio school pupils were women. When the day of the first class came every "school" had a Coleman kerosene lantern, a blackboard, chalk, Laubach charts, and well-trained auxiliaries. For 25 cents, the students received a notebook for home practice, worksheets to be used during the class, a Laubach Booklet I, and the assurance that they would learn to read, write and speak Spanish in one year. That was an optimistic promise. However, over the years the Ministry of Education recognized the alphabetization work of The Voice of Nahuala and other similar radios, authorized them to give official diplomas for the first six grades of primary school. In actuality, though, they never went beyond the second grade.

Over the succeeding years, the Voice of Nahuala grew and expanded its scope of action to all types of direct and radio education. It became a model educational institution, recognized throughout Latin America for its ability to enable people and promote education, culture and all aspects of Christian and Mayan life with the ever growing participation of the area's people.

From 1965 to 1990 Sister Janet, who continued in the radio after Sister Richard Marie and later Father Rompa left the Spokane Mission, was director of the radio. In 1971, under her guidance, the institution became an independent non-profit corporation known as the "Association for Development and Popular Education (ADEP) La Voz de Nahuala." Sisters Roberta Winkels and Janet were founding members of this association along with a number of Mayan co-workers in the radio the Voice of Nahuala. The radio and the association became one of the few professional institutions in Guatemala in the use of radio for adult education and promotion.

Sister Janet deserves much credit, praise and gratitude for establishing the radio on a firm foundation. Sister was also an important element in the

foundation and development of the Guatemala Federation of Radio Schools, of which she served as a board member for more than 16 years. In the early 1970's Sister Janet had the privilege of being one of the founding members of the Latin American Association of Educational Radios and served on the board of directors for two years. She once said, "Education is what our people need most of all. If they go to school, learn to read, to write and to think critically, then they will be able to help themselves and their communities." In 1991 Sister Janet received the Papal Cross for her work with the Quiché Indians of Guatemala. The Papal Cross is the highest award that can be given to a non-ordained person.

SAN BERNARDINO, PATZÚN, CHIMALTENANGO 1963-1988

Patzún is located in the highlands of Guatemala. Both Ladinos and Cakchiquel Indians make up the population. "Ladino" is a term used to define a creole, one of mixed Indian and Spanish blood. Ladinos control Guatemala politics and economy and determine the social norms. The Cakchiquel Indians are descendants of the Mayas who in times past lost aspects of their great culture and began to live in the mountains, isolated by geography and by language, the object of great discrimination.

If it were possible to read the description of a Mayan home before the time of Christ and to look at a Cakchiquel home in 1963, there would be little difference between the two structures. The Indian homes had no windows, thatched roofs, small doors and dirt floors. The people had basically the same life style as the Mayans who lived 4,000 years ago. Many people believed that for survival, the Indians had to change.

In the early 1950's an Italian Franciscan Father Justiniano Babuino, arrived to minister in Patzún, a village with an Indian majority. He soon realized the need for economical and agricultural change and began an agricultural cooperative that was a model for early cooperatives in the country.

Recognizing the need for quality education for the Indian population, Father Justiniano, with the cooperation of the Indian people, began the construction of a school where Indians would be well educated. Indian men were trained as masons, using bricks made from the clay soil of the area. The Indian women carried the needed water in clay water jugs from the pueblo's water fountain, several blocks from the building site. The plan was that the people of Patzún would be able to build the whole school, but they ran out of funds and the school remained unfinished. One day an official of the Agency for International Development noticed the unfinished school which was located on the highway to a resort area and asked why the school was not finished. He got AID funds to finish it which was, as a result, a bit larger than schools in most pueblos. The official name of the school was Escuela Comunal, Colegio San Bernardino.

There already was a national school in Patzún. Yet, when Father Justiniano built his school, both Ladinos and Indians attended. Ladinos and Indians competed, played, studied and worked together, both in the classroom and on the soccer field. As the years passed, relationships improved, though not made perfect, between the Indians whose pure blood strain and culture goes back thousands of years and the Ladinos descendants of mixed races, with both Spanish and Indian blood.

In September 1962 Father Justiniano wrote to Mother Ambrosia, "I am the pastor of Patzún and am very interested in obtaining some sisters from your congregation for my parochial school... My parish has 15,000 inhabitants, most of them very poor Indians, but they are very eager to improve themselves. I was able to build a school for 500 children... Alone I cannot take care of the parish and the school, but with the help of your fine sisters, I am sure we could together perform a fine job." Mother Ambrosia replied that Bishop Melotto had already called upon her to underline the request and that Mother Bernardia of Mankato was interested but that the shortage of personnel prevented a positive reply.

Disappointed but not discouraged, Father Justiniano traveled to Mankato. Contributions of the Indian people made his trip possible. Mother Bernardia's "Yes" made the journey well worth the effort.

August 26, 1963, Sisters M. Sylvester (Mary Jo) Trombley and M. Conrad (Rose) Schwab left Mankato to serve in Patzún. Thousands of citizens, including the mayor and other town and church officials, greeted them as they stepped from the car in the central plaza of Patzún. As they walked to the church through the crowds of smiling and then bowing faces, rose petals showered them.

When the sisters arrived in September to visit the school and to become more acquainted with the area, the building was already in use with 156 pupils being taught by four teachers under the leadership of César García as principal. The convent was well-planned but not yet finished. Since the sisters were not quite ready to teach, they went to Antigua until December to study Spanish with the Sisters of Charity.

In November the sisters returned to Patzún to go through their trunks which had finally arrived. The trunks had not passed well through customs. Everything seemed to have been handled and tossed back in and, unfortunately, not everything was returned. The good news was that it all came duty free.

The sisters returned to Patzún to stay on December 21 and moved into temporary quarters arranged for them in the new clinic. The convent on the second floor of the school was not finished until February 29, 1964.

School opened in January 1964 with nine lay teachers in addition to the sisters. The lay teachers received a salary of \$35 a month, in comparison with the \$100 the national school teachers received. The sisters helped to

coordinate the activities of the school and taught religion or English, since the state required a foreign language in the upper grades. César García said that a great contribution of the sisters to Patzún was their system and method of education. Before the sisters came, much teaching depended on the memorization of facts with too little done to show relationships or to promote thinking. With the arrival of the sisters, education changed.

The Cakchiquel Indian children, who spoke only Cakchiquel, learned enough Spanish in kindergarten to attend classes which were taught in Spanish. They had heard Spanish spoken around them but had never formalized their knowledge of it.

The sisters also cared for the girls who boarded in a little house on the school grounds. The priests boarded the boys. The students paid about \$22 a month for board and room, but brought their own beds, mattresses and blankets. The school discontinued boarders after four years.

A year after the first sisters arrived, the administration of the school opened a primary trade school. This was especially helpful for the Indian boys who could then find profitable employment.

Sisters M. Conrad and M. Sylvester conducted the school from 1964 until 1968. In 1968 Sister M. Trinitas Keltgen arrived and remained until 1984. During these 17 years, she assisted César García in conducting the school, wrote grant requests for Father Justiniano, organized parent-teacher meetings, and raised money. Sister Anna Louise Kemen joined Sister Trinitas and taught in the school for a number of years before going to open Río Bravo. Sister Karen Thein also had a long term of service at Patzún, serving from 1976 to 1989 as the assistant coordinator and English teacher. Sister Jean Ersfeld taught religion in the primary grades from 1975 to 1978. Sister Irene Feltz taught in the school from 1983 to 1988. Other sisters who served for shorter times in Patzún were Sisters Mary Bertrand, Patricia Nagle, Ann Carol Kaufenberg, Helen Jane Jaeb and Janet Druffel.

SAN LUCAS, SAN LUCAS TOLIMÁN 1965-1990

Bishop Alphonse Schladweiler of the New Ulm Diocese met Bishop Melotto of the Sololá Diocese of Guatemala at the Second Vatican Council and immediately recognized and sympathized with the needs of Bishop Melotto and his people. When Bishop Schladweiler returned from the Council he sent Monsignor Arnold Berg to find a spot in Sololá that the New Ulm Diocese could help. Monsignor Berg decided that San Lucas would be the place to help, not because it was situated on the volcano-rimmed Lake Atitlán and was a place of eternal spring and spectacular beauty, but because it was the poorest and most neglected part of Guatemala where for 200 years the 30,000 Catholics had kept their faith without the help of a resident priest. They were mainly Cakchiquel Indians who lived in the mountains where they eked out their existence. They had neither the basic necessities of life nor the means to secure them.

Father Stan Martinka arrived in 1962 and Father Greg Schaffer in 1963. They, their successors and their helpers worked to raise the Cakchiquel standard of living and to give them the rights they should have had as human beings. The mission began small industries, bought and developed land for small farms, taught the Cakchiquel about care for the land, and established housing projects. They also realized that a strong need of the mission was education.

In 1963 Bishop Schladweiler asked Mother Bernardia, "Could some sisters also come there to work with our diocesan priests?" In 1964 Sisters Philomena (Sandra) Spencer and Medard Zweber arrived in San Lucas and began with the teaching of catechetics in San Lucas and the neighboring villages.

Only a few of the children in the town and area were being educated and in 1965 the people expressed an interest in the education of their children, saying that they could see a future for their children only if they learned to read and write. The cooperation between the teachers and administration of the national school in San Lucas and those of the parish school contributed much to the success of the programs.

The sisters began slowly. Each one took about five children of pre-school and first-grade age level, both Indian and Ladino, and worked with them every day in a loosely structured learning situation. The sisters wanted to know what kind of "experiences" life had held for the children, their mastery of language, and how they would learn. The sisters also taught and learned from the Ladino teachers they hired. The following year they hired a native Cakchiquel teacher as an auxiliary so that the students could see that the Ladino, Cakchiquel and American teachers could work together.

The first full year of formal classes was held in the parish hall. The following year pupils and teachers moved into the rooms of the new school building. The school population and the education level grew. After the first students completed six grades of school, formal education came into its own in San Lucas.

The people became better equipped to deal with their difficulties: poor living conditions, very little ownership of property, poor diet, and illness which was frequently due to malnutrition.

Even though in many areas of Guatemala the extended family cares for orphaned children, the traditional family unit in the San Lucas area had begun to break down due to the economics and politics of the time. Sister Medard was an artist who painted pictures of life in the third world country, but her four years in San Lucas were spent mainly in working in the clinic and caring for the orphans who lived with the sisters in the convent. It was not until the number of orphans reached 19 that an orphanage was built and placed under the care of volunteers. Sister Dorothy Wagner arrived in 1974 and for eight years, along with the volunteers, worked with a

population of orphans that ranged from 18 to 20 before the war years and up to 70 and 80 in the late 1970's and 1980's. Sister Rose Ann Ficker also worked in the orphanage for some time.

Sister Arné Malecha, LPN (Licensed Practical Nurse) came to San Lucas in 1971 and settled into the community for nine years. She was the leader who made the Clinic and Nutrition Center intrinsic parts of parish life. She and Gilberto Maza brought the small parish clinic to a new level of competency and consistency. Other sisters helped for several years at a time with the nutrition program.

Sister Sandra Spencer remained in San Lucas for 19 years as Coordinator of Education, training teachers and catechists, working with volunteers, raising money for the needs of San Lucas, and directing the Básico which was begun in 1972.