

Southern Mexico mission challenges Dallas sisters

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On September 8, 1986, Sisters Jane Desaulniers, Linda Carmona, and I, Leah Couvillion, of the Dallas province celebrated one year in Mexico. As we look back to the beginnings that brought us here to the diocese of Tehuantepec in Oaxaca, southern Mexico, we want to share with you how we got here and what we are doing.

About two and one half years before beginning, we three discovered in each other a similar interest in foreign mission work in a Spanish-speaking country. Mexico suggested itself very strongly because it is our neighbor to the South and origin of many of the Hispanic people we minister to in the Dallas province.

Letting the provincial team know of our interest, we give the green light to investigate the "where." Already the "when" was determined by the year we would be terminating our current commitments – 1985.

On investigating we learned of three dioceses with courageous bishops who had made an option for the poor and in whose dioceses we would have the chance to work in a rural area with a team in the formation of "comunidades de base."

In time we visited all three dioceses and chose Tehuantepec. We spent our first three months visiting three parishes which had invited us to consider joining their team. Near Christmas in 1985, in days of prayer and discernment, we made the decision to come to this parish of El Porvenir in northeast Oaxaca.

It is served by two Marist priests and for a time two young lay missionaries from the States were with us. The parish has 30,000 people in sixteen villages. A large percentage of the people are indigenous, their languages and cultures being Mazateco, Chinanteco, and Mixteco. The rest are mestizos who speak Spanish.

It is a rural area, tropical and rainy, beautiful in its lush vegetation, but shocking in the poverty of the majority of the people.

Our pastoral work as a team follows the objective and priorities of the diocese. Worked out in 1977, the diocesan objective says:

"In solidarity and insertion with the poor, to form conscientized groups that will make up a people committed to a liberating evangelization, so as to create a new model of church, a church more of the people and one that will lead us to create new women and men and a new society in anticipation of the Kingdom of God."

In this first year our energies have been mainly directed toward insertion and accompaniment. We visit house to house in the pueblos, as well as participate in the training of the catechists. We felt strongly that we needed time to discover ways in which God was here in this culture long before us and thus avoid imposing our own ways.

Our living quarters are simple: two rooms and a bath, no running water. Even then it is better than the stick homes with thatched roofs of many of our people.

We entered Mexico at a crisis time in its history. An impossible foreign debt and plummeting oil prices have wrecked the economy. Recent protests of electoral fraud in Chihuahua and in our own state of Oaxaca have heightened discontent with the incumbent PRI party. Our Bishop, Arturo Lona Reyes, is a prime target for the opposition, not only from the government, but also from some of his brother bishops, because he is fearless in his confrontation with injustices. We are proud of him and the efforts in this diocese to conscientize the people of their power to change things for the better.

As the complex realities of this country and this parish unfold themselves to us, we are ever more aware of how fresh our beginnings really are, and we ask that you accompany us with your interest and prayers.