



Weston brothers with the Benedictine Sisters at their Casa Central in Mexico City, January, 2010

A Gifting Friendship

Sister Fidelina

AS I RECALL ALL THAT LED UP TO THE foundation of the Guadalupe Center, I am filled with so many wonderful memories, occasions, and stories that *Las Misioneras Guadalupanas Benedictinas de Cristo Rey* (Missionary Guadalupan Benedictine Sisters of Christ the King) and the Benedictine Monks of Weston Priory have shared together. We met unexpectedly in 1976; two communities with different lifestyles, number of members, and countries of origin; and yet who became close to one another from the very beginning. Both communities found common ground in our Benedictine spirituality and our openness to wherever the Spirit of God was leading us in friendship.

What caught my attention and deeply touched me from the very beginning, and continues to be a strength, is the love and respect that the brothers show for one another; and how they, in turn, treat each one of us whether we are younger or older Sisters and whatever our work or service in the community. All of us feel equally loved and respected. Also, it was very new for us Sisters not to experience a radical distinction in a monastic community between monks who were ordained as priests and those who were not. For the monks of Weston, each monk was ad-



On the way to El Ojite, 1980



The Chapel at El Ojite, 1980

dressed as “brother,” a relationship of equality. It was the same way that they treated us as “sisters.” This is one of the most beautiful experiences that I have had in my life!

Early in our relationship the brothers asked to become acquainted with our different mission houses and our schools among the poor, as well as the houses of domestic service and hospitality where our Sisters live and minister. They wanted to search together with us to find possible ways to be mutually supportive. We happily brought them to visit our various communities during each of their visits.

Soon after the milestone events of Vatican Council II and the Latin American Conference of Bishops’ Meeting in Medellin, Columbia, in 1979, we opened a house of insertion in a place called “El Ojite” in the state of Hidalgo, Mexico. We shared with the brothers the background and challenges of this mission, and we invited them to visit the mission with us. They enthusiastically responded, “Yes!”

As I recall this trip, several remembrances from that visit come to mind. It was 1980, and we traveled by bus to a town close to El Ojite. From there we had to travel on foot or horseback for an additional two or three hours. The people from the village were very poor, many of them indigenous. They borrowed some horses for transporting us. We began the pilgrimage, some walking, with others alternating on horseback. When we finally arrived, the brothers happily went to the dwelling where they were to stay for the night. The question arose about the beds for sleeping 14 or 15 brothers. Where would the people get them? Very generously the villagers appeared lending some of their own double beds. But the beds were small, and some of the brothers had to sleep with their feet hanging well beyond the end of the bed. Suddenly the weather changed, and it became quite cold. So we lit a small coal-fired stove to take a little of the chill out of the room.

The following morning, unexpectedly, brother Peter was feeling sick and his body was covered with welts. The Sisters were alarmed: was it an allergy or something he ate for supper the previous night? Then after searching his bed we discovered that there were many well-fed ticks that had a grand banquet during the night – at a cost to our brother Peter!

We also visited another indigenous community at that same mission



Brothers' sleeping quarters at El Ojite, 1980



Zacahuil being served at Sapollo, 1980

in the village of Sapollo. There we had two significant celebrations. The first was a traditional Eucharist in their very simple yet beautiful chapel. Upon leaving the chapel the second celebration began. Outside the people had set up another table with a tablecloth and had placed on it a large *tamal*, about a meter or more in length. The *tamal* was prepared with *masa harina* (ground corn meal), and stuffed with chicken or any other meat they had on hand. They wrapped it in large banana leaves, and baked it over an open fire. In their indigenous language it is called "zacahuil." Then, in almost ritual fashion, the people invited us all to stand around the table together and to take a piece of the *zacahuil* in our hands. Everyone had enough to eat with plenty left over. We all later commented that this too was a true and blest experience of Eucharist!

The brothers have visited all our communities throughout Mexico, sometimes traveling a distance of 8 hours or longer. As we traveled, we all contemplated and relished the natural beauty of the surrounding countryside. Joyfully we sang and laughed together as we struggled to communicate with the few phrases of English or Spanish that we each knew. There were also moments of fear. Once when we left Sabanilla, in the state of Chiapas in southern Mexico, at 4 in the morning we were aware that we were being followed by a large truck. We feared it might be the army or a paramilitary group wishing to harm us. We held our breath until we arrived at a place where we felt safe and free. When we did arrive, we found out that the truck was carrying people traveling much like us. Our tension and anxiety were released with a deep hearty laugh.

During the first six years of our friendship, we came to know and appreciate each other more and more. Groups of Sisters traveled to Weston to know and imbibe firsthand the brothers' monastic life, their wonderful values, their relationship with each other and with the many people who come to visit them.

For us, chosen signs can be important symbols in our culture and for communication. Some examples are:

Both communities have chosen a date to remember each other in a special way in prayer: the 12th of every month, in remem-



Br. John and Sr. Fidelina cutting the ribbon to inaugurate the Guadalupe Center, 1983



Br. Richard and Sr. Miguelina, signing the Arco Iris Covenant renewal, January, 2010

brance of Mary of Guadalupe and her message.

We Sisters decided to gift each brother with the very same medal that we receive at the time of our Profession as a sign of our acceptance of them as our brothers and thereby signing them as part of our family.

We searched together for other creative ways to root our friendship and decided to share in common a Center for Retreats that symbolized the communion of our vision and our freedom for the Reign of God.

During the visit of our brothers in January 1983, we celebrated the inauguration of the Guadalupe Center with prayer, song, and the cutting of many ribbons. The ribbons were located at the entrance to the Center, at the door of each bedroom, and at the entrance of the large all-purpose meeting room. I remember Sister Cecilia on this occasion walking very slowly, giving the scissors to some of the sisters and brothers to cut the ribbon and offering keys to open each room. There were moments when, in her excitement, she handed the keys in place of the scissors. Our hearts overflowed with such joy as we laughed, sang, prayed and walked together around our new common home.

As a sign of the commitment of our two Communities to each other, we wrote the *Arco Iris de Alianza* (The Rainbow Covenant). This is a covenant of mutual support and sincere friendship that has enabled us to touch the Reign of God breaking-in among us.

A sign of our commitment with one another is the Guadalupe Center. We had dreamt together, had reflected and planned each step of the way, and finally brought to completion this common project through the energies and efforts of both Communities.

This dream has become a reality. We now share a common home in Cuernavaca, a space for rest, reflection, and prayer, enabling a personal encounter with God; a place open to all persons and groups without any distinction of creed, nationality, or culture. It is a place where each person brings a special gift and where all are welcomed! ■