

# Mice, Mothers, and Hope

— *brother Michael*



**E**VERYONE IN OUR VAN IS LAUGHING. THE LAUGHTER is very relaxed; the kind where a smile remains and eyes continue to shine with enthusiasm. We are in Mexico again visiting with our Mexican Benedictine sisters; and this day we are traveling with Alejandro, our guide from VAMOS, to an after-school program in one of Cuernavaca's colonias named "Josefa Ortiz."

VAMOS, a nonprofit organization, ([www.vamos.org.mx](http://www.vamos.org.mx)) where "Every penny goes to the Mexican poor," founded this particular project in 1995. At that time there were no schools or electricity in this area of the city. Now, the after-school program reaches out to 82 children and 20 mothers. The program includes: pre-school; nutrition and mother/maternal education; primary school tutoring in Spanish and mathematics; medical, psychological and dental services.

One of the Sisters is driving, and Alejandro is giving directions. "Take a left...now a right...follow the taxi...now a right...look out for the dog...two lefts...down the hill...." We are wondering, "Where are we, and where are we going?" Suddenly a small city bus, "Route 16," comes charging towards us with a sign "Centro" flashing on the top of its windshield. Within the confines of the narrow street we manage to get out of the way and continue in the opposite direction.

We know we have arrived when the luminous chatter of children's voices fills the air. As we walk towards the buildings a multitude of curious faces peer out. Brother Daniel was assisting brother Robert with the walker and asks them, "Have you ever seen an 89 year old man up close before?" A singular resounding "No!" rings through the neighborhood.

The schoolyard is filled with three generations of women. Babies who are too young for kindergarten are attended by young mothers. The young mothers are nurtured by the presence of their own mothers. In the middle of the gathering there is a grandmother holding one end of a blanket, the mother on the other end, and a very contented baby rocks back



*Mothers and children at the VAMOS after-school program in "Josefa Ortiz" colonia.*

and forth in the makeshift hammock. All of the women sit together in the shade working at hand embroidery.

Their children are inside the school building. One room holds grades 1 through 6 and a group of junior high students, all doing their after-school work. About ten students from each grade work around a table which is supervised by a teacher. Going down a few steps we enter a second room containing about 20 children in kindergarten. The assignment for each child is to make a "mouse" working with paper, paint, yarn (for the whiskers), and glue. The students are using their finger as a brush, painting the white sheets of paper grey. Paint is everywhere: hair, cheeks, noses, clothes, chairs and desks. And papers are slowly transformed into a picturesque grey "mouse." I keep my distance; overwhelmed by this massive swarming construction project engineered by persons who come up to my knees.

A singular drama catches my eye. A small boy with a few disjointed smears of grey paint on his crinkled paper sits in deepest gloom. I quickly learn that he is new to the class and he misses his mother. A little girl, his peer, sits across from him. They are separated by a large tabletop. The girl is disheveled, with unkempt hair, a smudged face, and her clothes have not been washed for some time. In Mexico, as elsewhere, this means one thing: her family is dirt poor. As the boy's distress grows, and huge tears start running down his cheeks, the girl's face grows in empathetic concern. She does not appear confused, nor distressed, but seems to be saying with her whole being, "Look at me...I am here with you...I know your pain."

Restrictions of time and language end our visit together. We gather in the courtyard where the mothers give us gifts of hand-embroidered cards, table runners, and wall hangings. We smilingly accept their work and engage in simple conversation, knowing how important it is to accept these gifts as a sign of mutual hope and gratitude.

As we leave, two elderly men sit in front of a convenience store. One sits with his back against the wall, his cowboy hat shading his downturned face. I cannot make out his eyes, nor discern his facial expression. I sense he is watching us; the question of how he is observing us remains unanswered. Another man lies on the lip of the sidewalk with his lower body in the street. I wonder if he is lame, drunk, or both. He stretches out his hand saying, "Give me a peso." As brothers we rely completely on the sisters in such situations. Their local knowledge and use of discretion is a way in which we continue to learn how to respond to this grinding poverty. They sometimes give a coin to persons on the street, but most often give a piece of fruit, which is quickly devoured. This time, I saw no one approach him.

As we head back to the Guadalupe Center the journey seems so much shorter, and the vans resonate with our voices as we share our personal perspectives and experiences. This is such a rich time of continued learning, and there is no doubt that when we reflect on the experience with each other there is a profundity that I would never have if I were alone.

Keeping our eyes, ears, and hearts open is one of our most important "works" in Mexico. We come with our histories, judgments, and biases to every single encounter in our lives. Here in Mexico these dimensions of our person are even more apparent. Sometimes we don't know what to do, where we are going, or who the other person is. It is in those times that the limitations of our common humanity are experienced in the marrow of our bones. There is always a thread of vulnerability that weaves its way through our experiences. How can we best respond? Is it by being present and watching, and perhaps offering a silent prayer? How do we make our best effort? Trying to help one person is like, "Lighting one candle instead of cursing the darkness." We may freeze in paralyzing guilt, or sense our integrity with a creative response.

With the Sisters there is another strand of experience which is very strong and shines with clear authenticity. They always keep present some form of hope. Hope is not found in knowing the solutions, or doing things correctly. Hope is not blindness to suffering, nor pretending that injustice is someone else's problem. Hope is found in living, historical communities, long-lived or momentary, large or small. Our deepest source of hope cannot be found in individualism and fragmentation, but in recognizing how blessed we are in our embodiment. We embody the giftedness of God, and are called to be gift to each other.

Even in our best moments, when we have accomplished a thoroughly planned and well constructed goal, we still share our common humanity, humility, and vulnerability. One gift that each of us can offer is the gift of looking across the distance between us—table, ocean, or sides of a room—and filling that distance with an inner empathy, conveying: "I am here with you...I know your pain." As adults may we continue with the hope-filled question, "How can we continue on the journey together?" ■