

Mexico - Dec 6 to Dec 13 2008

The thirty-five pilgrims boarded our **MEXICANA** flight in LAX at 12:30 in the morning. Three and a half hours later our weary band landed in the small and crowded airport in **ZACATECAS**, proceeded through customs and were met by our guide and guardian angel for the next 8 days: Raul Gonzalez Cadena.

It was the morning of the 6th and Raul escorted us to our gleaming bus for the ride to our Hotel and a hot buffet breakfast. We then started our pilgrimage by visiting the first of what would be many magnificently carved and ancient Cathedrals. We would return later for Mass but after a quick visit we proceeded on a small walk around the environs of the Cathedral Square before mounting our bus for an extensive underground tour of an old and deep silver mine, no longer in use. In so far as it has crept under the town itself over hundreds of years it has been declared too dangerous to dig further. The poor miners who dug that massive and impressive underground mine carved an intricate labyrinth and its own peculiar architecture. One can only wonder at the blood and sweat left behind in that rich vale of tears. A great part of that moiled treasure went to Spain but much went to build the beautiful town and monuments above our heads. From there we went up the mountain and took a cable car ride overlooking the town itself. Back in the Cathedral we celebrated Mass and returned to the hotel. That evening, those interested went out to a unique restaurant constructed in an abandoned bull ring. The architect took great pains to include the architect of the old in to the new.

The 7th of December. We left our hotel and headed for Plateros and the shrine of Santo Nino de Arocha. The Child Jesus is depicted as a little traveler with his basket. This is a very popular shrine with many people approaching on foot even as we proceeded in our comfortable bus. Father Manning, SVD celebrated one of the Sunday Masses at the shrine for not only we pilgrims but for the hundreds who packed the church to hear him celebrate in Spanish. There was a devotion there and a site of "Milagros" as well. The walls are covered with testimonials of cures and miracles from this remarkable site of faith.

From the shrine we were on the road again and, just a dusk arrived at the very center of Mexico! It is marked by the shrine of Cristo Rey, a gigantic statue of Christ at the very top of a huge mountain. Our bus wound its way achingly to the top, switch back curves and all, to provide us with a view as well as another devotional site, Church, Mass and all. We were one of the last of MANY buses to have arrived and as we descended in the dark to the valley below, one of the first to leave. The bus driver did a great job and there was a collective release of breath once we hit the valley floor and proceeded to our Hotel and overnight in Guanajuato.

Guanajuato is a World Heritage Monument as declared by UNESCO. It too was a mining city and built in a riverbed. Over the years the diggings and tunnels there had been used for flood control but now serve as underground roads and passages. The 17th Century Basilica is painted a striking yellow and inside contains the oldest piece of Christian Art in Mexico. The statue of the Madonna is over 800 years old and was a gift from King Philip II in thanks for all the silver paid to the crown over the years. Guanajuato is a beautiful medieval town viewed best from the heights where we found the monument of El Pipila. (El Pipila was one brave patriot. He slung a slab of stone to his back, crawled to the city walls, set fire to the wooden doors and allowed the taking of the city in the war of Independence! His statue is well deserved!) The city played a key roll in Mexico's drive for Independence. The Granary, from whose four corners were hung the heads of four Mexican Patriots (long since laid to rest) still dominates the city. It is a city of beautiful monuments and churches as well as an outstanding baroque theater of the arts called Teatro Juarez. After a full day of touring, which included a stop at a bizarre catacomb and its mummies, we were glad to call it quits and proceeded to our hotel, surrounded by a town festival in anticipation of the the morrow's feast of Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception.

The 8th of December. This morning we leave another hotel but before leaving the city proceed to the church of San Cayetano, It is located high on a hill overlooking Guanajuato and, again, a product of the richness of the silver mines of ancient Mexico. It is ornate. It is baroque. It is beautiful. As usual, our group is enriched in our devotions by the presence of many local residents. After Mass our coach and

driver delivers us to the beautiful city of San Miguel de Allende, named after another of Mexico's founding and martyred founding fathers. San Miguel de Allende was founded in 1542 by Fray Juan de San Miguel, a Franciscan Monk. The entrancing colonial charms are evident in the cobblestone streets and continues to attract artists and artisans today. We wrap up the evening with dinner at a Restaurant, owned and operated by friends of Father Mike.

The 9th of December. After breakfast the group walks to the church of San Miguel and celebrate the Mass of the Day. Flowers are everywhere and are a residue of the feast of our Lady. Really, their display and placement are laid out by veritable artists and are evidence of a strong devotion to the Mother of God. This is evident not only in the building and artistry of the in and outside of the church but by the present day decorations. We wrap up our tour of the city, mount our bus and start out on the long trip to the city of Mexico. We arrive at dusk and are ready for our hotel but the traffic is so heavy it takes an unusual amount of time to arrive at our destination.

The 10th of December. We start the day by stopping at the Plaza of the Three Cultures, the Church of Santiago in Tlaleloico (where Juan Diego was baptized and which was also the residence of Bishop Zumarraga at the time of the apparitions) and to the small village of Tlaxpetlac, the site of the 4th apparition. And then we were at the huge plaza and shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe. The cloak on which her image was transposed is now almost 477 years old and hangs in splendor above the main altar of the relatively new Cathedral. (The original basilica shares the same massive square and is now under serious renovation and preservation.) People are already pouring into the site by the thousands in anticipation of the feast, now two days away.

In the afternoon we leave the city and head for the 13 mile square archeological site: the "Place where GODS are made" according to the ancient Aztecs. These massive monuments rival the pyramids of Egypt and have probably given up fewer of their secrets than those found on the plateau of Giza. Who were these people? Why did they build all of this at great expense and labor? What happened to them, when and why? These sites predated the buildings and Empire found by Cortez when he arrived to confront Montezuma. Is there a connection? Who knows.

En route to the site from Mexico city we witnessed hundreds of joggers running alongside the highway heading for their home villages. These runners bore torches as are normally seen by olympic runners. But their flames were ones of faith. The young people had gone to the Shrine of our Lady, lit their torches at the site and were now running the marathon home to light candles in their village in preparation of the feast of the apparition. On the way back in to the city we were surrounded by thousands of people on bicycles heading to the Plaza to camp out and await the dawn of the 12th of December. These manifestations of devotion are humbling to those of us watching from the comfort of our coach. "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!" Once back at our Hotel, some retire to their rooms while some intrepid others mount still another bus, and head out in to traffic to attend a performance at the city's cultural center. One way or the other, it was a long but interesting day.

The 11th of December. Our coach awaits and we head for the hills and the beautiful hilly city of Taxco. Its mines continued to produce with today's technology. High up in the town is the town square the dominant feature of which is the fantastic Baroque Cathedral. The outside of this ancient church has just recently been renovated and is a fitting shell for the treasures and art that lay within. The church has a "Wow" factor effect on anyone entering. Our guide Raul tells us that it is one of the three most beautiful churches in Mexico. Unfortunately we will not be able to visit the other two! The church was built centuries ago by the owner of the silver mine. One can only imagine the richness of his mine if he was able to build this piece of art as a single expression of gratitude. The floors, carvings and decorations are original and have stood the passage of time with little or no damage, revolutions and wars notwithstanding.

After Mass and lunch we then toured the many silver shops that surround the square. The place is a veritable treasure trove of magnificent pieces of affordable (and some not so affordable) works of silver. Then we were back on the bus for the trip back to Mexico City stopping in Cuernavaca on the way to visit

the Cathedral. It paled in comparison to all churches we had seen so far. On the other hand, its walls reeked of the history of the ages. As we drove along Raul suggested we make a stop to buy Roses for the morrow's festivities. It seems to be the custom and the flowers were beautiful and beautifully bound. Everyone got their bunch and the bus was full of Roses!

It was dark when we arrived back at our hotel. The streets streamed with people walking towards the plaza where they would encamp for the night in anticipation of the tomorrow's festivities. "Hail May, full of grace!"

THE 12TH OF DECEMBER!

This is the day the Lord has made. Five million people were in and out of the Plaza these days including us privileged few, We were in our bus and on our way to the Plaza already packed with tourists and Mexicans of different origins. Everyone, it seemed, had a drum. There was dancing and singing and, well, a cacophony of sounds. Many had slept the night in the Plaza and the evidence was all around us. The Cathedral was packed with attendees at the latest Mass which apparently goes on non stop throughout the night and day. Raul suggested that, if we wanted to get a seat, we be ready to "plow" our way into the Church as the incumbents made their way towards the exit. Roses in hand we readied ourselves and as the exodus began we commenced our advance. It was a matter of everyone for themselves to find a seat. The Mass of the Roses would not start for another two hours but if we ever wanted to sit down, now was the time to find a place among the multitude.

At noon the Cardinal and a posse of Priests, (Father Mike included) made their way through the crowd to the Altar and the Mass began. All of this time, of course, the drums kept beating and the various tribes continued their dances in the Plaza. The whole side of the Church was open to the Plaza and thus we were surrounded by organized chaos. The choir sang above the melee, the preachers preached and the Cardinal did his thing. Two hours later it was all over and the flowers were still with us. It was a matter of pushing against the outgoing tide to arrive at the side of the church and add the flowers to the mounds covering the ledges, and down to the floor itself. If it was Roses the Lady wanted, it was Roses the lady got! By the thousands; beautiful Roses of all shades and colors.

Gathering us chicks together at last, Raul was able to lead us out of the deafening crowd to our waiting bus and back to our Hotel of "blessed Silence!" The rest of the afternoon was ours. So were many unexplored sites of this wonderful city but they had to go unvisited for the most part.

The 13th of December. After breakfast we checked out of our last Hotel in the "ZONA ROSA," mounted our bus and went with Raul to the huge Plaza with Mexico's main Cathedral for our last Mass of the trip. It is a glorious building, huge, beautiful and full of answered prayers. Upon taking our leave from that magnificent Church we crossed the Plaza to enter and visit the Presidential Palace. This whole area covers the original Aztec Palaces and Temples that shone in the sun and enticed Cortez as he entered this ancient city. Through the pavement, here and there, through protective glass one can see remnants of those ancient ruins which come alive now in the pedestrian's imagination.

And then it was to the airport and our **MEXICANA** jet for the three and a half hour flight back to Los Angeles; or "El Pueblo de Nuestra Senora la Reina de los Angeles de Porciuncula (The town of Our Lady the Queen of the Angles of Porciuncula) as we returned Tourists from Mexico now call it! It was raining and it was good to be home.

SR Pardy, svd
4.14.09