

neighbors

WINTER 2009 A QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER FROM MISSION AMERICA

EL PASO: THE WEST TEXAS EVANGELIZATION PROGRAM

The phrase “evangelizing in the desert” has an Old Testament ring to it and conjures images of a camel-hair-clad John the Baptist and his diet of locusts and honey.

The 21st-century version of desert evangelization, as practiced by the two dynamic women who run the West Texas Evangelization and Youth Ministry Program of the Diocese of El Paso, still spreads the Word unflinchingly, but it uses more modern tools to reach Catholics who are spread out over the open range.

Since 1986, two Missionary Sisters of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph—Luz Donez and Margie Silguero—have crisscrossed the desert, driving a truck or a van, as a mobile ministry team headquartered in Marfa, Texas. At least half of their daily commute is after dark, when deer are more likely to be crossing the unlit roads.

In the summer months, there’s always an ice chest in the back seat. It contains drinks and sandwiches, because there’s a chance that the sisters themselves or the people they meet might be stranded. Also, they have no grocery store close to home, so the sisters do their food shopping whenever the opportunity presents itself, making the ice chest useful for refrigerated items.

The winter months are especially tough, Sr. Margie says, because the

driving is compromised by cold temperatures and ice on the roads. The sisters travel together and alternate driving their two vehicles, but the rugged conditions age the vehicles very quickly—and challenge the people who operate them. Last year, they hit a deer and totaled the van.

Nonetheless, Sr. Luz and Sr. Margie love their ministry and the people for whom they are a symbol of stability in the journey of faith. “The people are very responsive,” says Sr. Margie. “We’re known wherever we go, and if we were to leave at any time, the people would feel our absence.”

Evangelization Is Central

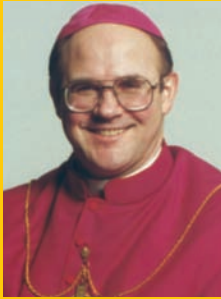
Evangelization is the primary focus of the sisters’ ministry. Sr. Luz concentrates on youth ministry, working with parish youth directors, religious formation directors, catechists, and local youth. She develops, coordinates, and implements youth programs to meet individual parish needs. She says that the aim of the ministry is to revitalize the faith and values of the participants.

The youth ministry draws in parents and sponsors to participate in many of its events. It has also developed a core

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FROM THE CHAIRMAN WINTER 2009



DEAR FRIENDS,

Following in the footsteps of Franciscan missionaries who long ago brought Catholicism to rural west Texas, two modern-day missionary sisters crisscross the rugged desert land in the mission Diocese of El Paso. Driving a truck or a van, Sr. Luz Donez and Sr. Margie Silguero travel up to 300 miles each

day, 6 days of the week, 11 months of the year, to reach Catholics who are spread out over 26,000 square miles, most in small towns with fewer than 10,000 people.

This creative mobile ministry, the West Texas Evangelization Program, revitalizes the faith and values of ranchers and farmers in far-flung mission parishes. As Missionaries of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, these very active religious women lead prayer services in the absence of a priest, help form parish and finance councils, visit the elderly and homebound, direct youth services, drive the sick to local medical centers, conduct wake services, visit hospitals and nursing homes, take notes to inmates' families, and identify for the local priest those who have yet to be baptized or confirmed.

"It's a tough ministry," says Sr. Margie. "Others who tried it have not stayed. The area is vast, and it takes a great effort to have ongoing ministry. The young population is especially mobile because of the shortage of jobs. You don't have malls and stores because there are no big cities here."

Because evangelization is a top priority of the bishops' Subcommittee on the Home Missions, we provide nearly all of the operating budget of the El Paso diocese's mobile ministry. Without the generous support of Catholics from across the country through the annual Catholic Home Missions Appeal, it would be close to impossible for this good work to keep operating.

By striving to make the Church present in these distant, isolated towns, Sr. Margie and Sr. Luz are successfully recruiting and training future lay leaders, including deacons, parish life coordinators, and lay ministers who can effectively collaborate with fewer, yet hard-working priests.

I believe it's a special blessing for us to support this ministry in this tough, dry, isolated terrain. It's truly a ministry on wheels.

Most Rev. Michael W. Warfel
Bishop of Great Falls-Billings
Chairman, USCCB Subcommittee
on Catholic Home Missions

DID YOU KNOW?



The Diocese of El Paso covers 10 west Texas counties comprising 650,000 Catholics, or more than 80% of the area's predominantly Hispanic population. They are served by 95 active diocesan and religious order priests, 26 deacons, and 138 women religious at 77 parishes and missions. There are currently 8 seminarians in formation for the diocese. Soon 17 others will begin their studies. The new seminarians are from Vietnam, the Philippines, Nigeria, Colombia, and the United States.

El Paso County itself is one of the three poorest urban counties in the United States. In the city of El Paso, more than 30% of the people live in poverty. El Paso and its larger Mexican sister city, Juarez, are within walking distance of one another. They have a combined population of more than 2 million, creating the largest metropolitan area on the border between the United States and Mexico. The four international ports of entry average 16,500 pedestrians and 45,000 vehicle crossings every day. Agriculture, cattle ranching, oil and natural gas production, and tourism are the primary industries. The Border Patrol also employs many El Paso residents.

Outside the city of El Paso, the nine rural counties of the diocese cover the most rugged, unforgiving desert terrain in the state. Most of the 30 small towns that dot the landscape have fewer than 10,000 people.

The **USCCB Committee on National Collections**, through its **Subcommittee on Catholic Home Missions**, provides financial support for missionary activities that strengthen and extend the presence of the Church in the United States and its island territories in the Caribbean and the Pacific.

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leadership group and music ministry team whose members help at events in parishes other than their own.

“We admire the commitment and dedication of these people who use their personal gifts to serve the people of a wider area, and we appreciate the sacrifices—and driving—it entails,” says Sr. Luz.

Sr. Margie directs the evangelization ministry, which she says is “called . . . to bring our faith communities to a renewed enthusiasm for their faith and for their parishes. We invite every parishioner to make a difference for Christ at home, at work, and in the local community. We have noticed that parishes that join our programs become vibrant, spirit-filled parishes.”

Participation requires a significant commitment by catechists and other volunteers in this area, where jobs are scarce. Sr. Margie says, “People have two or three jobs just to be able to make it. One of our volunteers teaches school until noon, drives a Federal Express truck from 2 until 7 p.m., and is also the mayor of his town. He helps with our ministry and gets no salary from us.”

Catholic Home Mission Support Is Crucial

Sr. Luz and Sr. Margie are the only women religious in the area. They minister to 5 parishes and 17 missions. In addition to their youth and evangelization efforts, they also help form parish councils and finance councils, lead prayer services in the absence of priests, and try to respond to other needs expressed by the diocese or the parishioners. Catholic Home Missions supplies 100% of the sisters’ annual operating budget.

In one town, the sisters went door-to-door over a two-week period, taking a census of what sacraments were needed to bring Catholics into fuller participation in the Church. They found elderly and homebound Catholics who were not able to attend church, as well as people who needed to be

confirmed or who wanted to be baptized. They shared the information with the local priest and the diocese to help develop an outreach plan.

Sr. Margie and Sr. Luz face challenges that are extreme by typical standards. They schedule their regular weekday ministries on an alternating-week basis, so they visit each of their locations at least twice a month. The distance to each parish or mission from their home base ranges from thirty minutes to three hours. To accommodate the schedule of the working parishioners, most of the programs are in the evening. On weekends, the sisters direct youth retreats and rallies and lead communion services in places where no priest is available. They also conduct wake services and visit hospitals and nursing homes.

A measure of the respect accorded the sisters is that they are given relatively open access to prisoners in their county jail. Sr. Margie says, “We come to evangelize them, but they edify us with their stories of sacrifice in their struggle to find a better life.”

She adds, “It’s unbelievable that [the officials] allow us to take notes to inmates’ families and do errands for them. There is a trust and a working relationship.”

The lack of basic services is a huge challenge for the sisters and the people they serve. “Sometimes the county announces that emergency medical services will be suspended for two weeks,” explains Sr. Margie. “Some people live three hours from a medical facility and could die in that time, so we help people get to doctors.”

She says they also open their home, a large convent, to anyone who needs to stay there, including diocesan staff, family members, and people in need.

Sr. Margie says that until recently, the parish where the sisters live was

“The Subcommittee on Home Missions provides nearly all (100%) of the operating budget for the West Texas Ministry. . . . Without the support of the Subcommittee, it would be nearly impossible for the ministry to keep operating.”

—JANINE YOUNG, PROGRESS AND GRANTS DIRECTOR, DIOCESE OF EL PASO

without a priest for five years. “We were running our ministry and managing the parish. We were wearing all the hats 24 hours a day,” she says with a laugh. They are now helping the newly ordained pastor to settle in.

Rewarding Life

El Paso’s Bishop Armando Ochoa is an enthusiastic supporter of the sisters’ ministry, says Sr. Margie. He visits every month for vicariate meetings and assigns seminarians to help in the area before they are ordained deacons.

The Missionary Sisters of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph were established in Madrid, Spain, in 1945 to help people displaced by the Spanish Civil War. The congregation’s local motherhouse is in Corpus Christi, Texas, 11 hours from Marfa. Sr. Margie explains that the West Texas Evangelization and Youth Ministry Program fits well with the charism of their religious order.

“Our charism consists in evangelizing through the works of mercy, in service to the poor and those most in need, with simplicity, joy, availability, and generosity,” she says. “We respond to the needs of the times and places in the spirit of self-giving and live out our fraternal life in the spirit of the Holy Family.”

Both Sr. Luz and Sr. Margie are native Texans. Together they have given 79 years to working for their congregation—and, thanks to God’s grace, they seem to be in no hurry to retire from their mission in the desert.





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In this issue . . .

Journey with two nuns as they evangelize in the deserts of El Paso, Texas, to revitalize the faith and values of the people they meet. Sr. Luz and Sr. Margie minister to 5 parishes and 17 missions, and nearly all of their operating budget is provided by Catholic Home Missions. Read about how these two remarkable women help people's lives, and consider how you can make a difference for Christ in your home, work, or community. For more information on the home missions across the United States, explore our Web site at www.usccb.org/hm.

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