



MISSIONARIES IN ACTION

DOMINICAN MISSION FOUNDATION

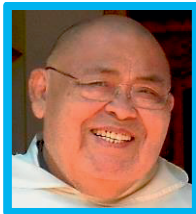
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REPRESENTING JESUS: Ministry in Time of Crisis



“It is not necessary to teach others, to cure them, or to improve them; it is only necessary to live among them, sharing the human condition and being present to them in love.”

B. I. Charles de Foucauld

Dear Mission Friends:

In 1965 when, at the request of the Diocese of Mexicali, we Dominicans first returned to minister in the present parish of Santa Maria de Guadalupe, Poblado Compuertas, I recall visiting one of the furthest outposts of the parish, Poblado Villa Zapata. The desolate area was dotted with the poorest, most dilapidated of houses and small, barren farms. I went to call on and introduce myself to one of the women of the poblado, Doña Magda, who was known as a leader of the community. Typical of all the others, hers was a simple one-room home with a dirt floor and glassless windows open to the elements.



Parishioners lined up according to guidelines as they await bags of food and household supplies.

It was a rare cool day in the desert and, gracious even amidst such poverty, Doña Magda offered me a cup of coffee. I was just about to decline her kind offer, considering the flies buzzing all around, but in an instant I realized that in all my experiences in accepting hospitality in similar situations, I had never been put in harm's way or become ill.

And now, ever since the emergence of the coronavirus pandemic, I have been reminded daily of the lesson I learned that afternoon 55 years ago. My first concern was about myself and the other Dominican brothers with whom I live becoming infected or ill. Fr. Bart, Fr. Martin, and I are all elderly and have underlying health conditions.

But then I realized that as friars of faith, we can't just be locked up in the convent, focused only on protecting ourselves. We must follow the example of the Master and care for the sick and the elderly among the poor whom we serve, who depend on us, who have no other recourse for food and basic home supplies. **Being a missionary means, I think, being with our people and standing by them, even—especially—in difficult situations.** The words of Blessed Charles de Foucauld, as in my opening quotation, have served as especially inspirational to me: **“I do not want to travel through life first class when the One that I love went in the lowest class.”**

Certainly we take sensible precautions and are obedient to the ever-changing protocols.



As I write, the latest report is that Imperial County, just on the other side of our border, is the most infected county in all of California; its only two hospitals are so impacted that they have been helicoptering patients to Riverside and San Bernardino. And Mexicali itself is the fourth most infected city in all of Mexico. Our mayor has forbidden anyone to be out of the house for any reason after 6:00 p.m. and the streets are being patrolled by the police.

But, while working within the guidelines, we must continue to serve the parish. **Those evils that are ever-present, that we have always worked to alleviate—deprivation and hunger, loneliness and fear—are all only amplified in this grim moment in time.** And to add fuel to the fire, since our Masses are celebrated in private, there are no Sunday collections and our resources are dwindling.

But by being prudent with those limited resources, by the selflessness of those of our parishioners who are not as bad off as most, and by the generosity of you, our Mission Friends, we have been able to serve almost 900 homes.

We made the commitment to buy sacks of beans, rice, and pastas; we asked parishioners who were able to help buy other basic food and house supplies; and we called for volunteers to put together and distribute or deliver food bags.





Moreover, as pastor, I am making myself available to anyone who needs help as much as I am able. I have set aside office hours from 10:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m., four days a week, offering the sacraments of Holy Communion or Reconciliation, counseling sessions, or short visits. Wearing masks, we meet individually under a tree outside the office. The other friars and I also do our best to accompany our people in their sorrows at private funerals.



Top left, even the volunteers must socially distance from each other; top right, donations of food; left and bottom, Fr. David presiding over a parishioner's private outdoor funeral service.

Again I recall the words of Bl. Charles de Foucauld: ***"We must love people as Jesus loved them. It is by loving people that we learn to love God."*** Like St. Francis, Bl. Charles, who will soon become a saint after a miracle attributed to his intercession was approved by the Vatican, preached the Gospel by his life. He sought to convert his neighbors to his Christian faith out of love, not through coercion or shame but through friendship and service. He wanted to conduct himself so that people would ask, ***"If such is the servant, what must the Master be like?"***



Bl. Charles continued, *“My Lord Jesus, you have put into me this tender and growing love for you, this taste for prayer, this faith in your Word, this deep feeling of the duty of almsgiving, this desire to imitate you, this thirst to make the greatest sacrifice for you that I can make.”*

In this difficult time, we are not afraid; we stand firm in the promises of our Savior and the great love of our Blessed Mother. And we thank you for any help you can provide during this time that is trying for us all.

May the Lord bless and keep you,
Fr. David Bello, O.P.

What’s true of all the evils in the world is true of plague as well. It helps men to rise above themselves.

~ ~ ~

What we learn in time of pestilence: that there are more things to admire in men than to despise.

~Albert Camus

Editor’s Notes:

Because the coronavirus is global, every one is affected and charged with navigating it as best we can within our own particular circumstances; but by the same token, because it is global, it is a reminder of our commonalities and interconnectedness.

I was especially struck by this notion while reading *The Plague* by Albert Camus last month. Published in 1947, the novel chronicles the abrupt arrival and slow departure of a fictional outbreak of bubonic plague in a town on the coast of French Algeria in the 1940s. Camus was born in Algeria and the town in the novel had indeed been devastated by various plagues, but not since the 16th and 17th centuries. His work was meant to be metaphorical and universal. It examines the complexities and nuances of human nature and all the varied attitudes and responses toward disruption of daily routines, toward separation and loneliness, toward tragedy and death, toward individuality and responsibility. An existentialist, Camus requires his readers to think critically about religion, life and death, despair and hope.

As I was reading *The Plague*, I was also reading up on the life of Bl. Charles de Foucauld for this month’s newsletter. (While Bl. Charles has been a significant inspiration to Fr. David, I had never before heard of him.) And, I thought to myself, “Is there something about Algeria—where Camus was born, where he set his novel, and where Bl. Charles lived and served?” An interesting thought—I’m always looking for connections and common themes in trying to make sense of this unpredictable and complicated world—but since both men’s lives and writings transcend time and place, probably not. What’s essential though, I think, to our own peace and the peace of the world, is to keep thinking and reading and listening and discussing and seeking to understand each other, from priests to existentialists and all in between.

While *The Plague* is demanding and unsettling and depressing, it is indeed timeless, and particularly relevant in this complex moment in history in which we find ourselves. And in the end it is comforting and uplifting, as seen in two of my favorite quotes above (Spoiler Alert!), the messages of which can be discerned in all the best works of literature, in all the best-lived lives.

~ L.W.



Charles de Foucauld was born into an aristocratic family in France in 1858. He rejected his faith as a teenager, sowed his wild oats, joined the army to see the world, and then became an explorer on his own. Eventually he returned to his faith, joined a monastery in France and then Syria, and at the turn of the century, became a priest and missionary, making his home finally in Algeria, which he had come to love. An oft-quoted writer and poet, he wrote that he “felt called straight away to go to the ‘lost sheep,’ to the most abandoned, the most needy, so as to fulfill the commandment of love.” Through his travels, he had found that no people were more abandoned than the Muslims of Morocco and the Algerian Sahara. Vowing to live in poverty, penitence, and love of God and neighbor, he gave himself over to them, providing food and medicine and alms, offering counseling, and even cooking and doing their laundry. He bought many out of slavery, imploring local French personnel to treat the native peoples with dignity and fairness. “When the government commits a grave injustice...we do not have the right to be ‘sleeping watchmen,’ ‘mute dogs’ or ‘apathetic shepherds.’” He was assassinated in 1916.