

**Our Lady of Fatima and Saint Helen's Parishes
Schenectady, New York
and Our Sister Parish San Agustín,
Cuanacaxtitlan, Guerrero, Mexico**



Contents

Becoming a Sister Parish.....	3
San Agustín Overview	4
PIME Missionaries.....	4
The Church of San Agustín.....	4
The Church of San Francisco	5
The Church of San Juan Diego	5
Background Information on the Mixtecos	6
Crops	6
Social Development	7
Schenectady Sister Parish Involvement	9

Becoming a Sister Parish

The journey of becoming a sister parish began in January 2002 when Saint Helen's Christian Service Committee studied Bishop Howard Hubbard's 1988 Pastoral Letter, *We are God's Priestly People*. In the Letter, Bishop Hubbard stated, "I have been searching for some tangible ways to create a greater awareness of the fact that we are members of a global family and to give concrete expression to that awareness. An excellent way to do this, I think, is to follow the example of other dioceses in our country which have entered into a "sister relationship" with a diocese from a third world....given the growing presence of the Hispanic community in our country and the fact that our future as a Church and nation is vitally intertwined with that of our brothers and sisters in the southern half of our hemisphere, I am suggesting that we pursue a relationship with a diocese (parish) in that part of the globe."

The idea of forming a sister relationship was presented to the staff and pastoral councils of Our Lady of Fatima and St. Helen's. After the approval and encouragement of the parish leadership, a steering committee was formed with representation from both parishes to begin the discernment process. Fr. Richard Broderick provided guidance to the steering committee about the Pueblo to People project and facilitated the steering committee's participation in a diocesan meeting on existing sister relationships. Representatives from St. Mary's (Crescent) shared the experiences of their sister or "twinning" relationship.

The steering committee was aware that Mary Moon, a parishioner of Our Lady of Fatima, served a small parish in Mexico while a student at Springfield College. Upon graduation in May 2001, Mary dedicated a year of service as a lay missionary to the mission San Agustín and the Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions (PIME) missionaries, functioning as the medical provider. In October 2002, Fr. Massimo Seg , PIME, visited Schenectady and offered a slide presentation on the San Agustín parish for our church communities. The steering committee was drawn to this parish and extended an invitation in December 2002 to Frs. Graziano Rota (pastor) and Massimo to embark on a sister parish partnership.

The goal of the sister parish relationship is to link our faith communities in mutual partnership so as to share each other's faith, culture, and community life.

San Agustín Overview

Our sister parish is comprised of three church communities, in the state of Guerrero, Mexico in the Sierra Madre del Sur Mountains, located about 100 miles east of Acapulco. The churches are in the Archdiocese of Acapulco. We commonly refer to our sister parish as the Church of San Agustín since it is the headquarters site for PIME staff. The Mixtec Indians are the indigenous peoples of Guerrero. They are an agricultural society, living in remote areas with limited means of communication beyond the immediate community. The indigenous people continue with some Aztec beliefs which are interwoven in the culture. For example, Saint Mark's feast day in April is celebrated in anticipation of the rainy season.

PIME Missionaries

The Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions (PIME) provides staffing for the sister parish villages. PIME is a missionary institute of Catholic priests and brothers dedicated to the missions among non-Christians. Missionaries are placed in 17 countries around the world serving the poorest people in the world. The North American Headquarters opened in 1947 in Detroit, Michigan. PIME also has a presence in Wayne, New Jersey and in several parishes in the Archdiocese of Detroit and the Archdiocese of Lansing. The Mexican regional headquarters for PIME is located in Acapulco. PIME missionaries began serving the communities of Cuanacaxtitlán and the villages in the San Luis Acatlán munic was installed as the pastor of San Agustín on August 28, 2007 (feast day of St. Augustine). Additional information on the PIME missionaries is available at: www.pimeusa.org .

The Church of San Agustín

Cuanacaxtitlán (Cuana), the largest of the three towns with approximately 5,000 residents, is the site of San Agustín. Cuana is more developed than Yolo or Cumiapa with an arcade, library, several shops, public announcement system, state sponsored schools, partial pavement of the roads, and a state sponsored clinic.

PIME staff and visitors live in the church campus in Cuana. The campus includes: a credit union (established in approximately 1998), pharmacy (2000), water purification system with retail distribution (2001), a second well for water (2003) and a medical clinic (2002) staffed by a physician employed by PIME. The campus also has a multi-purpose building used for the

missionary residence, office, kitchen, dining room, internet café and religious education. An additional building on the campus, previously a convent, is used as a residence for visitors. Transportation to Cuana is more easily accomplished than to the other villages; the roads are less affected by the rainy season and taxi service to Cuana can be arranged. Reliable electricity has been available in Cuana for a longer period than the other towns. A high school sponsored by the state was completed in 2003 but the water lines for homes project begun in 2007 remains unfinished with trenches dug in the streets. Spanish and Mixteco are the customary languages.

The Church of San Francisco

Yoloxochitl (Yolo) has approximately 2,000 residents and is the location of the Church of San Francisco. It is about 30 minutes by car from Cuana. Yolo has less retail services available than Cuana. Some residents have modern conveniences such as refrigerators and televisions in their homes because electricity has been available for several years. A state sponsored health clinic is available. Potable water is transported from Cuana to Yolo and sold at a minimal cost. Four nuns from Columbia are located in the village, living in the convent completed by PIME in 2008.

The Church of San Juan Diego

Arroyo Cumiapa (Cumiapa) is the most remote village, located about 1.5 hours from Cuana by car along unpaved, bumpy roads. Approximately 1,000 residents live in the village. Reliable electricity became available in 2007. PIME completed the construction of the Church of San Juan Diego, designed by Fr. Massimo's father, in 2003. Funds provided by Our Lady of Fatima and St. Helen's allowed PIME to construct a medical clinic in Cumiapa in 2008; however the state has not provided a physician. A state sponsored nurse lives in the community part time. State sponsored schools are within a short walk from the center of the village, and the students must cross a stream by foot which can be challenging during the rainy season. Residents obtain their water from this stream. Since the village is located at a high elevation, the water from the stream is not as extensively contaminated by wastes or chemicals as in Cuana or Yolo. The common language is Mixteco.

Background Information on the Mixtecos

The Mixteco live in the states of Oaxaca, Puebla, and Guerrero and are known as the “men and women of rain.” The State of Guerrero had a population of 3 million in 2005; forty-two percent of the population lives in rural areas. There are eight municipalities in la Montaña (mountains) and seven municipalities in Costa Chica (coastal) inhabited by the Mixtecos; the settlements are dispersed and many have less than 500 inhabitants. Mixteco identity is defined by territory/location and participation in social organizations.

During the 14th and 15th centuries, the indigenous people of mountain and coastal regions of Guerrero practiced slash and burn farming in the tropical forests and cultivated small irrigated fields along the numerous river valleys. The Spanish conquest brought dramatic declines in the native population and unlike many other areas of Mexico; the decline was not offset by significant Spanish settlement. Rough topography, the low potential for economic development, and perceived health hazards were disincentives to settlement. As a result, agriculture and cattle raising were not common in the region until well into the 19th century.

Crops

At the state level, maize is the most extensive cultivation. In some regions, the yield per hectare is 2.1 tons, but in the majority of the indigenous communities in la Montaña, it is only slightly more than 0.5 ton per hectare. Regardless of the low yield, the indigenous peoples continue to cultivate maize for self-consumption since it is part of their culture and history. The rest of the year, they buy grain at high prices. Maize is also used for currency.

Maize is cultivated in a system of temporary agricultural production. Over history, the farmers learned to make the most of their environment with its steep slopes. The “*tlacolole*” slash and burn agriculture system developed and is generally used today on the hill sides that have been cleared and leveled, it is well suited for delicate soils. This practice improves the quality of the soil on the steep slopes, and it also takes advantage of the daily movement of the sun. Faced with decreased production due to overutilization of the land and a lack of crop rotation, the indigenous farmers have begun to use chemical fertilizers which have resulted in an increase in yields.

In the areas where there are 30 percent or more indigenous, the primary crops beside maize are: beans, pumpkins, coffee, fruit, and vegetables. A variety of additional crops are

grown depending on geography, culture, and location including: rice, alfalfa, sorghum, chili peppers, tomatoes, melon, potatoes, tomatoes, yucca, onion, jicama, sesame, and watermelon. Cattle and turkeys are also farmed.

Social Development

The Mexican Constitution guarantees a free education. It further requires that children under fifteen years of age attend public or private schools to obtain primary and elementary education (nine years) during the time prescribed by the Law on Public Education in each State. The Mexican government has promoted and established bilingual primary and elementary education in some indigenous communities. Bilingual education programs have existed since the 1960s for the indigenous communities, in the late 1990s the focus was producing free text books in more than a dozen indigenous languages. In the 1970s, Mexico established a system of distance-learning through satellite communications to reach otherwise inaccessible small rural and indigenous communities. Schools that use this system are known as “*telesecundarias*” in Mexico.

Although education is the most consistent state program, there has not been a decrease in illiteracy rates among the indigenous population. Although written, the Mixtec language is read or written by few indigenous people. There are several Mixtec dialects spoken, and they vary considerably from area to area. In Mexico, fourteen percent of those over five years speak a native tongue; Mixteco is one of the most common languages. The census of 2004 indicated that the national illiteracy rate was nine percent for ages 15 and older (UNESCO). In 1995 in Guerrero, the illiteracy rate was 23.9 percent for ages 15 and older, the highest rate in the country. Among the Guerrero municipalities comprised of 70 percent or more indigenous peoples, the rate is 50.9 percent.

The primary cause of illiteracy is the absence of children from school. Participation in migrant agricultural labor leads to missed school and early dropout; children also are taken out of school due to a lack of resources. The bilingual schools, teaching Spanish and Mixtec, are usually located in municipal centers. In some isolated areas of la Montaña, there are schools, but no teachers.

Guerrero has experienced significant population growth and economic development during the last 60 years. However, the geographic pattern and character of this growth remain

strongly influenced by the state's rugged topography limitations on transportation. The Mixteco live by farming the steep mountain slopes; historically low food production levels for self-consumption and high levels of ecological deterioration has contributed to migration. Among the illegal migrants working in New York City, it is estimated that approximately 30 percent are Mixteco. Other employment options are limited to travel to larger municipal areas such as Acapulco or to northern Mexico and the US as migrant farm laborers.

The lack of paved roads has impeded the development of a regional economy. Only one Mixteco municipality in la Montaña has a paved road and the majority of the communities are cut off during the rainy season when the roads are impassible. Recent studies carried out by the Natural Resource Program of the University of Mexico (PAIR-UNAM) in la Montaña cite the need for productive projects that consider sustainable use of resources, developed in coordination with the demands and needs of the indigenous communities.

In 2006, the average life expectancy in Mexico was estimated to be at 75.4 years; Guerrero was among the states with the lowest rate at 73.2 years. The closest hospital, located in San Luis Acatlán, is approximately an hour's drive from Cuana. In 2008, it had a total of six in-patient beds, an emergency room, an operating suite, and several out-patient services. Common medical conditions include tuberculosis, diabetes, hypertension, gastrointestinal and respiratory infections and loss of hearing. There is a lack of routine medical and dental care.

There are limited municipal services in **Cuana** including a state sponsored doctor, electricity, a basketball court and a library. The area lacks indoor plumbing, septic or sewer systems and a municipal water treatment plant. Farm animals such as chickens, swine, and donkeys are often left loose to wander in very close proximity to family living quarters. Bodegas are located in the municipal center selling food items such as tortillas, candies, sweetened drinks, and beer; itinerant salesmen arrive once a week to sell goods such as fresh fish. The public address (PA) systems, owned by locals, function as the mass communication method. The PA systems are used to announce the arrival of sales trucks, doctor appointments, and deaths. Basketball courts can be found in the center of town in virtually all communities. Local and regional competitions are held frequently.

The residents depend on the summer's rainfall to supply water for the entire year. During the rainy season, June through September the creeks and small streams flow abundantly; once

the rain stops it becomes increasingly difficult to find sufficient water. The streams are used for bathing, laundry, and drinking water. Human, animal wastes and chemicals such as fertilizer wash into the streams, especially during the rainy season.

Schenectady Sister Parish Involvement

Several trips and projects have been held to foster the sister parish relationship including:

December 12 Celebrations of the feast day of Our Lady of Guadalupe

April 2003 Visit from Fr. Massimo who meets with parishioners and St. Helen' school children.

August 2003 Computers donated by GE Elfun Society are delivered to Wayne, NJ for transport to Cuana.

2003-2004 Water for Water fund raising by parishes to support well project.

2005-2006 Sale of hand made table runners and cloths which support women of Cumiapa.

2005-2006 Seaton Health donates disposable medical supplies, shipped to Detroit.

2005-2006 Religious education students make friendship bracelets and collect toothbrushes for San Agustín.

January 2005 Frs. James Kane (St H) and Dan Dwyer (Siena College), five parishioners and two Siena College students travel to Mexico City and then on to Cuana. The goal of the visit is to begin the journey of faith sharing during face to face encounters. The communities of San Agustín welcome us with overwhelming joy and friendship. During the trip, the greatest need identified is to offer routine medical care in Cumiapa. Fr. Kane shares this need with the Schenectady parish communities and a fund raising campaign is undertaken.

October 2005 Frs. Graziano and Massimo visit Schenectady; they participate in the celebration of the Eucharist and public receptions. Fr. Kane presents a check for \$30,000 to build the medical clinic in Cuana.

2006 Niskayuna High School Spanish Club provides books in Spanish for San Agustín.

2006-2009 Amigos á Amigos (Friend to Friend) fund raising provides funding to support self-sufficiency farming projects including turkeys, rabbits, goats, and fruit trees.

May 2007 Fr. Massimo meets with Schenectady parishioners, MDs and St. Clare's Family Practice residents to discuss a medical mission trip.

Summer 2007 After many years of work, a source for audiology evaluation is identified. A partnership with Gallaudet University (Washington, DC) is formed; students and an advisor

volunteer to provide screening service to the communities of San Agustín. Simultaneously, St. Clare's Family Practice Residency Program commits to participating in an international rotation. October 2007 Fr. Massimo meets with the Sister Parish Committee and the Family Practice Residents to discuss preparations for the upcoming medical mission. Representatives from the Council 8121-Knights of Columbus also meet with Fr. Massimo to discuss possible shared projects.

January 2008 Six volunteers from Schenectady and five from Gallaudet University team-up to conduct a medical mission to San Agustín. William Anyaegbunam, MD, a parishioner from St. Helen's, volunteers to supervise two residents from St. Clare's Family Practice Residency Program. Dr. Anyaegbunam also provides training to the PIME physician in Cuana; including the use of an ultrasound. The Gallaudet audiology students and their clinical supervisor complete screenings for hearing impairment. Five of the travelers are bilingual and provide translation to Spanish for the audiologists and physicians.

January 2009 Dr. Barry Loffredo and Dr. Donald DeLuke, from St. Helen's travel to our Sister Parish with three student volunteers from the University of Albany to provide dental treatment. The doctors obtain many donated supplies necessary to provide care; the treatments provided are palliative. Our sister parish community previously never had the opportunity for dental treatment. Fr. Massimo begins to work to obtain a dental chair from Italy for future visits.

February 2010 The second dental mission to San Agustín is completed by Drs. Loffredo, DeLuke, and Michael Comis. Three student volunteers from the State University of NY at Albany also travel with the group. One hundred twenty patients are seen by the dentists, 300 extractions are completed. The group begins planning for the 2011 trip.