

SAN DIEGO CATHOLIC WORKER



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Where to from here

Supporters suggest routes for Catholic Workers to take

Subsequent to an article in the last issue of the San Diego Catholic Worker newspaper and in response to a request for ideas that would help us live up to the ideals of Dorothy Day, the following suggestions were made:

Walter Desmond, a retired biologist who now spends his spare time as a college admissions counselor, says that when he thinks of what's most important about the Catholic Worker, he thinks of the personal experiences he encounters along with the opportunities it provides for service.

Among those opportunities, Desmond says, is the opportunity not just to serve, but to meet the others with whom we serve.

Through the Catholic Worker, Desmond finds opportunities to put the Gospel and the homilies we hear on Sundays into daily practice and to make personal the heroics we only read about. "The needs of villages in the Himalayas exist right here in San Diego," he reminds us.

Catholic Workers also learn from and about the saints in our midst what is truly valuable, Desmond says, and how to become leaders in our families, neighborhoods, parishes and workplaces.

"What's important then, is knowing the Catholic Workers themselves, what they do and who they serve and why," he says. "It's the Friday Night Soupers, the liturgies, the meatballs and the lunches served—all those opportunities to personalize the organization."

Downtown opportunities

Bob Bedore, a retired professor of engineering at San Diego State University, wrote to urge us to respond to our spiritual director Fr. Gil's comments at our Epiphany party about a "Relatives for Rent" program. There are people, perhaps in hospitals or jails, or recently released, who would welcome people who simply listen and talk to them.

Bedore also informed us that there is a building near downtown City College that has spaces available to non-profit groups. He also said there are many City College students in need of help.

And Bedore also suggested that Catholic Workers might explore the possibility of volunteering to help with the city's recently

organized programs for homeless people.

Peter Kopkowski, a veteran peace and social justice activist and friend of the Catholic Worker, responded by emphasizing the importance of the process by which we develop a plan, and rather than telling us what we "should" do, suggested we should focus on what we "could" do. "How about a focus on what I am "challenged" to do?" he wrote. "I mean, what is God challenging me to do, in this day of excess materialism, secularism and individualism?"

As Catholic Workers, he said, we are accustomed to giving large portions of ourselves and avoiding saying "no" to people in need. Nevertheless, he added, there are times when we must look at ourselves seriously with as much objectivity as possible, keeping in mind that God will guide us if we let him.

Time to commit

This takes commitment in time and discernment, remembering the old adage: "If you fail to plan, you plan to fail." We might say we are too busy, Kopkowski says, but if we fail to make the commitment, "we can only look forward to an unhappy end to the Catholic Worker. ... It cannot last forever with a relatively small group of elderly white people, all raised in the old 'institutional church,' trying to face the challenges of peace and justice in the 21st century."

In practical terms, Kopkowski says, this means exploring who we are, taking note of our talents and limitations; preparing a vision statement of what we would like to achieve; preparing a mission statement; identifying goals and objectives; preparing an annual plan and budget; and preparing an adequate and transparent reporting system by which we could gauge our progress on a regular basis.

"As we prayerfully go through these steps, we can compare what we are now doing to that to which God is challenging us to do, then we can plan accordingly," Kopkowski says. "There is always more that can be done, but it takes discernment to identify the work to which we are called. We also know that younger people will be attracted to the Catholic Worker by a wider variety of things 'to do' in service to the needy.

Tijuana charities suffer as drug gangs wage war

By Fr. Gentile S.J.

(The following thoughts have grown out of my personal experience and are my attempt to answer the many kind-hearted and sympathetic souls who have said to me, in one way or another, "Aren't you afraid to go to Mexico?" or "What's it like across the border?" I don't have any answers just some simple stories and some powerful words from one of the sisters who has been at the Casa de los Pobres in Tijuana for more than 30 years.)

On the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe this past December 12th I celebrated a very large, noisy and wonderfully joyful outdoor Mass, as I have for the past 22 years, at the Casa de los Pobres in the Colonia Altamira section of the city of Tijuana in the Mexican state of Baja California del Norte. The altar was on a raised platform in the patio area of the Casa and as I stood at the ambo trying to say some words that might inspire or comfort or amuse the three or four hundred people gathered to honor the patroness and protector of Mexico and of all of the Americas, I saw an altercation break out on the sidewalk across the street from the Casa.

I should explain that in addition to all of the many women, children, elderly and disabled people who come to the Casa for help, there is a large number of unemployed and homeless single men who also come to be fed. Some of them are not very well-behaved and some are under the influence of alcohol or drugs. So, it is not unusual that arguments or physical fights break out. Most often they are not very serious nor do they last very long.

Spanish for "duck"

This time the altercation seemed to be lasting longer than usual and it seemed more intense than usual. I began to get nervous and found myself trying to think of the Spanish word for "duck" because the thought began to run through my mind that the combatants would soon be pulling out guns and we would all be in danger of being struck by a stray bullet. Fortunately, the fight wound down and we continued with our Mass.

At the end of Mass as I was posing for pictures with the 60 or so children and young people who had made their First Communion—and some of them their Confirmation—along with their padrinos, I realized that there was something missing. No fireworks! In all of the years that I have been celebrating the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe

in Tijuana, I have come to expect, with some trepidation, the noisy volley of firecrackers that explode as soon as the final song of the Mass begins. This time there was only beautiful music. I thought to myself that this must have been a very deliberate decision on the part of the sisters since the sound of the firecrackers, especially in the semi-enclosed area of the patio, sounds just like gunfire. When I checked with the sisters later, I found out that unfortunately I was correct.

Allaying fears

A few weeks previous to Guadalupe Day I had received an e-mail from a Jesuit scholastic who had worked at the Casa during a number of different periods in his formation. He wrote that he was bringing a few students to the Casa from St. Louis University for a week or so in January. He asked if I had anything to say to the parents of these young people to allay some of their fears about their sons and daughters traveling to Tijuana. I wrote back saying that if they did what the sisters asked of them and stayed close to the Casa and didn't ride around in expensive SUV's (that last part was a joke), they should be fine.

A week later I was at the Casa for our usual Thursday morning Mass and I was talking with a Jesuit novice who had been living and working there during the previous three months. I was telling him about the e-mail from the scholastic in Missouri and about my response. He gave me a curious look and proceeded to tell me that two days before there

See **Border Charities** page 4

Everybody invited to Ignatian awards and Sunday dinner

The Ignatian Volunteer Corps of San Diego is extending an open invitation to all to attend a traditional Italian Sunday dinner honoring Michele Dunn, the recipient of the IVC's 2009 Della Strada Award.

The dinner will be held from 2 to 5 p.m. in the Diocesan Pastoral Center, 3888 Paducah Drive in San Diego, March 22, and the meal will be prepared by Fr. Gil Gentile S.J., friends of the IVC, and members of the Culinary Arts Program at St. Vincent de Paul Village. A silent auction and raffle will be held, live entertainment will be provided, and goodwill offerings will be gratefully accepted.

Dunne recently retired from Catholic Charities after 26 years's service to people in need. She is known for treating all with profound dignity and is the embodiment of Ignatian values.

The Della Strada Award is named after the first church used by St. Ignatius and the early Jesuits to serve the urban poor in Rome.

To reply to this invitation, please contact Margie Carroll at (619) 881-9509, e-mail mcarroll@ivcusa.org, or Pat Doyle, (858) 715-0900, e-mail pdoyle@ivcusa.org.

San Diego Catholic Worker

Traditional Friday Night

Free Bread-and-Soup Dinner and Discussion

Beginning 6:30 p.m., February 13
Our Lady of Refuge Parish Hall
4226 Jewell Street, Pacific Beach

Help for Africa

Medical and Educational Needs

Woody and Catherine Barley

The Barleys have been to Africa on numerous occasions as medical and educational missionaries, most recently from March to June last year.

For information call (619) 298-3755 or e-mail denyshorgan@att.net

San Diego Catholic Worker
P.O. Box 127244
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From the Writings of Dorothy Day

*Be happy,
keep
smiling*



There is a new motion picture uptown called "Monsieur Vincent." I want to see it soon. There was a quotation from it that moved me so much I must write it down for meditation for the new year. St. Vincent is supposed to have said to a new sister going out on her first assignment:

"You will find out that charity is a heavy burden to carry, heavier than the bowl of soup and the full basket. But you will keep your gentleness and your smile. It is not enough to give soup and bread. This the rich can do. You are the servant of the poor, always smiling and always good humored. They are your masters, terribly sensitive and exacting masters, you will see. Then the uglier and dirtier they will be, the more unjust and insulting, the more love you must give them. It is only for your love alone, that the poor will forgive you the bread you give to them."

Soaked to the skin

Going in to supper last night in the dining room which had been filled all afternoon by one table after another full of wet, sodden, dirty men, down at heel, many without socks or overcoats, wet to the bone, what with waiting outside because of lack of room inside, there was the heavy odor of human misery. You could cut it with a knife. There had been three hundred at least to eat our soup and bread.

If every church served the poor in the basements of their churches and rectories, if the good ones of the parish would serve tables as the deacons did, if there were communion breakfasts for the wayfarers, then there would be true agapés. God would pay the bills. And perhaps the Church would get poorer and poorer, and have less and less, and then perhaps she would have too, less of the enmity of the workers of the world, and what she had they would not try to take from her. "When you give a banquet, do not call in the friends and relatives, but the poor," is what our Lord said. (Luke 14:13)

Oh, for more hospices, for more tables, for more servants, for more love!

In the Acts, it says, the apostles rejoiced to be accounted worthy to suffer for Christ. St. Stephen was the first martyr, the first after celebrating the birth of Christ, which the Church celebrates, who was accounted worthy to suffer. And he was a server at tables, and fed the poor and did a lot of indoctrinating beside. You have to talk of what your heart is full of.

Best when wholly Jewish

Fr. Oesterreicher has a most interesting pamphlet on the Jews, "Salvation is from the Jews," as St. John writes, and Fr. Oesterreicher quotes Msgr. Charles Journet saying of the infant church: "Never again on earth will the Church be so fervent, so loving, so pure, as when she was wholly Jewish. Never again in the course of the ages will she find sanctity like that of the apostles." St. Augustine wrote in wonder that "it has not been recorded that any Church of pagan nations did this, (sell all that they had and distribute to all) because those who had as their gods idols made by hands were not found so near the truth.

"So inspired was St. Augustine by the first Church at Jerusalem and its spirit of sacrifice that he spoke again and again of those who 'mortifying the desires of the old man, burned with the newness of spiritual life, as the Lord had enjoined in the Gospels.' Under the tutorship of the Law, they had learned to worship the One Eternal God, and were very close to spiritual things. For this reason they were so receptive to the power of the Holy Ghost that they sold all they had . . . and dedicated themselves entirely to God."

It is a great ideal for the coming year to give oneself more fully, more completely and generously.

Excerpted from The Catholic Worker, January 1949. The writings of Dorothy Day can be read on the Web at <http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday>

How the rich get richer

There is such a thing as a free lunch but only the super wealthy qualify

FREE LUNCH

HOW THE WEALTHIEST AMERICANS ENRICH THEMSELVES AT GOVERNMENT EXPENSE (AND STICK YOU WITH THE BILL)

By David Cay Johnston.
Portfolio. \$24.95, 323 pp.

Review by Paul Spector

This remarkable book reveals how the richest Americans take wealth from the middle class and the poorest Americans. In a series of enlightening and horrifying chapters, Johnston, a Pulitzer Prize- and Polk Award-winning New York Times economics reporter, shows how the rich use their wealth, power and influence to reduce poorer Americans' incomes, wealth and quality of life.

Rich individuals, corporations and associations undermine the free enterprise system by a plethora of means. They use their wealth to persuade public officials to legislate and regulate in their favor. They use their power to intimidate public officials, competitors, and the ordinary citizens into positions that lose wealth for many thousands of public institutions and many millions of individuals. They collude explicitly or by subtle clues that evade anti-trust laws to raise and keep prices higher than any truly free market could. (Witness the Enron electricity deregulation scandal, bloated oil prices and current withholding of credit.) They influence public officials to favor them by campaign contributions, loans, kickbacks, favors such as free trips in corporate jets, by promises of jobs for themselves and family, and by outright money bribery.

Names names

Johnston delineates case after case and names names in which the rich with the assent and often the connivance of officials raid public treasuries, raise prices to unconscionable levels, charge usurious interest, use eminent domain to deprive people of their property and livelihood, and raise taxes to enrich themselves. They induce judges, legislators and regulators to favor them while keeping their depredations secret from the public. Early on, Johnston gives a foretaste of some of the cases he describes: "In the pages ahead we will examine just how thoroughly government has become the servant of the rich, showing how:

Warren Buffet's company has a two-thirds-billion-dollar interest-free loan from our government for more than 28 years, just one of many ways that the government has boosted the investment returns for which he is so renowned. President George W. Bush owes his fortune not to the oil business, at which he failed, but to a sales-tax increase that was funneled into his pocket, a fortune further enhanced by his paying millions less in income taxes than he should have. George Steinbrenner not only gets lavish subsidies for his baseball team, he also made a fortune from a scheme that damaged national security. Paris Hilton has resources to cavort shamelessly because her grandfather, thanks to government, snatched a fortune away from poor children. Donald Trump benefits from a tax that was enacted to benefit the elderly and the poor, but part of which is now diverted to his casinos."

Johnston details how former President George W. Bush parlayed a borrowed \$600,000 stake into a \$17,000,000 fortune. He and his five partners put up \$86 million to buy the Texas Rangers professional baseball team and sold it nine years later for \$250 million. They induced the city of Arlington, Texas to take land by eminent domain for them, and to raise the sales tax by a half percent to enable them to make a profit. Johnston shows that all the profit they made came from the sales tax. To see how Bush failed to pay his fair share of the tax on his profit you will have to read the book.

Swimming in money

The case of John Snow who was Bush's Secretary of the Treasury for three years is far more somber. He worked his way up to CEO of the CFX railroad company. He made millions, Johnston avers, while achieving the worst maintenance and inspection record in the industry. After CFX's record 19 deaths and over 100 injuries, Snow left to become Secretary of the Treasury, and his payments for the first two months of 2003 plus his cash-out payments came to \$72 million. After he left Treasury, Snow became CEO of the Cerebus company which now owns the Chrysler auto company. Chrysler, privately owned by Cerebus, just became the beneficiary of a multi-billion dollar government bailout. Although the owners of Cerebus, among them former Vice President Dan Quayle, appear to be swimming in money, they refuse to use any of it to bail out their own company. Better that you should.

The story of how non-profit health-care companies were privatized by their managers, who became vastly wealthy af-

ter buying them for pennies on the dollar is heartbreaking. The owners transformed service-oriented institutions into profit-oriented businesses at enormous cost to the public. Worse, these companies sought myriad ways to deny health care with the result that many died.

Health care rip-off

Also instructive is Johnston's story of how former Tennessee Republican Senator William Frist's family gained great wealth from a health care company, Hospital Corporation of America that they founded. The stock they held after the company was combined with HCI Healthcare increased enormously in value. The combined company, which became the largest health care company in the world, was run by Richard L. Scott. Under his management the company was involved in fraudulent practices by which it bilked the government and other victims of billions of dollars. Although it was ultimately fined a billion dollars, the penalty was far less than the money it stole. These dismal examples are a small fraction of the depredations Johnston shows us.

The full range should be known to every American. Just as importantly, every American should become aware of the hypocrisy of the rich and influential people who brazenly rail against taxes, while benefiting from them enormously. We should all be aware of the actions of people who deprive widows and orphans of their subsistence while benefitting from the very substance they deny or take from them.

Consciously and often quite unintentionally, the richest Americans have used every means by which the mind of man can be influenced in their favor—by true, slanted and false advertising, and by co-opting the brightest financial, mathematical and business minds in the nation and many in the media. The attention and interest of most citizens have been captured and displaced through wonderful games, entertainments and gambling. The upper classes have retained first class educations mostly for their own and a few lucky bright minds while the rest of the people are starved into a shoddy imitation of education that becomes hateful to most pupils. Most insidiously, yet blatantly, American workers at all levels of labor have been intimidated through job insecurity and excessive debt burdens.

Lobbyists corrupt the market

While waging implacable class warfare against working Americans the richest, Bush's base, decry, intimidate, even ruin those who call attention to their depredations. As jobs are flying abroad or disappearing because the so-called market has failed millions, the public is swamped with hypocritical misinformation about the beauties of the free market and deregulation while lobbyists do all in their power to get congress, state houses and municipalities to bend and constrain the market in their favor. There are over thirty thousand lobbyists in Washington whose influence has made it virtually impossible for the market to operate either freely or in favor of anyone but their bosses. Only a handful lobby for you and they are almost always a lot poorer than their opponents.

However, I realized as I read this fine book that even a really good author has trouble delineating some of the arcane legalities and subtle ploys the financial and legal professions, businessmen and outright crooks in and out of office have used to enrich the richest Americans while diminishing the rest of us. This is partly a fault of our education system, which sophisticates only a few Americans about finances and business. It is also a failure of our professorial class to convey to the public information they have discerned through research and investigation in language that most of us understand. This problem also exists because it is very hard to speak truth to power, as Johnston has, without getting hurt.

Finally, Johnston's remedies are the weakest part of his wonderful book. Although sound, they are far too impuissant to effect any real reform in the system. Given that much or most of Congress and other officialdom depend on the rich to win elections, and are more beholden to the rich than to the rest of us, reform is probably impossible unless the citizenry unites in an alliance of ordinary people that helps to educate us to the realities of our politics and economics. When we are better informed and more perfectly united we will be able to exert our enormous latent power in favor of our own betterment.

Get the book, read it, and weep. You will be a better informed, more powerful person when you do.

Paul Spector is the retired president of the Institute for International Research. He worked in Africa, Asia and Latin America on economic and social development programs, and in the United States on race relations.

Annual Dinner and Auction

Close to 300 friends eat well, have fun while raising funds for Catholic Worker

A turnout of almost 300 people had a ball attending the Annual Gourmet Meatball and Spaghetti Dinner and Auction in aid of the San Diego Catholic Worker at St. Mary Magdalene Church Hall, Oct. 11. While it would not be possible to list the names of all those who made the evening such a success, we list here the donors of items that were auctioned, and some of the volunteers who worked hard Friday and Saturday preparing the food and the hall and cleaning up afterward. We, and more importantly the people we serve, are grateful to all. We apologize to those whose names we have omitted.

Bali Ha'i Restaurant
BayClub Hotel
Bella Stanza
Beverly and Phil Bennett
Ann Bethel
California Tan
Barbara Cameron
Buick Invitational Golf Tournament
Clairemont Surf Shop
Cottage Antiques
Del Mar Racetrack
Tony DiMiglio
Tina DiStefano
Disneyland
Lorrain and Jack Duffy
El Torito Restaurant
European Cake Gallery
Gary Gilmore Jewelry
Good News
H&M Landing
Fr. Ron Hebert
Ice Town
Ipanema Watch and Jewelry
Jack and Julio's Old Town Restaurant

A.J and Peter Kopkowski
Carol and Hugh Kramer
Lamb's Players Theatre
Lillian and Al Macy
Mimi's Cafe
Mingei International Museum
In-n-Out Burgers
Old Venice Restaurant
Osinski Jewelry
Pat and Oscar's
Point Break Cafe
Point Loma Break Café
Point Loma Squido
Patricia Robertson
Rubio's
San Diego Museum of Art
San Diego Museum of Natural History
Sea World
Dr. Marianne and Richard Sipe
Janice and Steve Teixeira
Tomany's Burgers
Tom Hamm's Lighthouse
Trains are Good
Terry Whitcomb

And not forgetting the volunteers ...

A special thanks is also due to George and Terry Hajny, Rick Wiles,

Danica O'Leary Wiles, Chris Pond and Richard O'Leary.

We are extremely grateful to Walter Anderson's Nursery, who donated the flowers,

and Paradise Printers for printing the invitations,

and a host of others, far too numerous to mention,

who provided invaluable assistance with their time and money.

Four experienced caregivers are welcome addition to San Diego Catholic Worker board

The San Diego Catholic Worker recently welcomed four new members to its board. They are:

• **Maria Marsh:** Maria, an only child and mother of one daughter, is semi-retired now after spending a busy career as a bookkeeper in the entertainment industry and the offices of the San Diego County administration. She is a devoted lover of animals (five cats), volunteers for the local library and has joined the Catholic Worker board simply "in order to help people in need." Maria distributes clothing along with Mona Ohlin, who has performed that service for many years, and another newcomer, Sharon Everett.

• **Sharon Everett** is a retired elementary school teacher who is so full of gratitude for a happy life that she feels impelled to give back something to those who are not as fortunate as she is. She says she always had job security and loved her work, and led an extraordinarily lucky and fabulous life. She first realized her good fortune in the seventies, when she taught in U.S. government programs in Germany, Turkey and Japan, and made great friends with people who were not nearly as fortunate as she was. Sharon met Mona years ago when she was teaching, and now helps her and Maria distribute clothing.

• **Rick Landavazo:** Rick grew up in Father Flanagan's Boy Home in Boys Town, Neb., and attended the University of Notre Dame and graduated in 1980 with a bachelor's degree in American Studies, which included studies in Catholic social thought, sociology, and the arts. He received an MBA from Cal State San Marcos in 2001 and works now for the Community Research Foundation, a mental health services provider serving low-income and underinsured, as a cost accountant. He has been a member of Dignity San Diego since 1981. He has lived with his partner, Mike Klingbeil, in Valley Center since 1992.

• **Hugh Kramer:** Hugh heard Dorothy Day speak at his college in the 1960s and has admired her and the Catholic Worker movement ever since. "Service Above Self" (his Rotary motto), has kept him involved over the years with Mother Teresa as she established her projects in Tijuana, Mother Antonia and her work with the La Mesa prisoners, Mother Lillie and her school for girls in Tecate, Project Mercy homebuilding in Tijuana, Thousand Smiles cleft-palate repairs in Ensenada, and many orphanages in Mexico. He is the founder and owner, with his wife Carol, of Discover Baja Travel Club that helps people traveling to Baja and other parts of Mexico. They have two children in their mid-twenties.

Day by Day

A selection of thoughts that readers bring to the attention of the editor from time to time. To submit a thought of your own, please e-mail denyshorgan@att.net

We people of faith and conscience need to do what we can to support movements and projects for disarmament, justice and reconciliation on all sides so that the Middle East and North America might fulfill their callings to be lands of nonviolence. What we need is a new politics of love, nonviolence and peace that would transform the world's landscape. I hope more and more of us can continue to pursue that universal love, with all its social, economic, political and international implications, and model the religious practice we expect from everyone else.

By John Dear S.J.

National Catholic Reporter Jan 13, 2009



Idaho Die-in

Jerry Ebner, a Catholic Worker from Omaha, Neb., went to jail for nine days, Jan. 5, for participating in an Oct. 8 "Die In" to protest the holding of the 2008 Strategic Space and Defense Conference at the Qwest Center in Omaha. Ebner was imprisoned after he told the judge that he could not and would not pay a \$500 fine. Among another seven arrested the same day were Catholic Workers from Des Moines, Iowa, Duluth, Minn., Columbia, Miss., and 90-year old peace activist Peg Gallagher also from Omaha. The group were protesting against the arms race in space and in support of a United Nations resolution to prevent it that is being opposed by just two nations, the United States and Israel.



Two Catholic Workers were arrested Dec. 29 after cutting through a perimeter fence at the British Army's 43-acre Northwood Permanent Joint Headquarters in suburban London. Passionist priest Fr Martin Newell, 41, and Susan Clarkson, 62, are from the London and Oxford Catholic Worker communities where they live and work with refugees from the wars in Afghanistan, the Middle East and Africa. While the two were arrested praying inside the base, other members of the Catholic Worker communities held vigil at the entrance reading the names of British and Afghani war dead. Northwood Military Headquarters is the command centre for all British forces deployed in Afghanistan and Iraq. Fr. Newell had already spent time in jail in 2008 for protesting the war.

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"NEVER AGAIN, WAR!"

Border charities

Continued from page 1

had been an attempted kidnapping of the owner of the store right across from the Casa—about 50 yards from where we were standing. Juan, the novice, said that a number of men disguised (maybe or maybe not!) as policeman tried to grab the store owner and that he pulled out a gun and a shootout erupted with bullets flying everywhere. The store owner was shot in the leg. The bad guys eventually ran off and the store owner took his family and fled across the U.S. border afraid that either he or his wife or one of his children would be kidnapped or killed. So much for my advice about sticking close to the Casa!

The following Thursday I was once again on my way from the border to the Casa for Mass and I was a bit late. So instead of taking the main road, I took a back road. It was 6:45 in the morning and there was no one out. As I came around a bend in the road, I was startled from my early morning, sleepy haze by the loud squeal of brakes coming from a side street. I looked in my rearview mirror and saw a very large, shiny, black SUV that was barreling towards me. I was shocked and scared and stomped on the gas pedal. I outran him and with heart pounding quickly got to the main road without further incident.

Times they are a-changing

Now, if I had been telling this story in the early days of my going to Tijuana I probably would not have used words like, “startled” or “barreling towards me” or “shocked and scared” or “outran him with heart pounding”. Perhaps this whole scary incident was nothing but a coincidence and because of all that I have heard and read about the current situation in Tijuana, I interpreted it in the most negative way. However, whether I was in danger or not, it is very telling—and very sad—that I and so many others are feeling this way.

Recently I wrote an e-mail to Sister Maria Eugenia Es-

pinoza, the Superior General of the Missionary Franciscan Sisters of Peace, the order that founded and runs the Casa. I asked her for her thoughts and feelings about what is happening in Tijuana. She wrote back: “Mexico is afraid, very afraid. It is being swamped by a wave of uncontrollable violence. Now, the deaths are not only deaths but they seem to delight in doing unimaginable things to the dead. We struggle so hard for the sake of just one life and they destroy it in an instant and in such horrible ways!

We have to pray a lot for those who govern us so that they find ways to fight this situation with true wisdom. A lot of years have passed since this problem first began and it has been gaining so much strength that not even the whole government can do anything to control the perpetrators of the violence. It’s so sad. I think that perhaps one of the things that our country lacks is education.

We are all afraid because we don’t know when we ourselves or our loved ones might be the next victims.

We need much prayer that God take pity on all of us and we must not lose faith in Him nor in Our Lady of Guadalupe. I am confident that the Lord will help us both in the current economic crisis as well as in this crisis of violence.

This is my opinion, Padre, you can take some ideas from this although what I write is nothing new. Peace! Maru.”

Not “if,” but “when”

I was struck by the poignancy of Sister Maru’s words, beginning with her pronouncement that “Mexico is very afraid” and then her choice of words with the chilling “when...we might be the next victims” rather than the somewhat milder option of “whether.” I was edified, as I so often am when I am dealing with the people of the Casa, with her prayer that we not lose faith, and her confidence that the Lord will help us. It made me think of the 23rd Psalm, “Even though I walk in the valley of death I fear no evil for you are with me with your rod and your staff that give me courage.”

Her mention of the “economic crisis” in the same sentence as “this crisis of violence” made me think of a conver-

sation that I’d had with her earlier on in which she told me that many of the groups who usually go to the Casa from the United States have cancelled out of fear of the violence. This means that the economic/financial benefits that the Casa derives from their visits will be less and that in turn will cause increased hardships on the poor of Tijuana who are literally and figuratively caught in the crossfire. It is, as Sister Maru said, “so sad”—and on so many levels!

A suggestion that I would make is that as people may stay away from Tijuana for reasons of safety, that they remember to pray for and financially support—as much as possible in these difficult times—all of the wonderful ministries in Tijuana that serve the poor and the marginalized: like the Casa de los Pobres, or the Tecate orphanages, or the works of MANO and Fr. Jaime, or Amor Ministries, or Mother Antonia, or Mother Angelica, or the Casa del Migrante, or the Social Ministries Center of the Jesuit university, or whatever good works that the readers of this article have supported in the past.

Pray for all who are afraid

As far as lessons to be learned, I suppose that I can pray more; pray for the government officials, for the police and the army, for the victims and their families and for the perpetrators of the violence—and for all of those who are afraid. I can pray to have less fear and more “true wisdom” and more faith and confidence in God. I will continue to offer my service of ministry to the people, volunteers, staff and sisters of the Casa de los Pobres and on a very practical level. I will remember to take the main roads and to learn how to say “duck” in Spanish.

It is no mere coincidence that the last word that Sister Maru uses before she signs her letter is “Peace!” Indeed, may it be so!

Fr. Gil is spiritual director of the San Diego Catholic Worker.

Just how safe is Mexico?

By Hugh Kramer

Kramer is a recent addition to the Catholic Worker board.

“I’ve got thousands of loaves of bread for the poor, but I’m afraid to cross the border to deliver them,” Fr. Neal said. “Could you help me?”

It was the week before Christmas and a group of us volunteers had gathered in Tecate, Calif., in preparation for a special Christmas celebration and distribution of gifts to the poor at Mt. Tabor Monastery, home of the Trinitarian of Mary sisters, just outside Tecate, Mexico.

As we loaded our SUV with thousands of these donated bakery goods from his van, I talked to Fr. Neal (not his real name) about his extreme anxiety. The elderly priest confided that his superior had actually forbidden him to drive into Tecate for fear of being assaulted and killed, or possibly kidnapped (and his order had no money to pay ransom).

Question of safety

He seemed puzzled by the fact that none of the volunteers shared his fear. I explained to him that in my business, Discover Baja Travel Club, we deal with these safety and security issues on a daily basis. “Is it safe to cross the border into Baja?” is one of the most frequently asked questions that we field these days.

The ongoing violent conflict between the drug cartels with each other and the police has escalated over the past few months and resulted in gun battles and gruesome discoveries of decapitated bodies characteristic of gangster violence.

More tragic is the number of innocent people, including children, caught in the crossfire. Corrupt law enforcement officers have not only exacerbated the situation, but have contributed to a loss of confidence in the very component of government charged with providing protection and safety for the common citizen.

Computer blogs are loaded with comments by people who fear that they may be kidnapped, robbed, assaulted, raped or killed if they cross the border. To anyone who thinks that such catastrophes await them in Baja, my advice would be: Please stay at home.

Understanding the problem

To those with a more reasonable concern for their safety in Baja, I would offer the following observations and advice.

First of all, let there be no confusion about my assessment of the current situation: The level of violence and bloodshed is horrible.

However, one needs to know that when Felipe Calderon was sworn in as the president of Mexico on Dec. 1, 2006, he became the first president to very aggressively take on the drug traffickers and related criminals. Previous presidents, including Vicente Fox, looked the other way and tolerated the drug business as long as there was no major bloodshed that would interfere with Mexico’s lucrative tourist trade.

Calderon, perceived by most Mexicans, as relatively incorrupt, began to wage war on the cartels and traffickers; and as a result, thousands of deaths and massive violence have occurred over the past two years. Drug lords have been killed and imprisoned, corrupt officials at all levels of the government have been ferreted out and unenforced laws related to the drug trade have begun to be enforced.

Narco-world in chaos

The result has turned the narco-world into chaos. The violence has spilled into the streets of border towns, especially Ciudad Juarez, Tijuana and even Rosarito Beach.

It’s important to keep things in perspective. Dr. Jim Gerber, the director of the Center for Latin American Studies at San Diego State University, in a recent message to the university community points out that Tijuana has a murder rate comparable to Oakland or St. Louis, lower than Baltimore and Detroit, and well-below that of New Orleans.

Moreover, one cannot visit Baja these days without noticing the additional military and police units that have been deployed there and serve as a highly visible deterrent for any potential illegal activity.

I’ve been going to Baja for 42 years, and my wife and I continue to go to Tijuana and Rosarito nearly once a week on business. We take precautions to avoid unfamiliar areas of Tijuana and avoid driving after dark. Our 25-year-old daughter flew home from New York for the Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays, and with some girlfriends, went down to Rosarito both times for short vacations. Our 23-year-old son just returned from several months traveling around Mexico by backpack, and is back in Baja for a week of surfing, even as I write this.

Poor going empty-handed

I go back to that cold, drizzly day in December. I can still see the 6,000 Mexicans walking up the steep, winding dirt road to Mt. Tabor. If the dozens of volunteers who brought the food, blankets and toys had been afraid to cross the border, those needy families would have gone home empty-handed. I don’t think Dorothy Day would hesitate to respond to these needs.

According to Gerber, paranoia grows in proportion to one’s lack of familiarity and understanding, so he cautions against allowing fear to manifest in perceived narratives of racism or morality as has occurred far too often in interactions between the United States and Mexico. “We urge you to continue your normal routines in Tijuana and throughout Mexico,” he says, “following the same cautions you would use in any region that is undergoing an increased crime wave.”

All of us have our own comfort zones, and if travel to Mexico these days exceeds yours, don’t go. There are many other ways to help our “amigos” south of the border.

Catholic Worker Meetings

The San Diego Catholic Worker meetings are open to all and are held in the Sacred Heart Parish Hall on Sunset Cliffs Blvd., in Ocean Beach on the second Monday of every month beginning at 6 p.m. The next meetings will be held on Feb. 9, March 9, April 13, and May 11.

Mission Statement

The San Diego Catholic Worker is committed to the following actions that imitate Christ: a call to service, a belief in the human dignity of all, and an interrelationship with a compassionate God and one another.

As Catholic Workers, we struggle to carry out our double mandate: to minister to the needs of society’s forgotten people, and to challenge and offer alternatives to the attitudes, institutions and structures that create and perpetuate suffering and violence.

Following Christ’s example, we also believe it is our duty to spread the word of our work and provide others with the opportunity to serve.

The San Diego Catholic Worker will achieve its goals by the grace of God and by working together to bring about a world of peace and justice as envisioned by our founders, Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin.

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San Diego Catholic Worker

P.O. Box 127244

San Diego, CA 92112

Tel. (619) 298-3755

You may also contact the editor at denyshorgan@att.net

Please note new Web Site: www.catholicworkersd.org