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Lasallian Missionary Volunteer Movement

El Salto, Pueblo Nuevo,
Durango, Mexico

In this MEL bulletin there will be presented a series of documents from the Lasallian Volunteer Movement of El Salto, Durango, Mexico, which will enable the reader to get to know the context, propositions, methodology and the life of the Community of Volunteers of El Salto and its apostolic outreach.

1. Needs and the current situation

El Salto, Pueblo Nuevo, Durango, is a small city of some 60,000 inhabitants and it is located in the north-eastern part of the state of Durango. It is the administrative center of the municipality of Pueblo Nuevo and the episcopal seat of the prelature that bears its name. It is situated on the highway that connects Durango with Mazatlan, some 100 kilometers from the state capital. Deep in the western Sierra Madre mountains, El Salto acts as the commercial, social and political center of the small, mountain villages in the area. Although the Victoria Cultural and Social Center, home for the volunteers of the Sierra is located in El Salto, its activity and outreach takes place throughout the prelature. There are 15 parishes in the prelature with a land area of 18,492 square kilometers, which include 9 of the 38 municipalities of the state of Durango: Tamazula, Topia, Canelas, Otaez, San Dimas, Pueblo Nuevo and a portion of the Santiago Papasquiaro and Canatlan.

The Sierra is rich in natural resources: wood (pine, oak and strawberry trees), minerals (gold, silver, copper) and it is rich in the necessary resources which ensure agriculture, fruit-growing, cattle-raising, pig farming, poultry farming, bee-keeping, trout farming and growing and harvesting flowers. Its comfortable climate and its isolated places have also favored the growing a production and commercialization of stimulants such as marijuana and poppies (opium).

The majority of the population are from the working class: sharecroppers, farmers, employees of the lumber companies, miners and businessmen. The middle class is made up of factory owners, those who work for mid-size companies, and those who represent larger firms. There is a small group involved with high-tech resources, some union or political leaders, a few involved with major firms and those who are involved in the commerce of stimulants.

Even though there are health centers in the towns located throughout the Sierra and there are doctors and assistants who visit the towns and settlements, many people prefer the traditional methods for cures based on natural products.

The Mexican educational system today ensures that there are schools in all the towns of the Sierra. Children attend school usually up to the sixth grade of primary school. In some places there are television-based secondary school courses, with good academic programs but in general few students bother with this and even fewer continue after a short time. There are teachers who are very zealous in their efforts, others are mediocre and are often absent from their duties. Schooling among the adults is very low and young people tend to abandon their studies quickly and to not make any in-depth studies.

Economic profits are invested to satisfy the basic needs for nutrition, clothing, medicine and transportation. In many cases a significant amount is used for alcohol, prostitution, arms and drugs. Very little is invested in home improvements or programs to ensure a better future.

There are many examples of different religions present in the area. Members of Jehovah's Witness and Evangelicals have been making inroads on the Sierra and they make sure that there are Bible study meetings and worship services for their followers. The majority of the population (about 90%) say that they are Catholic. Their religious practices are generally simple and traditional: devotions, the celebration of patronal feasts, dances and the color of the local festivities in their simple houses of worship. There are persons who join more committed groups, with strong convictions and perseverance in their commitment as evangelists.

The visitor is struck by the characteristic values of the inhabitants along the Sierra: hospitality, generosity in sharing, the joy of living, family unity and perseverance in simple work all of which aim to satisfy basic personal and family needs.

The social, educational and religious problems that affect the population on the Sierra and which serve as the basic motivation for the presence of the Lasallian community in El Salto have the following characteristics:

- Little awareness of one's own worth, a low self-esteem, a naive perception of the social reality, little hope of personal growth in these areas.
- Machismo (male chauvinism). Discrediting women. Family violence.

- Arguments, jealousy, division, apathy in the towns which strongly limits self-rule the common will to improve.
- Overbearing authority structures, a lack of critical discussion in decision-making policy. Very little commitment for the common good.
- A very low schooling rate among adults. Manual labor at a very young age. Living together as couples at a very young age.
- A lifestyle that is traditional, repetitive, conformist, with a very limited view of the future.
- Dependence fostered by welfare activity on the part of government, political parties, union leaders and by the Church itself.
- The “religious culture” is low and is usually expressed more in popular faith expression and in rites than in moral experience, commitment to justice or sacramental life.
- The irrational exploitation of natural resources has meant the end to forests in some places and this has caused heads of families to leave the country and seek employment in the United States.

Besides these problems there must be added the breaking up of towns scattered by mountains and hills, connected, when available, by roads which are usually in very poor condition. Also it should be mentioned that the roads and paths in this area are not without robberies and kidnappings.

2. Our history

The history of the Catholic faith on the Sierra of Durango goes back to 1527 when the first Franciscan evangelists came to Sierra de Topia. In 1591 the Jesuits began their work also in the northern part of the current prelatore, and, as a result, notable martyrs such as Father Hernando de Santarén soon came along. The blood of the martyrs strengthened the faith in the Sierra and in 1630 missionary activity was resumed.

During the 19th century missionary support, while inadequate, arrived from Durango and Mazatlán. In 1964 the Carmelite Fathers took charge of the Sierra and it was in 1968 when Pope Paul VI created the Prelature of El Salto.

Invited by Father José Anaya Rodríguez, a third-order Carmelite and pastor of the local parish, Immaculate Conception, the first group of Lasallians arrived in 1982 as Holy Week missionaries and they were organized by Brothers Lorenzo González Kipper and Ramón Hernández Carpio.

From that time on Lasallians happily responded to the call of Father Anaya as they increased their course offerings in faith, Bible studies and catechetics, both during summer and Christmas vacation periods. From that time on the Holy Week Lasallian Missions have grown to serve more and more towns. The missionary fraternities are made up of students, former students, teachers, parents, friends, priests, Sisters and Brothers. The number of missionaries reached 2,500 in the year 2000, as they cared for 200 towns among eight parishes, including the indigenous Tepehuano area.

Considering the enormous educational needs of the inhabitants of the Sierra and encouraged by the very significant Lasallian activity already, Father José Anaya Rodríguez proposed, in 1986, to promote the creation of a community of Brothers in El Salto. Supported by Bishop Francisco Medina, OCD, he sent his first letter requesting Brothers on September 19, 1987. The response of the District Council offered little encouragement. This did not discourage Father José. On the contrary, he went to work building a house for the Brothers and, one year later, in December 1988, he

repeated his request stating that the house was finished and completely equipped, that his motivation was the charism of the Institute, educational charism and service to the poor and that he would agree to sign whatever contract that the Brothers would propose. In March 1989 Brother Visitor Everardo Márquez answered him very kindly, stating that although his request was appreciated and the great need for education was acknowledged “unfortunately we lack personnel and we do not see in the short term or even in the near future” how we can agree to your request. Father Anaya, a man of deep faith, continued to plead for Brothers in the years that followed. In 1990 he organized a solemn procession through the town to the house and he placed an image of Saint John Baptist de La Salle in the house, saying to his parishioners: “Today is a great day, because if the Father entered the house then soon, with God’s help, his children will enter.”

On July 16, 1991, Feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, special patroness of the Prelature of Father José and with the support of the new Bishop, Father sent another letter. The District Council for the District of North Mexico met on September 20, 1991, to plan the celebration of the tercentenary of the Heroic Vow of the Founder with the first Brothers. The Brother Councillors were at a loss to find any more significant way to celebrate this event than to agree to the request made by Father José and the Bishop of El Salto, Manuel Mireles Vaquera. Unanimously, the District Council opted to honor the Founder, clearly placing themselves in God’s hands and committing themselves to this new program in service of a poor and needy population “which is a work looked upon fondly by many Brothers who have had missionary Holy Week experience,” citing the Council minutes, and which “would be a gesture of commitment to the needy in this tercentenary year of the Heroic Vow.” Therefore, it was agreed to “open a community of Brothers in El Salto, Durango, in August 1992.”

This decision was approved by the General Council in Rome, Act 929108, on January 25, 1992. And on August 15, 1992, there was a formal signing ceremony of the “Agreement between the Prelature of El Salto, Durango, and the District of North Mexico of the Brothers of the Christian Schools.” Three founding Brothers of the new community arrived there: Brothers Pedro Córdoba Concha, Pedro Vela Rodríguez and Francisco Barba Arámbula.

These three Brothers officially moved in to the new residence on September 2, 1992. The name of the new institution was "Victory Cultural and Social Center," and it was located on Madroño Street in the area of Colonia La Victoria in El Salto, Pueblo Nuevo, Durango.

From the very beginning the founding community devoted its efforts to educational and evangelical tasks by means of Bible study courses in the neighborhoods of El Salto, marriage preparation classes, youth retreats, short missions, opening of a preparatory school, and by offering classes in the Prelature's minor seminary. They also taught classes for catechists in the Sierra and prepared extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist and they organized missions for Holy Week and for the summer.

In December 1993 Brother Francisco Barba A. was sent to the community in Guadalajara and in July 1994 Brother Pedro Vela became the Director of the community in Tijuana while Brother Pedro Córdoba was transferred to the community in Regio Contry, in Monterrey, Nuevo León.

A new community began its service in August 1994. This group was made up of Brothers Lorenzo González Kipper, Director, Manuel Ramón Camou Bohórquez and Pablo Rodarte Rojas. Immediately this community left the work as teachers in the seminary and they began to do mission work for the pueblos by training catechists and Eucharistic ministers, founding Christian life family communities and youth groups based on faith, community and service and by helping to create pastoral ministry programs in parishes. In El Salto, the community continued teaching occasional courses for catechists, courses for Extraordinary Ministers of the Eucharist and they gave talks regarding Christian formation for adults. They continued working with youth groups in the El Salto area and they established a free elementary computer school. From May to June 1995 Brother Juan Pámenes Ríos joined the community and his contribution was exceptional.

Throughout the years the community continued to receive new members. Arrivals included Brothers Juan José Martín del Campo y Noriega, Ramiro Montaña Sánchez and Roberto Roger Rodríguez Ritte. In August 2000 some new blood arrived in the community in the persons of Brothers José Francisco Hernández Zermeño (Director since January 2001), Domingo de Alba Suárez

and Gabriel Sarralde Huitrón and later on Juan Gómez Moreno. The work of this community continued the missionary tradition of the beginnings. United together with the local Church and as part of the overall pastoral ministry work, the community increased its missionary activity, it revitalized the faith and the Christian living in the pueblos, it promoted and advised youth groups. The community also trained Extraordinary Ministers of the Eucharist, catechists and youth leaders, it promoted the new evangelization and the rights of children and community centers and it supported Christian life groups while organizing and coordinating the great Holy Week mission. The eleventh generation of volunteers began work in 2004 - 2005.

3. The Lasallian program in El Salto, Durango.

As the Victory Cultural and Social Center was being founded and administered by Lasallians, Father José Anaya Rodríguez, the pastor for El Salto and the founder of this ministry established objectives for this work together with the Brothers:

a) To provide a Christian education, appropriate to their reality, especially for children and the young, making them aware of their dignity, rights and duties as human persons, raising their human and Christian culture, encouraging their active participation in their own educational process and in their social and apostolic planning, while boosting their own sense of solidarity and commitment in favor of society and in concern for the environment.

b) To foster the emergence and monitoring of youth communities, adults and families in which:

- there is awareness of their own lives and social responsibility,
- there is growth in faith and love of the Lord,
- there is living together in communion and participation with the Church and society,
- there is a strong sense of what it means to be Church, within the context of the pastoral ministry activities of the Prelature.

c) To train evangelists who, sent by the Bishop to the various pueblos and settlements of the Sierra:

- will form communities of faith and service,
- will strengthen the faith in the people of the pueblo and support Christian celebrations,
- will work in religious instruction and in grounding people in basic Christian principles.

As time went on, these objectives have been further refined to include:

- Placement in the pastoral ministry reality of the Prelature,
- Living in communion with and participating in the local Church,

- responding to the needs of human and Christian education of the population,
- being in solidarity with committed laymen and laywomen to carry out together educational work.
- To form and to mentor those involved in pastoral ministry in the areas of human development and evangelization.
- To promote and to strengthen communities of Christian life in the pueblos throughout the Sierra.

4. The missionary volunteer movement in El Salto, Durango.

From the very beginning living within the Church and as Church was for the El Salto community its wish and purpose. The awareness which was inherited from Vatican Council II of being Church-communion whose reason for being is the mission is at the core of the Lasallian openness to the lay volunteer movement. In Church and Lasallian awareness two dimensions have been appearing and every missionary project is based on them: Mission and Communion. And so the two ideas are combined in that “*mission is a concern for all Christians*” (AA 2) and that it is to be carried out in *communion* with others, but also in *cooperation* with all persons of good will (GS 43).

Just as the internal makeup of the Church is no longer represented by the triad of clerics, religious and the laity, but by the dual concepts of *community and ministries* where unity (community) is emphasized and is prior to and the basis of the differences (represented by the different ministries which build up the community), so the Brothers do not consider themselves as being separated from other Lasallians to carry out the mission entrusted to them.

The *Rule* of the Brothers is very precise in this regard:

“The Brothers gladly associate lay persons with them in their educational mission. They provide, for those who so desire, the means to learn about the Founder and to live according to his spirit” (*Rule*, 17).

“The Brothers make known to the rest of the educational community the essential elements of the Lasallian tradition. The Brothers offer to those who desire it, a more intensified sharing of Lasallian spirituality, encouraging such persons to make a more specific apostolic commitment” (*Rule*, 17 c).

Furthermore, the 42nd General Chapter reaffirmed the irreplaceable role of lay men and women to procure, associated with the Brothers, a human and Christian education, especially for the poor: “the Church and the Institute, with committed lay people, are writing together a new chapter in their history of shared mission” (Circular 435, page 31). With this impetus and as an attempt

to fulfill Proposition 3.2 of the Eighth District Chapter of North Mexico, the community of El Salto launched the Lasallian volunteer program in the Sierra. The first female volunteer for a period of one year was Ms. Karla Alejandra Hernández Trujillo, who began her year of volunteer service on June 19, 1995. She was soon joined by a male volunteer and then two more female volunteers. And so that is how the first community of Lasallian Volunteers in El Salto, Durango, was integrated. They defined their own project in this way:

“The volunteer movement is a response to the invitation which our Lord God make to us personally and it is our desire to give to him this year of our lives in a special way, to work for him and through him and to show God as a loving friend that we have met, and so to collaborate in the building up of his kingdom, associating ourselves with the Brothers in the service of our brothers and sisters on the Sierra of Durango.”

Prayer, ongoing formation, fraternal life, the service of human development and evangelization in a full-time capacity and shared leisure time made up the life of this young community.

Year after year the number of male and female volunteer from the two Districts in Mexico has increased:

1994 - 1995: 7 volunteers;
1995 - 1996: 8 volunteers;
1997 - 1998: 18 volunteers;
1998 - 1999: 22 volunteers;
1999 - 2000: 28 volunteers;
2000 - 2001: 25 volunteers;
2002 - 2003: 29 volunteers.

In June 2004 some 254 young people had participated in the volunteer program, 145 women and 109 men. The community of volunteers has been a sign of enthusiasm and renewal. The young people do mission work in the pueblos, they set up and act as mentors for youth groups, they collaborate in courses for catechists, they help in the writing, editing and production of teaching materials, songs, courses for personal self-help and social integration, they organize retreats and meetings for young people and adults, they occasionally host groups from France and the United States that share the mission with them and they are signs of vitality, solidarity and joyful commitment for the entire Prelature.

4.1 mission and vision of the volunteer movement.

Today the mission of the volunteer movement and the volunteers has been delineated as follows:

The mission of the volunteer program is to collaborate in the formation of young people and adults by responding to the call of Jesus in a Lasallian community of faith, fraternity and apostolic commitment. Together volunteers discern God's will to establish his kingdom among themselves and in the persons to whom they are sent, giving true witness to Christian life, following in the footsteps of Saint John Baptist de La Salle.

The mission of the volunteers is to be a part of the overall plan of the local Church, together with the people in the pueblos, in order to promote the quality of human and Christian life of each person in the various communities.

The young people themselves have described their identity in their own community annual program (CAP):

"We are followers of Jesus Christ who, aware of our dignity and responsibility as baptized and confirmed persons, are committed to the traditions of Saint John Baptist de La Salle and, as part of the Lasallian Family, serve our brothers and sisters who are poor in the Prelature of El Salto. Our full-time commitment on the Sierra is for a period of one year, a time which, far from being a digression in our lives, is an undertaking to a lifelong commitment to live our lives in the faith of Jesus, in fraternity as Church and in service especially of the poor, in the tradition of De La Salle."

The vision of the future of the volunteer movement in El Salto has given rise to wonderful perspectives, and among these perspectives there are signs that in the future:

The volunteer movement will be present within networks of small, stable communities of professional volunteers, single or married, in pueblos as a sign and as a driving force for the human and Christian transformation of social, economic and religious structures within the pueblos. These communities will be united among themselves and with the local Church, open and in communication with other organizations, in particular with other Lasallian communities within the country and abroad.

The volunteer movement will be present and will be a driving force, along with other educational entities, in formal and non-formal organizations, which offer multiple learning experiences to members of various social classes throughout the Sierra.

In this way the volunteer movement will be a pioneer on the Sierra of innovative processes and projects whose primary focus is human development for a supportive society, as called for in the PEARL project. (*Translator's note: the PEARL project is an overall plan for Lasallian education in Latin America*). The hope is to create a society that is economically viable, socially just, respectful of the environment, and one which takes into account the culture of the inhabitants of the Sierra.

4.2 Elements of the volunteer program

Among the elements which the Volunteers include each year in their Community Annual Program are the following:

a) To create a favorable atmosphere for human and spiritual growth by prayer, study, personal reading, participation in exchanges and in decision-making and in living together and recreation times with the community in El Salto, Durango.

b) To ensure training and ongoing formation in areas of human development: analyzing reality, strategic planning, community development, methodologies and strategies for transforming reality, human rights, communication, formation of social and evangelical awareness in terms of Christology, ecclesiology, morality, the Bible, prayer, popular religion, Lasallian topics.

c) To be trained in and to practice skills which will respond critically and creatively to spiritual and social needs in towns and settlements in the Sierra.

d) To become part of small fraternities.

e) To become an integral part of the Prelature's overall pastoral ministry program.

- The two great areas in which the mission is carried out are human development and evangelization. Both aspects are carried out within the perspective of incarnation, dialogue, responsible participation, creativity, and the promotion of justice:

- Incarnation: This has to do with knowledge, an esteem for one's

own reality and, based on that reality and the reality of others, to discover the ways of social and religious transformation.

– Dialogue: This involves listening attentively to words, and discovering meanings, questions and a common search for ways to improve.

– The responsible participation of the pueblo and authorities in a reflection on realities and perceived needs, in drawing up and carrying out plans and projects, in decision making with a view to personal and community improvement.

– Creativity to respond appropriately and effectively to inherited challenges that face the people and social groups in the Sierra.

– The promotion of justice, by enabling persons and social group to resolve injustices, especially those which involve human inequality, family problems, cultural and religious poverty, the misuse of natural resources, economic inequity, the production of intoxicants and alcohol consumption.

– Strategic planning to contribute to the community development while promoting the formation of persons in the pueblos, making them aware of their right to participate actively in solving their own problems.

- Along the lines of human development the objectives are to promote political awareness and organization among people, families and communities within the context of human rights.

With a view to these objectives the main activities in which the volunteers are involved include:

– Family visits and chats with parents and children. Need assessment.

– Along with townspeople, creating a strategic plan that responds to needs, to necessary changes and to present and future abilities and resources.

– Reflection on topics discussed and used for future actions in favor of families and of the community.

– Courses offered according to assessed needs: hygiene, first aid, nutrition, crafts, environmental improvement.

– The promotion of activities and talents: music, painting, leather crafts, dressmaking, hairstyling, beauty school.

– Academic support for official teachers on the Sierra and for pre-school activities for students.

- Courses and workshops for young people and for adults: self-esteem, self-knowledge, creativity, critical reflection, dialogue training, early intervention.
- Promotion of events with a view to civic participation and the promotion of social justice.
- Sports promotion and family recreational activities.
- Educational games, puppetry and formative theatre experiences.
- Support and assessment in planning improvements for the town and for committees in charge of improvements.
- With regard to evangelization, seeing to it that the proclamation of the Good News of Jesus be done in the abundance of its tri-fold dimensions: anthropology, ecclesiology, Christology. This has to do with seeing to it that evangelization fortifies faith, provides criteria and impetus for social commitment and transformation, leads to personal and community prayer and culminates in liturgical celebration.

The areas in which evangelization is promoted are: the family, the young and those involved in pastoral ministry.

The main activities and topics that are promoted are:

1. Formation courses for extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist, for promoters of human rights, especially the rights of children and for those who advise youth groups.

In these courses an assessment of human, spiritual and religious needs is made to respond in the best way possible to these needs. Generally there is an attempt to respond to these needs from different perspectives:

- Self-awareness. Self-knowledge. Self-esteem. Autonomy.
- Human relationships. Community organization. Responsibility for the common good. Conflict resolution.
- Human identity.
- The ability to express oneself orally, with symbols and in writing.
- Analysis of the reality in which one lives.
- A methodology for participation.
- Basic knowledge of the Catholic faith.

- The Bible.
- Values education. Catholic ethics and morals.
- Human rights. The rights of children and the young. Women's rights.
- Special topics: drugs, violence, the value of human life, family problems, injustices inherent in structures.
- Catholic social teaching.
- The history of the Church.
- Ecumenism and sects.

2. Becoming aware of women's rights.

In coordination with the "Promotion of and training in economic and social rights of women" civil association courses, workshops and consultants have been organized with a view to the regional development of this topic based on the recognition of women as persons with rights and the ability to direct their own lives and to contribute to the building up of a society which is more just, democratic and fair.

This project seeks to contribute to the recognition of and respect for human rights in a self-managed community organization. To do this, topics pertaining to non-violent means to end conflicts were discussed, as well as the recognition of the rights of women as part of their reevaluation and human identity and the operation of community centers became a reality.

3. Catechetical pastoral ministry and allowing people to be evangelized by the poor based on their own reality and keeping in mind basic elements highlighted in the PEARL project:

- Education in ethical values from a Christian perspective.
- The understanding of the Christian mystery.
- The integration of faith communities.
- Commitment on the part of all to educational service of the poor.
- Celebration of the faith.
- By means of a methodology characterized by:
 - An awareness of reality, with a critical attitude and an acceptance of the diverse cultural perspectives of the people who live in the Sierra.

- The interrelationship between faith and culture.
- The integration of faith lived as a life journey and as a result of a demand for continual growth.
- A transforming and freeing commitment of social reality.

Catechetical pastoral ministry as lived out by the volunteers occurs by:

- A system of courses and sessions for catechists.
- Drawing up catechetics manuals.
- The production and dissemination of catechetical and liturgical teaching resources.
- Offering guidance to the catechists as they visit the pueblos.

4. Formation in liturgy and prayer.

The dimension of celebration is important for the towns in the Sierra. Popular religion is deeply rooted. Lasallian missionary activity seeks to respect the people and to encourage openness in providing a deepening of their faith, an appreciation of traditional liturgical expressions of worship and to form them in the appropriate sense of prayer and worship of the Catholic church.

For this to happen, there are:

- Systematic formation courses for lay ministers of the Eucharist.
- Courses and sessions in liturgy.
- Pre-sacrament courses.
- Celebrations of the Word and communion services.
- Prayer groups.
- Practical discussions and experience in popular piety.
- Holy Week and Christmas celebrations without the aid of a priest.
- Practice in liturgical song.

5. Service to families and to young people:

In keeping with the priorities of the Prelature's pastoral ministry plan and with a view to having systematic educational activities, the Lasallian community takes great care in the way it cares for families and young people.

The community organizes:

- Promotional and support activities for family-based communities.
- Courses and meetings on the rights of women and children.
- Formations courses for leaders and youth group advisors.
- Training for the Holy Week, Christmas and summer missions.
- Meetings for youth and vocational retreats.

In addition, the Victory Cultural and Social Center generates many teaching resources, brochures, posters, and cassettes with songs which are for the use of those involved in family and youth pastoral ministry.

6. The overall pastoral ministry plan:

The Lasallian community was called since the very beginning to participate actively in the overall pastoral ministry plan, both in the parish of El Salto and in the Prelature at large. They have particularly appreciated and cared for this aspect of their mission in the Sierra. The Victory Cultural and Social Center over the years has become the Prelature's Pastoral Ministry Center. There they hold meetings and assembles dealing with pastoral ministry, they have retreats and meetings for different groups and movements within the Prelature. The community of Brothers and volunteers:

- Participates in the organization, infrastructure and discussion concerning the Prelature's assemblies on pastoral ministry.
- Puts into practice and promotes, in parishes and within Catholic movements, the directives coming from the assemblies on pastoral ministry and from the Bishop.
- Coordinates its activity with the Bishop and with priests.
- Puts its facilities and resources at the disposal of the Prelature.

7. Production of materials.

The community of Brothers and volunteers produces many teaching materials: brochures, posters, methods for effective group dynamics, song cassettes, and all of this is in service of Evangelization and human development in the Sierra.

5. Accomplishments and apostolic perspectives

In order to promote social transformation in light of the Gospel and to commit themselves along with the people on the Sierra to the building of a society that respects the dignity of persons and promotes fraternity and justice and which is solidly for the common good, the Lasallian community has established a network of community centers. Strategically located, these centers (measuring 8 meters by 24 meters plus washrooms) were built, with the active participation of the population, to respond to the populations' urgent needs of education and evangelization. In these centers health courses are taught as well as courses in how to improve agricultural production and care for domestic animals, living together with dignity, family relationships, child care, study methods, practical mechanics, carpentry, electricity, plumbing and bricklaying. First and foremost among the tasks of these community centers is training for young people and adults, making them sensitive to shortages in their pueblo and it is there where volunteer service is encouraged, along with commitment to Jesus Christ, as part of the Church.

With a view to the education and evangelization of the peoples in the Sierra, there is planned the creation of a radio station which, in connection with other Catholic radio stations, will broadcast messages of faith and promote the improvement of personal and community life.

There is also a plan to create in the Victory Cultural and Social Center formal intermediate courses on technology, adapted to the needs of the population, which will train students to promote a supportive and sustainable development in the Sierra and will give them access to competitive production in the work market.

The Victory Cultural and Social Center, the central site of the service rendered by the Lasallian community of Brothers and volunteers, is and desires to be more and more each day, a training center and driving force for social change, guided and inspired by the social doctrine of the Church, in the tradition of Saint John Baptist de La Salle.

6. Volunteer program policies

The following letter is sent to the young person who has expressed a desire to become a part of the community of volunteers in El Salto. The letter explains the policies of the Volunteer Movement in the Sierra.

Acceptance and a commitment to live according to these policies is a requirement to become part of the community.

Dear.....,

You have expressed the desire to collaborate with Christ, in his Church, as a Lasallian Volunteer in the Prelature of El Salto, Pueblo Nuevo, Durango.

It is important that you be aware, before reaching a decision, of the challenges and commitments that will be required of you as a member of our community.

We would be grateful if you would read carefully what we present to you here and that you return it to us, signed, if you are willing, with the Lord's grace, to live out these commitments with all your heart.

To be a Lasallian missionary is to give everything to Jesus, following in the footsteps of our Founder, Saint John Baptist de la Salle:

- As a willing response to a personal invitation by Jesus Christ.*
- By building up the missionary community, called by Jesus, in El Salto.*
- Committed to the building up of the Kingdom of God in this Prelature.*

Regulations for and commitments of a Lasallian Volunteer:

1. I freely join the Volunteer Movement, without pressure of any kind, and I decided to respond lovingly to the love of Jesus Christ.
2. It was my own decision to give this year of my life to Christ to show my love, building up and living in community, in service of my neighbor, especially the poor.
3. I am in good health, in the opinion of my parents and my medical doctor, and I am able to bear with the rough life of a Volunteer: cold, tiredness, long journeys, simple meals, sometimes very light ones.

a) I will take care of my health in order to offer to God the best of myself and to avoid that which would diminish my strength and physical capacity for service, especially avoiding unnecessary late nights.

b) My emotional balance is good. I am not joining the volunteer movement to “escape” from my current situation, nor because of any emotional problems which I hope will be resolved as a volunteer. I know that I will require emotional strength to keep myself strong and enthusiastic, with God’s help, for the entire year, in spite of the physical distance of my family and friends and by reason of my previous experience I can declare that my emotional balance is good and my ability to relate to others is healthy.

4. My commitment is for one year in accordance with the dates established by the El Salto Volunteer Movement: from August to June or from January to December.

5. My active participation in personal and community prayer, in regular daily participation in the Eucharist, in support for the prayer of the pueblo and for spiritual reading, will be an important part of my gift to Christ and my own spiritual nourishment.

6. My full application to continuing formation on a daily basis and to personal reading, to occasional participation in religious study sessions, will strengthen my own apostolic and human formation.

7. I accept each and every person that the Lord has called and gathered to live in community.

a) I am aware that personally and together we are responsible for forming and maintaining the good spirit of our fraternity. I know or I presume that community life will not always be easy, that different ways of being, different points of view, different ages and backgrounds will enrich all of us, but at time they may be a source of tension or inconvenience. But my intention, for the love of Christ, is to accept, dialogue with, collaborate with and to pardon, in order to promote understanding, friendship and growth among all in faith and love.

b) I will work hard to avoid gossip and misunderstanding, and I will see to it myself and as part of the group that jokes or poking fun do not become hurtful, tiring nor irritating.

c) I will watch my language, even when I am only with other missionaries, while avoiding all vulgarity or inappropriate words, keeping in mind my responsibility as a missionary. I will not use justifications such as "That is just the way I talk." In front of people on the mission I will be especially careful to use vocabulary and a way of relating with others that is worthy of my mission as a missionary.

8. I want to wholeheartedly surrender myself to Christ, collaborating in the building up of his kingdom:

a) I agree to go wherever I may be sent by the Brother Director for the time he specifies and to do my best in the work entrusted to me.

b) I will pay attention to the needs of the people and the pueblo. I will place my talents, abilities and knowledge at the service of the human development and evangelization of the people in the pueblos.

c) I will, with enthusiasm and good humor and in accord with the community, contribute my constructive criticism, my ideas and creativity to renew and adapt, in the best possible way, our apostolate to the needs of the people and the traits of the Lasallian charism.

9. To live with and as Jesus, who was poor:

I will serve gratuitously, I will share my goods and talents, I will cooperate in my work for the good of the community, I will dress simply, I will take care of my health, I will have an interest in and commit myself to the people in the Sierra with whom I will share my life.

I will carry out my year of service freely ...

10. For the love of Jesus, to whom I have devoted my entire being, especially this year, I will open my heart to all who make up the community and to the persons with whom I live and/or serve. I will avoid any form of exclusive love and avoid excluding others.

11. As a way of living out God's will I accept the organization of and the authorities responsible for the Volunteer Movement:

a) Brother Visitor, as God's representative at the District level and responsible for the Volunteer Movement.

b) Brother Director and the Brothers in the community, who are God's representatives at the local level and in charge of the Volunteer Movement.

c) The Coordinator and Sub-Coordinator who are delegates of the Brother Director to preside over and coordinate the life of the Volunteer fraternity as well as others who will be appointed within the fraternity for various services.

d) I will participate actively in drawing up our Community Annual Program (CAP) to plan our community life and our apostolate and I will take great care in carrying it out.

e) I will be punctual in fulfilling the responsibilities assigned to me for the good running of the community, as regards the house or our apostolate and mission.

12. During my time as a volunteer I will not absent myself from the community without authorization from the Brother Director. I will be especially careful not to ask for permission to be absent unless it involves a very significant event or a very important personal situation (health, studies...) or my closest relatives (parents, brothers and sisters).

I accept the fact that there will only be two holiday periods during the year outside the community: the last two weeks in December and the month of July.

13. Regarding my expenses:

a) I am grateful to the Lasallian community for covering my needs for food, lodging and ongoing formation, as well as normal apostolate expenses.

b) I will wash my own clothes and (if needed) iron them.

c) I agree to pay for personal expenses: toilet articles, personal medicines, photographs, personal items, postage for personal correspondence.

d) I will pay for long-distance telephone calls and I will see to it that these calls are brief and not too frequent. Out of respect for others in the community and in order to maintain the healthy distance from my former way of life, I will also see to it that the telephone calls I receive are brief and not too frequent.

14. I will see to it that my spiritual life is marked by:

- A great love for the Blessed Virgin Mary as mother, guide and friend.
- A great esteem for Saint John Baptist de La Salle, for the Brothers who are Saints and Blessed, and for the entire Lasallian ministry.
- A great desire and will to become familiar with and to follow in the footsteps of the patrons of the community: Blessed Brother Scubilion and Saint Teresa of the Child Jesus who were known in a special way for always doing more than was required of them and doing it very well, until death, for the love of Jesus.

15. In summary: During my year as a volunteer I will aim to make Jesus Christ the center of my life.

- I know that my personal fulfillment and my happiness are important,
- I know that building the community is essential,
- I know above all that human and spiritual service to persons is fundamental, but I want the focus and the purpose of my decision to be Jesus Christ. I want to unite myself with him, I want to dedicate myself to him and I trust that he will bring my decision to commit myself for this year as a Lasallian Volunteer in the Sierra of Durango to a happy conclusion.

7. Impact

It is not easy to detail the impact that the Volunteer Movement has had over the course of these ten years. Nevertheless, keeping in mind the testimony from people, clergy, the Bishop, the Brothers and the volunteers themselves, as well as verification from the life in the pueblos, several results can be highlighted.

a) In the Sierra and in the Prelature:

– The programs of human development have had an impact on the population. Committees, committed to building community centers and running them, have been set up. The campaign for a decent home has succeeded in increasing the number of three-bedroom homes, one bedroom for the parents, another for boys and another for girls. Popular organization has promoted beneficial activities for the population such as road improvements, secondary or primary schools in towns, and electrification. Community centers have helped community participation in common projects and individual and community human improvement.

– The example of the volunteers, the themes of raising public awareness and courses on the rights of women have all helped to trim down acts of male chauvinism, to motivate women to respect themselves more, and to motivate men to establish relationships distinguished more by dialogue than by imposition.

– The processes of evangelization have consolidated and helped in purifying the faith of the pueblo, halted the advance of Jehovah's Witnesses and Evangelicals, and they have helped in discovering the aspect of social commitment to the common good, so characteristic of Christians.

– The training of pastoral ministers, the active participation of the Lasallian community in the overall plan pastoral ministry in the Prelature, the good working relationship with the Bishop and clergy, have all been signs of the new ecclesiology that has been attempted in the Sierra: a church of communion and participation, a church community of ministries and charisms, a church as a sacrament of salvation for all.

- The continued training of extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist, of catechists in service of children and young people, of youth counselors, of those in charge of community centers, of liaisons in the pueblos in charge of the Christian foundation program, of promoters of education in human rights in many communities throughout the Sierra. All of this has strengthened a broad network of lay persons committed in and for the pueblos.
- The commitment of local youth groups and the living example of the volunteers has boosted Christian leadership among the young and has promoted their vocation of service in their own environment and their sense of missionary service abroad.

b) In the Lasallian Family:

- The El Salto Volunteer Movement has been a pioneer and an example for other volunteer programs that were established later on.
- The support of the volunteers has made for better didactic missionary contributions and an improved organization of the mission of Holy Week in the Sierra.
- The volunteer movement is a call and an opportunity for young people who feel called to a more radical commitment in service of the poor.
- Vocations to the priesthood, religious life, and to the life of a committed lay Lasallian have flourished during the volunteer movement.
- Many former volunteers continue their faith and service commitment when they return to their own surroundings, especially as pastoral ministry consultants or as consultants to youth groups in high schools, universities or parishes. Some have established the Adrian Nyel Community in which they commit themselves formally to live Lasallian ideals in coordination with the local Brothers' community.
- The volunteer movement of El Salto has been a meeting place for young people from different Lasallian Districts and from different countries. Within the Institute this movement is seen as an emerging response from the guidelines of recent General Chapters.

8. Finances

During the ten years of existence of the Volunteer Movement all financing has been left up to Providence in the form of contributions from the District and from benefactors. The volunteer offers his or her service gratuitously and is not paid, not even for personal expenses. The parents of the volunteer do not contribute for the upkeep of the volunteer. The services rendered to the people are likewise done gratuitously. There is a reasonable fee requested for food for those who participate in the courses given in El Salto, and this fee does not cover the costs. Fees are often paid by means other than with money such as with beans, corn, fruit or eggs.

So the financial backing of the Volunteer Movement has depended on the support received from the District of North Mexico, from the monthly, bi-annual or annual contributions by former students of the French Institute in Laguna, coordinated by Mr. Juan José Martín Bringas and from the free room and board offered to the volunteers by families during their stay in the mission pueblos. To facilitate and legalize these financial donations the Lasallian Volunteer Movement Association, A.C., was set up in the city of Monterrey, Nuevo León, with the authority to receive donations and to issue legal, tax-deductible receipts to the Treasury Department.

For material improvements of the Victory Cultural and Social Center, in addition to the first and crucial support of Father José Anaya Rodríguez who built the first residence, significant donations have been received by Proyde in Spain; also from Adveniat in Germany; from French Lasallians and from the Brothers in the District of San Francisco. These donations have served to purchase the house where the female volunteers reside, to buy the property and to build the pastoral ministry center located across from the Victory Cultural and Social Center, to purchase the land for and then to build the parking area, to improve facilities of the Victory Center and to buy vehicles needed for the mission.

The Lasallian community is also the intermediary for donations which the North American Christian Foundation for Children and

the Elderly of Kansas City (USA) sends monthly to approximately one-thousand children in the Sierra. Using this valuable resource, the volunteers provide different welfare and development activities in favor of children throughout the Sierra: launching the "Decent Home" campaign with a view to home improvement, acquiring educational resources, installing sports facilities and hosting games for children, acquiring more library materials and increasing the toy library in the Community Center, responding to urgent needs of health or nutrition.

Given the fact that the services provided by the community are gratuitous and some are even subsidized by the community itself, for example in large measure the materials and room and board for the participants in the courses at the Victory Center, there are no resources available in order to be financially self-sufficient.

The issue of project support has been discussed without finding an acceptable solution. One possible perspective would be to set up productive "workshops" or experimental farming camps which would offer technological and educational services to people in the Sierra. This topic needs to be studied and then a decision could be made.

9. Perspectives for the future

The Victory Cultural and Social Center's influence is not limited to the Prelature of El Salto, since former volunteers, organized at the national level as the "Adrian Nyel Community," in their various places of origin, continue to be committed to and united with the Brothers in high schools, universities, parishes and educational apostolic movements in their efforts for the young, in favor of the poor. Several former volunteers have opted for the religious life as Brothers, Priests or Sisters.

Future projects look inspiring: to develop a broad network of community centers in towns where there will be a systematic Christian education available for all, the establishment of a radio station that would support the work of human development and evangelization, opening a technical preparatory school in service of country people...a university forestry program...the creation of new, influential communities of Brothers in the Sierra of Durango itself or in other needy places in the country.

The community of Brothers and volunteers found a complete sign of commitment and dedication in the painful death of Adriana Cortés Cedillo, a Lasallian volunteer who died on May 20, 2000. The community vehicle overturned as it was returning from a mission, and Adrian, after having lived her last missionary service with all her heart, which was her custom, and having received the sacrament of confirmation and a plenary indulgence of the Jubilee Year of 2000, was called by the Father to his Kingdom of love. Adriana, from heaven, continues interceding for this community, where Lasallian Association among Brothers and lay, is made real, simply and deeply, by living its commitment to love the Lord, in faith and in community, in service of Christian education for the people who are poor and marginalized in the Sierra of Durango.

For the reflection

- What have you learnt from this Lasallian experience?
- Which types of Lasallian Volunteer experiences exist in your Region?
- Which are their characteristics?
- Which are the links with the pastoral ministry of the local Churches?

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