



Sister Joannes Klas: From Our Sister Parish A Saint in Our Midst?

*"Come, you who are blessed by my Father;
take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world...."*

'For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat,'

'I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink,'

'I was a stranger and you invited me in,'

'I needed clothes and you clothed me,'

'I was sick and you looked after me,...' Jesus (Matthew 25:34-37)

Her Story, in Her Own Words

A Wisconsin Girl

I grew up in St. Rose Parish in Fredonia, WI, and was received into the community of the School Sisters of St. Francis, Milwaukee, in 1952.

My first mission was in Waterford, Wisconsin and lasted from 1954 until 1968, where I was a teacher. In 1969, I moved to St. Therese Parish in Milwaukee and taught 7th grade. There, I met and fell in love with the Missionaries going to Appalachia.

Serving in Appalachia

Since the Sisters' first visit to Kentucky, my heart went with them, but because the need for teachers was so great, it was not until 1971 that I was given permission to join the team. Until that point, however, every vacation time I

had I spent traveling to Kentucky to be with the sisters. Families from St. Therese parish drove me there until I got my license. These trips helped introduce other people to witness and become supporters of the Appalachian project.

Once I arrived in Kentucky, my job was to be the bread winner. I worked in the Head Start program and the Cumberland River Mental Health center with severely disturbed children. I started a Big Brother-Big Sister program with money from the community development funds and also worked with youth groups and catechesis.

On to India

In 1976, I was invited by the community to participate in the Living Aware Program to live, learn, and participate in another culture. So I requested and was accepted to go to India with the sisters from Nazareth, Kentucky. Sr. Gertrude Roethle and 12 sisters from Nazareth and I all made the trip to India. My time in India was tremendous, even though we did not encounter sisters from our own community over there.

Helping the Appalachian Miners in Kentucky

When I returned from India, Fr. Les Schmidt of the Glenmary Fathers asked if I would be interested in working on a coal miners' strike in Harlen and Stearns Counties. For three years, this was my full time work: working with organizers, getting support for our other strikers in the area, and supporting the miners' wives, some of whom had been beaten by the police. I actually stayed with some families overnight because, knowing the men were out, the scabs would shoot into the windows of the miners' homes.

Because a number of workers had been killed due to unsafe conditions in the mine, we organized the purchase and sale of Blue Diamond Coal Company stock through the Catholic Committee of Appalachia in order to try and force them to change their policies.

Working for Economic Justice for African Americans in Tupalo, Mississippi

Through my involvement in this process, I was asked to work for Southerners for Economic Justice. My work with the SEJ took me to Tupalo, Mississippi in 1980, where I lived for two years. There I supported the efforts of the Industrial Unionizing Department, facilitated workshops on race and labor, and organized with sisters and priests of various parishes that were concerned about the labor conditions of black workers in the South. We picketed with workers, talked at their churches, marched for the cause of young blacks in jails, and confronted the KKK when they were recruiting.

Called in a Dream to Central America

In 1981 I awoke from a dream and felt called to Central America. I called Sr. Barbara Kramer in the Generalate and expressed this desire and she informed me that bishops had requested sisters to come and work with refugees in Honduras and Mexico.

In January 1982, I went to Mexico to study Spanish. After my studies, I traveled to the Mexican-Guatemalan border to meet with the bishop, visit a few sisters who lived on the border, and see the refugee camp. With one of our sisters, Sr. Darlene Negorsky (who has since left the community), we traveled to Guatemala City and then onto the refugee camp in Honduras where we met with Sr. Irma of Caritas and Bishop Oscar Rodriguez. They were happy that we were considering working at this refugee camp and offered to pay us 100 limpiras a month for our help. We agreed to return in October, later that year.

We returned to Guatemala City and met Sr. Albertina, who was also working in the Honduran refugee camp. The three of us planned how to work together in the camp. After that meeting, Sr. Albertina returned to the village next to the camp (she was not living in the camp) in Honduras, Sr. Darlene went back to the United States, and I left for Mexico to complete my studies.

Death Squads in Honduras

When I got back to Mexico, I was told that one of our sisters had been kidnapped off a bus by members of a death squad in Honduras. The newspapers never released a name, but the only sister returning to Honduras at the time was Sr. Albertina. Later, someone from a solidarity group in Mexico confirmed her identity.

I finished my studies in June and got word that my father was ill with lung cancer. I went home to Wisconsin for his anointing and death. I met with Sr. Darlene several times a week to plan our work in the camp. Soon, Sr. Darlene told me she had to go to Tuscan, Arizona, for an operation and could not make the trip with me to Honduras. So, October 1982 drew near and I decided to go it alone.

Alone, on to the Refugee Camp - El Tesoro

I did not know any of the sisters in Honduras, but I called and asked them to pick me up at the airport. As it was close to the Feast of St. Francis, we visited the Franciscans in Comyaguela and Tegucigalpa. If I remember correctly, it was the 8th of October, and a driver from Sr. Maria Rosa's project took me to Copan. From there, Sr. Irma of Caritas took me to the refugee camp, called El Tesoro.

Caritas had promised me a tent to live in and another for a small pastoral office. But there was not even enough room for the people – 30 or 40 of them shared a tent – so for a while, I slept in a storage room.

Teaching in the Camp, Creating Programs

My main purpose at the time was as an international observer (for protection).

Soon after I arrived in the camp, Bishop Rodriguez asked me to organize and prepare the people for the sacraments. He and a few priests planned to come to the camp to administer first communion, confirmation, penance, and matrimony on December 6th. I helped get several workshops underway and taught the people how to sew, make shoes, hammocks, brooms, and sombreros. This kept the people purposefully busy and also helped meet the needs of the camp.

Starting a Refugee School

In 1983, Caritas asked me if I would be interested in starting up a school in the camp. I inquired around the camp to determine their reading level. I learned that most of the people had never been to school, but some of the younger ones had reached 3rd grade. Since so few could read, I asked those with a third grade reading level to teach first grade. A young girl from a nearby village came to teach Kindergarten. There was no school building, so we held classes anywhere we could. Before long, however, we had little classrooms built with benches on dirt floors and used plastic sheeting for walls. Some generous Americans donated enough for us to buy textbooks. The United Nations also provided us a small budget for pencils, paper, and additional books.

The children were assigned to various classes which took place in the morning; in the afternoon, I prepared the teachers for the following day. Little by little, we developed the school to include sixth grade. *Some of the original teachers in the refugee camp are now teachers at the school in our village, San Jose el Tesoro.*

Opposing the Death Squads

One morning in 1983, soldiers from Guatemala and Honduras entered the camp with accusations of sedition against 17 of our men. We, the International Staff, knew we had no power against the military, but in an act of solidarity, we made a ring around these men, arm in arm, to protect them from the soldiers.

The soldiers hit us with their guns, pushed and pulled us, and finally, forcibly removed 17 men from our camp. Eventually, seven of these men were returned but ten others were put in jail and tortured until the United Nations intervened and found another camp for them. These men were sent off to Bolivia. A few

months later, 99 family members left our camp for Bolivia, to be reunited with their husbands, fathers, and brothers. Bishop Rodriguez celebrated a mass with us to honor their farewell and pray for safe travel.

[We did not forget them. It took us many meetings and much effort, and even raising a little trouble with the government to help these families return to Guatemala. Finally, on April 1, 2007, they were repatriated in Northern Guatemala.]

Smuggling Endangered Refugees across the Border

Every once in a while we heard rumors of refugees at the border. Although it was dangerous, we made trips to find them and bring them to our camp, hidden in our car. Throughout our time in the camp, we were often invaded by the military.

In contrast to their terror, Bishop Flores from Coban, Guatemala, also came to the camp. He had been the bishop of this community when they were living in home region of Izabal, Guatemala; he knew most of the catechists by their first name and his presence was a source of strength for us.

Preparing with the Refugees for an Uncertain Future

After many years in the camp, because Honduras still had not signed the UN refugee agreement, it was decided that we could not continue to live in the refugee camp. So the people faced a choice: either be nationalized as Hondurans or leave the country. But Guatemala was in no way ready to receive the returned refugees and the peace accord had not yet been signed there. Nevertheless, the people decided to leave and brave a return to Guatemala, rather than be nationalized as Hondurans.

During the preparation for departure, Bishop Flores returned a few times with the UN and made trips to look at sites in Guatemala where there would be enough land for 10 acres per family. In October 1990, a small group of refugees went with the UN to look at three possible sites for us to build a new community. The group settled on the land we now call San Jose el Tesoro in Yalpemech.

The Long Road to Yalpemech

To prepare for our arrival, we sent a truck filled with the boards from the school and church to leave first and put up a shelter in Yalpemech. Half the camp – 218 refugees – filled 26 trucks and six buses with all their belongings and left the refugee camp in Honduras for good on February 25, 1991.

The trip to San Jose was supposed to take us two days, but ended up taking four. The first day, we got as far as Chiquimula at the Franciscan Monastery. They had offered us hospitality, which we thought included food, but it did not. Although it was late, we were able to find a few stores still open to buy bread and juice for everyone.

The next day we got as far as Coban, where Bishop Flores had organized the people to welcome us in song and provide lunch – a good thing because the people were starved. The following day we began the trip from Coban to Raxruha, but because the roads were so bad, what should have been a trip of seven hours took almost two days. Halfway there, the bus drivers from Honduras refused to go any further. They knew the roads were bad, but not *that* bad. Because the bus drivers refused to move, that night we slept on any empty space we could find, whether on the bus or on the market floor. During the night, thieves took many of our supplies and possessions from our trucks.

The only means of communication we had was a two-way radio that fortunately reached all the way to Tegucigalpa. So, we called Tegucigalpa and they called Bishop Flores in Coban, who sent us six trucks for the rest of the way. The trucks were loaded up with all of our supplies and belongings. Mothers with tiny babies sat in the cabins of the trucks. For this portion of the trip, many of the children were separated from their mothers in the backs of the trucks; it was a nightmare. As I drive through the area now, I can still hear these children scream.

The following night, the Sisters of the Holy Child Jesus received us, had food prepared for us, and a place for people to sleep. Finally, after being stopped and harassed by the military many times along our journey, we reached our destination on March 1st.

Building a New Community Home in Yalpemech

After we unloaded the trucks and people began to settle, we had to name our village. Because the camp had been called “El Tesoro” and it was the first of March, we decided on San Jose el Tesoro. I stayed in Yalpemech a few days and then returned to Honduras at the request of the bishop to stay with the other half of the people who remained in the camp. We reunited the community in San Jose by June, thanks to a much less eventful trip.

In the beginning, the principal work involved building homes and finding food. Besides these pressing concerns, I focused on education and health, which has remained our central focus, along with community development. This was particularly challenging because the land we had been given was already inhabited by indigenous Mayan people by the time we arrived. A great challenge for my work in San Jose has been how to help this community learn to live in a mixed culture with people of different languages and ethnicities.



In the beginning I was here alone, but since the second and third years, other sisters have joined me, enhancing what we can provide the community by way of education and health. Guatemala's civil war finally ended and the peace accord was signed in 1996, but in the intervening years, our safety and security were at risk. Oftentimes, soldiers visited and threatened us. I even received personal threats several times.

Honored by the United Nations, Able to Build Some More

In 1997, I received the Fridthof Nansen award from the United Nations, given for outstanding work with refugees. This gave me the opportunity to go to Switzerland and address the United Nations. Some of our sisters from Europe came to be present at that event, which was a great support. The prize money went into building the church, convent, and medical clinic. Despite the fact that violence and political instability persists even today, with many people's help, we have established a strong and vibrant community.

St. Patrick's Helps in the Lord's Work in Yalpemech

Thanks to St. Patrick's, our sister parish in Hudson, WI, we were able to put in a telephone, get electricity into the village, and pay the taxes on the land we are now living on, among many other things. Parishioners from St. Patrick's have also contributed enough funds to help us build 163 cement block homes.

My home parish in Fredonia, WI, St. Rose, provides us the resources to maintain a free daycare center. This provides nutrition and social development skills for our smallest villagers at no cost to their parents. Because San Jose is multicultural and multilingual, children are able to learn each other's languages and customs in the daycare center and school.

When we arrived here from the refugee camp, there were about fifty students who had completed 6th grade but had no official Guatemalan documents. Sisters and volunteers from the Institute of Guatemala Radio Program have taught classes (since we cannot receive the transmissions from where we are located) so our students could be tested and receive the proper documents,

including diplomas for sixth grade. Over 400 students are enrolled in the grade school and in 2008, we began offering a co-op program for the 7th grade students to continue their studies at the 8th and 9th grade levels in the years to come. We also have a two-year university preparation program for students who have completed the 9th grade and a program to get accounting certification.

Because this education is costly, we have had to rely on generous donors to help provide scholarships for our students. Through our work and the contributions of many benefactors, we have the highest rate of young people who attend universities and matriculate in higher levels of education than any other village in our area. This serves to keep our youth focused on education and their future potential, rather than getting involved in gangs and organized violence.



San Jose Offers a Reverse Mission, Enhancing Those Who Volunteer



Through connections with sisters and friends in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, St. Patrick's parish, and other places, San Jose has served as a place for "reverse mission" where people can come and experience our way of life and share their experience with people back home. We've had some volunteers stay with us for a week, to a few weeks, others for even a year. This sharing of lives has reached many lives, including one young man who studied medicine and returned to work in our village for a period in 2008. He assisted Sr. Maria Diaz, who was studying to be a nurse, with running our health clinic.



Today, the sisters teach in the school and help with catechetical programs for the parish. I continue to teach several classes like accounting, physics, and English and I also serve on the Pastoral Social Committee in Coban and represent the five parishes in our zone.

I have shared life with many Sisters, including Sr. Elena Felipe, Others have been Sr. Maria Diaz , Sr. Karen Ramey, Sr. Maria Sagastume, Sr. Josefa Sandrez, Sr. Rutillia Garcia, Sr. Olivia Muñoz, Sr. Lucia Ramierz and others who are no longer in the community. Sister Bernadette Kalscheur, who connected St. Patrick's Parish with San Jose el Tesoro de Yalpemech, was a special friend. I am grateful for all of them.

GRACIAS SEÑOR

Por todo lo que me diste en los años pasados,
gracias por los días de sol y los nublados tristes,
Por las tardes tranquilas y las noches oscuras,
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Por las flores y las estrellas,

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por las penas y las alegrías.

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mantiene fuerte

Gracias por la soledad, por el trabajo, por las inquietudes,
los temores, las dificultades y las lágrimas.

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