

ST. GERTRUDE THE GREAT NEWSLETTER

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FROM BISHOP DOLAN'S TRAVEL JOURNAL

Bishop's forward – February 18th

My friend Fr. Martin, OFM kindly sent me a box of books this week, mostly about Bishop Baraga, an indefatigable Michigan missionary, Slovenian by birth, and consecrated bishop (November 1, 1853), like me, in Cincinnati. The first bishop of Sault-Saint-Marie began a diary the day he was named bishop, and noted some benefits from such a journal “for thinking over his actions, hints for pastoral theology, or being stimulated to humility, since many times the most stupid things occur.” Amen.

First Friday, February 4th

It is always difficult to leave home on a busy day. Many instructions for First Friday and Sunday have to be given, in addition to the packing. At least I won't have to worry about getting sick this trip. I already am! Still, by God's grace my old suitcase, now on its last legs, and I, make it out the door in plenty of time. I was tempted this morning to stay in my sick bed, but one always feels better when up and about.

The trip itself is pleasant (I am “bumped” up to Business Class for the Atlanta-Mexico City leg.) with plenty of time for restful reading and prayer. The flight attendant has a question about the Old Testament, and we chat a bit about Daniel and Esther.

For Mexican Customs, one presses a button. I usually get green, but this evening it is red. (I wonder how narco-traffickers do it?) An official looking young lady opens my suitcase, whose zipper proceeds to die on the spot, and then questions me closely about my breviary. My breviary! Maybe she knew its power, or was a secret partisan of the John XXIII.

It is awhile before Fr. Siordia arrives to collect me. There is usually some confusion at this point, and Father did not know I would be at Terminal II.

It took us three hours or so to get out of Mexico City, allowing for getting lost a few times, and the horrendous traffic for a holiday weekend. All of Mexico used to keep



When the Lord assures you of His tender love for you, placing the lightweight necklace of brilliant flowers around your neck, you will be strengthened. You will praise God with much devotion.

–St. Gertrude of Helfta

a holyday for its first saint, Philip of Jesus, a Franciscan martyr in Japan, but the Masons thought better of it and replaced it with Constitution Day, February 5. But since it falls on a Saturday this year, the government put its celebration on a Monday, making for a holiday “puente” or bridge weekend. The whole world, it seems, is heading south towards Cocoyoc, land of perpetual spring. The Cocoyocers of means, not to be outdone, themselves have decamped to Acapulco, heedless of their heads it seems, as the “Narcos” are chopping them off in some numbers now in that resort town. I always found it too hot and humid myself, even before they started with the heads. Still, it is a venerable city, for the late and very holy Bishop Carmona lived and died there.

First Saturday, February 5th

We arrive, duly weary, about 1:30 A.M. local time, 2:30 A.M. in Cincinnati. I wondered how I would be able to speak with my sore throat, but managed just fine. Fr. Siordia updates me on people and a few exorcism stories to prime the pump. I make the intention to remember them, and pray decades when we fall into silence.

“No rest for the wicked,” my mother used to say. How true. The *borrachitos* (“little drunks” is the affectionate Mexican diminutive) or “street people,” we would say with political correctness, have arrived at 5:20 A.M. to toll the church bells for whoever died the previous day. A respectable (well, unrespectable, actually) little group gathers and takes turns tolling for some three hours. Custom dictates that they may then proceed to the home of the deceased for a bite to eat, and some of the local firewater, “agua ardiente,” cane sugar alcohol mixed with hot water. No wonder the locals say if you drink the water of Cocoyoc, you will surely return.

Eventually I give up trying to sleep, and pray for the deceased as I arise for morning coffee and devotions. It is First Saturday, but the emphasis here is on preparations for tomorrow’s feast of the appearance of Our Lord of the Expiration. The ladies are cooking up a storm for the morrow’s fiesta, and kindly send over to my house a fine dinner. We eat at 2:00 P.M. I always kid Fr. Siordia about this, one of his few inflexible rules. He eats once a day, “a las dos.”

I offer Mass at noon, and Fr. Siordia at 5:00 P.M. (This is Mexican time, so everything actually starts about fifteen to thirty minutes late, and nobody minds a bit. A paradise for the punctuality-challenged, such as myself!) Father gives a classic sermon of his own style, part pious, part near tirade, but warm, humorous and reflective as well. He gets a kick out of my analysis later.

The first of the fiesta’s bands is NOT tardy, and starts to cut Father off. An altar boy is sent to urge them to patience. They are rewarded by being admitted into the church afterwards, where they play an ear-blasting medley of *Mañatitas*, hymns and pious waltzes, magnified by the acoustics. And so it begins.

We sup on the Church grounds in the din of band and in the long Mexican twilight. Tamales and posole, festal food, are offered. As the meals commence, Father has taken to saying “*Moñseñor, yo voy a sopear,*” which means he’d like to eat using a tortilla and his fingers instead of a fork. I assure him that I have a list of concerns for my priests, but that table etiquette is not one of

them, and to go right ahead.

We discuss the slim prospects of sleep that night. It seems some bandleader, out of devotion, has shown up to play gratis all night long, and nothing is to be done. After a good long visit in church (extra prayer time is one of the luxuries of this trip) I put in my earplugs and fall into a deep sleep for three hours or so. After that I “keep watch with Christ,” as the Compline prayer phrases it.

Sunday, February 6th

“Roll out the barrel, we’ll have a barrel of fun!” At 5:00 A.M. I roll out of bed to the incongruous tune of a Polish polka in Mexican dress. The roll call is well timed, for soon *los borrachitos que tocan los muertos*, begin to toll the dead with great vigor and devotion.

Many faithful arrive for Fr. Siordia’s 8:00 A.M. Mass, too many for the small church to hold. The dancing cowboys, or *vaqueros que bailan* arrive too, an ancient confraternity of young men who vow certain ceremonies and prayers in honor of Our Lord of the Expiration for the annual feast. That afternoon during the fiesta they will edify me by their single-minded devotion. For hours they do a kind of a slow line dance outside the door of the church, accompanied by fiddles, and wearing silver spurs, interspersed with recited prayers learned by heart, as well as by a sort of ritual bull fight for each member. “The band plays on,” but they’re dancing to their own ancient music, with sublime Mexican patience.

The dancing Aztecs, another obligatory feature of these fiestas, have drifted over from the *Novus Ordo* celebrations across town. They strike me as more pagan and less interesting with their incessant Aztec drumming and moves and costumes. One expects a dripping heart to be produced at the finale.

Earlier that day, I “sang” Mass at noon, barely able to produce much noise myself due to my illness. We were a sorry twosome in this land of music, the cantor and I. He was hoarse as well. We are afraid Don Florencio has throat cancer, and are praying for him. According to the old customs, he has always played the harmonium and sung for my visits. The choir loft is accessed by an old wooden ladder, where he holds forth. I hope he will be all right. He tells me he can’t interest the young men in learning the Gregorian.

I manage — barely — a sermon during Mass, the hand held mic (I always feel like an entertainer with one of those things) helping me to overcome the surrounding and competing sound. Almost seventy Confirmations

follow Mass, mostly small children according to the excellent and ancient Mexican custom, which accords so well with the early Church and the still-existing Oriental discipline. How much these children need the graces of the Holy Ghost! How many assaults await their innocence!



The entire village is invited to the meal and entertainment which follow. Last year someone at the church refused a plate to a Novus Ordo man. How shameful! He said nothing — but returned this year and offered to Father to pay this year's dinner for everybody. How edifying it would be for a like spirit of charity to prevail everywhere.

By nightfall my voice is almost gone as Fr. Mardones calls to check on things. The party is going strong, but will soon end. After a little nap, I return to church for my evening visit. An inebriated young man approaches me about making a vow, but Father wisely tells him to return to church the next day when sober. He does not. That night the young man takes a seat next to me in the crowded church, and weeps quietly for awhile, as I say my rosary.

Still, I must say the crowds were respectful and orderly, and only one or two drunks were to be encountered. Fr. Siordia forbids drinking and dancing on the church grounds, and he is obeyed. He tells me that's why he projects such a fearsome persona. He is a very down-to-earth, classic parish priest, with a bit of the mystic tossed in.

How death and life mix in Mexico! The churchyard is an ancient cemetery and the remaining headstones are in ill repair. The party takes place over the old graves. In passing, I see a girl jumping over an old wrought iron crucifix, supporting her weight on it. The next day I

notice it is broken. But blessed are these dead, so near the Blessed Sacrament, and a good priest to pray for them daily. This intercession for the poor souls is an important part of Fr. Siordia's apostolate.

Monday, February 7th

A day of rest. I'm used to the bells now. The drunks are thoughtfully policing the grounds for trash, which may have some peso value. I offer Mass to honor Our Lord of the Expiration, for all of the intentions confided to me. Fr. Siordia and I dine at a local buffet in nearby Cuatla a town which is always hot and crowded. Once, with Fr. Saavedra when he was having visa problem, we came across a witch here, but today the coast is clear. The conversations with Fr. Siordia are always fascinating.

Tuesday, February 8th

After Mass in honor of the Holy Child Jesus, Doctor of the Sick, for all of our sick, we leave for our annual pilgrimage to Tepeaca in Puebla State. This trip takes us from volcano to volcano, Popocatepetl to Pico de Orizaba, Mexico's largest, which we must cross to reach Vera Cruz State, and that on a fairly hair-raising road on which many a truck goes awry, as brakes give way on the steep descent. It's no fun crossing in the fog or frequent light snow, but this time all is clear, and the mountains shine majestic against the sun. The next day one solitary cloud, foot shaped to my imagination, surmounts the Pico, and makes me think of Elias the prophet as we head to the Church of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel in Dos Rios.

But first we visit the Little Doctor Jesus, who is looking good in His shrine. They say the Baby Jesus' face changes, depending. He received us, and our heartfelt petitions, kindly. They're re-gilding His church of St Francis of Assisi in this ancient town founded by Cortez, which looks magnificent. We always dine there after the visit (*a las dos*) in a simple corner restaurant, and Fr. Siordia pronounces himself particularly satisfied with today's meal, which featured the best pasta since he left Italy and the St. Peter Martyr Seminary at Verrua near Turin.

That night we meet with Fr. Hernan Vergara to discuss the morrow's program, and to have a little visit. The next day after Mass we will be eager to start the four hour drive back to Cocoyoc, as it will be late. The Mass is delayed until noon, because my visit corresponds with the distribution of the dole from the Federales. This assistance helps the poor peasants to survive. As it is, most live on beans and tortillas.



After High Mass and sermon and four Confirmations in Father's ever more impressive church (he has added a cupola with seventeen windows) we sit down to a savory feast in the unfinished part in front. A tour of the new construction (The people are so poor, how do they manage to build a church?) follows, along with brief private interviews with the Fathers. Then, this bishop's work is done, and we head back to the mountain pass and Puebla and finally Morellos and Cocoyoc. The penultimate stretch of the journey takes us over a toll road through a valley, surrounded by hill and the majestic volcano. The light during the leisurely mountainous *crepusculum* lingers long in Mexico, all dark rose and pink. I'm praying the rosary for our safety, as a deserted stretch of road would be an excellent place to be ambushed and get your head chopped off, but mind. Our Lady and the angels are with us.

Wednesday, February 9th

St. Cyril of Alexandria is one of my patron bishops, even though this intrepid champion of the Mother of God is quite the opposite of the gentle Bishop of Geneva. I figure I need a bit of both as a bishop. "The Kingdom of Heaven suffereth violence, and the violent bear it away."

The people of Dos Rios are known for their generosity, and provide a fine Recibimiento, or reception procession for the bishop, as well as a parish tasty "comida" with music afterwards. It all is really a most impressive sight. We are a bit early, so I climb the steps to an outside shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe outside of town to pray for a bit, and await the arrival of the procession, heralded with music and firecrackers.

Boys lead off performing the old dance known as "Moors and Christians." Their costumes look vaguely pirate-like, replete with large machetes. Then come the priests, the servers, candles, incense and cross; the people with flowers and confetti, and the canopy. Confetti is liberally poured over me (later on an able altar boy gets all of it out of my biretta, and is handsomely rewarded with ten pesos, although there will also be confetti in my collar and cassock and ...) Next a wreath of flowers is placed around my neck, the band strikes up a hymn, and we are ready to go. We clergy chat as we can over the band as we go, catching up on news with another priest from far away Merida, Yucatan. They pass the local public elementary school, and crowds of children peer at us enviously through the fence. They get a blessing, too.



Thursday, February 10th

I arise at 5:00 AM on St. Scholastica's day to finish packing and depart. Yesterday's angelic protection continues and we make it to Mexico City in plenty of time for my flight. Fr. Siordia and I stand outside of security in yet another fascinating spiritual conversation, neither wanting it to end, rather like St. Scholastica's last visit with St. Benedict, I suppose. Mutual guidance and edification and encouragement are offered and received. Adios, until next year!

The flight back is crowded, and Continental's personal or "Big Brother" T.V. screen flashing in front of me is a bit too much to take, but I read and pray my way back to the good old U.S.A. Another world awaits...

—The Most Reverend Daniel L. Dolan