



Meeting with Elvia Garcia de la Cruz (center, in the green shirt) and her extended family was a moving experience for representatives from the Diocese of Erie who accompanied Bishop Lawrence Persico on a recent visit to the Mission of Friendship. Tricia Pipkin, director of the Mission of Friendship in Mérida, is kneeling at far right.



(above) Children at the day-care center and the after-school program run by the Mission of Friendship enjoy healthy food and educational enrichment as well as recreation, all in a secure environment.

(left) Ann Badach, executive director of Catholic Charities for the Diocese of Erie, enjoyed interacting with a family at the Mission of Friendship's day-care center on our trip to Mérida.

Finding friendship in Mexico

I HAD A VERY INTERESTING EXPERIENCE RECENTLY that I want to share with you, the young people of the Diocese of Erie. It demonstrates that learning and growing do not end after school. God continues to invite each of us to stretch beyond our comfort zones throughout our entire lives.

truth in charity

You may not know that we have been in a sister-diocese relationship with the Archdiocese of Yucatán for 45 years. Take a look at the map on page 9 and you will see the archdiocese is at the eastern-most tip of Mexico. The relationship began because one of our priests, the late Msgr. James Peterson, knew another priest doing mission work there in the 1950s. For several summers, “Father Pete” and

a group of students from Gannon University’s St. Thomas More Club drove to the Yucatán to help the poor in the region. Google Maps says that’s a 50-hour drive, and I doubt they had air conditioning in their station wagon. Now that’s an inspiring commitment.

In the 1970s, we established a permanent outreach in the Yucatán: the Mission of Friendship. ■ The Most Rev. Lawrence T. Persico, Bishop of Erie



of Friendship. Today, we still oversee a day-care center, an after-school enrichment program for elementary girls, a medical dispensary, a family sponsorship program and more. The people of the Diocese of Erie should really celebrate the fact that their generous donations have brought food, education, medicine — and even peace of mind — to thousands of people with significant need.

It’s no secret that I am not a big fan of travel. Naturally, God, in his infinite wisdom, put me in the largest diocese in Pennsylvania, which means I am on the road quite a bit! Actually, travel within the diocese is enjoyable; I am always energized when I get to spend time with parishioners. But Our Lord, and Pope Francis, have called us to be missionaries, and to reach out to people on the peripheries. I decided it was important to experience the mission firsthand. I also wanted to meet Archbishop Gustavo Rodriguez Vega, who became the archbishop of Yucatán a year ago.

I don’t know about you, but when I hear the word mission, I think of something out in the wilderness, with no one

around. So I was a little surprised to discover the Mission of Friendship is located in a busy neighborhood of Mérida, a city with a metropolitan area of nearly 1 million people. That was a deliberate choice, and it makes sense. Volunteers and staff live among the people they serve.

The contrasts in Mérida are striking. While there, I experienced everything from extreme poverty to beauty and even opulence. The mission house is simple and comfortable, especially compared to some of the homes I visited.

One situation was particularly challenging. I was invited into the home of Elvia Garcia de la Cruz, whose family is sponsored by the Mission of Friendship. Even with our help, the family is living in deplorable conditions. The extended family lives in a cinderblock dwelling of four rooms. The second room in the house has no roof — just a few pieces of tarp and wood. They moved in because it had been abandoned. It’s been more than 10 years, but they are still concerned that, at any moment, the former owner or perhaps a distant relative could insist they leave. Imagine living with that kind of stress.



(top, right) Indira Suarez, left, who was recently named director of missions for the Diocese of Erie, was among those who traveled to Mérida to renew and strengthen ties to the Mission of Friendship. She is pictured with Tricia Pipkin, who coordinates the mission in Mexico.

(top, left) Dr. Silvia Solis Canto, in pink, has been offering medical care through the Mission of Friendship for nearly three decades.

(bottom, left) The people of the Yucatán celebrate their heritage with food, with music, and often, with traditional dance.

They get water and electricity from their neighbors. One of the children, José, is dealing with a terminal illness — his brother has already died from the same disease. The family makes money taking in laundry and doing a little sewing, thanks to equipment provided by William and Sharon Piano of St. Luke Parish in Erie. The Pianos have helped support Elvia's family for many years through the Mission of Friendship's Amigos Sponsorship Program. Through a combination of work and sponsorship funds, the family scrapes by.

Entering their world, even for a brief visit, certainly put things in perspective. It showed me the bigger picture. There are very different levels of poverty in the world. And even though we can't take away all the problems and offer what we would consider even basic comforts, it was amazing to hear them talk of how important our support is.

I also was impressed by their faith. In fact, when we arrived, José was at a neighbor's house because they had been meeting to pray a novena all week. Our visit did not interfere with his commitment to that prayer.

I came away feeling very grateful for the past 45 years of generosity shown by the people of the Diocese of Erie. Serving the needs of our brothers and sisters is important work. We have extended a hand to people most of us will never meet, and

they have felt the love of Christ. After this moving experience, it is my hope the good people of the Diocese of Erie will continue to reach out in a missionary spirit to the people of the Archdiocese of Yucatán.

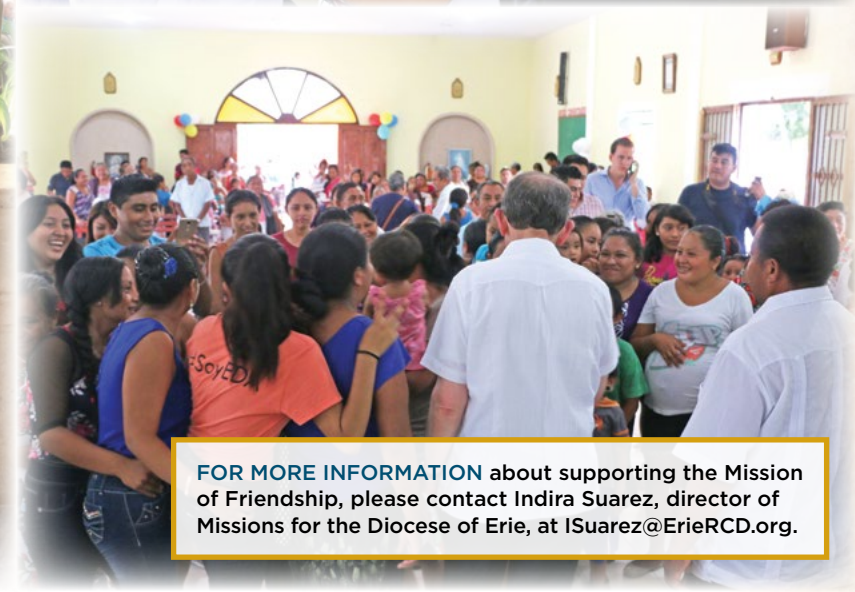
The local staff members who work with the Mission of Friendship are amazingly dedicated. We provide resources, but they are the boots on the ground. And while the coordinator, Tricia Pipkin, is American, most of the staff is Mexican, which is key. It would be arrogant for us to impose our American ways. We need to follow the lead of people who know the culture well. We don't have all the answers. It was inspiring to see Tricia extend herself to the people she serves, sharing and praying with them and living among them with such ease. Her work is a real mission of love.

I am pleased that several of our parishes have sister parish relationships with parishes in the Yucatán. Some have sent groups to Mexico, spending a week in service. We heard stories about the people of St. Mark Parish in Emporium and St. Patrick in Franklin. I know St. Julia Parish in Erie has also shown great commitment to their sister parish. I must especially thank God for the people of Franklin. They led the fundraising effort to help the Mission of Friendship purchase an air-conditioned van. That was a welcome oasis as we traveled from site to site in temperatures reaching 100 degrees.

The people we met in Mexico have a great love for their

(below) Archbishop Gustavo Rodriguez Vega gifted me with this beautiful framed photograph of Our Lady of Guadalupe, purchased at the famous pilgrimage site near Mexico City. It's now hanging behind my desk, a daily reminder of our brothers and sisters in Mexico.

(right) The people of Dzibikak, a small village outside of Mérida, welcomed the diocesan contingent with a program of dance, song and poetry. Afterward, it seemed as though every single villager waited to greet me or take pictures.



FOR MORE INFORMATION about supporting the Mission of Friendship, please contact Indira Suarez, director of Missions for the Diocese of Erie, at ISuarez@ErieRCD.org.

culture, a wonderful integration of their Mayan and Spanish heritages. On the weekends, they close the main square in Mérida, and people come to enjoy a local market, food and beautiful traditional dances and singing. It's a delightful place and I saw great joy in the people. I'm sure many of them don't have much, but they know how to enjoy the simple things in life. They were celebrating Sunday, celebrating the weekend and celebrating the life of the community.

I wish I had more room to tell you about my visit to the day-care center or the compelling tours given by the young women who go to the after-school program we offer. Or about Dzibikak, an entire village that came out to greet me. Today, the church we helped them build through the efforts of Bishop Emeritus Donald Trautman is the heartbeat of their village, and the faith and gratitude they expressed were overwhelming. They rang the church bells when I got to the village so that everyone knew it was time to gather. It appeared everyone had stayed home for the day. We enjoyed two hours of song and dance, food, poetry and speeches. Then it was another half hour of personal greetings and photos.

Finally, I want you to know I had an excellent visit with Archbishop Gustavo. He is very interested in and supportive of the mission. The goal of cementing the relationship between the

archdiocese and the Diocese of Erie was accomplished. I hope we can host him in Erie in the not-too-distant future.

I want to encourage you, our young people, to take advantage of any opportunity to take a mission trip. You don't have to go to Mexico, of course. But it's important to be open, to reach out to others. Remember, the Gospel message is not just about "me and Jesus," it's also about Jesus in my neighbor. I can assure you, from my own experience, you will be deeply blessed if you are willing to be inconvenienced, to step out of your security and to make even small sacrifices. This is why we ask the young church to do service hours. It's not about getting done with an assignment for confirmation. It's a hands-on way to teach about our faith. It's a tangible experience of grace, a way of bringing the Gospel to life.

If this missionary outpost captures your attention, you can read all about it in a special edition of *FAITH* magazine that was published 10 years ago. Visit www.ErieRCD.org/Faith.htm and click on the July/August 2006 edition in the archives. We've also posted a PowerPoint about our most recent visit to the Yucatán. Find it at www.ErieRCD.org/mission.htm. Watching it will help you to remember to pray for the people in our sister archdiocese; please especially remember the staff. ✚