

## **Walking in the Footsteps of Philippine Duchesne in Mexico**

By Andrew M. Byrne, dean of faculty, and Lori Wilson, theology chair and campus minister

*During the last four summers, Convent of the Sacred Heart faculty and staff have had the opportunity to experience international formation to mission trips to enhance their understanding and appreciation of the history of the Society of the Sacred Heart, and to grow in their ability to help realize the mission of Convent of the Sacred Heart as outlined in the Goals and Criteria of a Sacred Heart education. Our experiences have included, “Walking in the Footsteps of Saint Madeleine Sophie Barat” (France), “Walking in the Footsteps of Janet Erskine Stuart (England and Ireland), “The Society of the Sacred Heart: Past, Present and Future” (Italy), and “Walking in the Footsteps of Philippine Duchesne” (Mexico).*

On the morning of July 4<sup>th</sup>, 10 Sacred Heart faculty and staff embarked on a 12-day journey to Mexico. Our purpose was simple: to grow in our understanding of the life work of Saint Rose Philippine Duchesne, rscj; to learn more about the international Sacred Heart community; and to do service work with the poor women and children of Mexico. Each day included a prayer service led by one of the participants, a speaker or panel that would share information about the history and work of the society, and service to the poor.

For many people, the name Montezuma has certain ill-feeling connotations, especially for those who enjoy traveling. The reality is that Montezuma, Mexico is a beautiful and established town in the central part of the country, about two hours from the major city of San Luis Potosi. It is a town that once flourished and was a leader of Mexican industry. However, in the last 20 years the industry has faded and the challenges of the people have become numerous. Unable to find work, many older boys and men have left their wives, mothers, and sisters behind and crossed the border into the United States to find gainful employment so they could send money to their families. Their long range hope is to return home one day.

Our first full-day in Mexico in July 2008 was spent in Montezuma where we met with the women and children who stayed behind while their fathers, husbands, or brothers pursued the American Dream. A group of 10 Sacred Heart faculty and staff, several Religious of the Sacred Heart and other volunteers, gathered in the dilapidated annex of an early 19<sup>th</sup> century church, where one woman shared the story of her husband and four sons who left to go to the United States.

She spoke of the challenges that her husband and each son faced and the impact this separation had on her family and the entire town. She spoke about how she needed to be both mother and father to her children, and how she would spend each evening praying that they were well, while hoping to hear from them soon. In her words, she grabbed a hold of God for strength to get through her daily trials. The woman spoke about coyotes, the dishonest men who aided her husband and sons in their effort to cross the border. She also shared stories about the coyotes

who take advantage of people in similar situations, and about those who were unsuccessful in crossing the border.

To say that those of us hearing this reflection were in shock would be an understatement. For many of us, the immigrants that inhabit our local community finally had an identity and a story -- a story of courage, faith, love lost, struggle, and hardship. After hearing the personal account of this woman, and seeing the remnants of a once-striving town, each volunteer was transformed; they had seen and experienced the cry of the poor.

Later that evening, we returned to where we would be doing our service, San Luis Potosi. Our evening prayer with the Sacred Heart volunteers expressed heartfelt commitment to the students we would serve during our brief visit. We reflected on how our lives as educators had been changed by this experience.

Saint Rose Philippine Duchesne (1769 ó 1852) spent many years pleading with Saint Madeleine Sophie Barat to expand the borders of the Society of the Sacred Heart. Finally, in 1818, Philippine was granted permission to travel to St. Louis, Missouri to establish a Sacred Heart school for the wealthy and the poor. Although she was unable to predict the challenges that would lie ahead, Philippine persevered; this perseverance resulted in the establishment of schools of the Sacred Heart in the United States. Towards the end of her life she was able to realize her dream of working with the Potawatomi, a Native-American tribe who inhabited the lands outside of St. Louis. Her struggle to learn English and limited resources at that time made it difficult for her to fully accomplish all of her goals as quickly as she wanted. Many of these same challenges exist today for the Religious of the Sacred Heart, as they attempt to help the poor and the indigenous groups of Mexico. During our trip, several of our faculty and staff struggled with the language, similar to the struggles experienced by Philippine, and as a result gained a deep appreciation for the challenges that Philippine experienced more than 150 years ago.

Contemplation, prayer, and service were the hallmarks of Philippine's life. In order to experience the life of Philippine, these three pieces, in addition to the Goals and Criteria, were included in all aspects of our trip this summer. Each day, the volunteers modeled and experienced the Goals and Criteria. We demonstrated to the people who we came in contact with and saw evidence of ña personal and active faith in God, a deep respect of intellectual values, a social awareness which impels to action, a building of community as a Christian value, and a personal awareness which impels to actionñ in the Religious of the Sacred Heart and others we met during our trip to Mexico. The mornings were spent reflecting and learning more about the life of Philippine and the work being done by the religious in Mexico. Perhaps, our most moving workshop was conducted by Celia Salinas, rscj.

Celia grew up in an indigenous tribe not far from San Luis Potosi. She came to know of the Society from several religious volunteers in the area. She enjoyed learning about the Catholic faith, but was unable to give up the spiritual roots she developed as a child. Celia is a modern-

day pioneer, a person who lives Philippine's vision each day. Her challenges assimilating to a new culture have been numerous. However, she has worked diligently to merge the beliefs that she came to appreciate as a child with those of the Catholic faith and the Society. Her spirituality is deep and comprehensive. Today, Celia is working actively with children in a preschool program, and she often returns home to speak with those in her tribe. Celia is just one of many religious who are living the vision of Philippine and Sophie.

On our final day in San Luis Potosi, we gathered in the Mater Chapel at Colegio de San Juan de Dios, the Sacred Heart school, to reflect on our service and the Society's work. During a powerful and moving prayer service, our School's faculty and staff spoke passionately about the transformation they experienced during the trip. At the conclusion of our reflection, Imma De Stefanis, rscj and Reyna González, rscj, invited each volunteer to receive a special ring as a symbol of their commitment to justice and to serving the poor. Now that we are home, this ring continues to remind us of our work and of our commitment to fight for justice.

Later that same afternoon, our volunteer team worked with the students for the last time before our departure. Although we had a brief opportunity to know them, the bonds we formed were forged for a lifetime. Many expressed the hope and desire to come together again and to continue the work that we started.

The final days of our "Footsteps" experience were spent in Guadalajara. We stayed in the comfort of a retirement home for the Religious of the Sacred Heart at Casa Grande. When we arrived, we had the chance to hear from more than 20 religious, as they shared stories of their life's work in the Society. Many had more than 40 years in the Society, and one had been a religious for more than 70 years. They spoke about their commitment to justice and peace for the people of Mexico. Many were involved in the education process at the Sacred Heart schools in Mexico, and they spoke about their love and passion for missionary work. The following morning, we joined the nuns for Sunday Mass. We prayed together and dined with them, all the time in awe of their dedication and love of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

Some may believe that 11 days in Mexico is too short a time to transform the mind and spirit of 10 educators. To the person, each of the 10 admits that this change has taken place. A very wise person once told me that in order to hear the cry of the poor and embrace the mission of the Sacred Heart, one's heart must be broken. During this experience our hearts were broken.

There is still much work that needs to be done in Mexico. Our hope is that this experience was just the beginning of a long and fruitful relationship between Convent of the Sacred Heart and the religious of the Sacred Heart working in Mexico. In Philippine's words: "Humility is the virtue that requires the greatest amount of effort." It is this humility that we hope to share with students, parents and other faculty and staff whom we work with on a daily basis.

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*Follow –Up:*

*There is much work that still needs to be done in Mexico and in other developing countries. If you are interested in participating in the planning or would like to participate in a similar experience please contact Andrew Byrne, dean of faculty, at [byrnea@cshgreenwich.org](mailto:byrnea@cshgreenwich.org) or (203) 532 – 3598. If you are interested in donating resources to help the Religious of the Sacred Heart in Mexico, please contact Reyna Gonzalez rscj, at [Reynaglezv@gmail.com](mailto:Reynaglezv@gmail.com).*