



# *Overseas Update*

**A Report on our Overseas Ministries  
Number 27**

**October 2010**

## **25 Years of Ministry in South Africa**

The 25 years of IHM ministry in South Africa were remembered on Oct. 11, 2010 by the congregation of Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary at their Motherhouse in Monroe, Mich., and in Howick, South Africa. In 1985 four IHM Sisters were missioned to Howick, KwaZulu-Natal, at the invitation of the Redemptorist regional superior, Kevin Dowling, CSSR, and Denis Hurley OMI, Archbishop of Durban. The sisters began ministry at St. Joseph Parish, Howick; St. Anne Parish, Mpophomeni; and at St. Joseph's Scholasticate, Cedara.

In all, 11 sisters have served in South Africa: Ann Aseltyne, Annette Boyle, Judy Coyle, Marie-Esther Haflett, Eileen Karrer, Mary Kinney, Joan Mumaw, Peg O'Shea, Sue Rakoczy, Rita Rennell and Annette St. Amour. Their ministries have taken them to Bethlehem, Cape Town, Cedara, Durban, Howick, Johannesburg, Kokstad, Mankwe and Mpophomeni.

Their service has included pastoral ministry, opening of preschools, building of churches, coordination of improvement programs in teaching and learning in farm schools, college teaching (mathematics), theological education (including supervision of advanced degrees, as well as theology, spirituality, liturgy courses), spiritual direction, service on Boards, publication of books and articles, outreach to street children/orphans and children/adults infected and affected by HIV/AIDS, sewing classes, women's issues, nursing, catechetical coordination for the Archdiocese of Durban, coordination of fundraising for the Catholic Institute of Education, and networking with

many ecumenical projects, including uMngeni AIDS Centre, Masibumbane, Khazimula Children's Project and CHUMA (Children of the uMngeni Area).

A celebration was also held at St. Joseph's Theological Institute on Oct. 5 and another is planned in Johannesburg on Nov. 27.

The sisters came to South Africa to serve, but their experience of 25 years continues to transform them! The IHM Sisters invite you to share their gratitude on this special anniversary by donating food or funds to the poor.

*Peg O'Shea, IHM*

## **2010 – 25 years of IHM presence in Juárez**

With much sadness, suffering and confusion, we are “celebrating” the anniversaries of the 200 years of the independence of Mexico and the 100 years of the Mexican Revolution. The current situation is one of violence, insecurity, the economic crisis which Mexico and especially Juárez have been experiencing during these last three years.

Juárez is becoming a ghost city with a large number of businesses closed because of threats; thousands of families who have fled the city (for the United States or returning south to their hometowns); a high number of kidnappings for ransoms; the killings of men, women and children (more than 5,500 in three years) resulting in families without a father or mother; grandparents who are bringing up the more than 16,000 orphans; and a climate of fear, anxiety and powerlessness reigning in the city.

Also, many youth are without the means to study and are unable to find work. Some participate in the drug trade because of threats to their families' lives. Other youth see the traffic in drugs as the only option to survive economically.

Despite this terrible reality of terror, violence and death, we IHMs see signs of hope in the people of Juárez: the groups of youth who serve as coordinators of confirmation courses for other young people; the protest march of the doctors of the city demanding safety and justice for health service to Juárez; and motivating others to unite for security in the city, decent jobs, education, etc.

We also share hope with other groups who are organizing in Juárez such as lawyers, journalists, human rights groups and ecclesial base communities. In our pastoral presence we experience the solidarity of people who share the grief and suffering of families who have lost a family member through violence.

“Three days ago a young mother of three children – 6, 5, and 3 years old – was killed. The grandparents now are responsible for their three grandchildren and have decided to flee the city, leaving behind a home, possessions and a network of friends and neighbors, returning to their hometown to begin

again from nothing.”

The presence of the Church is more visible in the base communities, the people who struggle to unite, survive and support each other from their own need.

After 25 years of IHM presence in Mexico we desire to continue serving and accompanying the people of Juárez in solidarity with them in their search for paths of hope, peace and redemption. We pray: “*Que en Cristo, Nuestra Paz - México Tenga Vida Digna*” – That in Christ, Our Peace - México May Live With Dignity” – (Pastoral Letter- Bishops of Mexico 2010)

*Carmen Armenta-Lara, IHM, Maria Antonia Aranda Diaz, IHM, Maureen Kelly, IHM, Julie Slowik, IHM*

## **25 Years in South Africa: A Personal Reflection**

The invitation to consider ministry with the Redemptorists in South Africa came from Sister Mary Jo Maher, IHM, then vice-provincial of overseas missions. I recall at the time telling her two things: 1) I never thought of myself as a missionary, and 2) I can’t imagine a further place in the entire world than South Africa! I left the next day for Pagani Center and my annual retreat, in retrospect a rather dangerous move.

The retreat began with a meditation on the day’s Gospel of the call of the rich young man, but I found myself, not in the place of that fellow, but among the disciples surrounding Christ. Meditating then on Matthew’s missionary discourse (just in case there might be something there!), from hour to hour the retreat progressed until, *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, decision and desire became one. And that “farthest place in the entire world” possessed me.

Our initial preparations and discernments took two years, with Sisters Eileen Karrer, Annette St. Amour, Annette Boyle and myself now forming the final four. The level of violence in the country on the eve of our departure almost put paid to the entire venture, but the call and desire never wavered. I found the village of Howick where we finally arrived not unlike the city of Coldwater where I had spent five years wandering in a ministerial desert, somewhere between the clarity of classroom teaching and whatever it was that was to come next. Howick, South Africa was that “next.”

The initial years were very difficult. The parish, though integrated by dint of local circumstance, was hardly so in mind or heart. Absorbing the diverse cultures and constantly moving between the divisions was both a psychic and physical requirement, in what one IHM visitor described as “the most complex society I’ve ever experienced.” But the word of God sustained us, and the eventual surrender of the apartheid government, the release of Nelson Mandela and the first free elections were incommunicable experiences, perhaps somewhat akin to America’s election of Barak Obama!

Eventually our work extended beyond the small town of Howick, to Cedara, Mpophomeni, Elandskop, Kokstad, Bergville, Mankwe, Durban and Johannesburg. And it also moved beyond the first four sisters, with seven other IHMs coming in their turns to serve in South Africa. Until now,

25 years later, we are once again four. Recently a Franciscan priest hearing we were going to celebrate this jubilee remarked. “for such a small number, you IHMs have certainly made a contribution.”

In retrospect, however, we acknowledge that this work, this mission has only been possible because of the IHM congregation, because of the missionary discourse which flows through its veins and because of the generosity and unfailing support of its members.

This work, too, will one day come to an end. Hopefully the Church will be enriched for our having been here; indubitably we IHMs have been.

*Judith Coyle, IHM*

## **Being in the Land and Milieu of Jesus**

During the month of July, I participated in the Bat Kol Institute of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem. The program offered presentations by 24 different Jewish and Christian scholars on themes in the book of Deuteronomy and the Gospels inviting us to live into the Bat Kol mantra, “We will hear and we will do” (Deut.5:27).

My interest in this program began three years ago at the recommendation of our local Catholic Bible Foundation staff with whom I collaborate in catechetical ministry. It stemmed from work with the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd for 9-12 year olds, where children enter into a “rabbinical method of studying scripture.” I had participated in a workshop held in Durban given by a staff member of the Bat Kol Institute and was quite eager to understand this method better.

Prior to going to Israel, participants, with the help of a CD and books, learned the Hebrew alphabet and did readings on Catholic-Jewish dialogue stemming from the Vatican II document *Nostra Aetate*. The month was incredibly rich with a variety of experiences especially in Jerusalem, but extending to three days in Galilee, a day in the West Bank towns of Bethlehem and Hebron and a weekend in the desert wilderness near Beersheba, beginning with a visit to the Qumran caves and a swim and mud bath in the Dead Sea.

A particularly meaningful interaction was with two women, one Palestinian, one Jewish, from a group called *The Parents’ Circle*. They spoke to us about their efforts to witness together to as many groups as possible about their common pain of losing a family member in the “war” and pleading with Jewish and Palestinians to end the violence. Both sides needed to see each other as real people who desire the same thing: to protect their families and live in peace. This movement is making an impact on people and swelling the ranks of those crying for negotiations and peace. The experience of these women and the whole struggle resonated deeply with the experience of the South African struggle and the deep longing for peace in a land of violence prior to the 1994 South African elections.

The intensity of the month's activities left little time for reflection until the end. I kept asking why I was really here, deeper than the wonderful opportunity to be enriched. On my last day, while resting from a long hot walk to and from a Sunday liturgy at the École Biblique, I was aware that exactly 28 years ago, during a course on the Gospel of Mark, based in Ain Karem, while walking in the streets of Jerusalem, I received the insight that life was about "going to Jerusalem" as Jesus did, and knew I was called to something more. Where was that Jerusalem that I was being called to?

In time, with prayer and discernment I began to see that "Jerusalem" for me was a call to ministry and life in South Africa. It happens to be exactly 25 years that I have been part of IHM ministry in South Africa and maybe this journey to Israel was a gift celebrating those years and a deeper stimulus to offer those with whom we minister the rich biblical spirituality we have been fortunate enough to experience through the blessings of our IHM community.

*Annette St. Amour, IHM*

## **Reflections from Puerto Rico**

"With Jesus we share the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of all our sisters and brothers in the human family..." (*IHM Constitutions* #10)

In Africa, in Juárez and in Puerto Rico, we IHMs share directly in the "...joys, hopes, grief and anguish..." of so many. Each country's story is colored by the local reality.

Here in Puerto Rico, the situation is critical in terms of the political, economic and social reality. Each day decisions are made which directly (and often, adversely) affect the lives of the people. However, we also rejoice in the commitment of many who are dedicated to the transformation of society, and to the empowerment of the people to bring about this transformation.

According to a recent study, in this country 60 percent of the population lives below the established poverty level, and the unemployment rate in the private as well as the public sector continues to increase. The utility rates of the majority of the population grow while casinos, hotels, etc. are exempt. Public institutions (such as education, social and medical services) are being privatized, institutions which have guaranteed these services in the past.

Many of these policies are due to legislation being passed without the necessary studies, public hearings, etc. The opposing party (minority) claims that they receive the documents without the time to study them. Meanwhile, the legislators propose to raise their own salaries, diets, transportation, etc.

Public safety is a growing problem in a population that has very ineffective arms control. Violence is growing daily. There are a large number of assassinations, even of children. Domestic violence and sexual abuse are captured in the news daily, affecting not only the young, but the elderly as well.

However, in this paradigm, there are signs of hope. Groups and new movements are forming to respond to these realities. We rejoice in the efforts of many who are committed to the transformation of society and the empowerment of the poor and oppressed.

Organizations, such as the Center for Puerto Rico, promote social change beyond political considerations to empower the poor to affect change in their lives. A doctor, Dr. Vargas Vidot, administers integrated health care in the streets to the homeless, offering alternatives to addiction and toward rehabilitation. Organizations of leaders from diverse sectors of society meet to find sustainable alternatives to the common socio-economic problems facing us in this new century. There is an increased commitment by volunteers to respond to the many needs which confront us today. Efforts are being made on the grass-roots level to encourage urban gardening. One also observes a growing consciousness of recycling and preservation of the quality of our environment.

This is the reality of our times in Puerto Rico – the joys, hopes, grief and anguish that we IHMs share with all our sisters and brothers in *this* part of the cosmic family.

*Janet Hill, IHM*

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