

A Beacon of Hope on the Border

By Fr. Edwin L. Gros, S.J., Pastor, Sacred Heart Parish, El Paso, Texas

In my three years as Pastor of Sacred Heart, last year, 2009, was especially challenging, both because of the acute economic crisis felt around the globe, as well as the horrible violence which has exploded in our sister city across the border, Ciudad Juárez, where the major Mexican drug cartels are caught up in a bloody turf war that results in 10 to 15 violent deaths each day. Juárez is now one of the most dangerous cities in the world, much more so than Baghdad. And our parish is located three blocks from the major pedestrian bridge linking us together.

El Paso has increased in population by an estimated 30,000 people in the past 12 months—many fleeing the violence, and many looking for better employment than that offered by the super abundant maquilas or sweatshops in Juárez. As a result, we have seen increased numbers here at Sacred Heart, both in church attendance as well as in visits to our Pastoral Center, where we receive countless requests for financial aid to pay utilities and rent, or just to buy food. We have two Jesuit Volunteers who work in our Pastoral Center, along with three paid staff and a handful of very generous volunteers from the city. Because of the increased number of requests for financial assistance, our pastoral office, especially through the work of our Jesuit Volunteers, has secured some new grant money so as to make more funds available to help families.

Our Centro Pastoral offers direct help through our food pantry, as well as through a program for helping people either find a job or be better prepared to land one. This job-seeking program has undergone some development in the face of the recent economic crisis. Since jobs are even scarcer than before, we have decided to change the focus of the program. We now call it “*capacitación laboral*”, which helps people become better prepared to navigate the waters of the job search market by teaching participants how to write resumes, dress and present

themselves for job interviews, and maintain positive attitudes throughout the search. Since we couldn’t always find jobs for the clients, we decided at least we could help to better equip them to find jobs themselves.

We have an adult education program at Sacred Heart called La Plaza Comunitaria, which helps over 300 adult students each semester with classes in ESL, GED on the primary and secondary level, citizenship in Spanish and in English, and Computer Literacy—a class that helps adults learn basic computer skills. The teaching force for La Plaza Comunitaria is all volunteer.

The Church operates a restaurant on the weekends that helps provide jobs, as well as good food at reasonable prices. The restaurant also provides many free meals to people who are in need.

On Wednesday evenings we have a program for children and their families. This provides a wholesome alternative to roaming the streets. In this program we offer faith formation, physical activities, and a time to socialize.

Our Church also has a home for women called Villa Maria. Located two blocks from the Church, Villa Maria provides shelter for 22 women who need a place to stay for a short period of time while they are getting on their feet or simply recovering from traumatic events in their lives. Two Sisters of Loretto work full time at this house giving loving attention to the residents.

There are a number of other Catholic and non-profit centers near Sacred Heart that also reach out to immigrants in need, including a center for migrant farm workers, Annunciation House rescue mission, the Opportunity Center, and the Centro Mujeres de Esperanza. Needless to say, all of these facilities, just like Sacred Heart Church, are run on shoestring budgets and many are staffed fully by volunteers.



Sacred Heart Church, El Paso, Texas
Three blocks from the border

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Fr. Gros blesses parishioners after Mass.



Exterior view of Sacred Heart's tortilleria.



Interior view of tortilleria.

Despite all of the programs we offer, there are still many more needs than we can handle. But we always try to give something—whether it is just a small part of what a person is requesting or just a caring human heart to listen to their stories. We believe that a gesture to relieve their pain and stress will let a suffering pilgrim know that the church cares and wants to give them hope and encouragement.

Immigrants are facing unprecedented hostility these days, something that was never envisioned by our founding fathers and mothers. It seems that, today, the statue of Liberty should read instead: “If you are tired, poor, or huddled masses yearning to breathe free, homeless, or tempest-tossed people: you need to go elsewhere.” Here at Sacred Heart Parish, we try to be true to the welcoming spirit upon which our nation was founded. In this way we are truly patriotic.

As pastor, I have had to take bold, public stands to challenge city planners, reminding them that revitalizing Downtown El Paso as well as our neighborhood, el Segundo Barrio, can easily displace thousands of powerless, undocumented people—our parishioners. I believe that we as church have managed to maintain the people’s trust and confidence because they have seen us stand up for them and call for their just treatment.

Sacred Heart Church is the first stop for many of the 20,000 people who cross the Santa Fe Bridge into El Paso. They walk those three blocks and stop to pray before a statue of Our Lady of Guadalupe outside the church. I am always reminded that the Church is THE beacon of hope for most Mexican people. This makes us so much more than just a social agency. They look to us to preach and live the Gospel, and to give them a safe haven to gather with their families, in a loving community, in a FAITH community. Unless one understands the high regard the Mexican people have for the church, as well as the centrality of faith in their lives, one will never totally capture the mission of Sacred Heart Church.

In our mission statement we say:

We strive to build the Reign of God as we implement a pastoral program that seeks to evangelize in a complete and comprehensive way. Our ultimate goal is the formation and education of the whole human person: body, mind and spirit.

We believe that the Society of Jesus, or Jesuit order, calls us to minister on all these levels, and that all Jesuit institutions need to ask themselves what they are doing to address the needs of the poor and marginalized members of our society.

That being said, everything we do to help people is ultimately grounded in the proclamation of the Reign of God. And in a world so full of despair, we believe our mission to be a Beacon of Hope for all those who come to our doorstep.

SEE: Jesuit Conference website on Social Research and Analysis at <http://www.jesuit.org/index.php/main/jesuits-worldwide/social-justice/what-do-we-do/social-research-and-analysis/> and its section on serving inner-city populations.