



ENCOUNTER

Catholic laity on mission – everywhere

September 2020

Welcome to Encounter!

Mission invites us to embrace diverse cultures by reaching out and going with others who are not like us. Leanne and John Bergford have shown how to do mission at home and abroad. They are wonderful examples on how mission both changes us and helps the communities around us. What does mission at home look like for you? What does mission abroad look like to you? While Leanne and John had to cancel this fall trip they are still missioning at home. Last month we had our membership meeting and Sr Nancy Schramm, OSF, the president of U.S. Catholic Mission Association addressed the members with a beautiful reflection we would like to share with everyone. How can USCMA and you at home contribute to the transformation of a reality so extreme in its challenges?

The Seeds of Mission, at Home and Far Away

Olympia, Washington, is more than 1,700 miles from the sister cities of El Paso, Texas, and Ciudad Juárez, Mexico. But distance means very little to people on mission, who know you can be on mission across the world, the country or just across town.

In 1978, Leanne and John Bergford were a young married couple with four children and a desire to be of service to the church. At a conference in Olympia, John met the late Fr. Rick Thomas, a Jesuit priest who had been serving the colonia (neighborhood) surrounding the garbage dump in Juárez. The Holy Spirit Center, near the dump, was the site in 1972 of what many call the Christmas miracle, when food prepared that day for 150 people served more than 300.

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Fr. Rick needed help locating and drilling a well, and with a background in geology, John believed he could be of assistance.

“Our first four kids were all little, so we figured we either do it now or wait until later,” he says. The family moved to El Paso and, John recalls, “that kind of got us hooked.”



The Bergfords remained on the border for a year before returning to Olympia, where their family eventually grew to nine children. During those years, John worked and was an active volunteer at their parish, St. Michael's, becoming a deacon. Leanne was engaged with a house full of kids, but also earned a master's degree in education with additional studies in theology and spent time teaching and serving as the parish's steward for faith formation.

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“That's called mission at home,” she jokes. It would be about 20 years before they returned to the border, “but we didn't lose the connection,” says John.

In 1999, John began joining parish mission trips for teenagers to Tijuana. The experience of the other chaparrones struck a chord with him. “What I witnessed was also the transformation of the parents,” he says, “and I thought, this shouldn’t just be for the young people.”

The following year, he and Leanne returned to El Paso and Juárez for what would be the first of many parish mission trips there—at least two per year, and sometimes three or four, lasting seven days. Close to 700 parishioners have taken part.

“There is a beautiful community of people who live in that colonia who serve their neighbors in so many different ways. And our privilege has been to bring people from middle-class America to be with and serve with people at the center,” says Leanne. “The center has had a tremendous effect for peace and justice in the neighborhood and in the lives of those who have experienced short-term mission immersion there.”

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And what of that transformation that John saw during that long-ago trip to Tijuana? “I can see it in the people’s eyes when they go on trips, and they’re so excited about meeting people,” he says. “It’s holy ground there. It’s our eyes being open to it. That’s our journey. That’s the journey of the heart.”

Most of those folks remain engaged in the Olympia community once they return—doing what Leanne still calls “mission at home.” Whether it’s at a homeless shelter, soup kitchen, in detention ministry, or setting up a clothing bank, “many of those people started in mission abroad and then discovered that they’re called to continue the same work at home.”

Pat McCarty has joined the mission to El Paso/Juárez several times. He’s active at St. Michael’s when he isn’t traveling to the border. The trips have touched him deeply.

“loving people that you encounter along the way”

“It’s a very spiritual experience, both from the standpoint of the loving people that you encounter along the way, which includes the children at the Holy

Spirit Center, but more so the people who volunteer there,” he says. “The heart that those people have for the kids is amazing.”

Because of the pandemic, the spring trip to El Paso/Juárez was cancelled, and just recently, the fall trip was, as well, but the Bergfords remain busy, missioning at home.

“God helps us to see God’s people everywhere”

“God helps us to see God’s people everywhere, and we’re called to really live our baptismal promises in a vibrant, active way,” says Leanne. “And the impetus for that, the seeds for many people, have been planted in their mission experience.”



For more information on Saint Michael Parish email office@saintmichaelparish.org or website <https://saintmichaelparish.org/>.

For more information on The Holy Spirit Center email HandsForChrostMinistry@hotmail.com or visit their website <http://www.handsforchristministry.org/home.html>

Article by Julie Bourbon, ENCOUNTER Editor

Getting Our Hands Dirty with the Work of Compassion

Sister Nancy Roberta Schramm, OSF

Essential to the life of any organization is contemplative time to reflect on mission: what is the spirit that moves us to be members of the USCMA and, of course, what is ours to do?

I need not repeat all of the challenges that we are facing because of these pandemic times. These past six months have changed all of us and our way of being in so many

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ways. We continue to pray for the many victims of Covid-19 and grow more fearful as the winter flu season quickly approaches. The political and social arenas for us as Americans and for the world are the most difficult ones that I have known. Deep wounds and grave evils in our society have shown their faces again and again, especially with the senseless murders of so many people of color; as they continue to occur, it is

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incomprehensible to our Christian hearts and minds. Our hearts also cry in solidarity with the people who have lost everything because of natural disasters, from the terrible hurricanes in the East to the unstoppable fires in the West.

This is our world of today. This is the world that USCMA must respond to and reach out to in order to be the presence of God’s love as we live the mission entrusted to us. Do you feel as overwhelmed as I do right now? Does the present reality seem to be beyond our capability to contribute a meaningful response?

I seek my inspiration for these questions from one of Pope Francis’ most recent talks, given September 12 to 250 members of the *Laudato Si’* communities who were meeting in Rome. Francis uses two very important words, which I believe are in the hearts of every missionary that I have known, including in my own heart: contemplation and compassion. These are



intrinsically part of our mission; as we contemplate our reality, the pains and struggles of all peoples, we grow in compassion and thus become co-creators of a new reality.

Robin Gomes, who writes for the *Vatican News*, summarized the Pope’s words:

Contemplation requires silence and prayer so that harmony, which is a healthy balance between head, heart and hands, or between thought, feeling and action, returns to the soul. Those who contemplate discover the tenderness of God’s gaze and that each one is important in the eyes of God. Each one can transform a little world polluted by human voracity into the good reality willed by the Creator. Those who contemplate, do not remain with their hands in their pockets, but instead find something tangible to do.

I see each one of us and the USCMA as embracing contemplation as a way to fulfill our mission. Through silence and prayer, a harmony is restored within us, one that does not allow us to simply lament the obvious wrongs while waiting for others to do something. Through contemplation, we discover the tenderness of God’s gaze, God’s love, and we are compelled to bring that love to others. That is our mission—not to remain with our hands in our pockets, but to do something tangible. We are compelled and strengthened by our own experience of God’s love to embrace actions that seek transformation of our world as willed by the Creator.

The second key word is compassion. Robin Gomes continues with the summary:

The fruit of contemplation, Pope Francis said, is compassion. We become compassionate when we see with the eyes of God and regard others as brothers and sisters of a single family living in the same house. God's compassion is the opposite of our indifference and it is the best vaccine against the epidemic of indifference. The Pope said the world needs this "creative and active charity from people who do not stay in front of a screen making comments, but who are willing to get their hands dirty to remove degradation and restore dignity." Having compassion is "choosing not to have any enemies" but to "see everyone as a neighbor." How hard that is, especially today.

"see everyone as a neighbor"

Seeing everyone as neighbor can break the pandemic of indifference. And again, we ask ourselves: How can the USCMA contribute to the transformation of a reality so extreme in its challenges? One thing I do know is that we need all of you, each member, to join us—the national board and the executive director—to develop

actions that can make a difference. We cannot give excuses as did those who hurried past the beaten man who was robbed, but we must be like the Good Samaritan who bathed the man, found him a place to recover, left money to sustain this recovery and then promised to return to pay for anything that was needed. My mind and heart are moved by the symbolism of each of those Gospel lines in the parable and what they could mean to us as members of the USCMA and as individuals.

Let us call each other to collective action, not standing on the wayside with hands in pockets but getting our hands dirty, so that they become hands of compassion and transformation.

Thank you for being part of the USCMA and God bless you for giving your life to promote life, all life.

Sister Nancy Roberta Schramm, OSF, is the president of the U.S. Catholic Mission Association. This piece is adapted from her address to membership at the annual meeting, held virtually on September 17,



USCMA Happenings

•**Occasional Paper** | "Understanding the Rhetoric of Covid Conspiracy Theories" By Fr Chris Saenz. You can find it on our [website](#).

•**Integration– A New Video Resource** | November 11, 2020, this video resource is from the third wave of mission. This introductory webinar will introduce the resource, how it can be used, and who can support you. The webinar is at 2 pm ET.

•**Catholic & Citizen– A post 2020 Election Dialogue** | November 12th, 2020. An open meeting to explore what we saw, how we understand it and discern next steps. The meeting is at 1 pm ET.

•**Fratelli Tutti and the Mission of Social Friendship** | On Nov. 19th, 26th, Dec. 3rd and 10th. A four part study session on Pope Francis's newest Encyclical. The series will meet for consecutive Thursdays at 1 pm ET.

•**Books Reviewed** *Engaging Our Diversity: Interculturality and Consecrated Life Today*, Maria Cimperman, RSCJ, and Roger P. Schroeder, SVD, editors, Oribis Books, Maryknoll, NY, 2020, 246 pp. Reviewed by Fr John Burger, SSC, you can find his review on the [website](#)

•**Solidarity with the Church of El Paso** | Join USCMA on November 7, 2020. . The 2020 Border Mass. Save the date. Live streaming of the Mass will be available. USCMA will provide the link, and resource material, so the church can accompany our sisters and brothers who are seeking a better life for their families.

•**Books for Review** | USCMA receives complimentary books about missiology, theology, and spirituality for review. Our feature book for October is *Moral Leadership: Integrity, Courage, Imagination*, by Robert Michael Franklin. For this book or a current listing, [email](#) Airianna Beitler, USCMA Communication and Publication Associate.

The United States Catholic Mission Association is a national alliance of individuals and organizations committed to the mission Jesus entrusted to his Church. Through its members and services USCMA animates missionaries, prepares them for mission, accompanies them through mission, and form them for leadership. ENCOUNTER is made possible in part, by a grant from [Catholic Communication Campaign](#). You build bridges of global solidarity by supporting USCMA. Donate at [uscatholicmission.org](#). Copyright 2020.



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