

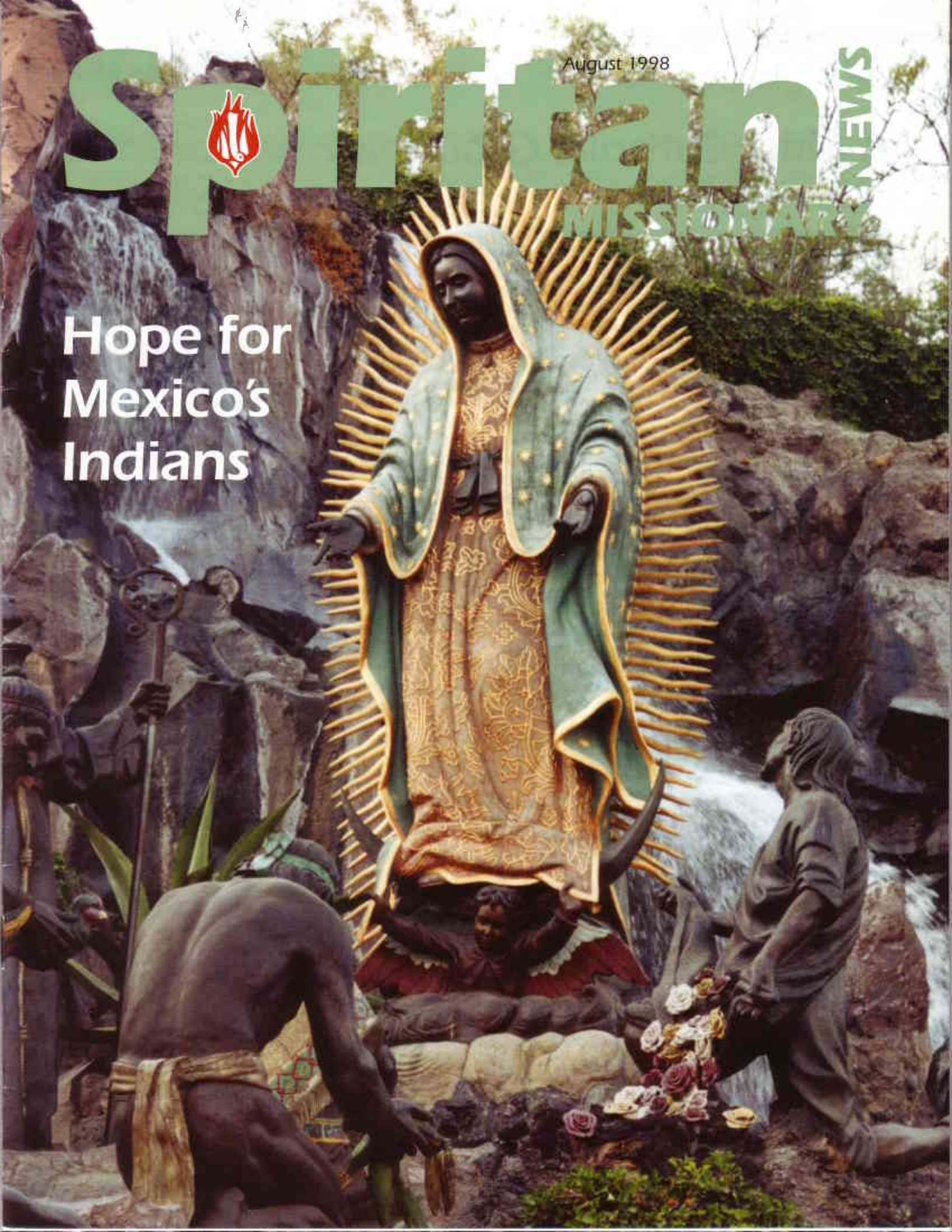
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Hope for
Mexico's
Indians



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A Most Catholic Group

Our Catholic Church is alive on all five continents as it prepares to celebrate its two thousandth birthday. Widespread — yes, but how all-embracing, how all-inclusive of the whole human experience, how catholic are we? We believe in God — Father, Son and Holy Spirit — a God who is Trinity. A God who says: together we are one. We become a church true to our name to the extent that we are in the image of our God, not only tolerating unity in diversity, but respecting, valuing and nurturing that very diversity. This spring at the Synod of Bishops for Asia our Church was challenged to be Asian as well as European in its approach, in its prayer, its liturgy, its theology, its language and its ways of thinking. Whenever we resist that challenge, whenever we confuse unity with uniformity, we are neither sufficiently trinitarian nor sufficiently catholic.

International in makeup, the Spiritans in Mexico have struggled to be inclusive. It has not been easy to make room for everyone. It has meant enlarging the circle to encompass eleven different nationalities within a group of eighteen men, respecting several different theologies, incorporating the established ways of the pioneers and the ideas of the more recent arrivals. But the fact that there is no one dominant group, that all have had to struggle to learn Spanish, and above all the decision to open their membership to Nahuatl and Huastecan Spiritans have made them perhaps the most catholic group of Spiritans in the world.

Twofold conversion

They refuse to stay in their town churches, inviting the indigenous people in the surrounding hills to come to them. They go out among them, eat and stay with them, celebrate and pray with them, and have begun to speak their own native languages. They have been open to conversion, not only to converting the Indians to Catholic Christianity, but allowing themselves to be converted by these deeply religious people.

Their present leader, Christian Choquereau, grew up in northern France as a militant Young Christian Worker. When he came to Mexico in 1988 he found pilgrimages and candles, incense and rosaries very popular among the Mestizos. "I was tempted to dismiss it all as too devotional," he says. "But it gives people an incredible strength. It's not opium. In life's difficult moments those who draw from this faith have been able to keep going. Over the years when the sacraments and rituals of the church were outlawed, the Holy Spirit was there creating this popular religion."

One is reminded of what was written at the last General Chapter of the Spiritans held in Itaici, Brazil in 1992: "The missionary believes that the Holy Spirit is present long before he himself arrives in a place. Certainly he is the herald of the Good News, but the people he meets, in their turn, reveal to him aspects of the Gospel he carries that he had not fully appreciated before. But this realization cannot take place without a permanent conversion on the part of the missionary."

A "catholic" church is taking shape in the north east of Mexico — a church that has much to contribute to the wider Mexican church, a church that embodies how close God is to daily life. This Spirit-led church looks forward to the day when the young indigenous Spiritans they are now forming will bring the gospel to their own people and bring to others their people's wisdom and communion with God.

Worldwide, in regions such as this, the Catholic Church of the next one thousand years is coming to birth.

Patrick Fitzpatrick CSSP

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Unbind the Spirit

Deirdre McLoughlin

In Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* we observe the interaction between the dying pilot and the woman, who because of unlikely circumstances, becomes his nurse. As the story unfolds one becomes aware of something amazing happening. Despite his physical suffering from terrible burns the airman, in his dying, helps call to life and unbind the spirit of the woman who is spiritually and emotionally dead. She in turn, in ministering compassionately to his needs, helps him live into his dying. It is a dramatic example of how we as human beings can call forth life and freedom in one another.

This story brings to mind the raising of Lazarus (John 11:1-43). Jesus responding to the pleas of Martha and Mary, raises their brother from the dead. Martha assures Jesus that she knows Lazarus will rise on the last day, but that she has faith and hope that Jesus will bring her beloved brother back to life immediately, even though he has been dead for four days. Jesus, troubled and moved to tears at his friend's grief, orders the stone to be rolled back from the tomb and calls to the dead man to come out. He does, but is bound from head to toe by linen strips. Jesus commands the sisters and friends to untie the bandages and let him go free. It is in their hands to do this, strip by strip, to release him gradually from bondage.

In Nigeria

Many years ago in Nigeria I was involved in a crèche for orphaned and abandoned infants. I watched as, despite being well cared for, baby after baby died. This caused the care givers inordinate distress and grief. I witnessed the sister in charge becoming more and more upset. She wept and grieved but insisted there had to be a key to stopping the deaths and that God would help us find it. She was a woman of faith and hope and prayed often.

One morning Sister Marie arrived at the crèche looking less tense and sad but very determined — "We feed them, change them, make sure their cribs have fresh linen. We keep the crèche spotless but we have missed the essentials. The babies are bound in their cribs! We must cuddle them, hold them, play, stimulate or sing to them. How can they know that they are lovable and that we love them? This has to change!"

From that day anyone, staff, volunteer or friend who had a spare minute spent time holding, talking to and playing with the little ones, and they began to thrive, all of them, even the weakest. Imagine the joy when

Peter the eldest celebrated his first birthday, now a healthy sunny little boy with huge sparkling eyes.

In El Salvador

Years later I met a child in El Salvador. His eyes, unlike Peter's, were without expression and dead. He was about eight years old, a street child, a victim of the war. He was a modern day Oliver Twist who worked long hours selling chewing gum and candies. He came to our table in the restaurant at ten o'clock at night. His lifeless face and the sadness and weariness emanating from him haunts me to this day. He needed love, but instead he had a gang leader, a quota to meet and a hovel for a home. I could not eat my dinner as I realized there was nothing I could do except pray and I have done that every day since. My prayer is that someone will intervene, call him to freedom and unbind his spirit with love.

Like Martha and Mary, we too are called to have faith, and many times in our lives to reach out in hope and love to a fellow traveller, help unbind them and lighten their load. ☪

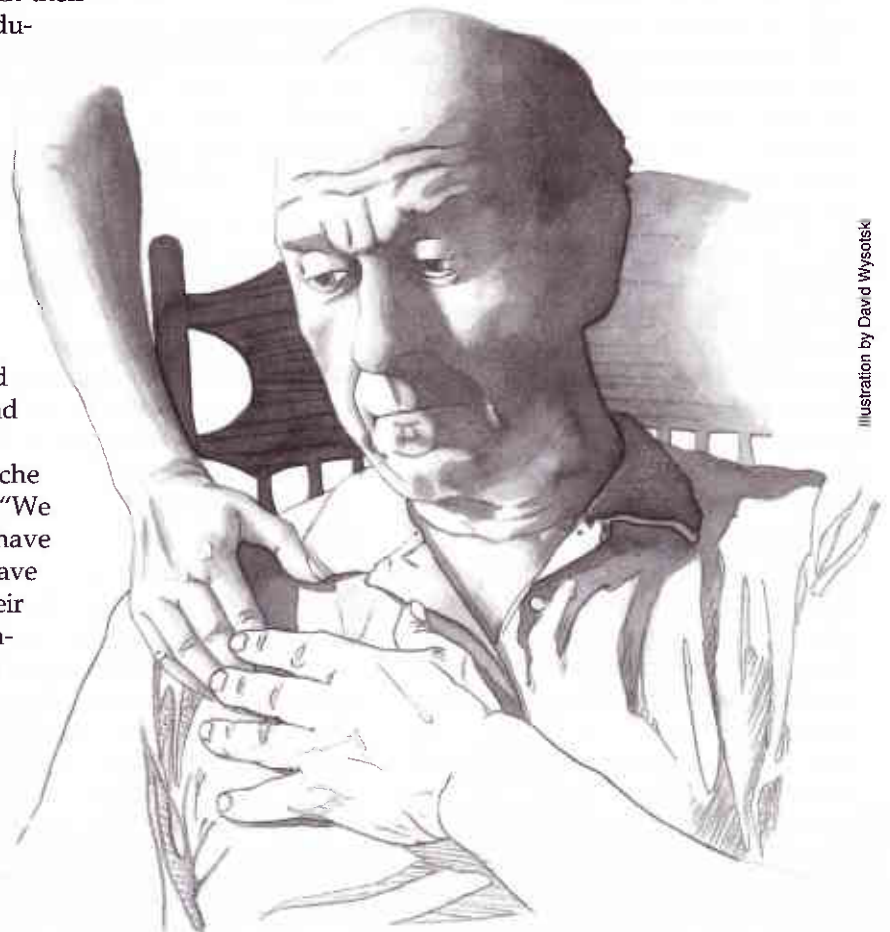


Illustration by David Wysocki

Our Journey of Discovery



The idea of devoting an issue of the *Spiritan Missionary News* to the Spiritan missions in Mexico was first discussed by the co-editors of the magazine in 1996, the twenty-fifth anniversary of this endeavour. We know that this project will be of interest to our readers for a variety of reasons. One reason is that the team which serves in this mission field is the first truly international venture of the Congregation. Priests and seminarians from Trinidad, U.S.A., France, Ireland, Poland, and Portugal work side by side to minister to the indigenous people of the Sierra Madre region. Because of the woeful economic plight of the people they serve, much of their efforts and energies are spent in projects which help the people involved to support themselves and their children. A considerable portion of the funds needed to initiate these projects is supplied by the Canadian Spiritans and their benefactors. Another reason is that the NAFTA free trade agreement between our two countries, Canada and Mexico, has made our economies more closely interdependent.

But the determining factor in our decision to visit our Mexican missions and write about them was the fact that for the past two years the plight of the Indians in the state of Chiapas, and the sufferings they endure at the hands of the civil authorities, have been in our newspapers and on our TV screens on a daily basis. How were the Indians in the state of San Luis Potosí faring, we wondered.

Mexico City, the Capital

So in the the spring of this year, the co-editors found themselves stepping off a plane in the airport of Mexico City into the thin, polluted air of one of the largest cities on earth. Its estimated size is over 20 million people. The airport was very modern and wonderfully efficient and as Christian Choquereau, the coordinator of our Mexican missions, drove us to our hotel we saw how luxury and poverty live cheek to jowl in Mexico. The grandeur of beautiful civic and ecclesiastic buildings of the Spanish era, and of the modern office towers and public monuments contrasted with the plight of the Indians we saw beg-

ging or working as street vendors.

In three days Christian gave us the grand tour of the city. We visited the Palacio de Bellas Artes, the magnificent Cathedral built by the Spanish in the centre of the Inca capital, the remains of Tenochtitlan exposed in new excavations, the wonderful museum with a separate building devoted to each of Mexico's great cultures and civilizations, the shrine of Our Lady at Guadalupe, the ruins of the magnificent Mayan city of Teotihuacán with its two giant pyramids, the home Cortez built for his son, and many beautiful old Spanish churches.

Tampico, Centre of Our Mexican Mission

Then we flew with Christian to Tampico, which is the administrative centre of the Spiritan endeavours in Mexico. Here we visited our seminary in Altamira and met the young Mexican Spiritans doing their studies and also Antonio Laranjeira CSSp, their director. The first two of them will be ordained within months. We were very impressed by their friendliness, their vision and their zeal to work for the poor and oppressed wherever their lives as Spiritans may lead them.

We spent a day with Curtis Poyer in his Parroquia Beato David Roldan Lara, a parish in a very poor sector of Tampico, dedicated to one of the many Mexican priests executed during the revolution. Curtis is assisted by Gerard County, a fellow Trinidadian, in a parish that is vibrant, joyful, and poor and in which the many young people of the area are actively involved.

Another day was spent with Christian, who, despite his administrative duties, is involved in many services and projects. He is the unofficial chaplain to a large hospital. Mexican law forbids official church involvement in any public organization. He brought us to visit a school for orphans, to a