

ORAL HISTORY OF PROJECT MEXICO CASE STUDY OF A CROSS CULTURAL ORTHODOX MISSIONARY EFFORT

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of
Master of Divinity in St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary
Crestwood, New York
April 26, 2002

Abstract

Christ compels us to "Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to all creation." (Mark 16:15) Throughout the centuries many faithful Christians have followed this command by spreading the Good News to people throughout the world. Recently, a small group of these individuals formed an organization in order to share the Gospel with suffering people in Mexico. This organization is called Project Mexico, and serves the needy within the poverty-stricken neighborhoods of Tijuana. This thesis will present certain parts of Project Mexico's history by utilizing primary data attained from interviews of its' missionaries. Essentially this thesis is an oral history project which tries to give an accurate chronological account of the major events that have occurred during the life of the organization, at the same time explore the feelings and attitudes of the missionaries who have labored for the cause. The people who were interviewed for the thesis have played a variety of roles within the organization ranging from the founder of the organization, to one of the orphan boys. Most of the data came from interviews, but still much information was gathered from board meeting minutes, journal entries and Project Mexico's board reports. By thoroughly reflecting on all the information certain conclusions were determined. First, to do any project similar to this a person needs tremendous support both spiritual and financially. Second, it is difficult to identify and recruit qualified people to work in this type of ministry. Third, running a cross-cultural missionary organization is not easy work. It pushes peoples capacities to the limit and exposes them to many different temptations such as despair, frustration, and pride, to just name a few. The fruits of this endeavor are immeasurable but the labor to cultivate this harvest has been at times unbearable. This thesis hopes to provide a small snapshot of the journey of Project Mexico so to encourage and inspire the faithful to overcome the obstacles of the world and live the Gospel by sacrificing oneself for his or her neighbor.

Preface

In writing this thesis I found much joy and inspiration. Thousands of people have been involved in making Project Mexico a success. I have only mentioned a small handful of them because of the limited length of this thesis. I pray that all those involved in this project whom I have not been mentioned will forgive me. The absence or inclusion of any person in no way is intended as a reflection on importance of the people involved. Rather it shows my need to choose which examples to use in order to communicate the issues treated in the thesis.

I lived and worked at the St. Innocent Orphanage for three years. The first year I was a single person, and the other two years was with my wife Merilynn and my son Joshua. My ministry was inspired and fueled by my loving wife, who gave me the maturity I needed in order to endure the challenges of those years. She is not mentioned extensively in this thesis but needs to be acknowledged as a major anchor in my life as a missionary for Christ and a seminarian. My experience working with Project Mexico has been both fulfilling and frustrating. In life we are given a finite amount of resources, and through God's grace we are challenged to make the most of those resources, but often the passion of frustration can be very real. Project Mexico has tried to make the most out of

the resources that they have been given, and I feel they have accomplished an incredible amount.

In writing this thesis I have tried to be as objective as possible. At times this was very difficult, especially when I started to write about the years when I was present at the Orphanage (July 9, 1996 – September 1, 1999). I am mentioned several times in that period, but only when I felt it would have been an untruth if I did not mention my involvement. Overall I believe that this thesis offers an unbiased portrayal of Project Mexico while still being an intimate account coming from a first-hand witness of events. There were several times that names and events are not provided in full in order to avoid any awkwardness to parties who might read this thesis, but I feel that despite this, the reader will get a realistic picture of what has taken place. Overall I feel this thesis accomplishes its goal of inspiring those who wish to undertake similar endeavors but at the same time gives a realistic picture of what it takes to start a cross-cultural missionary organization.

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I. Introduction

Christ proclaimed "Go, make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded." (Matt. 28:19-20) In response to this commission many faithful Christians throughout the centuries have set out to spread the Good News to people throughout the world. Recently, a small group of these individuals formed an organization in order to share the Gospel with suffering people in Mexico. This organization is called Project Mexico, and it serves the needy within the poverty-stricken neighborhoods of Tijuana. This thesis will present certain parts of Project Mexico's history by utilizing primary data attained through interviewing missionaries from Mexico. Being an oral history project, this thesis tries to give an accurate chronological account of the major events that have occurred during the life of the organization, at the same time explore the feelings and attitudes of the missionaries who have labored for the cause. The people who were interviewed for the thesis have played a variety of roles within the organization. Greg and Margaret Yova, Mary Danakas and Luis Sánchez are all currently part of the key management staff of the organization and have been the longest standing staff members of Project Mexico. Larry Hughes and Fr. Gregory Safchuk were involved with the organization from its inception but are no longer actively involved in its work. Sheff Priest started working with Project Mexico's home building in 1994 and was actively involved up until fall of 2001. Jodi Dithart worked with the orphans from early 1997 until summer of 1998. Most of the interviews took place over the phone except for the

one with Ismael, one of the orphan boys, who was interviewed in Mexico at the orphanage. Even though most of the data came from interviews, much information was still gathered from board meeting minutes, journal entries and Project Mexico's board reports.

Project Mexico began in 1988 when a young Orthodox man named Greg Yova led a group of enthusiastic Orthodox Christians to build a home in one of the impoverished neighborhoods of Tijuana, Mexico. As a result, both the Mexican family and American Orthodox Christians were showered with God's loving message. The Mexicans witnessed God's love incarnated through those self-sacrificing American volunteers, and the Americans experienced God's love through those Mexicans, who were genuinely able to love despite how little they had. In those early years, the foundation was laid for Project Mexico to be an inter-Orthodox organization that would allow over 5,000 Orthodox Christians to help needy families and abandoned teenage boys in Mexico. But establishing an Orthodox organization to help the needy was not an easy endeavor. Its organizers have been faced with many challenges, broken promises, vengeful spreading of rumors, chronic illnesses and virtual bankruptcy, any one of which could have led to the fall of the organization. But by the grace of God and a lot of hard work, Project Mexico has not only survived but prospered. This thesis will attempt to present some of the challenges and the miracles that have taken place throughout the years of the organization, in order to give a realistic picture of what is involved in spreading God's Word in a cross-cultural and cross-economic setting.

In order to understand the struggles and joys of such a missionary effort, this thesis will first look at the character and background of some of the key people involved

in this project and how they ended up with Project Mexico. This will be done by closely reflecting on the lives of four missionaries before they joined Project Mexico. The bulk of the thesis will focus on the history of the organization, being broken into several parts: the initiation of Project Mexico, the beginning of the St. Innocent Orphanage, the closing of the orphanage, the interim until the orphanage opened a second time, the second opening of the orphanage, and the most recent attempts to find long-term stability. The historical part of the thesis will focus on certain events that relay a realistic view of missionary life. The conclusion of the thesis will identify certain key issues that have dominated the life of the organization and elaborate on what can be learned through those issues. Overall the purpose of this thesis is to inspire and encourage those who wish to undertake a similar endeavor, and at the same time provide a concrete resource of *dos* and *dont's* for starting a missionary organization.

II. Where do they come from?

As stated earlier, Project Mexico is an Orthodox organization that spreads the word of God to the needy in Mexico through acts of charity. Project Mexico is the missionary umbrella organization of two separate ministries of philanthropy. One is the building of homes for Mexicans who live in horrendous conditions. The other ministry is the running of an Orthodox orphanage in Mexico for Mexican teenage boys. The establishing and running of these ministries has required a variety of skills and resources. Fortunately Project Mexico has been blessed with numerous dedicated Orthodox Christians who attended to the needs of these complex ministries. A core group has played a major role in the success of the orphanage and the home-building projects. This core group consists of Greg Yova, who is the founder and Executive Director of Project Mexico; Margaret Yova, the Associate Director, who has been with Greg during the most difficult times of the ministry's growth; Mary Danakas, the Director of Development, who has played an indispensable role in creating support for Project Mexico and developing awareness within the Orthodox community of its missionary efforts; and Luis Sanchez, the Director of the Orphanage, who has labored tirelessly in order to create a loving and stable environment in which teenage boys can grow to be young men. These four people have been crucial in the foundation of this Orthodox missionary effort, and they continue to play an essential role in its stability. They can be compared to the four blades on a helicopter; propeller, if one is missing the aircraft will not fly until it is fixed

or replaced. To better understand what type of person dedicates their life to missions, the stories of each of their journeys will be told.

Greg grew up in a suburban town in Ohio and was raised in a Romanian Orthodox household. Coming from hundreds of years of Orthodox ancestry, he felt the Orthodox faith deeply inseminated into his family life. This indoctrination instilled in him an understanding of what it means to “love your neighbor,” which resulted in him having a soft spot for the underdog.¹ Unfortunately there was a time when Greg fell away from the church because of youthful misguided zeal and frustration with the over-emphasis on ethnic formalities, which often exists in Orthodox parishes. During that time he earned his engineering degree from Purdue University and pursued several entrepreneurial endeavors, which eventually lead him to work for Xerox in Southern California as a sales manager. Although not actively participating in church life, the Orthodox sense of helping the underdog never left him.² In the mid 1980s, reaching a very low point in his life, he was asking himself “am I living for God or am I not.”³ Looking for answers, he became involved in a Protestant church, and it was there that he was first exposed to helping the Mexican people. Going into Mexico to build homes with this group of young Protestant adults “was like a punch between the eyes,”⁴ putting everything into perspective, with all the poverty in the world and simplicity of how life could be. His life was forever changed. He realized that he had to go to Mexico on a regular basis “in order not to lose his soul.”⁵ This process also made him realize that the Protestant church could not answer the complex questions concerning his salvation. Therefore he turned back to

¹ Interview with Greg Yova, 10/11/01

² Greg Yova, “Here Am I,” *Again Magazine*, vol. 19, #2 (June/July 1996), p. 16

³ Interview with Greg Yova, 10/11/01

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ibid

the Orthodox faith for guidance, and there he found answers. As a result of his journey he was able to utilize his entrepreneurial skills and his Orthodox ethos to start involving other Orthodox Christians in helping the Mexico homeless and establishing an organization that would touch the lives of thousands.

Margaret Yova is Greg's wife and has many times been not only Greg's right hand but both his hands, carrying the entire load, especially when he was disabled due to illness. Margaret grew up in a rural conservative Protestant household in Pennsylvania. Ever since she was young she had a desire to help the needy in a cross-cultural setting. She studied music in her undergraduate degree program but never pursued that type of career. Rather, after graduating from college she dedicated herself to full-time mission work with Cambodians in the neighborhoods surrounding Los Angeles, California. For seven years she worked with these people, teaching them the message of the Gospel and assisting them with the hardships of living in the inner city as recent immigrants. Margaret reflects on the experience by saying "it was a tremendous experience, and it was through that that I realized I wasn't happy being a Protestant." Her tradition preached that if a person did not believe in Christ he would go to Hell. This was hard to explain to many of the recent Cambodian immigrants, whose ancestors had been loving people but because they were Buddhist and not Christian, they were definitely in Hell. Her work with the Cambodians ended in 1992. Feeling disenchanted with Protestant teachings, she discovered Orthodoxy through her cousin, who had recently converted, and through Greg, to whom she was recently introduced. Greg encouraged her to learn more about Orthodoxy with the hopes that she would find the answer to some of the questions which the Protestant faith was not able to answer. In the spring of 1992 she

was chrismated. Since then she has been working intensely with Project Mexico, which has fulfilled her desire to help the needy and utilized her experience as a cross-cultural missionary. In addition, her music background has been indispensable in appropriately setting much of the Orthodox hymnology in Western notation and translating texts from English into Spanish. As can be seen, her journey to the faith led her to Project Mexico, where her skills were fully utilized and her desires were fulfilled.

Mary Danakas started with Project Mexico in 1996, and like her two companions, she was led to missionary work so that she could use her skills and fulfill a deeper calling to help persons in need. She was raised in a Greek Orthodox household in the state of Rhode Island. Even though growing up she was brought to church on a regular basis, she never embraced the faith on anything more than a superficial level. Despite her lack of faith she always had a call to help those less fortunate. With this in mind she pursued a degree in social work with the goal of eventually doing missions overseas. Finishing her undergraduate studies, she decided not to pursue the life of poverty and work overseas as a missionary, but rather to get a job that pays. As a result she started to work for the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese in New York City, helping them in raising funds for the Greek Orthodox Church in America.⁶ While working with the Archdiocese, she went on several mission trips to South Africa and her eyes were opened to the calling to do cross-cultural mission work. She did not feel threatened by the extreme poverty of those countries. Rather, it compelled her even more to serve there. With this spiritual awakening, she decided to leave her work at the Archdiocese and go to Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology in Brookline, Massachusetts. She felt if she was going to be a missionary for the Church she should first have a good foundation on what the

⁶ Interview with Mary Danakas, 8/18/01

Church believes. After graduating she went to Greece for a year and a half in order to strengthen her prayer life for the challenges that were to face her as a missionary. She returned to the United States and looked for work as a missionary with one of the Orthodox mission organizations. This search eventually led her to work with Project Mexico. She has been with the organization for six years, using her skills as a fundraiser and fulfilling her calling to help those who are poverty stricken. She has truly been an indispensable player in the establishment of this inter-Orthodox missionary organization.

The final part to the four-bladed propeller is Luis Sanchez, the Director of the St. Innocent Orphanage. He was born and raised in the border town of Juárez, Mexico, opposite El Paso, Texas. His mother, being a devout Roman Catholic from Mexico, tried to cultivate in him the utmost respect for the church and Christ in order to counteract the countless temptations that a young person faces growing up in an inner-city environment. Despite her efforts Luis quickly learned that on the streets the strongest is the one who survives. He became a force to be reckoned with and made sure no one ever threatened his authority. As he got older he began to settle down and raise a family. Being blessed with four children, he supported himself by opening and running a bar. Four children and running his own business was enough to keep him busy, but having such a large family gave him a new appreciation for children. This appreciation manifested itself when he was faced with the reality of the hundreds of homeless kids living on streets in Juárez. Luis, having been thoroughly exposed to street life growing up, could relate to those young kids. As a result he started to open up his business to the children during the day so that they could eat and shower. His ability to connect with those homeless kids and his deep concern for children led him to start his own ministry of helping street children.

This deep connection to street children is what led him to work at the St. Innocent Orphanage. Since Luis was Mexican, the boys at the orphanage immediately connected with him. His experience of street life gave him an understanding of their situation and helped him to provide an environment that would foster Christian values in teenage orphan boys. Luis has been instrumental in the success of the orphanage, and it can be said that it would not be the same if he had not been there.

III. In the beginning

Growing up as an Orthodox Christian, Greg had heard many times the words of Christ, “If any one will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.” (Matt 16:24) But had he truly understood what was being asked of him? Was he carrying his cross? As a young adult Greg fell away from the Church and moved to California. There he got a great job, had a new sports car and a California girlfriend, but things did not seem right. He had everything, but he hated life.⁷ Reaching the pit of despair, Greg realized that his life was hell not because God had abandoned him but because he had abandoned God. He realized that he was trying to control everything, and with this realization he vowed to let God run his life. With this in mind he turned back to God and the Orthodox Church and took responsibility for the mistakes he had made. He began this process by begging God for forgiveness, but little did he know that his journey back to God was just beginning. The breach in his relationship with God was great and developed over many years. Therefore to heal from the past was going to take time and a lot of effort. All he knew is that he wanted to be truly happy and that could only happen with Christ in his life. He realized that being a Christian was full of temptations and was much more than just going to church on Sundays and reciting biblical passages. He took the words of St. James to heart that “the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.” (James 2:26) He knew that his life in Christ could not continue to heal unless his faith was strong and alive, and this would not happen unless his faith was

⁷ Yova, 16.

manifested in concrete tangible acts.⁸ His conviction was affirmed when he went to Tijuana, Mexico, to build homes with a Protestant charitable organization called “*Amor*” (Spanish for love). By helping those poverty-stricken Mexicans he realized that almsgiving gives life to your faith in Christ. With this in mind Greg laid the foundation for the first inter-Orthodox missionary organization to serve Mexico.

Greg felt he had found a spiritual treasure that allowed him to get closer to God, and he wanted to share this treasure with others. He felt called to give other Orthodox Christians the same opportunity he had. At the time there was not an organized group of Orthodox Christians helping the poor in Tijuana. Therefore Greg started to bring small groups of Orthodox people with the “*Amor*” organization to build homes in the neighborhoods of Tijuana. But Greg was not alone. There were three other young Orthodox Christians who emerged to work closely with Greg in those initial stages of the ministry. Greg came back into the Church under the guidance of Fr. Joseph Morris, and he attended St. Barnabas Antiochian Church in Huntington Beach, California.⁹ There he met Larry Hughes, Andrew Ninichuk, and Silvia Lembesis, with whom he became close friends. These four young Orthodox Christians were full of energy, ready to serve the Church.¹⁰ Those initial years were very difficult, often resulting in long, tiring days commuting on the weekend to work in Mexico. They would leave from Huntington Beach at 5:00 AM Saturday morning, meet other Orthodox young adults at Carl’s Juniors restaurant just over the border in Chula Vista, California, go across the border, work on the house with “*Amor*” ministries, have lunch there, work the rest of the day, come back across through the border traffic, which often took up to an hour, and then get back to

⁸ Interview with Greg, 10/11/01

⁹ Interview with Larry Hughes. 10/4/01

¹⁰ Ibid.

their respective homes around eleven or twelve at night. This was after working a forty, fifty, or sixty-hour week at a secular job. This experience is best described by Greg:

It was rough. At the time we weren't thinking about it. It was just happening and growing. People's lives were being blessed and people were getting houses. It was so exciting, the kind of thing like when you are dating and you don't need to sleep. After every trip it was so exciting we would sit down, me, Larry, Silvia and some other people, and brainstorm about the future of the ministry. We would be on such a high because what was going on was unbelievable. It was awesome. The joy of it was that we were physically a wreck but just the spiritual joy was intense.¹¹

The energy and zeal for doing Christ's work was truly present in that first group of Orthodox Christians, and this laid the foundation for a vibrant ministry that would touch thousands of people.

The houses they originally built with "*Amor*" were basic wood-framed houses, covered with chicken wire and stucco, and with a leak-proof roof. Although the houses built by "*Amor*" did not have concrete floors, these new structures were a major improvement over what the families had to live in previously. Many of these Mexican families had moved from some other part of Mexico to Tijuana in hopes of entering the United States. When their attempts to leave Mexico failed, they were forced to settle in Tijuana and search for better economic prospects. Hoping to settle down, they often ended up spending the bulk of their money on a piece of government-subsidized land. As a result they usually were left with very little to build any type of house and would haphazardly try to piece together some type of shelter either from scrap pieces of wood, cardboard boxes or pieces of metal. This resulted in very unhealthy living conditions for

¹¹ Interview with Greg Yova, 10/11/01

the entire family. There would be no way to adequately protect themselves from the elements (rain, wind, the cold) and no possibility of locking their home to protect it from thieves. This resulted in an extremely dangerous environment for raising a family. With this reality staring Greg and his fellow Orthodox missionaries in the face, they decided to commit themselves to helping these people on a regular basis. Within the first year, they were making quarterly trips with “*Amor*” to build homes, and in that time some significant changes started to happen.

Greg and the others were working extremely hard, and it was only through the excitement of a new and growing ministry that they were able to maintain that pace. Within this first year they learned a lot about how things worked in Mexico and what it takes to build homes for those people. Eventually they assumed much of “*Amor*’s” responsibility, which allowed Project Mexico’s staff members to organize and facilitate the work trips of the American Orthodox. “*Amor*” was still responsible for contacting the potential families who would receive the homes and gathering all the construction materials, but the cross-cultural and spiritual guidance was now done by Orthodox group leaders. This was a significant step because it shows the initial growth of Project Mexico, which gave them the skills to establish a strong Orthodox missionary organization. Despite this level of organizational maturity, Project Mexico was still faced with the reality that their missionary efforts were virtually entirely located in the United States. This raised many issues and challenges. One was how effective can cross-cultural missionaries be if one foot is in the culture of the targeted client and one foot in another culture and land. Such a situation gives an impression to the targeted population that the gospel being preached is not truly self-sacrificing because the target people,

though grateful for the help, know that the missionaries will be back in their suburban home far from any of the cares of the life of poverty in Mexico. In addition, the infrastructure of the organization is under significant strain because running construction projects from another country is extremely difficult. Project Mexico needed to have some type of presence in Mexico in order to more effectively function as a relief organization and be a better Christ-like witness to the people whom they were serving. In the winter of 1989 a solution seemed to have arisen.

In late 1989 Greg started to hear about Fr. José Valencia, who was an Orthodox priest living and ministering in Tijuana. He was American-born and had been working with the Orthodox Church in America in Mexico. He had a small home in Tijuana where he cared for several young Mexican adults who were homeless. When Greg discovered Fr. José, he saw this as an excellent opportunity to combine resources in order to minister to the Mexican needy as a unified Orthodox effort. This new bond worked out quite nicely. Now when Project Mexico brought groups into Mexico, they could use the priest's house as a type of home base. They were able to have meals there, talk to the groups about cross-cultural ministry issues, hold divine services and even sleep there if needed. They eventually converted his garage into a type of chapel with a portable iconostasis.¹² This new relationship helped to solve the problem of having no permanent presence in Mexico. In addition, Fr. José also knew of a core group of Arab Orthodox Christians who had settled in Tijuana/Ensenada (Ensenada is a one of the bigger cities in the Baja California area) and wanted to get involved with the ministry. Through this contact Greg was able to get these people organized and begin talking to them about how

¹² Interview with Larry Hughes. 10/4/01

they might help the needy Mexican people. With this new connection things really started to grow even more, and they started to look at the possibility of a long-term Orthodox presence in Mexico.

In 1989 Greg also started to organize the active Orthodox American members of Project Mexico. They realized that there was a need for a larger and more stable location for their missionary effort in Mexico. With this in mind they learned through Fr. José that in Mexico there was a lack of orphanages to care for teenage boys. There was a possibility they could open an orphanage that would double as a Project Mexico home base. An orphanage for adolescent boys was needed as the Mexicans lacked the capacity to handle that age bracket. Usually when an orphan boy reached the age of twelve or thirteen he ended up on the streets, fending for himself. As a result there are hundreds of teenage boys living on the streets trying to support themselves. Despite their initial efforts to earn an honest living through legitimate means, either through selling newspapers or cleaning windows, inevitably they resorted to some type of criminal behavior, stealing, selling drugs, or selling themselves as prostitutes. Fr. José, living and working in Mexico for many years, realized how tragic this was and proposed that Project Mexico do something about it. Working with the Orthodox from Mexico and with those in the United States, they discussed the possibility of Project Mexico supplying the funds and the volunteer labor to start an orphanage. The Mexicans would administer the orphanage and maneuver all the legal matters concerning Mexican government. In addition, this orphanage would serve as the home base across the border for Project Mexico, which would solve their dilemma of not having a permanent stable

presence in Mexico. So they began to search for a home for Project Mexico and for the location of the first Orthodox orphanage in Mexico.

In 1990 Project Mexico began looking for land for the orphanage, and at the same time they started the process of getting permission from the Mexican government to open an orphanage. Neither of these two processes was easy. Greg proclaims that “God has always protected us and blessed us with the home building projects. It is clear that God’s hand was with us. With the orphanage, God’s hand is clearly with us, but for whatever reason we have been tested terribly.”¹³ This type of testing has been seen on many different stages of the development of the orphanage, from getting legal documentation from the Mexican government, to getting the land for the project, to hiring the proper staffing for the orphanage. It has not been easy. An example of this is when Greg first experienced trying to get the legal documentation for opening the orphanage.

Someone had to create the legal documents and help us with that process. There was an attorney friend of the community in Mexico, who lived in Ensenada, who was willing to help us with this process. So the plan was that I would come down from Orange County during the week, pick up Fr. José, go to Ensenada, get this done and come back. So, I took a day off from work, which at that time was really difficult, but I thought we have to do this so Andrew Ninichuk and I left my house at around 8:30 AM and started driving down. At around 9:00 AM, traveling down interstate 5 freeway, the traffic comes to a complete halt. This was extremely strange because there was almost never traffic on this part of the freeway. We turn on the radio to find out that a small plane had crashed in the middle of the freeway. So I’m thinking, ‘well this is a bit unusual.’ You know, keep a good attitude. Well we made it across the border but we are late because of all of the traffic, so Fr. José is understandably upset because this person

¹³ Interview with Greg Yova, 10/11/01

we are going to meet with was a very important person. We decided to take Fr. José's car since my car was only a two-seater. Andrew was going to drive so I could talk to Fr. José about the orphanage and the progress being made. Well, when Andrew was backing the car out of the driveway, he brushes against the wall and rips the mirror off the driver's side. Now Fr. José is very upset, and I try to explain to him we will get it repaired, but that did not relieve the tension at all. So, okay, we get on the road and then we are getting onto the Mexican freeway where they had been doing construction the night before. In Mexico they do not use flares to signal where the work site is on the road but rather they use lighted coffee cans filled with diesel fuel to indicate where cars should avoid. During the daytime the coffee cans are left there and are extinguished. You can't see them because they are all black, so Andrew runs over about fifteen of them, and they are just thumping on the bottom of the car going around. I thought, 'Man this is it! Fr. José has had it.' Well we survived, and we made it down to Ensenada being only about five minutes late. We get there, and we tell the receptionist that 'we're here to see Mr. so and so,' and she says that 'he is in San Diego.' So after that I say 'I can't believe this.' So we quietly got back into the car and started to return home. There is really nothing to talk about, and so I said okay let's just go back. I do a u-turn and start going and then all of a sudden I hear sirens ... police pull us over. The police officer proceeds to tell me that I could not do a u-turn there and several other things that I violated. Well, I explained that I was in a hurry and if I gave him \$10.00 could he pay the fine for me. Well he starts chewing me out for offering him a bribe. I didn't mean anything bad. Then he bent down and saw that there was a priest in the car and said 'forgive me, Father. Tell this young guy here not to do that anymore,' and he lets us go. Well we get back to Tijuana, drop father off and sit through the border line, and once we hit the other side we're thinking okay it was just a long hard bad day. Now let's just relax, put on some music and cruise home. We were probably a half an hour on the

freeway when the car in front of us all of a sudden starts to disintegrate. Car parts are flying over my car and the thing starts spinning. It goes off the side of the road, into the grass, spins around and then stops. So we pulled over and help the person. Once he was all right and help arrived, we shook our heads, got back into our car and went home. And that was our first day doing something official for the orphanage.¹⁴

Through much more effort and many challenges, Project Mexico in 1991 got permission from the Mexican government to open an orphanage.

The challenges in establishing the orphanage continued, and this is seen in Project Mexico's efforts to find a piece of land. In 1991 they started to look for real estate, and they searched for about one and half years. Project Mexico inquired into just about every piece of land in Tijuana, but they all ended up having something wrong with them. For example, there was a ten acre plot of land for a reasonable price of \$100,000, but the piece of land was right next to a giant slaughter house. This would be fine in the winter, but in the summer it would smell horrendously. Later a group of land owners said they would donate a piece of land to the orphanage, but when Project Mexico's Board of directors went to visit it, they realized it would not work because it was basically in a ravine, not a place to raise teenage boys. One time a successful businessman from Ensenada offered to give several acres to Project Mexico, from a large land purchase he was going to make. These projects take time to arrange so Greg was just waiting for the paper work to go through. Well, after waiting for six months, the deal fell through, and they were back to square one. It was a discouraging time.

The board of directors was working diligently, but they began to get tired, and Greg knew something had to happen soon or he would start to lose people. Then in the

¹⁴ Interview with Greg Yova, 10/11/01

winter of 1992¹⁵ they found a 25-acre ranch for race horses. The ranch had 24 stalls that could be converted into rooms. It had two barns, one would be the chapel and the other the kitchen. There was even a well for water, which was drinkable, and there was an electric generator because energy lines had not yet reached the ranch. In addition, it was located in the peaceful rural hills of Tijuana with a beautiful view of the Pacific Ocean. Everyone who saw it thought it was perfect. The only problem was the price tag. The owner wanted \$675,000 for the 25 acres. Greg started to contact his large supporters within the Orthodox Church, but it seemed they were in a Catch 22 situation. They wanted to start an orphanage but they needed money. Unless they had an orphanage, no one was going to give them any money. Project Mexico had something of a track record but not enough to raise that type of funds.¹⁶ So Greg proposed to the owner to divide up the land into thirds. Unfortunately, he did not just divide the price by three because Project Mexico wanted the piece of land with all the buildings, so the owner wanted \$350,000 for that piece. So now instead of having zero money for a piece of land worth \$650,000, they now had zero money for a piece of land worth \$350,000. They were very discouraged, but then Margaret said, “let’s see if he will rent it to us.”¹⁷ Greg did not think the owner would do it, because they had already asked for the owner to divide up his land into thirds, and now they were going to propose not to buy but rather to rent it. Project Mexico had no other choice, so they talked to the owner and explained their situation. Fortunately the owner, Jimmy Bell, was a good southern man from Arkansas who believed in Project Mexico, and ultimately he agreed to the arrangement. So in July, 1993, Project Mexico began to lease the land for \$1000.00 a month with the option to

¹⁵ Board meeting minutes, 10/12/92

¹⁶ Interview with Greg Yova, 10/11/01

¹⁷ Ibid

buy.¹⁸ And after a summer of intense remodeling, they officially opened the doors of the St. Innocent Orthodox Orphanage.

Two major events that happened prior to the opening of the orphanage must be mentioned. First, in 1991 Margaret Wallace (Yova) came into the picture. Margaret had just finished working as a domestic Protestant missionary for seven years when she met Greg. They were introduced to one another by Margaret's cousin, who had become Orthodox several years earlier. Since Margaret had extensive experience in cross-cultural missions, she immediately became interested in the work Greg was doing. Greg did not encourage her involvement because of fears that her motivation for being with Greg would be based more on the ministry in Mexico rather than on their relationship. Greg did finally bring her down on a work trip in the early fall of 1991,¹⁹ and soon after that she started to work with Project Mexico full-time. During this time, their relationship started to grow, but Greg made it clear that it could only go so far because she was not Orthodox. He was not saying that she had to become Orthodox but rather she needed to decide on her own if she wanted to embrace that faith, and if so, then they could contemplate a deeper relationship. She was very excited about Orthodoxy because she was finally getting answers to many of the questions that the Protestant faith could not answer. But just converting to Orthodoxy was no little matter. She had been a Protestant missionary for seven years, and during that time she was fully supported by Protestant friends and family. They were not supportive of her getting involved in an Orthodox organization. If she was to convert to Orthodoxy, she would surely lose all of her support. She came to the realization that it was either do what she believed in or do what

¹⁸ St. Innocent Orphanage Board meeting minutes, 8/4/93

¹⁹ Interview with Margaret Yova, 9/5/01

would bring her more financial stability. The answer was obvious. In the spring of 1992 she was brought into the Orthodox Church through chrismation. At this point she has been with the organization for over ten years, and certainly without her the organization would not be where it is today.

The second major event occurred in the summer of 1992. That July Greg decided to quit his job at Xerox and start working for the ministry full-time. This was a great leap of faith, but he could not continue working sixty hours a week and put in another thirty hours a week into the ministry. It was just too much. So he left his job and his cushy Orange County condo and moved in with his friend Larry Hughes, who lived much closer to the Mexican border. Around the same time Greg proposed to Margaret, and they were planning to get married in January of 1993. It seemed as though everything was going along well. It was still extremely hard work, but the ministry was growing, and they looked forward to continuing it together. That August, however, something unexpected happened when they were driving through the San Joaquín Valley, California. They had been visiting some friends in Northern California and were on their way back when Greg stopped to get gasoline. During those few minutes a small dust storm arose, and Greg remembers inhaling a lot of dry air. He thought nothing about it, but ten days later he was in the hospital with double pneumonia. It was strange for a young man to get double pneumonia for no apparent reason, but he was prepared to spend several days in a hospital in order to get better. Several days turned into several weeks, and several weeks turned into several months, and the doctors could not diagnose the cause of the severe symptoms. Greg commented on that initial time of his sickness:

Everyday around 4 o'clock my fever would start going up, and I would just know it would be a few hours until I would be able to return back into

the real world, because my bones would start to feel like they were being crushed, and the fever would rack my body and at times cause hallucinations. What made it worse was the doctors tried everything and started to pump me with massive antibiotics that would burn my veins. I thought to myself “my poor fiancé, one week into the deal and she had to deal with this.”²⁰

He was in bed for a couple months and was 50% to 90% disabled for a long time.

Margaret comments on this time:

In '92 when he got sick, basically everything stopped for a while as far as his and my direct involvement. I believe there were still some weekend trips that some of the other board members would run, you know, people who had been doing it, doing the home building with Greg for a couple of years. They would take some groups down, but we stopped. He just couldn't. You know, he was in bed or on the couch. At times I had to pull him up off the couch just to get up and use the rest room or whatever, and he couldn't do anything.²¹

This complicated the ministry because they were negotiating for the land, trying to get people involved in the ministry, and trying to raise support from the Orthodox clergy and hierarchs, and Greg was the hub of the wheel. It was a difficult and frustrating time for Greg and all the people involved.

During this time, Margaret and the board members never said “let's stop.” They just kept on going. It was frustrating. Imagine in the midst of a growing organization, expanding its ministry into a totally new field of work, running an orphanage, and all of a sudden it loses its prime leader for no apparent reason. All anyone knows is that he is sick and cannot get out of bed, but no one knows why. Margaret shared some of the

²⁰ Interview with Greg Yova, 10/11/01

²¹ Interview with Margaret Yova, 9/5/01

frustration that she experienced at a meeting that Greg could not attend because of his illness. Margaret stated that on one occasion

Greg had a 103° fever and he could not get out of bed. There was a meeting to plan the opening of the orphanage, but since Greg couldn't attend, he gave me the agenda items with which I would lead the discussion. At the meeting the absence of Greg's leadership was truly felt and some people even felt abandoned. One person questioned if Greg was really sick, and in this person's frustration he suggested that "Greg needed to closely look at the cause of his sickness and make sure he was not neglecting his responsibilities." It was a very tense time and we were all put in difficult positions.²²

Greg was truly sick, and it was unfortunate that at times peoples' frustration and anger got the most of them, but everyone was trying to make the most out of a truly crazy time within the ministry. In January Greg was finally diagnosed with Valley Fever, also known as coccidioidomycosis, which is caused by a fungus that grows in the soil in the southwestern United States and attaches itself to the pulmonary system and produce flu-like symptoms. The disease kills 300 people a year, but most of the time it passes through a person in a few months. For Greg, probably because of his strenuous life style before contracting the disease, his sickness was prolonged for several years, with the worst symptoms occurring in the initial six months but chronic fatigue plaguing him up through spring 2001.²³ Now, in the year 2002, he is at about 90% of his full functioning capacity, but it is important to factor into this extremely difficult ministry the reality that the leader of the effort had a significant health problem.

²² Interview with Margaret Yova, 9/5/01

²³ Project Mexico and St. Innocent Orphanage Historical Highlights for board of Directors, March 2001.

IV. I did not know I was opening an orphanage

Until 1993, most of Project Mexico's ministry focused on giving Orthodox Christians the opportunity to put their faith into practice by building homes for the homeless in Tijuana. The idea of opening an orphanage was an entirely new ministry for them. Fr. José was the originator of the idea since he had worked with orphanages in Mexico before. So it was only logical that he would administer this orphanage while Project Mexico would raise the funds and supply volunteer labor for any remodeling. Project Mexico had everything in place in order to open. They finished essential remodeling of the horse ranch in order to open. They raised over \$60,000 in committed funds from four separate individuals so that the first six months' expenses would be covered.²⁴ Larry Hughes provided \$10,000 of the \$60,000 by getting cash advances on his credit cards.²⁵ Fr. José had asked the government for ten boys. The board decided that the first group of boys should not be juvenile delinquents because they would be too difficult to handle in view of Project Mexico's lack of experience.²⁶ The administration would be run by Fr. José and another Mexican professional who was to arrive from Mexico City. There had been a lot of planning involved to open the doors, and it seemed as though the St. Innocent Orthodox Orphanage was ready to open. Unfortunately this did not go as smoothly as they had hoped. As Greg comments:

Everybody was unanimous in that we didn't want juvenile delinquents because we had to get this thing figured out and running before we try to

²⁴ Interview with Greg Yova, 10/11/01

²⁵ Interview with Larry Hughes. 10/4/01

²⁶ Ibid

deal with that. Well DIF [the Mexican children and family welfare agency] showed up with a van full of kids; and they were the worst kids they had. They were just wild, and on top of it they are new, mostly new to each other, but also to the staff and to the program. Plus on top of all that, it was just chaos for weeks and weeks because the director that was supposed to come, an Orthodox guy from Mexico City, who had just finished his degree in college, got appendicitis and couldn't come for six weeks. Also, during these difficult times Fr. José became more and more unreliable and I was managing more of the entire project. Eventually Fr. José resigned. And the whole thing was compounded by the fact that before we opened the doors, we had commitments of over \$50,000 promised from three different groups and we would never have opened the doors if we didn't have the promises. The commitments were from places that are well known and I asked the question five times, "Is there any reason to believe this won't happen?" So we opened the doors and all three donors proceeded to back out of their commitments. There was me, Margaret, Alexie Montiel, and Niko Gilman an intern. We had a great plan, but it just kind of unraveled.

Luckily, Margaret's cousin Ron Olson, who was fluent in Spanish and had done mission work in Columbia for three years, decided to come and dedicate his time to helping Project Mexico until the director arrived. But it still was not easy.

Ron would come down during the week, Monday through Friday, and run the program, but he had never done anything like this before. It became more complicated since we did not understand the Mexican government, who were always breathing down our backs, because we were new. They would always come around and see what was going on. And it was one gigantic problem after another. We were trying to register our boys in school, but DIF did not give us any of their credentials, so it was close to impossible to do so. The director of the school was saying 'you have to

give something' and 'we're saying we don't have anything.' We were put in a place where we had to figure out everything.²⁷

In addition to the many unexpected challenges that arose, there was still much remodeling that needed to be done in order to make the facilities more livable. The hallways going into the boys' rooms consisted of gravel and dirt rather than cement, and therefore it was extremely difficult to keep the boys' rooms clean. The kitchen had not been completed, so they were using a small kitchen located in the director's trailer, which was very cramped and awkward. The boy's shower had not been completed, so there was no hot water for showers. The chapel had much work to be done. This was a tough time physically and emotionally for the staff and for the boys. One of the boys who was living at the orphanage at the time, and still lives there now, recently reflected on that experience in an interview:

When I arrived the first time I was just 9 years old. Things were not as well organized as they are now. After time it got better. School was not that good. There was a priest, and in that time it was much more difficult than it is now. There was a lot of dirt and the rooms were very cold. School was the most difficult time. I spent about six months the first time I came to the orphanage.²⁸

Obviously this was a very difficult time. Project Mexico did everything in their power to have a healthy environment to raise teenage boys, but they made mistakes and they had to meet a lot of unexpected challenges. In October the director from Mexico City arrived and was able to take over much of Ron's responsibilities. But unfortunately he did not have the type of experience needed to work with teenage orphan boys, so the

²⁷ Interview with Greg Yova, 11/14/01

²⁸ Interview with Ismael, 7/26/01

job was very taxing for him. With the unexpected departure of Fr. José, the orphanage was still without an overall coordinator for the boys' program. Late that fall, Project Mexico seemed to have found the person to fill that void.

In the fall of 1993, an Orthodox priest from Latin America sent Greg a request to start working with Project Mexico. He had had experience working with the church, and he also had been involved in development work. He seemed great on paper, and he would fill the leadership needs of the orphanage. Since he was recommended by certain clergymen from the church, Greg decided this man could answer many of their problems in working with boys and the Mexican government. Unfortunately he was a lot better on paper than in actual performance. He ended up being confrontational with many of the staff members, and he had issues with obeying authority. He endangered the program by mistreating the staff and the boys, he misspent funds, and showed a lack of respect for the church and his bishop. This all lead to him being suspended by his bishop and instructed to leave the orphanage. He did not take this very well, and he spread rumors about the orphanage and Project Mexico among the local Mexican people and Orthodox clergy in the United States. This ended up being a drawn-out process, which just added to the stress of the whole situation. The suspension and removal of the priest and subsequent problems he brought against the orphanage resulted in the entire Mexican board quitting except for Mrs. Diane Tamer, a local Orthodox businesswoman, who stayed with the program through all the difficulties.

In the midst of that crisis, DIF started to place demands on the orphanage which required them to make major construction changes in order to keep the orphanage open. These demands seemed to come from nowhere because DIF had mentioned nothing of

them when they first opened. (It was later discovered that the orphanage director from Mexico City had angered DIF on several occasions and they were not happy with him.) One of the most difficult demands was DIF's insistence that each room be connected with the next. This meant that doorways had to be cut through each wall, a huge endeavor. Each room was separated by 12-inch block walls filled with cement and rebar. This was not only an extremely labor-intensive work but also very dirty. In addition to the stress of these new demands, finances were still an on-going problem. The orphanage was receiving almost no support from the Orthodox Church, whether through the clergy or through the laity. This was a difficult time. So they decided it would be best to close the orphanage, get a new director, and complete the remodeling to meet DIF's demands. Greg estimated it would take perhaps three months before the boys could come back. It took much longer than they expected and almost ended up being indefinite.

V.They are taken without saying goodbye

Even though the boys were leaving temporarily, it was still difficult for everyone. Unfortunately DIF sometimes works in a bureaucratic way, not taking the child's feelings and emotions into consideration. This was obvious when they came and took the boys without notifying anyone.

They just showed up one day, put the kids in the van and left. If you are not there to say good bye – too bad. And if you don't give the boys time to get their favorite stuffed animal, too bad. They just pick them up and drag them out.²⁹

Greg and Margaret tried to track some of them down to let them know that they were planning to bring them back, but the boys were really hurt by the feelings of being abandoned once again. The plan was to get things remodeled and open up again. This was delayed because much of 1994 was spent addressing the rumors spread by that Orthodox priest about Project Mexico. Greg was still suffering from Valley Fever, which slowed the efforts of Project Mexico. In 1994 Project Mexico had to begin payment of a \$35,000 bi-yearly mortgage. All these factors put a huge strain on the organization and basically forced them “to the end of their rope.”³⁰ This struggle is described best in a journal entry by Greg Yova in September of 1994:

Satan wants to wear me down. We can all get discouraged over situations. We need to examine our conscience, our actions, and our souls and then confess our sins. We must not be self-centered where we complain or feel

²⁹ Interview with Greg Yova, 11/14/01

³⁰ Ibid.

bothered even if it is valid. Don't let Satan take these problems and turn them against me. My illness doesn't help. God lift this burden from me!

Later in January of 1995 Greg wrote:

Burnout is when a person's sub-conscious activity refuses to cooperate and the body shuts down. It is from a life of internal struggle/strife/confusion and keeping it all inside. Depression is the sense of uselessness with the feeling that you are owed something by people or God. I need to be proactive.³¹

Project Mexico and Greg were truly facing difficult times, and they were not sure where to turn. They had been petitioning bishops and pleading and begging with laity for help but getting very little response. As a result they started to ask themselves "is this God trying to tell us that this is not the right thing at the right time, or is something preventing us from doing the right thing? We don't want to be jamming a square peg in a round hole." All they knew was that "God cares a lot about orphans and wants them cared for and protected. And this is the way God will measure the well-being of Israel."³² It was clear that God wanted the orphans to be cared for, but the question was who would do the caring. It looked like Project Mexico would not be the bearer of this ministry. Things were just not happening. Greg and Margaret decided to start talking to the YMCA in Tijuana, which had much experience in working with troubled homeless youth. Greg and Margaret were willing to give the ownership of the orphanage to the YMCA and they could then continue from where Project Mexico left off. The YMCA was very excited and said they would be very happy to take on such an endeavor. Project Mexico had made much progress, but there seemed to be no alternative. There was no light at the end of this tunnel, so they agreed to sell the orphanage to the YMCA. This was in

³¹ Journal notes from September 1994, & January 1995

³² Interview with Greg Yova, 11/14/01

January of 1995, but soon after that things started to change. The next months would see a major turn-around in the Project Mexico's efforts to establish an orphanage.

VI. There is light ... Things start to change

In March of 1995 Project Mexico got a phone call from Metropolitan Theodosius, the primate of the Orthodox Church in America, who was going to be in the area and wanted to visit the orphanage. Greg and Margaret were surprised and thrilled. They did not even know he was going to be in the area, so they were elated with the possibility of him visiting. A small group of people came down from San Diego with the Metropolitan to bless the orphanage. Greg reflects on this experience:

It was a pretty clear sign from God. I mean we had just been praying and praying and praying and in anguish, and so its not very often the Metropolitan calls you and says "I'm in town and I want to see you," and then he comes and says, "I heard what happened and if you are able, I want to encourage you to keep on going." We said to ourselves, "thank God, talk about a breath of fresh air, a cool breeze."³³

When the Metropolitan came to the orphanage, he first went to the chapel. Margaret describes the experience:

The Metropolitan said he felt the presence of St. Innocent and that his spirit was already there and that he needed to be there physically. That's when the tide started to change, exactly then, when he sent us that relic. I mean, things started to change because he came and it was such an encouragement and he told us don't stop, keep going because this is good work, but then he sent us the relic, and within a few of weeks, after it was installed in the chapel, things changed. From that point on the once

³³ Ibid.

irremovable obstacles were one by one removed. It was amazing to watch as staff, government, and other problems were resolved.³⁴

There were two major problems that kept the orphanage from opening again. One was getting a qualified and reliable person to be the full-time director of the orphanage. The other was doing the proper remodeling so that the Mexican government would authorize the reopening of the orphanage and not continually harass them. Project Mexico was working diligently to make the changes to the facilities, but that took a lot of work. Through the grace of God, at the end of 1995, they had been able to fully cement all the sidewalks leading to the each boy's room, which cut down dramatically on the amount of dirt tracked into the rooms. They also constructed a new water tower and a commercially equipped kitchen with enough room to hold 35 people. In addition, they constructed a hot-water shower facility for the boys and a laundry facility. The most difficult project was connecting each boy's room by cutting through solid concrete walls in order to make doorways. With a diamond-bladed skill saw, incisions were made on each side of the wall. Then the door was knocked through with a sledge hammer. It was grueling work. All this was very difficult manual labor, but in addition to the labor, thousands of dollars had to be raised for all the materials. What they accomplished was monumental, but Project Mexico also needed to hire and retain qualified people to help share the responsibilities that Greg and Margaret were being faced with.

The frustration over lack of personnel resulted in Greg being over-worked. This is apparent in his journal entry:

I don't want total responsibility for Project Mexico: running of the orphanage, managing staff, overseeing all renovations, recruiting work groups, running the work trips, raising all the funds, managing all the

³⁴ Interview with Margaret Yova, 9/5/01

paperwork, correspondence, accounting, recruiting priests and workers, purchasing all construction materials, pursuing corporate donations, and generating publicity through articles/conventions, etc...

It was too much work for the skeleton crew they had. In addition, Greg's health still haunted him and at times limited his ability to work effectively. But slowly, qualified people began to join Project Mexico's team.

The first key player that was found was a new director for the orphanage. In the summer of 1995 Michelle Iverson arrived on the scene. She was a Mexican-American professional with much experience working with Mexican street boys, and she seemed to meet the needs of the position. She ended up being a great match, and with much hard work she was able to manage and prepare the orphanage administratively so that the Mexican government would allow Project Mexico to again open the doors of the St. Innocent Orphanage. This was a huge endeavor because the Mexican government set such of list requirements for Project Mexico to complete that it seemed almost impossible. But Michelle was able to coordinate the Mexican state officials, the Mexican staffing and the American volunteers and staffing in order to comply with all the civil requirements for Project Mexico to operate. She was able to do something that no one else could do successfully. The process went so well that the orphanage received approval in one week of submitting the paper work to the Mexican government. This process usually takes months. The government was so pleased that now the St. Innocent orphanage's paper work is given to other organizations as an example to go by.

The other key staff person was Mary Danakas. She was hired to relieve Greg and Margaret of the overwhelming responsibility of fundraising for Project Mexico. In the past one person had never been in charge of public relations or development. Now to

have one person in charge of just that area was very welcome. Mary had worked at the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese raising significant funds for large diocesan projects. She knew the type of labor involved in this type of work, especially the challenges that she was to face with Project Mexico. When she worked at the Archdiocese, there were two separate teams of people to work with, public relations and development. Joining Project Mexico as the sole person responsible for both areas was going to be extremely difficult. Resources were wanting, but despite that Mary still accepted the position enthusiastically. What attracted her most was the direct application of the faith that Project Mexico was providing for thousands of Orthodox Christians. She saw that building homes for the needy in Mexico and caring for abandoned Mexican boys was allowing the eyes of Orthodox Christians around the world to be opened up. With this vision and conviction, she has been able to spearhead efforts to help Project Mexico to become more financially stable.

The other important person that came on board at that time was Nicholas Andruchow. He was a young Orthodox Christian fluent in Spanish and had two and a half years experience working in Latin American with the United States Peace Corps. Nicholas arrived days before the boys arrived in July of 1996, but within that year he met his wife, got married and she moved down to the orphanage to complete two more years as a married couple. Nicholas' responsibility was going to be to spearhead efforts to open two businesses at the orphanage for the boys' work. The orphanage was being designed as a "working ranch" where the boys would have the opportunity to gain vocational skills by working at on-site businesses, which would at the same time raise money to cover orphanage expenses. Nicholas had four years of work experience as a

micro-business consultant, two and half of those years consulting in Latin America. It seemed like another perfect match, and it turned out to be that way. Nicholas was able to establish an on-site business that gave the boys concrete skills in a vocation and had the potential of generating thousands of dollars for the orphanage. In addition to utilizing his business skills, the orphanage depended on his Orthodox upbringing in order to maintain the church's presence and teachings through several periods when there was an absence of trained Orthodox leadership. In summary, Nicholas played an important role in both the vocational and religious foundation of the Orphanage.

VII. Let's open the doors, and this time we are ready

Now with key positions filled and major remodeling completed, the orphanage was ready to open, but no matter how much effort is put into planning, things just do not go as smoothly as one would hope. Ten boys were selected for St. Innocent Orphanage from the orphanages that surround Tijuana. This time Project Mexico made sure that each boy was properly screened so that they did not receive any boys who had a history of delinquency. The first ten boys who came in 1993 had all been the problem children from the state orphanages whom no one else wanted. Project Mexico tried to learn from earlier mistakes by securing adequate personnel to work with the boys. Therefore Michelle, the orphanage director, hired an assistant director who was Orthodox and moved from Mexico City with his recent bride and mother-in-law to work for Project Mexico. There were American staff members living at the orphanage, who were to be full-time counselors for the boys. In addition, a Mexican family was living at the orphanage who served as caretakers for the ranch. Also Nicholas was living on-site in order to supervise the orphanage business and train the boys in business management. Greg and Margaret were to administer Project Mexico as a whole, assisting Mary Danakas and Michelle when needed. Greg's health still affected his work considerably, preventing him from working at 100% capacity. Despite that handicap, Project Mexico was in a totally different situation from where it had been when the orphanage first opened three years earlier. Members of the team were ready to try again. Greg describes the second opening of the orphanage:

Compared to the first it was infinitely better. It was equally difficult in certain ways in that the staff was all new to one another, the boys were new to one another, the boys were new to us, the boys were new to the program, but we were much better prepared and we really didn't get caught unaware of anything. The biggest challenge was just the newness to everything and everybody. It was going to take three to six months before the boys even calmed down. I mean, you've got them out there fist-fighting every day and trying to kill each other. That's hard, but you have to have the perspective that, well, this is what's going to happen. These boys have gotten beaten, abused, threatened and scared their whole life so they are going to be hostile until they have the stability and feel safe. It is hard opening anything, especially an orphanage.³⁵

These difficulties were stressful for all the staff members and each one reacted in a different way. The tension manifested itself specifically in the assistant director. Like the majority of the other staff members, he had never worked in this type of environment before, and it was just too much for him. As a result he was asked to leave just three weeks after the orphanage opened. This was a significant loss because he and his family represented three-fourths of the Orthodox community living at the Orphanage, which meant for a brief time Nicholas was the only Orthodox Christian living at this "Orthodox" orphanage. Luckily the dearth of Orthodox community only lasted for a few weeks until another Orthodox missionary, Matthew Miller, arrived and started to work directly with the boys. Nonetheless the Orthodox presence was clearly outnumbered, which hindered the immediate acceptance of this "foreign" religion.

³⁵ Interview with Greg Yova, 11/14/01

VIII. Can we be one Holy Catholic and Apostolic Faith?

Quickly many pressing questions arose due to the pluralistic community at the orphanage. How were we to raise Catholic boys at an Orthodox orphanage? No matter what religion they were going to be brought up in, who would lead their spiritual development? Would it be an Orthodox person or a Catholic person? Most of the boys saw their identity as being both Mexican and Catholic and anything else was seen as betraying their country and their fundamental essence. These challenges are described by Jodi Ditthart, an American Orthodox volunteer who served at the orphanage from February of 1997 to May of 1998:

It was very complicated, very complex. I think that the only people at the orphanage who were Orthodox were also the only Americans. There were a lot of things that were mixed together, culture was different, language was different, religion was different. I think on both sides people did not know what was happening. Were people acting a certain way because they were Mexican or because they were American, or because they were raised Orthodox or Catholic? How did you know why anyone was doing anything? I think it was hard to be a role model to the kids because being Catholic was identified as being Mexican in the boys' minds. To identify with Orthodox would betray their "Mexicanism." I remember one time when Jorge said, "I cannot believe in a religion where Jesus is more important than the Virgin of Guadalupe, because to be Mexican you need to love the Virgin of Guadalupe more than anything."³⁶

³⁶ Interview with Jodi Ditthart, 4/1/02

The question arose often if the orphanage was subtly forcing the boys to become Orthodox because of the staff's lack of encouragement for the boys to participate in the Catholic religion. For example: "Yes, you can be Catholic, but we will not take you frequently to a Catholic Church." There was never any negative propaganda against the Catholic faith, and the staff took the boys to a Catholic mass on several occasions, but the reality was that the founding organization of the orphanage was Orthodox, and this strongly influenced the teaching and life style for the boys. The boys often reacted in a hostile manner to the Orthodox faith, seeing it as something foreign or American because those were the only people teaching them. What was missing in this whole equation was an Orthodox priest, preferably Mexican (for cultural reasons), to minister to the orphanage full-time. This had been difficult because of Project Mexico's intentional pan-Orthodox structure left the organization orphaned.

One of the early tenets in forming Project Mexico was not to limit it to any one ethnic group or Orthodox jurisdiction (OCA, GOC, AOC). This was difficult to do in the United States because in effect every jurisdiction in the United States is separated largely because of ethnic origins. This has been very divisive for the Orthodox Church as a whole. Therefore Greg, with Andrew, Larry and several other key players, decided that if Project Mexico was going to exist, it would have to be with the participation of all jurisdictions, not excluding anyone, as stated in Project Mexico's bylaws.³⁷ This resulted in Project Mexico welcoming all Orthodox jurisdictions, no matter what ethnic background they came from. The other side of this was the reality that no one single Orthodox jurisdiction would formally support them because they were not with them.

³⁷ Bylaws for the regulation of Project Mexico of the Orthodox Church – A California Nonprofit Public Benefit Corporation, Article II, Section 1, 1991

This led to both financial and spiritual consequences. No Orthodox jurisdiction was willing to help Project Mexico with any considerable financial contribution nor would they assign a qualified priest to assist in their missionary efforts. In 1991 Project Mexico was adopted by SCOBA (Standing Council of Orthodox Bishops in America) as being blessed by all the jurisdictional representatives to serve as an Orthodox missionary organization in Mexico. With this blessing Metropolitan Theodosius, the primate from the Orthodox Church in America, offered to supply the antimimension for the orphanage chapel. This was essential in order to be able to celebrate the Divine Liturgy at the orphanage. These two steps legitimized Project Mexico as a reputable Orthodox organization, but still no jurisdiction would release a priest to serve the orphanage's daily needs. Also there was the reality that there were not too many qualified Spanish-speaking Orthodox priests around to do this type of ministry. As a result Project Mexico learned how to maintain spiritual development itself on a daily basis. Greg and Margaret were left to make many difficult decisions because there was no one else who knew the circumstances as well as they did.

In 1996, SCOBA assigned Bishop Basil from the Antiochian Archdiocese to be the bishop and liaison to Project Mexico. It helped to have a specific person to turn to for pastoral and spiritual needs, but still the constant presence of a seasoned Orthodox pastor was truly missed. In 1997 St. Innocent received a boost when Fr. Josiah Trenham, from the Antiochian Archdiocese, volunteered and was allowed to move himself, his wife and four children down to the Orphanage to serve as its spiritual guide. He accomplished an incredible amount during this time at the orphanage. One of the major accomplishments was the transformation of the orphanage chapel from being a basic barn with a few icons

into a beautiful place of worship with a full traditional Byzantine iconostasis. Fr. Josiah's commitment was to serve at the orphanage for one year and possibly longer, but his time was cut short after he had served there for nine months, and he and his family returned to the United States for another assignment. Once again the orphanage was faced with the absence of an effective Orthodox presence, which added more confusion to the dilemma of how to run an Orthodox orphanage staffed and occupied mostly by non-Orthodox people.

In those initial years after the reopening, the Orthodox Christians who were present did the best they could without having a priest. Margaret Yova organized and coordinated most of the liturgical and musical components of the divine services. Jodi Dithart, an Orthodox volunteer living at the orphanage as counselor for the boys, supervised the catechism of the boys for a year after Fr. Josiah left. Nicholas Andruchow led the on-going daily prayer life for the boys and later led the spiritual training for them after Jodi left. These people did not have any formal seminary training. They were just Orthodox Christians called to fill a need that no one else was filling. The services they held or the classes they taught were nothing extraordinary. They just tried to meet the need for raising ten Mexican boys in a loving Orthodox Christian environment. Month after month, year after year, the boys would receive spiritual nourishment no matter if a priest was present or not. Ideally a priest should have been overseeing the daily Orthodox life of an Orthodox community, but for one reason or another that had not been the case for the St. Innocent Orphanage. So they have made the best out of what they had.

It was made clear to both the Orthodox and the non-Orthodox staff that Project Mexico's purpose was to raise healthy young Christians who would be responsible and productive Mexican citizens. It was not Project Mexico's goal to convert all the orphan boys into faithful Orthodox Christians. Nonetheless, it was difficult to have liturgical services where not everyone within the community could participate fully, but the boys and the staff members made the best of the situation. It was clear that if the boys had embraced the Orthodox faith, then the community life would be more unified, but never did any of the Orthodox staff members pressure anyone to embrace the Orthodox faith. In 1998, Nicholas, under the advice of his spiritual advisor, asked one of the boys if he wanted to become Orthodox. Nicholas thought, "maybe they just need to be asked." After morning prayers one day Nicholas approached Alfredo, one of the more pious boys who was very involved in the liturgical life at the Orphanage, and asked if he wanted to become Orthodox. Alfredo looked right back at Nicholas and responded with a firm "yes," as though he had been waiting to be asked and he finally could do what he had wanted to do for a long time. Alfredo embracing the faith was a huge milestone for the Orthodox spiritual life at the orphanage. In fact he was given the name of Andrew "the first called" at his chrismation. Up until then the possibility of living in communion as an Orthodox community was not even imaginable. The boys were Catholic, and that was just the way it was going to be. This was quite clear early on, when the boys first came to the orphanage, in their hostile reaction to the Orthodox faith. The Orthodox staff members never degraded the boys' Catholic faith but there was always a yearning for fuller communion with each other, since they lived so close together, praying, fasting, feasting, and struggling with life's issues. Alfredo becoming Orthodox opened up the

orphanage to the possibility of having a living Orthodox community. This community could embrace the struggles of life together as Orthodox rather than being divided by differences in beliefs.

Within the next year, four more boys embraced the faith (Ismael, Cruz, Everado, and Ricardo). It was a true blessing to see the environment of the orphanage slowly change from being an “us” (Catholic) - “them” (American Orthodox) environment, to just being an “us” (Mexican Orthodox) environment. One of the greatest catalysts in the boys’ embracing the Orthodox faith was the involvement of the Orthodox clergy from Mexico City. Early in 1998, a Mexican Orthodox priest from the Antiochian Cathedral in Mexico City started to visit the orphanage. These were Mexicans who grew up as Catholics in Mexico but embraced the Orthodox faith as young adults. They came to the orphanage to minister to the boys on a priestly level. Their presence was extremely encouraging for the boys because they could see Orthodoxy as something other than just a religion of foreigners. The importance of their pastoral influence cannot be overstated because without it things might have turned out quite differently. In the summer of 1999 all the remaining boys converted to the Orthodox faith, along with the orphanage director Luis. Since then each boy who has arrived at the orphanage has also embraced the faith. There is a continual relationship between the clergy from Mexico City and Project Mexico which has resulted in several of the boys visiting and serving at the Cathedral in the Mexico City along with several of the Orphanage’s key staff members. Because of this relationship and the foundation laid by the earlier Orthodox missionaries, the orphanage has been able to cultivate a healthy community trying to live in unity as Orthodox Christians rather than being divided by religious differences.

The influence and effect that Luis Sanchez has had on the development of the orphanage must be mentioned. As indicated earlier, within the first weeks of opening the orphanage, the assistant director had to leave his position. As a result Luis, the husband of Michelle, who was then the orphanage director, replaced him and has been a major part of the operations ever since. Luis came from a background of working with Mexican street kids outside San Diego, which prepared him well for working with orphan teenagers. Working at the orphanage he immediately became a father figure for the boys. Ismael, the oldest boy at the orphanage, stated that “Luis was good because he was a Mexican man and talks well with the boys. He loved to play with us, which was a lot of fun.”³⁸ Luis was a native Mexican. Therefore he could relate intimately to the boys, in contrast to the other American staff, who spoke Spanish but were from a different culture. In addition to understanding the Mexican culture, he was very sensitive to the culture of the United States, which has been essential in coordinating the different administrative components between United States and Mexico and vice versa. Due to certain unfortunate events, Michelle had to leave her responsibilities as director, which resulted in Luis assuming those responsibilities and becoming the new director of the orphanage. Since the fall of 1999, Luis has lived at the orphanage and managed the overall functioning of the facility. His role has been indispensable.

³⁸ Interview with Ismael, 7/26/01.

IX. We shall sell no swine before it's time!

When the orphanage opened the second time, it was with the intention of establishing a home where the boys would have a place to live, go to school in the local area, and have the opportunity to learn a vocation by working at the orphanage in one of its income-generating projects. It was going to be a “working ranch.” For this reason Nicholas Andruchow was recruited. He had experience working in the United States Peace Corps starting businesses in Latin America, so to start a business in Mexico for the orphanage would utilize his skills well. The boys would study at a public school in the morning. Then in the afternoon they would work in the businesses, gain a tangible skill and help earn money for the orphanage through the running of a business. The intent was to have several businesses established in order to give the boys exposure to different vocational areas. It was decided to have some sort of agricultural business along with some type of light manufacturing venture. The first business was going to be a pig farm. The goal was for Nicholas to establish the pig business within the first few months of his work there, and then start working on establishing the second venture. Unfortunately things did not run smoothly, and after working with the swine business for several months, everyone realized that it was going to take a lot more work and time than anyone had imagined.

What ended up happening is that Nicholas became the manager, the cleaning and feeding worker, sales representative, construction supervisor and laborer, veterinarian consultant, and coordinator and trainee of all the boys' work and business education. He

would clean the stalls in the morning, a little later he would pick up pig feed, in the afternoon he would hunt down possible clients to buy the pigs, and in the evening he would give businesses training classes to the boys. It was a lot more work than anyone expected, especially the boys. When the boys first arrived at the orphanage the oldest boy was thirteen years old. The business was extremely labor-intensive, especially since much construction had to be done in order to finish the facilities. The boys would help with cleaning the stalls and feeding the pigs, which was initially done with leftover restaurant scraps, and they would help with construction. Initially this averaged about two hours a day. These boys did not come from orphanages where they worked a lot. Rather they mostly had everything done for them. Therefore it was quite an adjustment for them to work so intensely. As a result they were very rebellious and disrespectful, which stretched the patience of the employees working with them. Despite the difficulty of the work, the boys learned a tremendous amount. Within a year and a half of starting the business, the boys were performing surgical techniques, maintaining record keeping, and effectively working at the facility with very little supervision. The business was far from running itself, but it had come a long way.

The major problem with the pig business was the amount of time it took away from the boys' school work. All the boys who arrived at the orphanage were behind in their expected educational level, because their schooling had been constantly neglected due to the abuse and abandonment they experienced so early in life. Their lack of education hindered their studies so much that they had to dedicate significant amounts of time to catching up to their age and grade level. This resulted in cutting back on the amount of time they could work at the pig business. Therefore in 1998 each boy was

working only four hours a week in the business compared to ten hours a week in 1996. As a result, the original ethos of a vocational orphanage or a “working ranch” had to be changed in order to focus on the boys’ education. The boys still work but not to the extent that was originally expected. Now the construction of the livestock facility is three-quarters finished, with hopes of completing it when the boys become older and are able to dedicate more time to the running of the business. Nicholas left in 1999 to pursue studies at St. Vladimir’s Seminary in New York. Much of the coordination of the business stopped because of the lack of qualified personnel to manage it. The facilities now house a variety of animals used for consumption at the orphanage.

X. Home building has always continued

Project Mexico started as an organization to build homes for the poverty-stricken Mexicans living in the Tijuana area. For the life of the organization, that vision has always played key part in the ministry. From 1988 to 1999 the amount of hours dedicated by Orthodox Christians has increased at least by 100% every year. Overall, home-building has been the bread and butter of the organization. It has allowed over 5,400 Orthodox Christians throughout the world to put their faith into practice and build more than one hundred homes for suffering Mexican families. This part of Project Mexico's ministry has also functioned as an excellent vehicle to spread the news of its work. The best promotion that Project Mexico has is the thousands of Orthodox Christians who have gone to Mexico and volunteered their time building homes. They return to their suburban communities with a new view on life and how a Christian should live, helping the least of God's brethren. Sheff shares his experience of how this work affected people:

The longer people would volunteer for, or the more often people would come down, the larger affect it had on them. Some kids are affected differently. Some kids it sticks for a couple of weeks and some it sticks forever and there are some in-between. It is the kind of thing that is planted in the back of your mind and it comes out at the specific time. God does that. He plants a seed in your mind and when the time is right the seed can bear fruit.³⁹

³⁹ Ibid.

Sheff also shared the blessing of the missionary teams living at the orphanage with the boys:

When we would come home from the work trips, the groups would unload the truck and then go play. They heard the stories of the rough background of the boys and now they see the boys laughing and giggling and they realized the smallness of their own problems. They realized that they do not have to share the language in order to share and communicate with these kids. I feel the groups learned a lot. The boys had a lot of fun with the groups. It was like thirty new playmates every two weeks – play soccer, play volleyball, make faces over dinner, pray in chapel, and flirt with the girls. The interaction was fascinating.⁴⁰

Overall this ministry has been a blessing on all fronts, but like everything it has not been easy.

The greatest challenge in the home building program has been finding long-term reliable people to coordinate the work trips. In the beginning Greg, Larry, Silvia, Andrew and several other volunteers would coordinate the home building, but as the organization increased in size, there was a need to have one person organizing the work. This initially fell to Greg, but eventually that became too demanding with all of his other duties. Fortunately other people have risen to the challenge. One significant person who has been involved with home-building for many years is Sheffield Priest, who has worked both part-time and full-time with Project Mexico from 1995 through 2001. He had run the work trips for several summers and Greg challenged him to come work with Project Mexico full time. Greg says that “Sheff was a godsend because he was able to manage a piece of the program for us which allowed me to focus on the mountain of other demands.” After getting married in the summer of 1998 he decided, with his wife

⁴⁰ Ibid.

Nuli, to dedicate full time to the ministry. This was the first time that anyone had been able to devote such time to this part of the ministry. They ended up spending two years coordinating the home building trips, which brought the work to a new and higher level than it ever had been before. In the fall of 2001, their two-year commitment ended.

Fortunately the vacancy created by their departure was filled by two exceptional young adults who decided to commit for another year in the ministry. Project Mexico is looking to have a full time coordinator for the home building program in order to handle the ever increasing numbers who want to come. Until then Project Mexico will try to make the most out of what God gives them.

XI. Looking for stability

Financial stability has been one of the main priorities of Project Mexico, as seen in their efforts to establish an on-site business. In addition to this they have continually tried to establish a larger donor base in order, as much as possible, to get out of debt. Raising seventeen teenage boys (since 1996 five boys have left and twelve more have arrived) is an expensive task. There are expenses for clothing, schooling, food, medical care and everything that one can think of when raising teenage boys. The majority of these expenses have been covered by donations, but during certain times of the year these donations slow down for one reason or another. This always has resulted in a very tight cash flow. Every fall and spring the money coming into Project Mexico drops off, and as a result the orphanage and everyone working with Project Mexico has to scramble in order to cover basic needs. Inevitably during this time, payment of certain bills is delayed or credit cards are temporarily used until the dry season passes. This pressure of overwhelming debt clearly manifested itself in the mortgage of the orphanage land. As mentioned earlier, Project Mexico in July of 1993 started to lease the land, with the option to buy, and in 1994 they took out a mortgage on the land, which required a \$35,000 payment every six months. It was an extremely difficult endeavor to raise that type of money twice a year, but feeling the need to get out of debt sooner rather than later, they accepted the terms. They would usually approach larger donors in order to raise those types of funds, but this did not always go smoothly. Mary Danakas explains one difficult situation:

For one of the land payments we had \$20,000 committed by a donor and we had just two more weeks to come up with the remaining funds. We had already raised another \$6,000 so we just needed to raise another \$9,000 (\$35,000 total). I was on my way to Wichita, Kansas, to meet with a group of laity belonging to the Antiochian Orthodox Church in America to raise the remaining funds. I was not too worried about raising the money because the people I was going to approach could easily handle that type of money. Unfortunately on my way to Wichita I found out that the donor who committed to the \$20,000 decided to back-out of his commitment. We were in a very tough spot. Now instead of needing to raise just \$9,000 we had to raise \$29,000 in a matter of weeks. If we did not get the payment, we could have lost the ranch. With that type of pressure I was very stressed. I remember the silence in the room in Wichita when I said that “I could not leave that room without raising \$29,000.” That is when I truly learned how to publicly beg. And I did not have a problem with it. I had no other choice. It was for those boys, so I had to do whatever I could to get the money. I remember saying some very difficult things to people who had given me donations that night [a pause of silence.] I remember saying to people who had just given me a check, and after seeing the amount I would say, “Thank you very much, but is there any way you would consider giving a larger donation.” That was a very difficult time, and the stress was so high. But thank God we were able to make the land payment.⁴¹

They were indeed able to make the land payment, but only after one of the board members offered to loan them the money until Project Mexico was a little more stable financially.⁴² Things had been financially difficult for Project Mexico for a long time. At one time Greg was owed back pay for nearly a year and a half, so he was basically

⁴¹ Interview with Mary Danakas, 8/18/01

⁴² Project Mexico and St. Innocent Orphanage Historical Highlights for board of Directors, March 2001.

working for nothing for about eighteen months. But through the grace of God and a lot of hard work, things became a little more stable. In 1998 Project Mexico was able to raise enough money to pay off the mortgage two years early, saving a total of \$19,000 and relieving them of such incredible pressure. But this does not mean that Project Mexico is now well off. Rather, it just faces a different type of pressure. Mary explains: “Before paying off the land there was this intense pressure which had to be addressed or the lives of the boys could be thrown back into turmoil again. Now the stress is somewhat different. We still live hand to mouth, now it is just a type of constant pressure.”⁴³

Project Mexico has come a long way in the fourteen years of its existence, but it seems that it is entering a period of a little more stability. It is still not easy, to say the least. The recent tragedy of September 11 not only hurt the country but also devastated Project Mexico financially by sending them into debt by \$40,000 because of a dramatic drop-off in donations. That again created a period of immense pressure for the organization, but because of their commitment to the ministry and the boys, they were able to overcome that challenge. Certainly there will be more challenges in the future. Through overcoming those challenges, those involved in Project Mexico not only have been able to help hundreds of Mexicans and inspire thousands of Orthodox American people, but they have also gained a vast amount of knowledge of what it takes to start a cross-cultural mission organization such as Project Mexico. We will now discuss certain aspects of their experience from which we can learn.

⁴³ Interview with Mary Danakas, 8/18/01

XII. Let us learn together

One very clear challenge in running a cross-cultural missionary organization is obtaining qualified people to work in the field. A person has to be ready to work in a different language and culture, in rustic living conditions and under intense emotional, spiritual and physical stress. This requires cross-cultural and linguistic skills plus a considerable maturity in order to handle the complex personal issues with which the boys deal. Luis comments that many American volunteers have had problems adjusting to the relaxed Latin American life-style, in addition to the taxing environment of working with abandoned teenage boys.⁴⁴ Just the fact that those boys are “teenagers makes their situation incredibly complex, add to that total abandonment and horrific abuse at the hands of ‘loved ones’ and you have a tough, tough situation. No wonder why there are no orphanages for teenagers in Mexico.”⁴⁵ Project Mexico would like to expand the orphanage to house fifty to sixty boys, but they barely have the staff to handle the ones they have now, much less quadruple their capacity. As the Lord said, the harvest is great, but the laborers are few (Luke 10:2). This need for help does not mean that just any zealous Orthodox Christian should be signed up for missionary work. Project Mexico has gotten burned several times by not thoroughly screening volunteers, which has resulted in damage to the ministry and the person volunteering. To avoid possible disaster, each potential candidate for missionary work must be carefully screened.

One thing that has been learned is that to do effective missionary work, the

⁴⁴ Interview with Luis Sanchez, 9/8/01

⁴⁵ Project Mexico and St. Innocent Orphanage Historical Highlights for board of Directors, March 2001.

laborers have to try to embrace the culture and life-style of the people whom they are serving. Ideally a missionary needs to be living with the people in Mexico and working with them side by side. This helps on two levels. It allows the missionary to embrace the culture of the peoples he or she is serving so that they can more effectively minister to them. And on another level, the people who are being helped have a greater sense of solidarity with the missionaries because they are embracing a life-style similar to their own. Greg, Margaret and Mary have undeniably sacrificed their physical, spiritual and emotional lives for the orphanage and the ministry, but none of them have been able to live in Mexico for longer than six months. Everyone involved in the ministry in Mexico highly respects them for what they have done, but the effectiveness of their efforts is hindered because of this. They are not living in the United States because they prefer the American life-style but rather because of the administrative and fundraising requirements of the ministry. Nevertheless this has surely shaped their work. The reality is that only one American missionary has lived at the orphanage for more than three years (Nicholas Andruchow from 1996-1999), however there have been a total of 5 missionaries (Constantine Somow, Robert Blankenstien, Will Christianson, Niko Gilman, and Alex Montiel) who have lived at the orphanage for more than a year, and three missionaries (Jodi Dithart, Teresa Cruz, and Merilynn Andruchow) who have lived there for more than a year and a half. It is clear that Project Mexico has tried to embrace the culture on a short-term level but it seems that their capacity to inculturate their efforts has been limited. This truly presents a challenge for Orthodox missionaries in Mexico. How ready are they to embrace the culture of the people in order to share the faith of Orthodoxy? Through the experience of Project Mexico it is clear that the missionaries

need to live in Mexico and engulf themselves in the culture of the people whom they are trying to serve.

Another large and painful lesson has been trying to establish financial stability for Project Mexico. Greg says he never would have started the orphanage unless he had the proper financial backing. That was in 1993, right after three major donors backed out on their commitment to support the orphanage for its first six months of operation. A certain level of financial stability is critical when starting any project of such magnitude.

Without that type of backing, the staff suffers by being pushed to the brink of burnout.

Greg comments that it has been an uphill climb. God has provided, but this has come with much prayer, sweat, tears and anxiety. The land is paid off, and “giving” is stabilizing, but by no means is Project Mexico in a good position. There is a continuous and unrelenting need to fund-raise. This need takes Greg, Margaret, and Mary away from focusing on the program for the boys. They have accomplished a lot with very little, but at what expense? Has Greg’s Valley Fever worsened because of the need for him to work so much because of the lack of resources? Has Margaret’s spiritual life suffered because of the requirements for her to work relentlessly because of deadlines, covering for Greg, and constant financial pressure? How much do these people have to suffer? It is obvious that the ministry is difficult, but is the Orthodox Church responding in the way it should to support a legitimate program which helps the poor and allows the faithful to put their faith into practice? Having the pressure of raising a \$35,000 mortgage payment every six months put huge a strain on Project Mexico. Greg does not regret what he has done. Rather, he did what he had to do. One thing is certain, he will

never take out that much debt again. It was just too much to handle. Margaret reflects on this by asking,

Did we push too much? I believe that it has been the right thing. I believe that it has been a good thing. You only have to look at the boys to know that, but I question myself a lot of times and say, “well, should we have stopped and trusted that God would bring somebody else to keep doing what was supposed to be done.” Did we push too much? Greg has definitely has paid a big price with his health. We are human and sometimes our stubbornness and pride keeps you going when maybe you should say, “I don’t think I am the strongest person to be doing this.” I don’t know. Whatever good has come out of this, it is because of God’s grace. In doing this work it is essential never to forget God because basically it is God’s work you are trying to do.⁴⁶

Greg adds to this by stating:

If your intentions are not pure, you will not make it. If there is pride or whatever mixed in there, the devil will use that against you and continuously strip you down naked and leave you totally empty and devastated. If your motivations are not for the boys, then every failure haunts you and totally consumes you, and you will not be able to clearly see the vision that you once had. I am not saying I have accomplished that or done better than anyone else would do. I just know that it keeps coming back to that, the ability to be focused on the other, not on myself.⁴⁷

Greg later adds:

It is really hard work. That is why no one wants to start orphanages. It is just too tough. It seems many people do not want to sacrifice, but this is

⁴⁶ Interview with Margaret Yova, 9/5/01

⁴⁷ Interview with Greg Yova, 11/14/01

what we have to teach people. The Church needs to teach its people to sacrifice as Christ sacrificed.⁴⁸

In conclusion, there is no question of whether good has been done, but rather at what cost has good been done. Have the laborers been blessed with spiritual growth in Christ or plagued with passions of “pride, anger, and many other negative feelings”?⁴⁹ It is difficult to discern, and this is why the missionaries of Project Mexico are living and working in a community with obedience to a spiritual advisor, which keeps them accountable and ensures that they are not living a life of self-delusion. Essentially no one knows how well they are responding to such a diverse environment. At the worst they have accomplished much in the name of the Lord, but have suffered spiritually, and at best – besides the boys at the orphanage and the Mexican families who have received homes - thousands of Orthodox volunteers have purified their hearts and have lifted the blinders from their eyes so that they can see God more clearly. May the Lord bless their work, and all those who follow and learn from what they have done.

⁴⁸ Interview with Greg Yova, 4/8/02

⁴⁹ Interview with Mary Danakas, 8/18/01

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