



Merida Foundation

2212 Cedarbrooke
Jefferson City, MO 65109

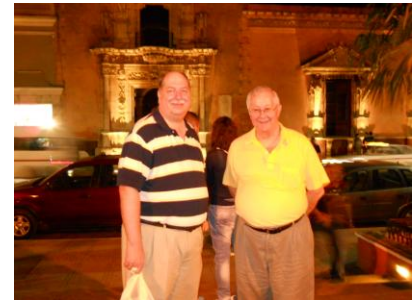


Dear Friends,

It is hard to imagine that Thanksgiving is already past and that Christmas is almost here. We know that this is a very busy time for most, but we are asking you to take a few minutes to hear about what is going on with the work of the Merida Foundation in Mexico. Honestly, we are hoping that after you hear the latest news from Merida and the good work that is going on, you might decide to put our work on your Christmas list.

We returned from our most recent visit in mid-November. It was a good trip, tiring as usual, but every time we go, we are even more convinced of the need and the success of our work. This was no exception. We come back committed to raising what money we can, gathering and coding more glasses, and planning our next visit in February.

One thing different about this trip was the company we had. Bishop John Gaydos, and our pastor, Msgr. Robert Kurwicki, joined us for a portion of the trip. This was particularly exciting for us because the Diocese of Jefferson City has generously given us some mission support over the last few years. We welcomed the opportunity to give Bishop Gaydos a personal look at what we do.



The first day of their visit, Luis took them to visit the Mayan ruins at Chichen Itza. It sounds like the “touristy” thing to do, but we encourage all of our visitors to see something of the Mayan remains. It gives them a sense of the history of people, particularly those that live out in the rural areas. It is also important to understand that, though many of those Mayan descendants today live in poverty, their bloodline and their culture are still the source of a great sense of pride for them.



We did have time to visit a number of the feeding sites with our guests. We drove out to Yaxkakul, which was the second of the rural schools we began helping a few years ago. It was good to get out there, first of all to meet the new principal, who was so enthused about the program and so grateful to all of you for what the daily breakfast is doing for the kids there. But we also got to see the kids again. Of course this is always fun, but it is also good for the kids to see us, to know that there are people far away who care about their health and their lives.

Fortunately, Bishop Gaydos, does well with Spanish and was not shy about talking to the kids and their teachers. He had a long visit with the principal, listening intently to the many problems that poor rural schools face in Mexico. On the good side, we saw children running, laughing,

and full of energy. The teachers told us what a difference the daily meal meant for the kids, but the real proof was in their behavior.

We all went to Escuela Hogar, the “orphanage.” Fr. Guillermo and his brother Fr. Ricardo continue to provide a safe, nurturing place for young boys who would either be living on the street or suffering a difficult situation at home were it not for this boarding school. The two are very simple, humble men, content to do this special ministry that God has given them.

We are always warmly welcomed when we visit the orphanage, but this time was special. Fr. Guillermo and his brother were just overwhelmed that a bishop from the U.S. would be interested in their work. They gave



the grand tour of the dormitories, kitchen, and classrooms, introducing us to the boys we met along the way. Before we left, we had mass in the chapel and the two brothers seemed so proud to be up at the altar with Bishop Gaydos and Msgr. Kurwicki. It was a nice affirmation of all they do for some very needy children.



We also visited Emmanuel, another of the feeding sites in Merida. We know that noon meal for kids in this neighborhood would not exist were it not for your generosity to the Merida Foundation. At the same time, when you look around the kitchen and the dining area you see the mothers

who spend some long, hot hours there cooking, serving and cleaning up. It wouldn't happen if it weren't for them either. All they get out of it is a plate of food if there is anything left after the kids have eaten. They do it for their children and their neighbor's children. We need to remember that, in our nutrition sites, even the poor have something to give.

Once again Bishop Gaydos was a big hit. He spent time in the kitchen talking to the adults and had no problem talking to the kids about their meals and their classes. He was a special guest for them too, but they are always excited and most grateful when we come. Just like in Yaxkakul and Escuela Hogar, there is a feeling of energy and community at Emmanuel. We are doing something important for the nutrition of the kids, but this place is making a contribution to the attitude of this neighborhood as well.

Our time dispensing glasses was shortened by a day because of other demands on this trip, but we certainly made the most of the time we had. The first day we went out to Seye to deliver some things to an old priest friend of ours. It is a large town by Yucatan standards, around 10,000 people. But it is a very small area and probably 90% of it made up of huts. We set up in the same place we did five years ago and by the time we had everything out and ready to go, there was a line waiting for us.

Five years is a long time in terms of glasses. It is easy to lose or break them over that period, but it is also likely, especially for older adults, that your vision will change. A significant number of people who didn't need glasses five years ago could need them now. These were all thoughts we had as we wondered how many people in Seye would come to us for assistance. We couldn't handle everyone that first day and promised to return by 9:00 the following morning. The second day turned into a third, and the third turned into a fourth. We spent four full days

tending to the people of Seye and left only when we ran out of glasses. It's a good indication of the need of the people there.



We developed a system that worked well. We had the people form two lines. If their need was simply glasses for reading and detail, they went in a line to Rudy. He has gotten pretty good at narrowing down what a person might require based on their age. He asks “Cuantos años tiene?”, “How old are you?” He usually gets a giggle from the women, but everyone responds and he usually knows what range of magnification to start looking for.

The more difficult ones go to Dorothy. Luis usually works with her because the person can help the process by describing the problem or what they see when they try a pair of glasses. Luis moves easily between English, Spanish, and Mayan and is an incredible help. In most cases, we find glasses that, even if they are not exactly what is needed, will still be of benefit to the person. Sadly, there are still many cases of disease or injury. Or some form of vision loss for which we can do little

other than give them a pair of sun glasses, say a prayer, and urge them to see a doctor, but we know that is not going to happen.

When the dust had settled and we had given out all the glasses, we found that we had dispensed over 1,000 pair. We may be getting old, but we are still getting the job done. Who knows, maybe in four or five years we'll be back in Seye again.

We failed to mention that there Greg Mihalevich was also on the trip with us. We hadn't forgotten him; it is just that he has been down there before and functions as a part of the team. Greg is a great “behind the scenes” player, doing whatever needs to be done to keep things moving along. He kept glasses supplied and organized, distributed rosaries, tried to keep the lines orderly, and took a ton of pictures, including all of those appearing in this newsletter.



Greg is the kind of person who would give you the shirt off his back, or at least his glasses. The last day in Seye when the glasses were gone and we were packing up to leave, a little girl came in who needed glasses to better see the text in her school books. We had nothing left, but Greg reached into his shirt pocket and asked her to try his. When she put them on and picked up a newspaper, the big smile and the moving lips told Greg they worked. Of course he gave them to her.

Later that evening, Greg was on the square near the hotel. He was talking to one of the street vendors who said his name was Gregorio. “That's my name, too,” Greg said, pulling out his Missouri driver's license to show him. The man squinted and told Greg he couldn't read the print. Greg remembered he had another pair of readers in his backpack so he found them and

offered them to vendor so he could read his name. Long story short, they worked fine and Greg ended up having a hard time filling out the customs form when we returned to the U.S. We like the opportunity to tell you about our trips to Merida. This letter is a great way to keep you informed about the work of the Merida Foundation and the use of your donations. However, we all know that it's most important role is to ask for your continued financial help.



It's Christmas time, and there are a lot of worthy organizations asking you for contributions. We hope that you will consider ours. Feeding 450 kids a day and providing a new vision of the world to thousands each year is as important as the work of most charities. However, we are also your neighbors and your friends. You know us and you can trust us.

We need to make a special push this Christmas. It has been a difficult economic year for many and our contributions reflect this. Giving to the Merida Foundation is off almost \$6,000 from this time last year. That may not be a lot of money to large organizations, but it is a significant part of the budget for us.

We'll be honest. We are not going to close down at the end of the month if we don't make up some of that deficit. We'll find a way to make it another year. But without some generous Christmas gifts, it is going to be more difficult to maintain the commitments we have made to so many kids and their families. Without some extra help, we are not going to be able to add that other school that is begging for a nutrition program from us.

We have to ask you to do as much as you can this Christmas to help us continue this work among the poor of the Yucatan. Having asked that, we know that you will do what you can, because you are our friends and neighbors as well.

Please keep us in your prayers as we do you. Blessings on your family and Feliz Navidad!

Sincerely,

Dorothy Lemke
President

Rudy Lemke
Vice President