



Dear Friends,

We realize that this letter is just one of many solicitations that you are receiving this time of year. We can't compete with fancy Christmas cards or complimentary ornaments for your tree, but we hope that you want to read this letter because it is about how we – you, us, and other good and generous people – are living the spirit of Christmas among the poor in Mexico's Yucatan.

Last month, another Merida Foundation delegation, complete with letters of reference and carrying close to 1100 pairs of glasses, journeyed to Merida. The group consisted of Fr. Fred Elskamp, Carolyn Saucier and Mark Saucier.

Leaving St. Louis, we were concerned about our connection in Houston. We had only 40 minutes between flights – not a lot of time to get to the international terminal, especially when everyone was dragging a carry-on because we used our checked baggage for glasses.

As it turned out, we arrived in Houston early and had ample time to get to our Merida flight. Upon arrival in Merida, we showed our letters and explained our free eyeglasses ministry. For the first time in forever, they waved us through without even opening our bags. One of the customs agents even thanked us for what we were doing.

When things are going that well, you start to wonder when or how our tides of good fortune will turn. As they say, 'Every silver lining has a cloud.' Quite the contrary, we were blessed with a very enjoyable and fruitful trip in which even those plans which went awry seemed to lead us to a better alternative.

We saw this on the very first day. On a rainy Sunday morning, we headed for the town of Seyé, about 45 minutes southeast of Merida. Much to our chagrin, we found the municipal building locked tight and no one around.

Luis got in touch with the mayor. She explained that she could do nothing about Seyé until the next day, but she had different proposal. Would we mind going on a little farther to a small village where the people are quite poor and very much need the help. This was a village in her district, and she volunteered to go with us.

Holactún was a sleepy little place with few people out because of the rain. The mayor directed us to the local municipal building consisting of one tiny office, an unlocked storage room, and a porch area, half of which was under the roof.



The mayor quickly got out of our vehicle and asked a couple of women to spread the word about what we were doing. Then she grabbed a broom and started sweeping the water that had collected on the floor. It was obvious that she took her role as a public servant quite literally.

There were people in line before we even had the glasses out on a table. There seemed never more than ten people queued up, but never less than seven or eight. This went on for hours.

We always talk about one memorable person on these trips. For Mark, it was an older man led in by his daughter. Carolyn had tried to find some glasses that would help, but had no luck. She passed him to Mark, asking that he go through the bags of glasses to try to find the strongest we had.

The daughter seated her father in an old school desk. When Mark offered him some glasses to try, the old man reached out his hand, pawing at the air trying to find them. Mark had to take his hand and place them in it. On the third try with old cataract glasses, the man suddenly broke into a big smile, and effortlessly grabbed Mark's hand. It wasn't perfect, but it was an enormous improvement. He followed his daughter out-- no need for her hand.

We stayed that day until we had helped everyone. Perhaps we didn't see as many people as we might have in Seyé, but we realized once again that it is not about the numbers. In the eyeglasses as well as the nutrition sites, we are trying to reach the people who need it the most. These folks are often isolated in very small villages.

Monday morning we were planning to return to Seyé, but we took a side trip to visit one of our first rural nutrition sites in Yaxkukul. The teachers and some of the students remembered us from earlier visits and gave us an enthusiastic welcome.



To our surprise, two young girls greeted us in impeccable English. Their family had relocated from Texas. It was sweet to converse with all the children through these interpreters. We learned that many of them love math, others science and one literature. We learned that their favorite part of the nutrition program is the meat and cheese sandwiches or wraps; they also enjoy the pancakes.

The mayor was waiting for us when we arrived at Seyé later in the morning. She had already talked to the staff at the municipal building and, as soon as we arrived, chairs and a long table appeared. The mayor publicized our arrival on the city's social media; people quickly appeared, again queuing up before we had laid out the glasses.



It was a long day with the line never under 25 people. We saw a wide-ranging mix of people needing glasses, from older men and women in their eighties with severely diminished eyesight to young students of eight or nine who had difficulty seeing the blackboard.

In this ministry of fitting eyeglasses there are always moments that make the heart sing. Carolyn had tried many pairs on an 87-year-old gentleman without success. So she reached for the strongest on the table; they were thick and heavy. But when the man looked out on the

world, his whole body smiled. The delight was visible as his surroundings took on a clarity and color he had not seen in some time.

After hours of attending to these folks, the line was still long and we promised to return Wednesday morning. We already had plans for Tuesday.

The next morning, Luis drove us to a little village called Detetzunich. It was obviously very poor, with many houses still roofed in thatch. It took us a while to find the tiny kindergarten inside an area enclosed by an old wall and a heavy iron gate.



This school tended to village children aged 4-6. There were 16 of these little ones. They were under the care of Mayra, the principal and teacher who once worked in Yaxkukul. A young, enthusiastic woman in her early thirties, Mayra contacted Luis and asked if the Merida Foundation might help. Her kids were hungry.

But these children like everywhere across the globe were full of fun. Suddenly Carolyn was in the midst of a hide-and-seek game. The kids hid under the desks and behind the door, and when Carolyn found them, they ran wildly to the play area for escape. Of course, she quickly followed and they laughed with excitement and fake fear—running to hide once more. What a gift it was to play with them—and even more the group hug as we said goodbye.



While we were visiting with Mayra another woman approached. Mayra introduced her as a local resident who managed what amounted to a daycare center next door. She had 14 two and three-year-olds in her care. This was a common sight in many of the smaller Mayan villages: a mother would tend to other children while their mothers worked. Play was a big part of the schedule, but the young students were to be taught the Mayan language and culture.

This woman asked if we could help her little school as well. If her students' diet was as sparse as their classroom – bare concrete floors, a few ragged toys, and some papers hanging from gray stucco walls, they needed all the assistance they could get

To the great delight and, no doubt, relief of these two educators, we agreed to start delivering food for both of the schools when classes resumed after Christmas. We also committed to buying a small stove and refrigerator that they will share.

Just a little note here. We didn't have the \$200 for the stove and \$350 for the refrigerator in our budget, but we made the commitment trusting that we would have the money once our friends learned of the need.

After viewing these two programs, we drove to another pueblo called Pixyah. We have one of our more recent nutrition sights there. It is a small school in a poor village, but the children were as lively and friendly as could be. It may have had something to do with the fact that they were eating food provided by the Merida Foundation.

In Pixyah, mothers are encouraged to be involved as they are at most of the schools. Their involvement was evident the day we visited.

In these villages, children don't grow up with milk as ours do. They don't develop a taste for it, but we think that it is important for the nutrition it provides. Since the kids balk at drinking milk, the mothers find other ways of getting it into their diet. On that morning, the kids were eating pancakes, with healthy milk and eggs, with just a little syrup to entice the kids.



After visiting the school, we set up shop in Pixyah to distribute glasses. Similar to our first day in Holactún, there was no one around when we arrived, but by the time we got the glasses out, people were crowding the table. And like that first day, we didn't fit 200 or 300 people, but we served some of the area's neediest, and everyone went away grateful and happy.

The final day we returned to Seyé as we promised. We spent a long day, working until our supply of glasses diminished. As we were leaving, that same mayor came up and asked if we could come again on a future trip and plan for a Sunday. She said that there were many residents, particularly women domestics, who worked in Merida six days a week but would be off on a Sunday. They needed our help, too. How could we refuse a public official so genuinely concerned about the welfare of her people?

It was a great trip. We gave glasses to over 800 people, visited two of our schools and committed to two more sites. But there was also the pure human aspect that you can't into numbers.

If you are ever feeling low in spirit, these dear people will lift you up with their joy and witness of community. They freely express their gratitude with warm hugs, even kisses on the cheek, and smiles that celebrate life. We scarcely know their stories, but spanning classes and cultures, our hands and hearts connect in unforgettable ways.

We know that this is a busy time and you have many people begging for your charitable dollar. We just want to remind you we need your help. It takes money to purchase and deliver food to feed over 500 kids each school day. It takes money to provide glasses to thousands of vision impaired people each year.

With the exception of a stipend to Luis in Merida and the cost of this newsletter, every donated cent goes into direct help to the people of the Yucatan. You're not going to get a better deal this Christmas!

We hope that you find it in your heart to make a contribution to the Merida Foundation. We also hope that you have a wonderful and blessed Christmas, that your life may be blessed as you have blessed the lives of so many Mayan people in Mexico.



Gracias y Feliz Navidad,

Fr. Fred, Carolyn, Mark
And
Rudy, Anne, Greg, Larry and Pat