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Dear Friends,

He looked out over the sea of children with a weary smile. Five hundred boisterous pre-teens have a way of unequivocally affirming 50 years of vowed celibacy. As priest and uncle, he knew that good parenting was some secret blend of blind love and dumb luck, but after hours of ten-year-old talk and pre-adolescent play, he realized that sheer endurance might have an equal role.

An endless line came forward to get their gifts. After the first few jubilantly held high their trophies for all to see, the limited selection had been exposed. Different colors and different shapes, it was still balls for the boys and dolls for the girls. But hundreds of each had not diminished the delight as every child received something that was only his or only hers, a concept of property their parents could not afford.

A young boy approached and gratefully took his gift. Only when the child returned to his seat did the priest realize that the 1-in-2 odds of kids being poor were the same for getting the wrong present. As the boy unwrapped a doll, others whistled and called him the kind of names that people use in any language to defend their fear and ignorance.

Horried, the priest brought him back. He offered a soccer ball, whispering an apology and assuring all would be fine. The boy shook his head and tightened his grip on the doll. "Take the soccer ball and the kids will stop," the priest urged. "No!" the child refused. "Why?" the priest pleaded. "My little sister has never had a doll and I want it for her."



The priest involved in this true story was Fr. Richard Clifford. Fr. Richard, like Rudy and Dorothy, has gone to his reward, but in the early years of the Merida Foundation, he was a partner, organizing a couple of nutrition programs through the Maryknoll parish in Merida.

When Rudy and Dorothy made their trips to Merida, they would often take one evening to invite Fr. Clifford out to eat. The good father was about as set in his ways as Rudy and he always wanted to go to the same place, Kon-tiki, a nothing-special Chinese restaurant.

Over dinner, we heard a lot of stories about the Mayan poor. When he told us about the Christmas incident above, our conversation naturally raised the question of why so few have so much while so many have so little. Perhaps, though, what we needed more to know, is what in that meager world teaches a child this kind of love?

We are still trying to answer the latter, but we know that the secret to teaching that love is not by talking about it, but by modeling it.



That is what Rudy and Dorothy wanted to achieve through the Merida Foundation. Sure they wanted poor children to be fed and they wanted the vision-impaired to see. But most of all, they wanted all these people to know that they are loved.

For us trying to carry on the work of Rudy and Dorothy, this is one of the hardest parts of the COVID pandemic. In the state of Yucatan, the schools are locked tight, at least until next month. Because of this, we haven't been able to feed our kids in the schools.

Until recently, the virus made travel to Merida impossible, so we have not been able to distribute glasses either. Even now that flights have resumed, travel to Mexico is still considered a Level 4 risk, the most dangerous classification of the CDC.

However, there are hope-filled signs. On November 17, the state of Yucatan had the lowest number of daily cases since May. The numbers have spiked since then, but a recommitment to safety and preventative measures should bring them down again.

The rural areas have done even better than the city of Merida, so there is a chance that, at least in the countryside, schools will reopen in January or February.

We are making preparations to start up as soon as we can. When we start, we hope to increase the number of students we will be feeding daily. To facilitate this, we plan on hiring an assistant for Luis to help in the purchase and delivery of the food. This young man is already learning the ropes and understands that we can't pay him until the schools open.

We are also in the process of searching for a newer SUV to haul supplies and chauffeur the glasses crews when we visit. Used vehicles are not cheap in Mexico, but dependable transportation is an absolute must for the work of the Foundation.

So, in a raging pandemic, in the uncertainty of the times, we come to you asking for your help. We can provide food to kids and glasses to their parents and grandparents because of your generous help.

We can teach them to love and care for one another because you first loved and cared for them!

If you can't make us a part of your Christmas, perhaps you can do something in the New Year. Regardless, we want you to know how much we appreciate your support. We wish you a safe, holy, and merry Christmas!



The Merida Board