

Make Me a Channel of Your Peace

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One of the special things about the Diocese of Las Cruces is how one can stumble across a little church hidden away in some remote corner, learn its long and fascinating history, and observe the vibrant faith of the people who worship there today. I had that experience recently when I visited the old San Jose Mission near the Rio Grande. I was welcomed by Sister Marie Paule Willem who invited me to sit under the gazebo in the church's lovely prayer garden. Sister explained how the parishioners and an NMSU student had donated hours of time and hard labor to design the beautiful garden, plant the flowers and make it a place for contemplation. I made a visit in the church as Sister placed fresh flowers from the garden in the sanctuary.

Sister Marie Paule Willem was born into a large Catholic family in Bruges, Belgium. She entered the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary when she was twenty-three years old. Her religious congregation was founded in India and adheres to the Gospel simplicity that is at the heart of the Franciscan way of life. When asked how she received her call to religious life, Sister recalls the misery that persisted in Europe after World War II. She witnessed firsthand the danger, hunger, and anger of suffering humanity, and she wanted to make a difference, or, as she puts it, "to save the world." And Sister Marie Paule has certainly done her part to make this world a better place.

After completing her novi-

tiating, she began to teach general education courses at a Catholic school for nurses. Later she worked in Argentina and Paraguay where she learned to speak fluent Spanish. Here again she witnessed the suffering of people who had lived through war or political corruption. She reached out to help political prisoners and learned that her name was on a death list and she was targeted for execution. She was eventually kicked out of Argentina and Paraguay and went to work in Switzerland for a time.

Finally, Sister Marie Paule came to the United States with a community of seven sisters and began a ministry as Director of Religious Education in a parish in Roma, Texas. The climate in Roma was very hot and humid, and the sisters decided to move, but they didn't want to leave the border region, so they settled in Chamberino, New Mexico where Sister Marie Paule began her ministry to Immigrants on the Rio Grande. She also worked in Garfield where she enjoyed helping young people grow in confidence and develop a strong work ethic. With these young people, the sisters would do projects such as painting, doing woodwork or metal work, cleaning houses, or caring for the elderly. Even today, Sister Marie Paule will sometimes encounter former students in Las Cruces who thank her for those experiences that helped to make them the people they are today.

In her fruitful years of service, Sister discovered the work that she loves and that she continues today at San Jose Mission. The Franciscan Missionaries of Mary always choose to serve where the need is the greatest, where no one else wants to go, where life is poor or unattractive, where



Sister Marie Paule sits with Clarita in the prayer garden at San Jose Mission Fairacres.

people have been forgotten. Their work includes religious education, English as a second language classes, citizenship classes, and prison ministry. Sister plays guitar for the Saturday evening Mass at San Jose, and on Sundays she has a class with adults while the CCD teachers work with the children and young adults. She is quick to praise the dedicated teachers and volunteers who make San Jose Mission a special community of faith.

The Franciscan Missionaries of Mary share a home in Las Cruces. They pray the Liturgy of the Hours in common and are dedicated to adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. In accord with their Franciscan charism, they choose simple work that does not draw attention to themselves, but helps them to live a life of humility and simplicity. Sister Marie Paule's Franciscan spirit is even evident in the names she has given to her two pets: Clarita, a tiny Chihuahua who devotedly follows Sister everywhere she goes; and

Francesca, a stray cat who was lost and sick when Sister found her and took her in.

San Jose Mission is looking very nice these days. In addition to their beautiful garden, the parishioners have just completed a remodel of the parish hall. It has a new ceiling, a new floor, new ceiling fans, and new tables and chairs. Everyone is working together to clean the kitchen and put everything back in place before the Bishop comes to bless the renovated building. There is never an end to the work, but Sister Marie Paule enjoys it all and has a contagious spirit of joy.

When I asked Sister what she feels proud of, she remembered the Living Way of the Cross that she started in Chamberino and that continues there every year and she recalls fondly the young people she has worked with who have grown into self-confident adults and good parents. Mostly, she is just content to be working with the people of the border region and doing her part "to save the world."