

**The Fields are White for the Harvest:
A trip to see the Orthodox Missionary work in Mexico
March 31-April 5, 2012**

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“The greatest missionary land of the Orthodox Church in America is Mexico.” These words of Su Gracia, el Obispo Alejo, Bishop of Mexico, ring in my mind after spending a full week in this enchanted tierra. Perhaps you are not even aware of the Exarchate of Mexico. I hope that this reflection will give you a picture of this expanse of missionary opportunity. I would go so far as to say that Mexico offers the opportunities of every level of missionary effort: big city, town, and village; cathedral, mission, and virgin territory.

There is a fair amount written on the Mexican Exarchate of the OCA, which was granted diocesan status several years ago. Please consider reading the brief history [here](#). Suffice it to say that Su Gracia Alejo continues with great spirit, energy, and prayerfulness, a truly evangelistic work, in cases easily (and without exaggeration) comparable to those of the Apostles, and most certainly to those of the St Herman and his fellow monastic missionaries to Alaska. Changing the changeable, in fact, the evangelistic work of the early Alaskan Mission and the Mission to the pueblos in the mountains north of Mexico City (like San Esteban and Pisaflores), is all but identical.

Bishop Alejo is a quiet and humble servant of God, and filled with two great gifts that God has given him: love for the people of Mexico—“su gente”—and mucha paciencia—“much patience”. Though filled the grace of patience, he does not sit still for long. He does not eat much. He is always making visits and phone calls, checking on his priests, and preparing the pastoral visits of his small but confident and capable band of monastic missionary priests. I had the privilege to travel intensively with two of them: Padre Serafin and Padre Elias. Father Seraphim is in charge of several local missions, one of which he visits twice weekly, and he is also sent to the pueblo San Esteban, which is a difficult 8 hour bus ride from La Catedral in Mexico, twice a year. Fr Elias travels where his is sent, but is in charge of the mission in Chiapas, which is (are you sitting down?) an 18 hour bus ride from his monastic community housed in the Catedral de la Sagrada Ascension.

I arrived to the Cathedral on Friday afternoon, and Obispo (Bishop) Alejo assured me that it would be my only free time in a week, so his assistant, Abraham Labrada (who is secretary to His Grace, chief translator, iconographer, and subdeacon—among other things) took me downtown to see the sights and to soak up a bit of el cultivo urbano. After a long walk, we returned to the Cathedral in time for a beautiful Liturgia Presanctificada. Supper with the Bishop and the monks, and then to sleep.

Padre Serafin and I were to be downstairs at 6:15am, in order to get to the bus station for a 7am departure. We boarded a finely appointed Euro-style Greyhound, complete with (unfortunately) a dubbed Adam Sandler movie. (Perhaps we as Orthodox Christians could work on exporting more

wholesome material to the rest of the world?) A two hour ride brought us to Tulancingo, where we waited an hour or more in a **very** rural town. We enjoyed a sizeable homemade Mexican breakfast, complete with freshly squeezed orange juice for about \$4 each. I could not have imagined what would come next.

We boarded a very old bus for about 30 passengers—all bound for various areas on the way to San Esteban. I'd guess the bus was from the 1970s or 80s, and was complete with broken windows and a noteworthy (nearly 3 foot) and very bloody crucifix which was mounted in the front windshield. I was advised that there might be chickens and other farm animals aboard. In this I was disappointed, as the only 'odd' luggage included a small but quiet dog, a man who brought a whole farmer's market aboard (a 4 foot, 100 pound bag of jalapenos, boxes of tomatoes, a 30-gallon bag of cabbage, 50 lbs of tomatillos, among other things). All of this, plus all of our suitcases and all of the passengers, were squeezed onto the bus (there were small overhead racks, but no place for either produce or suitcases. It may also be helpful to note that all 30 seats were filled, and there were, at times, up to 10 other passengers standing in the aisles. It was very dusty and crowded, however there was a spirit of happiness aboard, and we made new friends on the way. After 3 hours, we stopped for a 30 minute break in a small mountain village. A man from San Esteban had traveled also three hours from his town (where we were heading) to meet us and help care for our luggage. Fernando is one of the kindest-hearted, hard-working men I have ever met. Once again, I could not imagine what would come next.

While the Farmer's Market fellow disembarked, we were joined by several Catholic nuns and some teenaged guitar-wielding companions, plus a man who had cases and tarps-made-sacks filled with rosaries and knick-knacks he was going to sell during Roman Holy Week in another pueblo. I sat basically with his heavy hand-truck at my feet, and nearly in my lap. After about 30 more minutes of traveling, the road ended—but we continued on. I would not call it a gravel or dirt road. I would call it a mountain pass comprised of dust and large, sharp rocks and stones. We were on this 'path' for two hours. Fr Serafin suggested it was like riding a horse. I imagined it more like riding a bull. But everyone was happy—tired, but happy. Then it also began to rain, as we went through the curves of the mountains, with no guard-rails, a precipice of easily 500 feet on my side of the bus, and often only one lane—which meant that in oncoming traffic, there was a need for someone to back up for a while. I could not have imagined what would come next. (Let the reader understand the pattern!)

At about 2.5 hours into this leg of the trip, Fernando advised me that we were nearing San Esteban. I was excited and nervous—but here I was, coming to witness true missionary work. There was suddenly a throng of people (I'd conservatively guess 500) standing in the middle of the road. "Who are they waiting for?" I asked Fr Seraphim. "You!" He replied. Unreal.

I stepped off the bus and was greeted by a quarter of the pueblo of San Esteban. A 10 piece marching band. Dozens of women in traditional, indigenous attire, laden with flowers and many holding terra cotta censers in their hands, which were billowing with some local bark-incense. Flocks and herds of children. Cohetes (bottle rockets which must have come from Texas due to their magnificent size). Hundreds drew near for a blessing and a greeting. Many did not kiss my hand, as we are accustomed, but rather made the sign of the cross over my hand with their heads, as if blowing the sign of the cross

onto me. I was vested with marigold leis and a crown of marigolds—and we walked, I'd say, a half mile or more into town, greeting bystanders and onlookers along the road.

We went straight to the village church (passing the Assemblies of God mission on the way), and perhaps 400 or 500 folks came with us, not including those who stood curiously in or just outside the door. The three of us priests offered a brief service of Thanksgiving, and then blessed buckets and buckets of water (maybe 30 gallons in all) which were also filled with marigolds and hibiscus flowers. Then, for the first (but not the last) time, I was asked, on no notice, to preach, and give a word of thanks. So, to the mic and en español I preached on “bienvenir”—to welcome, and thanked the people immensely for their incredible welcome and fervent, evident, and simply profound (as well as profoundly simple) faith. On leaving, we blessed every single person, in a sort of organized chaos, with the holy water, after which, the owners of the buckets took them home.

From there, we went to the house of “Profe” (Pro-fey) or “Maestro”, the town’s teacher of the local dialect (Automi) for a simple supper of hand-made corn tortillas, beans, and rice; horchata (a delicious rice milk with cinnamon and nutmeg); and a cafecito (little coffee). We were then led to the home where we would spend two nights—a newly erected home, as yet unoccupied, though furnished. It was a palace by comparison to most of what we saw, including that it had indoor plumbing (but not hot water). Fr Serafin and I, who had met up here with Fr Elias (who had come earlier to prepare the way), were instant friends, and stayed up another two hours getting to know one another, speaking about the love of God, the faith of the people, and missionary strategies and ideas. At Midnight, all the local donkeys began to make their noises. After twenty minutes, they stopped and the local pack of dogs began to fight. Once settled, and at 1am, as if on cue, the gallos (roosters) began to crow—for a while. Either everyone gets up very early in the morning in San Esteban, or the gallos are on the old clock (like the Old Calendar, it is off by a noticeable amount!). This animal concert occurred both nights like clockwork.

Sunday morning, we went at 9am for a visit to Fernando’s home, where we met his wife and four children—a delightful bunch. His wife was preparing some meals for the day over an open-flame wood fire in their open-air kitchen. Their home reminded me of perhaps a 17th century Jamestown hut, only with cinderblocks and a corrugated metal roof. At 10am we were at the church, having overlooked that Saturday night was Mexican “spring forward” night. Though arriving an hour late ourselves, no one seemed to notice, or care, as the church was completely filled, and the people were incredibly attentive for the two-hour liturgy. As the village is still in a catechetical stage, only the priests communed. I was given the honor to serve as first priest, and sang the ever-memorable Archbishop Dmitri’s Spanish translation for the first time in my life. I was also asked to preach.

This day was the 87th anniversary of the founding of the parish church, so I preached about San Esteban, the village’s heavenly patron, and the vital necessity of preaching and teaching the gospel, even unto death (as St Stephen did), and the vital necessity of forgiving and prayer for our enemies, persecutors, and even executioners (as St Stephen did). We finished the liturgy with the blessing of another 30 gallons (in individual buckets) of flower-bedecked water, and blessing the people. We then took a jubilant procession through the streets with the marching band leading us. We again greeted bystanders, drunkards, and the small Assemblies of God crowd as we passed through the village.

Afterwards, numbers of the faithful asked us to come to their homes to bless them or to pray for and anoint the home-bound sick. After a brief lunch at Profe's house, we went from home to home blessing and anointing as invited. All the while, the village enjoyed the marching band, pick-up soccer, and a huge cookout.

As for our work, we anointed a sick teenage boy, an infant with chicken pox, and a dying elder. We also blessed a home or two and a store. In one home, a chicken was tethered to the bed by a small string, so as to prevent escape. With the spring-forward loss of an hour, and all of this pastoral work, we took a rest at 530pm for one hour (further missionary discussions amongst us three priests), and then returned at 630pm to the church for an evening service of Thanksgiving. About 300 attended. I preached again, and more folks, having heard of our anointing of the sick earlier in the day, asked for the same. Instead of one by one, we planned a service for the sick for Monday AM. As usual, we finished with the blessing of waters in the customary quantities, took photos, and prepared to go home. At the time to leave, a mob of women and teenagers rushed into the church, as one of our friends was being chased and threatened by a severely intoxicated, giant machete-wielding man just outside the doors of the church. The local police were involved, and the man was incarcerated—the police station is just across the courtyard of the church.

We stopped at (Fer)Nando's house for a cafecito, which was fun. We enjoyed a great conversation and many laughs over some refreshments. Then 'at home', another hour or so of missionary discussions amongst the priests, the concert of the various animals, and a few hours of sleep.

Monday morning, we packed our bags, then headed for a 9am breakfast at Nando's home, where we were treated like kings. At 10am to the Church, where we served a service for the sick and suffering (I preached) and then we anointed about 600 people for their health and salvation of soul and body. Following, the customary blessing of waters, and then the people offered me (and us) many beautiful gifts, including hand-embroidered towels, as well as bags and bags of fresh local bread (sweet and regular) and fresh fruits. Then, more than two dozen photographs with many combinations of the locals and us, then to our truck for travel to Pisaflores, where we were to meet His Beatitude, our beloved Metropolitan Jonah, who was traveling separately from us and from another place, with His Grace, Bishop Alejo. I could not have imagined what would happen next...

An old Ford pickup truck was hired for our 2.5 hour mountain-pass trip. It would be just like the last two hours to San Esteban: dusty, rubble roads—no pavement at all to speak of. One lane most of the way. But even this far out, and this high up into the mountains, we still saw two new, clean Coca Cola delivery trucks. If you have to have it there on time---FedEx may not go there, but Coca Cola does.

About 15 villagers from San Esteban came along, in order to meet the Metropolitan. A number of them have not left San Esteban before. I think only one had been to Pisaflores. It was only an 18 or 20 mile drive, but because the terrain did not permit us to leave first gear, it was a long, dusty ride. Fr Serafin and I rode in the front with the driver. Fr Elias with the others, in the back—that is, in the pickup part of the truck, in the open air and hot sun. About an hour and a half into the trip, and half way up a steep part of the mountain, the clutch failed and the car stalled. The ensuing efforts inspired any number of

“how many _____ does it take to fix a Ford’s clutch in the middle of nowhere?” jokes. About 5 of us tried, plus a few local farmers who were coming the other direction. In the end, we backed the truck 15 yards back down the mountain, and off to the side, and began the walk to Santa Maria, the next village, a walk which—up and down the mountain’s rocky, dusty road-trail, took us a half hour, including luggage. We were drenched with sweat and exhausted, but cheerful, if not remarkably. Miraculously to us (but not to the locals), somebody new somebody who had a friend there who on no notice, took us the 45 minutes to Pisaflores. We arrived at 4 or 5pm, having missed our village greeting by 4 hours—since we had no way of getting news of our delay to the village.

We spent from 6pm or so visiting and enjoying refreshments, and then some supper with Aaron, the key lay-leader and assistant to his father, a missionary Subdeacon. Aaron is a married man, whose wife is a diligent worker, but whose name, due to her quietness, I never got. They have several small children, and live in a hut/house with semi-paved floors, and open air, just next to the parish church. We had a beautiful time laughing and learning and trading stories about the church and life at home. Aaron shared with us stories of the missionary work that he and the Subdeacon do, visiting nearly 21 missions, all hidden in the mountains, barely accessible. It was not long ago (just 7 or 8 years) that much of their mission work was done on horseback—often 4, 5 or more hours away by horse. He also shared with us stories of the various poisonous or deadly animals that are found nearby: a certain transparent salamander, gigantic tarantulas, certain vipers, and a tale of an anteater which can kill humans (if you ask me I will tell you how).

At nearly midnight, we three priests were taken to Juan’s home, where he, his wife, son, daughter, and mother (I think) live. They slept in hammocks in the courtyard, we slept, I think, in their beds. It may just be that we slept in a guest quarters that had just been built, but not yet used. The first thing we saw was one of the above-mentioned salamanders. The second thing we saw—and heard—were the roosters, who apparently are able to communicate with their brethren in San Esteban, as they also crowed at 1am.

We slept well, but not long, and woke up to a nice local breakfast of cafecitos, bananas straight from the tree, tamarindo from the tree, and sweet local bread. I also took a lesson in making tamales using banana leaves or cornhusks. These corn-tortilla based delights are steamed in a large pot, but cooked over an outdoor open stove/firepit. We enjoyed the tamales at lunch with the Metropolitan about six hours later.

The fathers and I went and prepared the church for the bishops’ arrival, and then also took a little stroll through a large and lively outdoor market, which comes to the village every Tuesday. At high noon—it was indeed high noon in the John Wayne sense: high, hot sun, dusty roads, old, crumbling buildings—we took a half- or three-quarter mile walk with about 200 or 300 residents of Pisaflores out to the main entrance of the village, where we waited for Metropolitan Jonah and Bishop Alejo to arrive. After about twenty minutes under a huge shade tree (it was baking hot and full sun), they arrived, and the female elders, in their traditional and beautifully hand-embroidered *vestidos* (dresses), greeted the bishops with similar crowns and marigold necklaces, hand-held incense, and immense smiles. Many of these

women are in their 80s, maybe 90s, and appear as St Mary of Egypt in the icons. They are incredibly strong and full of faith, and delighted in greeting the hierarchs.

After a profoundly beautiful, but wickedly hot procession (we were absolutely melting in our black cassocks; Vladyka Jonah had the benefit of a parasol-bearer which helped some, but not much), we arrived to the church, where we sang an Akathist to the Virgen de Guadalupe, whose miraculous image has been baptized and received by the local Orthodox Christians, especially through the texts of this beautiful service. His Beatitude and I were invited to take part in the singing en Español, which we both did with gratitude and joy, in very packed church. Photos of the service reveal a most-resplendent light emanating in the oven-like temple.

At the end of the Akathist, a two-year old girl was brought forward for baptism. Señor Obispo Alejo baptized her, and Vladyka Jonah was invited to do the Chrismation. After the services, we blessed the customary buckets of water, and also blessed the people with it. The Metropolitan, through a double-interpreter (one into Spanish, and the other into the local dialect), spoke beautiful words to the people, having shared with them that he had heard of their faith from quite a distance, and was grateful to come and see it first-hand. He took a few minutes to teach the people and encourage them to learn and pray the Jesus Prayer, which he also had translated into their local dialect. Scores of folks gathered around for blessings and photos.

Awaiting us under a carport outside was a festive reception with local foods (tamales made fresh in the morning and also tamarindo juice). A local chorus sang for the Metropolitan, the Pisaflores marching band played for him, and many of the village (lady) elders, danced a traditional dance to the music of a small stringed trio. Drenched and ‘muertos de sudor y calor’ (dead from sweat and the heat), we loaded up the 10-passenger van which had brought us the two hierarchs, and we began our 8 hour journey back to Mexico City. Remarkably, there was at least 5 miles of bumper-to-bumper traffic leaving the city at 10pm.

We arrived late—around 1030pm, and we were each glad for a shower and a good night’s rest. The hustle and bustle of La Ciudad de Mexico stood in stark contrast to that of the Village of Pisaflores. The link between them was a quantity of nighttime noise: in the city, barking dogs, traffic, and party-seekers; in the village, the nightly choir of donkeys, roosters, and other farm-type animals.

The following day we were to meet the Metropolitan for breakfast, so Vladyka Alejo and I set out for a 1 hour car ride (which only took 15 minutes in the quiet of the previous night) through the morning traffic. On arriving to the Metropolitan’s hotel, we learned that Vladyka Jonah had been visited by Montezuma, through some shellfish he had eaten the previous night (note to future travelers!). Thankfully, he was recovering, and spent the day resting. Bishop Alejo reassured the Metropolitan in clear terms that this was a gift from God—“You need rest, and this is how the Lord is assuring it.”

Vladyka Alejo and I returned to the area around the Cathedral of the Ascension, where he took me to see a small urban mission—a simple but beautiful chapel, still under construction. He introduced me to the resident caretaker, a faithful Orthodox Christian who lives on site to keep an eye on the church, in

exchange for rent and a shop where he makes all manner of brass and silver ecclesiastical goods for the Exarchate. Really amazing!

After this brief stop, His Grace informed me that I would be the proxy for Metropolitan Jonah at a luncheon organized by another local urban mission, also with its temple under construction. This mission is served twice weekly by Hieromonk Serafin, who was my guide and companion from the beginning. Since it was during the work-day, it was mostly women and children who took part; I would say 30 or 40 folks. A delicious homemade lunch, including horchata (a most delicious, sweet, homemade cinnamon-laced rice milk). Afterward, I was asked to speak a word, so I shared with the people en Español my gratitude for their warm hospitality. I extended likewise the greetings of our Metropolitan, and I encouraged them all in their missionary work, highlighting how our faith unites us as one, and inviting them sometime to come and see our missionary work as well. Additionally, I explained to the teenagers that when I was their age, I was learning Spanish and did not really know why at the time, but was grateful that God was preparing me even then to meet and serve and pray with them on this beautiful occasion.

I had one final destination in my travels: Cuernavaca, a two-hour bus ride south—about half-way to Acapulco. Deacon Antonio had come up to meet me, and to travel back south with him to the mission he serves. We enjoyed a lengthy conversation en route, focusing mainly on the missionary strategies and mindset needed in Mexico, and especially college ministry. It is my growing conviction that the College Campus is the only 'live', non-electronic market-place ripe and actively discussing the meaning of life, where everyone is looking for answers, and most folks are getting bad spiritual direction. Whether Cuernavaca, Charleston, or Canada we need to be investing our time and resources into college ministry.

From the bus depot, we took a twenty minute race-of-a-cab-ride to his beautiful home, where I met his wife, his son-in-law, his grandson, and a little later, his daughter. The children and their son were visiting from Mexico City; Dn Antonio's mother-in-law lives with them. We spent the evening in wonderful conversation, tasting great wine and a homemade Mexican supper. We retired to the garden for another hour or two of charla (chatting). This was a particularly momentous day, as it was the 9th Year anniversary of my ordination to the priesthood at the hands of the ever-memorable Archbishop Dmitri, whose work helped to establish all of the above missionary work in Mexico, including this Deacon's mission. Beautiful also is the fact that Deacon Antonio's young grandson had been baptized by His Eminence. Amazing how across miles and miles and geography and language and landscape, our faith is one, and united also by our beloved Archbishop Dmitri. Memoria eterna!

After a peaceful night's sleep, the family took me (and the Deacon) to the bus depot, for our return to Mexico City. Deacon Antonio would be meeting His Beatitude at the Cathedral to return with him for his own one-day tour of the same mission. God gave us a beautiful journey back, marked by a sunrise which could only have been painted by Him: brilliant morning reds and oranges shooting up from behind a smoking, active volcano. The trip was quicker and easier than yesterday—not much traffic.

At the Cathedral, I had a few minutes with the Metropolitan and Bishop Alejo and a few others, where we basically highlighted the week's efforts and were reminded of His Grace's missionary mottos: Patience and Love. We all agreed that this had been a marvelous visit, and that we would talk soon about the possibilities of work that we could coordinate through the Department of Evangelization in Mexico.

This whole trip had been made at Bishop Alejo's "come and see". A 'regular' planting grant is not really possible there—which I couldn't understand at first, but on visiting is very clear now. How can "we" help? By our Prayers, first. Pray for the Exarchate. For the Bishop. For his clergy. For the faithful. For the Mexican people. Add them to your personal and parish prayers. Do you speak Spanish? We need to develop further a network of those who have language skills and/or the willingness to learn them! Regardless, do you have a desire to offer some time—a week, two weeks, a month, longer—to "come and see" and to offer yourself, in the Name of Christ, to a people thirsting for God's love? We need also to develop a network of such servants of God.

In closing, I share one of the first words that I ever had with His Grace, Bishop Alejo—in a storage-room-turned-sacristy in a Hotel in Seattle at the most recent AAC. When asking him about mission planting, he said (translated), "Father, I don't believe in 'missionizing', that is planting churches. Rather, I believe in evangelizing. Planting churches can lead to good or to bad, when the focus is on church planting. It can lead to one of the main problems we have today—that many people have been sacramentalized but not evangelized. That is: they have been baptized and chrismated, and communed and married, but they were never discipled. So, we need to evangelize the people. When we teach the Gospel first, the rest will come."

Venir y Ver! Come and See!