

Fifty years and counting in Saltillo

BY MONSIGNOR MICHAEL FLANNERY

SALTILLO – The good work begun by Father Patrick Quinn continues south of the border in Mexico.

Bishop Joseph Brunini, adopted a mission in Saltillo, Mexico in response to an appeal from Pope Paul VI to all the bishops of the world to send priests to Latin America. The ratio of priests to congregants was one priest for every 10,000 people. The ideal is one priest per 1,000.

Father Patrick Quinn was chosen to be the first pastor and he was presented to Bishop Luis Guizar y Barragan for assignment and appointed as pastor of Perpetual Help Church, within the city of Saltillo July 1, 1969.

Prior to that date Father Quinn had resided at the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Guadalupe, in Saltillo for six months while learning Spanish. At the time of his appointment, the population of Saltillo was 200,000. The city has quadrupled in size and is now over 800,000 population.

Initially, Perpetual Help parish had 33 mountain villages and three colonies within the city of Saltillo, giving a total population of 30,000. The people in the mountain villages had not had the services of a priest in over 10 years. Father Quinn was joined by Father Patrick Murray to serve the parish in July 1969.

A rectory was built adjacent to the church to accommodate the priests. Every village or rancho would now have the services of a priest at least once a month. Perpetual Help Church would have two daily Masses and the three colonies would have Mass every Sunday.

The main thrust of the ministry of the priests would be to the mountain villages. The city of Saltillo is 5,000 above sea level and the mountain villages range from 7,000 to 9,000 feet.

At first, Fathers Quinn and Murray celebrated Mass in the open air. Then an effort was made to build a place of worship in every rancho or village. A wooden altar was provided. Benches were used instead of pews. These chapels served as community centers, funeral parlors and places where a wedding could be celebrated and village meetings could be held.

Not with-standing the fact, that these people did not have the services of a priest, the faith was still very strong and mostly centered in the home. Every home had a sacred space where there was at least a picture of the Sacred Heart or Our Lady of Guadalupe. The people were

elated with the services provided by the priests and responded graciously to them. The priests now had the trust of the people.

Within two years of establishing the mission, the Saltillo Summer program was born, where the youth of Mississippi were invited to come and spend a week at the mission. Over time more than 20,000 of the youth of Mississippi participated in the Saltillo Summer program.

Accommodations were added at Perpetual Help which could house 100 people. For the most part, these facilities were in a dormitory-style. For all the participants who joined the Saltillo Summer program, it was a game-changer in their young lives. For the first time in their lives, they came face to face with real poverty and met people who did not know where the next meal was

coming from. When they came back to Mississippi, they appreciated the basic amenities of life, such as: when you turned a switch, a light came on, when you turned faucet water came out. On their return to Mississippi, some of the youth chose professions such as medicine, social ministry, all of which were ministries to other people.

A great program at the mission was called “Bean Monday.” On the first Monday of every month, two kilos of beans were distributed to every family that came to

rancheros except for the visits of the medical doctors, dentists and nurses from Mississippi.

For over 30 years, Dr. Kuluz, a pediatrician from Pascagoula, went to the mission and donated his services for at least a week every year. He convinced his colleagues to join him and not only to donate their time but also, their sample medicines to the mission. Many a life was saved through the medical services provided.

There is no question that Father Patrick Quinn was the inspiration behind the mission and its success. He gave his life to the mission and was called to the Lord on Jan. 9, 1997, after suffering a heart attack. He served the mission for 28 years and is buried in an alcove of Perpetual Help Church.

His death marked a time of transition and change at the mission. Bishop William Houck of Jackson, asked Bishop Francisco Villalobos (Bishop of Saltillo) for three months to find a priest who would be familiar with Mexican culture and speak Spanish to replace Father Quinn. Msgr. Michael Thornton from the Diocese of Biloxi was chosen for the task.

Msgr. Thornton was first assigned to Saltillo in Sept. 1973 and served the mission until Aug. 1977. He was familiar with the mission, spoke fluent Spanish and had acquired a knowledge of Mexican culture and customs.

In 1998, Bishop Villalobos created San Miguel as a parish and named Msgr. Thornton as pastor. This new location is still within the city of Saltillo and surrounded by a beautiful colony named Vista Hermosa (The Beautiful View).

Presently at San Miguel there are two priests: Father David Martínez Rubio, administrator, Father Evelio Casarubias Rodríguez, his assistant.

The present number of villages being served by San Miguel is 24. The number of churches within the city of Saltillo, served by the priests of San Miguel number eight. Every mountain village is served at least once a month and every church within the city at least weekly. In total, the priests are covering 32 different locations.



SALTILLO – Preparing to hoist a statue of Jesus during construction in Jan. 2016 on Divine Mercy church. (Photo by Elsa Baughman)

Perpetual Help for assistance.

Word spread throughout the whole of Saltillo. Two kilos of beans would feed a family of six for a week. On any given year 100 tons of beans would be distributed to the poor.

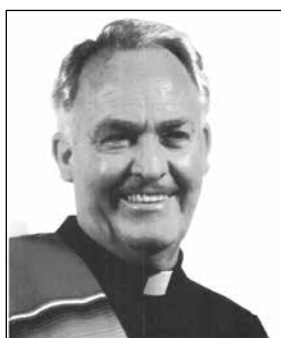
The villages ranged from a 45-minute drive from Saltillo to a six-hour drive to the most remote villages.

Over time, the number of the villages grew to 62 and the number of churches within the city of Saltillo being served grew to ten.

Another program at the mission was the building of cinder block homes for the poor. Again, Father Quinn built 2,340 homes for the poor. The building of these homes was a cooperative venture. The petitioner had to own the land on which the home would be constructed. Father Quinn provided the raw material such as cement and sand for the footings and the cinder blocks for the walls. The owner had to provide the labor to build. After the basic structure was near completion and after an inspection, a steel door and windows were provided as well as material for the roof. These homes certainly made a difference in the lives of the people and were greatly appreciated.

The mission was blessed from the beginning by the generosity of the good people of Mississippi who not only supported the mission financially but also with their time. When medical doctors, nurses and dentists came to visit the mission, they would also often serve the poor of the mountain villages.

Usually, the priest was the interpreter and translated the symptoms which the patient indicated to the doctor, nurse or dentist. Little or no medical help was provided to the



Father Patrick Quinn

Those who have served our Saltillo Mission

Father Patrick Quinn 1969-1997
Father Patrick Murray 1969-1973
Father Michael Farino 1970-1971
Father Michael Flannery 1971-1973
Father Michael Thornton 1973-1977
Father Louis Lohan 1974-1978
Father Paul Madden 1977-1979
Father Paddy Mockler 1986-1991
Father Michael Thornton 1997-2004
Father Bill Cullen 2004-2006
Father Richard Smith 2007-2009
Father Benjamin Piovan 2009-2014
Father David Martínez 2014 - present
Father Evelio Casarubio 2014 - present

1963 - 1970



December 1963 – Pope Paul VI appeals to bishops around the world to send priests to Latin America

November 1964 – Perpetual Help parish established by Bishop Luis Guizar

1968 – Bishop Joseph Brunini installed as the 8th Bishop of Natchez-Jackson

July 1969 – Father Patrick Quinn appointed as pastor of Our Lady of Perpetual Help church in Saltillo

1969 – Father Quinn reports 500 baptisms in his first parish report

June 1969 – Three youth from Pascagoula, MS visit Saltillo

September 8, 1969 – Diocese of Natchez-Jackson officially adopted the parish of Our Lady of Perpetual Help (Perpetuo Socorro)

1970 - 1980



April 1970 – Father Quinn began building chapels in outlying ranchos

July 11-31, 1970 – First session of Saltillo Summer – youth program

December 1970 – Bishop Brunini visits Saltillo

1972 – Saltillo Summer Program reduced from three-week commitment to one-week

July 1972 – Father Quinn requests permission to start taking up special collections mission needs

February 1973 – Volunteer catechist from Perpetual Help Visit Diocesan CYO Convention in Mississippi with Msgr. Michael Flannery

1976 – Father Quinn began building cinder block homes for parishioners – over 2,200 homes were built by this project

1978 – Father Quinn reports 1,416 baptisms, 1,200 First Communions and 256 Marriages at the mission

1980 - 1990



March 1980 – Bishop Houck of the Diocese of Jackson – first visit to Saltillo

October 24, 1984 – Feliciano Villanueva ordained to priesthood – the first priest from the mission

May 1986 – Father Quinn awarded honorary doctorate of humane letters from Loyola University and a Governor's Award

1986 – Father Quinn named Man of the Year of the city of Saltillo

January 9, 1997 – Father Quinn passes away due to a heart attack

February 1997 – Bishop Francisco Villalobos appoints Father Raúl Ramos to be pastor of Our Lady of Perpetual Help

September 1997 – Msgr. Michael Thornton of the Diocese of Biloxi took on responsibility of pastor of the ranchos of Saltillo

1997 – Parishes or college groups visiting the Saltillo mission required to be accompanied by a priest fluent in Spanish

July 1998 – Bishop Francisco Villalobos makes San Miguel a separate parish and names Msgr. Thornton the first pastor

December 1999 – Bishop Villalobos retires and Bishop Raúl Vera, OP installed as Bishop of Saltillo

January 2003 – Father Bill Cullen of the Diocese of Jackson succeeded Msgr. Thornton as pastor of San Miguel in Saltillo

2006 – Father Richard Smith of the Diocese of Jackson replaces Fr. Cullen as pastor of San Miguel

November 2006 – Father Benjamin Piovan, a retired priest of the Archdiocese of New Orleans, takes up residence near San Miguel to complete his life's dream to do missionary work

Spring 2009 – Bishop Joseph Latino and Bishop Roger Morin of Biloxi issue joint decision halting the Summer Saltillo Program for youth after the U.S. State Department issued a travel advisory to the effect that it was no longer safe to travel to Mexico. This advisory is still in effect today and specifically mentions the State of Coahuila where Saltillo is located.

2009 – Father "Benny" Piovan became pastor of San Miguel

2014 – Fathers David Martínez Rubio and Evelio Casarubias Rodríguez replace Father Piovan following his death

July 2019 – Bishop Kopacz of Jackson and Bishop Kihneman of Biloxi visit the Mission of Saltillo in celebration of 50 years of partnership

1990 - 2000



2000 - today





Reflections on Saltillo

BY MONSIGNOR MICHAEL THORNTON

Last July, I had the pleasure of being in Mexico with Bishops Kinneman and Kopacz and others of the dioceses of Biloxi and Jackson as we celebrated the 50th anniversary of our Saltillo Mission. I had worked there with Father Patrick Quinn in the early days of the mission and later as pastor following the untimely death of Father Quinn in 1997. The mission has been very generously supported by Mississippi Catholics since 1969 and for most of that time our church in Mississippi has been enriched by the spiritual experience of thousands who have ventured south of the border.

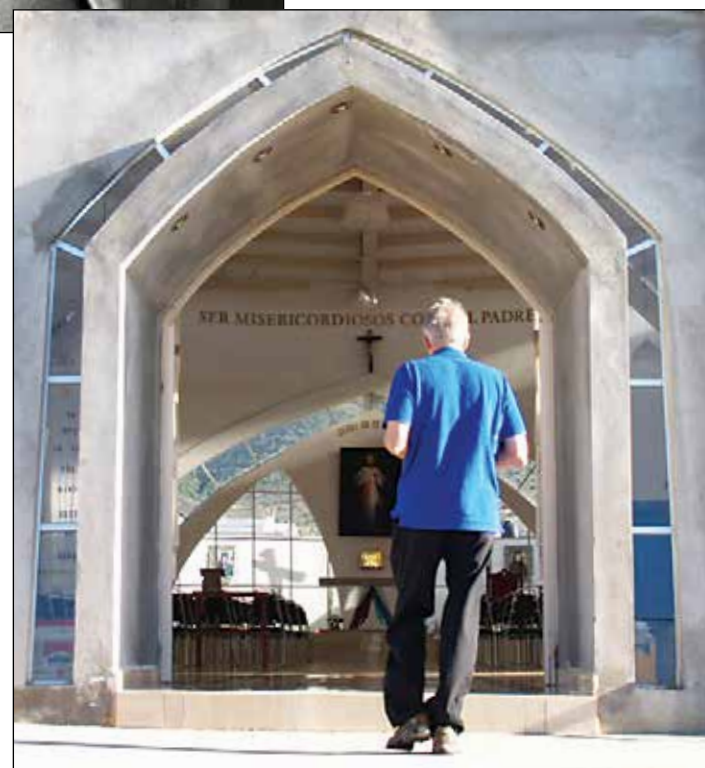
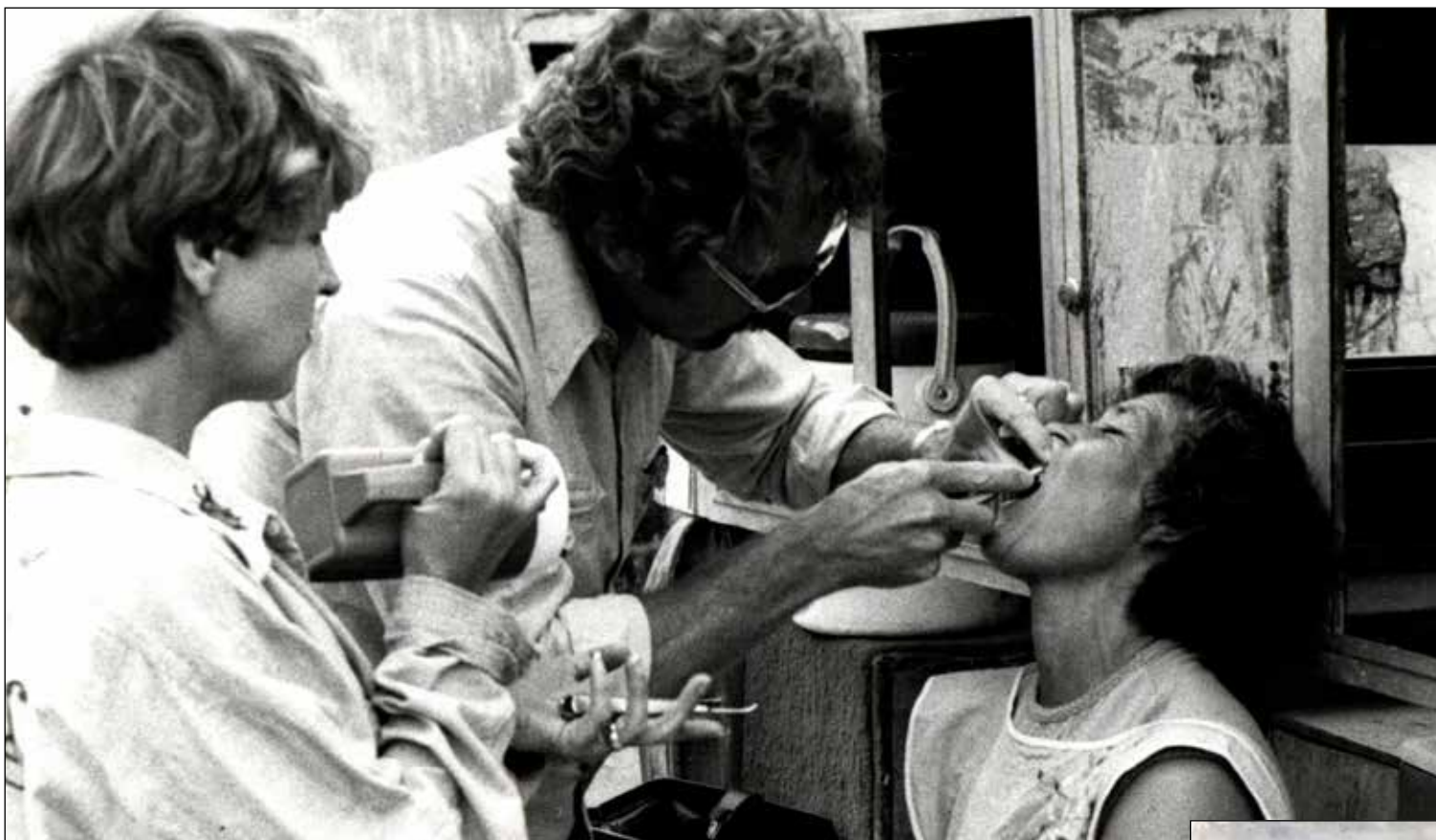
Events of the past several years have greatly restricted travel to the mission. While the situation has been improving around the city of Saltillo, outbreaks of violence throughout much of Mexico leave it too risky to resume the mission trips of so many years. Hopefully the situation will improve in the near future.

For over forty of the past fifty years the Catholic Church of Mississippi was able to assign priests to serve the mission. Presently the San Miguel Mission is staffed by two priests from southern Mexico, Fathers David and Evelia. They are doing a wonderful job continuing the great missionary work of Father Quinn. When Father Quinn arrived there fifty years ago, Saltillo was a city of less than 100,000. Now, the population is estimated to be close to one million. There were four parishes in the city when he arrived and now there are over 25 parishes. Several were started by Father Quinn and Mississippi benefactors.

Our mission is located in a very poor area on the south side of Saltillo, with eight churches in the city and 25 chapels in villages located up to three hours south of town. It serves over 20,000 Catholics.

The golden anniversary celebrations in July 2019 were a remembrance of the past, a time to recognize our close kinship with our Catholic brothers and sisters of Saltillo and an assurance that our partnership with our San Miguel Mission is vibrant and ongoing.

For many years it was possible to experience mission work first-hand, as Saltillo is only three hours south of the Rio Grande. Often over a thousand were able to travel south each year to enjoy the experience. This is no longer possible, but we can continue and strengthen our partnership by our prayers and donations to the mission. Our friends in Saltillo appreciate the partnership of fifty years and are delighted that the bonds of faith and love are still strong.



Golden jubilee celebrations abound in Saltillo



on the road to Emmaus, the breakfast meal at the Sea of Galilee where Peter made his triple profession of his love of the Lord, the commissioning of the apostles to go and teach all nations and a final scene of Father Quinn responding to his vocational call to become a priest.

The group rose early on July 12 for departure to the ranchos of Ejido Notillas, San Jose, Garambullo and Sabinilla. At each village the bishops offered their blessing to the people. An effort was made to make it to the most distant village El Tapon, but unfortunately the dirt road was washed out, due to heavy rain.

The group returned to Garambullo where Mass and First Holy Communion were celebrated at noon-time. After Mass, the group returned to Saltillo and a concelebrated Mass at Perpetual Help Church which had been the center of the Saltillo Mission for 29 years.

Bishop Kihneman preached a homily on his memories of Father Quinn, "In my first year of priesthood, 1977, I accepted an assignment in Saltillo. The first priest to greet me was Father Quinn. Instantly, I knew I was in the presence of greatness. ..."

"Because of Father Quinn's identity with the people of the villages, I came to identify better my own vocation and calling as a priest. Because of his influence, I returned to visit the mission for many years. My experience of coming to Saltillo, taught me a great lesson of what my ministry as a priest

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SALTILLO – The Dioceses of Jackson and Biloxi celebrated 50 years of service to the mission of Saltillo from July 11-15 2019, with golden jubilee celebrations around the mission.

Bishop Joseph Kopacz, Dr. Charles Caskie and Msgr. Michael Flannery represented the Diocese of Jackson and Bishop Kihneman, Msgr. Michael Thornton, Father Serio Baldaras, Terry Dickson (editor of *Gulf Pine Catholic*) and photographer Juliana Skelton represented the Diocese of Biloxi.

On July 11, the group flew to Monterrey, Mexico and were met by Father David Martínez Rubio and Father Evelio Casarubias Rodríguez, then traveled 70 miles to Saltillo and the church of San Miguel, the mission center.

Bishop Kihneman is no stranger to Saltillo as he spent his first year of priesthood assigned to Saltillo (1997-98). At the time, he was a priest of the Diocese of Corpus Christi, which had a mission in Saltillo at Arteaga. Bishop Kihneman was a frequent visitor to Perpetual Help Parish which was the mission center at the time.

After getting accommodated at San Miguel, the group traveled to Divine Mercy Church in the colony Fuentes del Pedregal, for a concelebrated Mass with retired Bishop of Saltillo, Bishop Francisco Villalobos.

After Mass, followed a pageant with several scenes performed by the parishioners which included a re-enactment of the Last Supper, the story of the two disciples





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and later as a bishop should be one of service to the people of God. Today, fifty years later, I love to come back, because here I can re-dedicate my priesthood and my ministry as bishop to the Lord," said Bishop Kihneman.

At the end of Mass packed to capacity, both Bishops processed to Father Quinn's tomb for a blessing, then lis-

tened to people share their memories of Father Quinn.

On Saturday, the group hit the road again for the village of Ejido la Brecha for the consecration of a new church named San Jose. The Mass was presided over by Bishop Raúl Vera, Bishop of Saltillo, and concelebrated by Bishop Kopacz and Bishop Kihneman.

The villagers had never witnessed so many bishops in one place. They were proud of their accomplishments in having a new worship space.

Last year during his visit after Easter, Bishop Vera and Bishop Kopacz had blessed and laid the foundation stone. Now the building is complete and will serve the village of La Brecha for many years to come. Bishop Vera preached as did Bishop Kihneman. Bishop Kopacz remarked

La Brecha, there were forty floats. Bishop Kopacz rode a horse for the last forty yards.

To a packed church, Mass was celebrated along with 40 confirmations. Bishop Kihneman reminded the confirmandi that they had a great model to follow in Father Quinn, as his spirit is very much alive in the villages served by the mission.

From there the delegation headed to the village of Rocamontes for the blessing of a parish hall in honor of Father Quinn and honored with a delicious meal of goat, tortillas and rice. The arrived back at San Miguel at the end of the day, exhausted from the adventures at the Saltillo Mission, before packing up to head back home to Mississippi.

Reflecting on the trip, Msgr. Flannery said, "I must admit that the visit to the Saltillo Mission was a whirlwind tour, but a spiritually fruitful trip. The excitement and spiritual fervor of the people was contagious. The good work begun fifty years ago by Fr. Patrick Quinn continues and the evident fruit of his ministry is evident to be seen and experienced. It was a glory to behold to see both bishops of Mississippi working in unison at each village, demonstrating the unity both Dioceses of Mississippi in its commitment to the mission."

of the great faith of the people as he had been part of the laying of the foundation stone just 15 months ago.

The group returned to Saltillo in the midafternoon as Confirmations had been scheduled at San Miguel for 6 p.m. There were sixty confirmandi. At the end of Mass, banners were presented by six of the local church communities demonstrating their love and affection for Father Quinn. This was followed with a dinner with Bishop Vera at San Miguel.

On Sunday, July 13 the delegation ventured to the village of La Ventura. On the way, stopping at San Francisco to visit with the villagers and have a blessing. Once reaching La Ventura, a caravan of cars, pick-up trucks and decorated floats of all descriptions were assembling for the journey back to La Brecha, thirty-five kilometers away.

On this journey, others decorated floats joined the caravan while passing through La Purissima, Presa San Pedro and Tanque Escondido. On arrival at

