



Religieuses de l'Assomption
Religiosas de la Asunción
Assumption Sisters

Interprovincial Experience Central America Cuba - USA :

“OUR EXPERIENCE IN CHAPARRAL”

Sr. Odessa shared with our communities in the Province of Central America-Cuba the letter from the community of Chaparral speaking of their collaboration with the thousands of refugees who came to El Paso. In the letter they mentioned that most of the refugees came from Central America. The sisters have been living in Chaparral for almost twenty years. At that time the community was only three sisters. We all felt called and wanted to share closely the harsh reality of Central American migrants who were arriving non-stop in El Paso, very close to Chaparral. The volume of refugees had increased so much that the Chaparral parish prepared to receive a group of 40 refugees every 15 days. Thus began a commitment to support and collaborate with the ACC province and the USA in Chaparral.

Until now, four sisters -- América Caal, Miriam Martínez, Ana Milagro Portillo and Carmen Amalia Ortiz have been arriving at the Chaparral community in turns for some months, and it has been our turn to share with them different moments and situations, in this exodus of people who find no other solution than to abandon everything to save their lives. The migratory process has been changing throughout these months and that is why we each have different experiences. We share some of them with you:

America Caal:

“For me, this time was an experience of God. When I saw the faces of the migrants that reflected pain, tiredness and hope, my heart was moved to the depths. To think that people from so many countries risk everything, abandon their culture, leave their roots, their land, their parents and their country with the desire to begin a new life in a strange land. Meeting parents with children of all ages made me feel very close to God who looked at me and told me: *I am hungry, I am afraid, look at my children, we are tired and have nowhere to go.* I did not know them but I knew that God was speaking to me in these brothers and sisters of mine.

Here I was able to appreciate the effort of the sisters and the laypeople of St. Thomas More parish, available as a frontier community, close and in solidarity. I could not take photos, but this experience is engraved in me. Each day was a great challenge. Beyond

the plans, the reality surprised us and demanded availability and dedication; it was God who disposed what had to be done in each circumstance. What a joy it was to see the sisters working alongside so many lay women and men, friends of the Assumption, each one solving some need, all full of enthusiasm and sharing gifts as precious as time, cooking, sweeping, tidying, sorting clothes, washing, sheets, smiling and making people laugh, welcoming, listening, transporting, making documents, accompanying. Many of these volunteers also are or were migrants who one day arrived empty-handed and now open their hearts to solidarity.

Sister Chabela led an extraordinary organization with many women who were attentive to so much urgency that sometimes we could hardly keep up.

In the summer we also had three weeks of camp. One of the weeks coincided with the reception of refugees. The camps are for local children from 5-12 years old. Groups of young people from Mexico and the United States come and take care of the activities with the children. These young people took advantage of their vacation to come and have an experience in another reality. Again, welcome, activities, games and preparation meetings with each other, a very good and exhausting job! I liked very much the interest and the participation of the young people and adults of Chaparral who are also involved in this mission, which is different from helping the migrants, but which awakens an awareness of service and of welcoming others, sharing the joy of being together. It was a work of the Assumption, of the Church body, of reflection and of service. It is a commitment that makes us believe that it is possible to live the love of God, to feel that we are an Assumption family, that we are not separated by language or culture or anything else, but that we are united by the experience of love. The ladies always finished their services to the refugees very late, the priest remained attentive and helpful; once he even prepared the meal himself.

The community of Chaparral is very open and responds to the needs of those who arrive. It is on the road, on the periphery, to respond no matter what time it is; I never heard anyone say "I don't have time" or "I am tired" or "I can't anymore."

At the end of the activities in Chaparral, the Province had the Centenary Retreat and the Provincial Chapter. So God gave me a great gift, allowing me to get to know the province and each sister. Time was short, I am grateful for the welcome and the attention, I felt part of that family, I felt them so close, I was with two former Superiors General, we went for a walk, everything was grace. In their prayer I found the reality present, God manifests himself in the midst of the pain, the anguish of the people, but at the same time, God looks for you, speaks to you and sends you.

I think it is very important to continue this work of support between provinces; I thought I could not contribute anything, but God allowed me to give a little bit of my service, to put my little stone. Our chapter commands us to go beyond, to take off our shoes and see beyond, to look at the people, the children, to question our security, to change our mentality, to contribute, even if it is the simplest and most insignificant thing, but which for the poor is a gift from God, as the migrants say. They discovered the true community-Church when they were welcomed as brothers and sisters and not as just another case or a burden on society. It is an excellent experience for our province and for the congregation. I am very grateful to the Christian community of Chaparral, to the province of the United States and to mine for all that I learned.

I am the sister of two refugees who struggle every day. When I visited my sister, I found many refugees from different parts, especially from the Petén and in Lansdale groups of Salvadorans.

Miriam:

"TO RISK THE FRONTIERS... IN THE SERVICE OF LIFE"

"The time shared with the Chaparral community allowed me to feel the reality that so many migrants live. At the same time, I was very impressed by the welcome and solidarity of so many people who donate their time to provide a hot meal to the refugees in the Refugee House in El Paso and to make themselves available to them.

It was a time to discover where life is developing, to go out and to go to the outskirts, as the G.C. invites us to create bonds of friendship between sisters, AMAS, laity and other people very close to the Assumption.

On the Day of the Faithful Departed, we participated in the Border Mass at the Rio Grande Canal, where many people joined from both the Mexican and the U.S. sides. There we remembered all those who have lost their lives in the attempt to cross the border into the United States. A reality that touches our hearts and urges us to build bridges instead of walls, as the Bishop of El Paso, Mark J. Seitz, said in his homily. It was a meeting in which we felt truly brothers and sisters without language, skin color or nationality being an obstacle. We stand in solidarity with the families who have lost loved ones on that journey. The pain of others humanizes us and makes us sensitive to these harsh realities. And I have discovered the God of life who becomes human, who suffers with the poor and who walks with his people in this march towards that land which many dream of and for which they risk their lives.

We have all gone through different moments in the life of this community and have thus discovered various ways of responding to the calls that arise with the changing reality.

Carmen Amalia:

"I arrived when the influx of new refugees was decreasing, but the community continues to be attentive to any movement or change that would allow it to meet this reality. This community was created to accompany the migrants who, little by little, have been establishing themselves in Chaparral and who now face the challenge of the refugees who arrive, above all, from Central America and also from other countries.

Once a year, State Migrant Day is held in Santa Fe, the capital of New Mexico. A very interesting activity, any New Mexico resident can go to the Capitol to dialogue, ask questions or question their senators about their work and let them know the reality they are living and make suggestions. The ACLU (American Civil Liberties Union) invited us to participate. So Chabela and I went out with a good group of other organizations early on. When we arrived, we met to agree on the issues to be discussed with the legislators this year, for example: policies to cover and protect confidential information of the immigrant : no public official or employee will be able to share them with federal

agencies, such as Immigration, etc. (genetic information, Social Security number, tax identification number or address, etc.) All petitions are submitted to the governor of the state, with the hope that they will be approved at some point due to pressure. The halls of the Capitol, which are very beautiful and I would have liked to visit slowly, were full of people from all over, all demanding, asking, face to face with their legislators. The number of refugees, as I said, has been decreasing, but they continued to be welcomed in other centers, such as the House of the Refugee in El Paso, and Romero House, both supported by volunteers, both lay and religious. House of the Refugee asked for help in making meals, because it does not have a kitchen or facilities like a house. It was an empty factory. The RA community and volunteers from the Chaparral parish committed to bring a dinner for 150 people every two weeks to House of the Refugee in El Paso. But the laws were tightened even more and the refugees have now been unified into one Center.

What about the Refugees? Don't they come anymore? Yes, they keep coming, but they can't stay in the USA. The current process is that the refugees "turn themselves in" to the Border Patrol, to be detained. They stay there until they are tested for "credible fear." If the agents judge that they do qualify to appear before the Immigration Court and ask for asylum, they are returned to Mexico to wait for their appointments. The appointments can take more than 7 or 8 months. If they do not pass the "Credible Fear" test, they are deported directly. At this time, all of the Reception Centers have exceeded their capacity. They have to face problems of food, hygiene, living space, health. Now, the coronavirus emerges as a serious threat to everyone.

The sisters of the community visited the Migrant's House in Juárez; we wanted to have elements of discernment to commit ourselves to collaborate with them. The Migrant's House is an NGO that has offered its services for many years. It has its own staff, and they operate with donations. Now two religious from another congregation, have joined as volunteers and they accompany more personally the Refugees and Deportees.

But we have not been able to advance further in the search, due to the outbreak of the coronavirus. The borders have been closed and with it the possibility of giving a hand.

The government of President Trump has just approved a subsidy for all citizens, but the undocumented are left out of any help. However, thousands of them have lost their jobs, and they are the sector most at risk not only because of the disease but also because of the economic situation.

The Assumption community is very much loved and valued by the people; they are part of their families, they are counselors and friends of all, the people know that the doors of the house are always open and the small chapel too. Everyone is attentive to the needs of the poorest or sickest, they visit them, they share their food and above all their friendship. I had the opportunity to accompany a sister with two laywomen who take communion once a week to the sick. People are also attentive to the life of the sisters. The group Assumption Together is very animated and committed in many of the projects and in the life of prayer.

My present experience is that the pandemic has changed the lives of all of us. Nothing seems to be moving. But the community is living an intense time of prayer; a long Holy Saturday, a time of waiting and Easter, asking, with Pope Francis, for the miracle of New Life for our world.

The surrender and testimony of love that never tires has made it possible for life to spring up in this desert. All of us who have passed through here wish that our province will continue to support this community.

Thank you very much, sisters of Chaparral, for your dedication and your willingness to welcome us as sisters. Thank you very much to our province which took on our work to give us this opportunity."