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**When the Wolves Came: A Memoir**

**The Missionary Life of an Oblate Priest in Mexico, 1963-2007**

**By Francis Theodore Pfeifer, O.M.I.**

## When the Wolves Came: A Memoir

### The Missionary Life of an Oblate Priest In Mexico, 1963-2007

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*(Editor's note: This number of Documentation OMI contains excerpts from the autobiography of an Oblate from the United States who worked for many years in Mexico. In the words of Fr. Pfeifer, we too "wish to thank J. Michael Parker, director of communications at Oblate School of Theology in San Antonio and former longtime religion writer of the San Antonio Express-News, for his news coverage of those efforts and for typing and editing the manuscript of this memoir.")*

*"I am the good shepherd. A good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. A hired man, who is not a shepherd and whose sheep are not his own, sees a wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away, and the wolf catches and scatters them. This is because he works for pay and has no concern for the sheep.*

*"I am the good shepherd, and I know mine and mine know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I will lay down my life for the sheep."*  
John 10:11-15

#### Introduction

The parable of the Good Shepherd in the Gospel of St. John is well known. It is an apt lesson for any young minister of the Gospel. This autobiography describes a humble Texan's preparation, decision and lifelong commitment to live that lesson in a radical way, serving a remote mountain people most of the world has forgotten – the poor. This is the very charism that has distinguished his congregation of Religious men, the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, since its founding by St. Eugene de Mazenod in 1816.

It was with good reason that Pope Pius XI in 1938 gave the Oblates a title of great respect, Specialists in the Most Difficult Missions. Besides the usual vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, Oblates make a fourth vow, handed down by their founder: *Pariter iureiurando voveo ad mortem usque perseveraturum* (I will persevere even unto death).

Father Ted Pfeifer, OMI – "Padre Francisco," as he was known in Mexico, was no stranger to difficult

missions by the early 1980's, having spent some 15 years laboring among the indigenous people of Oaxaca, southern Mexico. They knew only hardship, and little of the modern conveniences of life in the First World. But then, drug cartels arrived among the Chontal and Zapotec Indians in Oaxaca, bringing violence, terror and even death. These became Padre Francisco's frequent companions as more than 150 families were devastated by the ruthless murders of loved ones.

Padre Francisco didn't just preach about good and evil; he spoke out in very strong, specific terms about the evil unfolding around him. For that, he was marked for death. Though scared, he continued to defend his people, taking the Gospel parable of the Good Shepherd for his sustenance and refused to leave his people. He knew they had no escape from harm's way. He wondered why he deserved to retire to safety when they had no way to do so.

Only a stroke in the fall of 2007 at age 76 forced Fr. Ted to leave Mexico and return to San Antonio, Texas, where he had received his formation for the Oblate priesthood some 50 years earlier.

His personal story is of a piece with those of many other Oblates since the frontier days, when the Oblates in South Texas earned the famous nickname "The Cavalry of Christ," by proclaiming the Gospel in remote places where others could not or would not go. This is his contribution to that hallowed legacy.

J. Michael Parker  
July 2008

## Beginning My Missionary Life

In December 1962, a short letter arrived from the Provincial. Written in Latin, it directed me to go to the missions of Tehuantepec, in the state of Oaxaca, Mexico, in January 1963. I had become so enthralled in my ministry at Holy Family in Corpus Christi, Texas, that I almost forgot I'd volunteered for the missions in Mexico.

Tehuantepec is an isthmus, 120 miles wide, in the state of Oaxaca in the southernmost part of Mexico. It separates the Bay of Campeche and the Gulf of Mexico to the north from the Gulf of Tehuantepec and the Pacific Ocean to the south. The isthmus is the shortest land distance between the Gulf of Mexico and the Pacific. But those 120 miles include the Sierra Madre Occidental Mountains, a remote, isolated region inhabited by a variety of indigenous tribes and dotted by missions established by the Dominican Fathers in the 1600's. When I arrived, most of these places were accessible only by four-wheel-drive vehicles on primitive roads, and some only by horseback.

In those days, there were no more than about 15 priests in the entire Diocese of Tehuantepec. The diocese was later split to create two new dioceses. In 1938, the Oblates' willingness to accept such challenges already had prompted the Holy See to give the Oblates the cherished accolade which we still accept proudly: "Specialists in the Most Difficult Missions."

Huamelula had 40 or 50 missions. Two parishes made up our mission there, each with many individual missions. If you call the trail a road, there was one open into Huamelula from Salina Cruz. Traveling from Salina Cruz to Tehuantepec, eight to 10 hours was considered good time in dry weather.

But when the rains came, there was no such thing as making good time; we were fortunate if we could pass even in a Jeep. At times, the trip took two days. In 1963, Huamelula had only a trail for four-wheel drive vehicles. The trucks were damaged going in and out. In those days, the sound of a motor brought many people from their homes as a truck roared into a village. Young kids would jump onto the moving truck, which didn't make for easy driving. Some drivers would blow the horn to announce their arrival and departure.

Huamelula is planted with sugar cane and corn. The

rainfall of spring is important for the crops. My stay there was only a year, and I must admit in such a short period of time, there was much I did not know.

Eight pesos was the cost for the eight-hour trip from Huamelula to Salina Cruz. In good weather, it was a seven-hour drive, with all the heat and dust thrown in free, to say nothing of having to ride the rough trail. The Jeep was loaded with chickens, fish, flowers, clothes and lots of other things. Those who could not pay had to walk. Sometimes we were looking at a day and a half. At the end of the 1970's, roads finally were put in.

Now buses, trucks and cars of various sizes are able to travel in shorter time. Bridges were built, making travel possible year around. Needless to say, it is no longer a novelty for a truck to arrive or leave town.

Priestly ministry moves along with changes. Priests are able to move rather quickly from pueblo to pueblo. It is not uncommon for some to celebrate six Masses in different places in one day, but at the same time, a priest can leave his own home in the morning and return there to sleep at night.

## Tequixistlán

After that, I went to Tequixistlán. I had spent about 10 or 12 days in the mountains in December 1963. To my surprise, while coming from the rest of the pueblos on December 23, I received a telegram from my superior, Fr. Bill Nash, OMI, asking me to be in my new place at Tequixistlán, Tehuantepec, Oaxaca, by Christmas Day.

The best I could manage was to leave Huamelula on New Year's Day 1964. On my trip into Salina Cruz, I celebrated Mass, heard confessions and spent the night in a pueblo. After Mass the next morning, I took the jeep into Salina Cruz. Fr. George La Liberte drove me to my new parish.

Tequixistlán is very different from Huamelula. The Dominican Fathers started the parish of Tequixistlán in the 1700's when the Spanish arrived in Mexico. The Oblates were given this parish around 1960. Fr. Joe Mosel, OMI, the first priest, had difficulties at times. Perhaps the people did not understand what the new American priest was about in building a new home. Needless to say, there were many difficulties. Fr. Richard Philion, OMI, arrived in 1963 to help Fr. Mosel. I replaced Fr. Mosel in 1964 and remained in Tequixistlán until 1969.

We served that and two other parishes, each having about 35 or more missions. Most of these were in the mountains, and there were no roads. Travel was by mule or horseback. We spent one day at a time and one visit at a time in each place. Besides the fiestas of each village and pueblo, we tried to maintain contact with every place.

Meetings with other Oblates and priests occurred about once a month. During the rainy season, many times the long trip was not made. One year, I spent 40 days in the mountains without ever seeing another priest. Most of the time, there was no communication among us. We felt it was a great advance to have an old telephone for awhile. The phone would reach San Carlos Yautepec, but it was a leftover from World War II. Most of the time, the line would break and that was the end of a call. To send someone on foot to San Carlos took a whole day. You can say it was pretty much isolated.

On some Friday afternoons, we had religion classes for young children. The classes were called in Spanish *doctrina* (doctrine). In the Jeep pickup truck, I took children from Las Majadas to El Camaron to join another group of children.

After the class one afternoon, I returned to Las Majadas with the children. Ten or 12 of them rode in the back. In Las Majadas, they climbed out of the truck. A man was waiting there with three or four small bales of dried corn.

Without saying a word, he began to load the truck with the corn plants. I didn't appreciate people loading the truck without saying anything. I didn't know where they were going. I was not in a good mood. Climbing out of the truck, I said to the man, "*Por favor, quita todo el saquite de la camioneta, y no preguntaste nada.*" (Take the plants out of the truck. You didn't ask permission). The man replied, "*Pero Padre, es un regalo para sus caballos*" (But Father, it's a gift for your horses). I had two horses. I learned a lesson that day. I asked the man's pardon, realizing that I shouldn't be so quick to judge. I realized I had some more matter to prepare for my next confession.

When I arrived in Tehuantepec, the Second Vatican Council had already brought changes to other parts of the world, but they were just starting in this part of Mexico.

We were assisted in our ministry by many dedicated men and women whom we called *catequistas*, or

catechists, who took responsibility to educate others in the Catholic faith and prepare them for Baptism, First Communion and Confirmation.

Tequixistlán is a municipio inhabited mainly by poor families. It has a government and a president. In the whole area, they had no full-time priests and no doctor when I arrived in 1964. Father Richard Philion, OMI, and I did as much as we could to help the people. A few people were taken to a small hospital in Salina Cruz, but sometimes, people died.

This creates many problems for the poor. If they die in the hospital, the bodies must be taken to the municipio to obtain permission to move them to a pueblo. First, a casket must be bought, and it was not cheap. Then their families had to make a trip to the municipio, and there was always a large fee to get permission to move a body out of the city. There was no embalming. You can appreciate the necessity to move bodies quickly in the severe heat of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. Often, the poor were not given the bodies of their deceased loved ones because they had no money. So what did the poor do?

It was common to take very sick persons out of the hospital and allow them to die in a home, thus avoiding the municipio. The difficulty was to get someone with a pickup to move the body back to the pueblo of his or her birth. This is where I learned a new and important pastoral ministry – and also the scriptural injunction, "Bury the dead." Sometimes I became a "night rider." For the very poor, on many occasions I carried dead bodies in the cab of the Jeep, with a relative of the deceased holding the body as if it were someone sleeping. Sometimes, another priest would accompany me, but most often I was the only priest and driver.

## Quiechapa

In 1969, I was asked to be pastor of the parish of San Pedro Martir in Quiechapa, Yautepec, Oaxaca. The parish is high in the mountains and has 16 missions. The Chontal Indians are a very humble people.

The Dominicans' history mentions Quiechapa in the 17<sup>th</sup> century as having very docile people. The pueblo of Quiechapa was called the Paris of the region. One can find fruits like peaches and apples. Beans and corn are the diet. There are animals such as horses, donkeys, mules and chickens. It is about 6,000 feet above sea level, and the climate is very cool. It's cold in the winter months, and the houses do not have

windows to keep the cold out. In the 1960's, most houses were adobe with roofs made from the trees. Fire was always a problem. There was no electricity until the mid-1970's.

Rain was abundant from June to October. One of the greatest blessings of Quiechapa is the abundance of water. Cold water from the mountain above flowed through the pueblo all the time. The pueblo is very proud of this. The people love their church and are different from those of the low lands. The men in the parish go to Mass in greater numbers.

During my years in Tequixistlán, my brother, Mike, was a student at the De Mazenod Scholasticate [now Oblate School of Theology] in San Antonio. He spent some time with me. After he was ordained Father Michael Pfeifer, OMI, on Dec. 21, 1964, he came to Mexico. This was a blessing because of all the help he obtained for the missions.

Later, from 1981-85, Father Michael was our provincial for the Southern U.S. province and for Mexico. On July 26, 1985, he was ordained a bishop and thus became the first Oblate bishop ordained in the United States. As I write this, he is in his 23<sup>rd</sup> year as bishop of San Angelo, Texas. Bishop Michael has a great love and concern for the Mexican province and its missions.

### **Vatican II Comes to Quiechapa**

In the mission of San Pedro Martir, Quiechapa, Vatican II had begun. After my arrival, we sent six catechists into one of the large pueblos to accompany the formation of catechists. The catechists were four ladies and two men. They were to help prepare the people for some of the changes into Spanish. My plan was to go to the pueblo after two weeks and dedicate my day to Mass, baptisms, marriages and confessions. At the same time, I would visit the pueblo and look for possible catechists.

When I arrived in the village, many in the pueblo were sick, including most of the catechists. While I was there, about 28 people died, including children 12 and 14 years of age. None of the children were vaccinated in those days. There were no doctors and there was no medication. I did as much as possible. I sent back to Quiechapa for a box of 200 tetracycline and aspirin. My days were taken up with caring for the sick and burying the dead. I became doctor for the pueblos.

One day while many were burying the dead, the

presidente and a commission of men came to me. They wanted to know if it was considered some kind of sin to bury more than one person in a grave. After speaking and assuring them it was not a sin and nothing would happen to them, they began burying three people in already used graves. The people used no boxes for burial. The dead were wrapped in something made of palm leaves.

Little by little, the catechists returned to health. When better, they went home weak and would return another day. We had Mass and asked God's blessing for all. The day I left, the people were very grateful. They played music and wanted to know when I could return. We returned another day, and many days more, to them and the other communities to continue working. Thanks to the funds my brother and Father Gus Petru had sent, we were able to obtain more medication. We couldn't have obtained any without their help.

I reported to the health officials in Salina Cruz the number of children who had died. They gave us the infant vaccines which we had to carry for days and make sure they were kept cold. The vaccines were useless if they became warm. Ice was always a problem, so we moved as fast as possible on horseback.. This was 40-some years ago. Thank God, conditions have improved since then. Two nurses worked with us for several months.

In 1970, we had a young doctor, Yolanda Cruz Alcazar of Oaxaca, with us for a year, just out of medical school and paid for by the Oblates. She worked with the people of the pueblo caring for the sick and preparing others to help. I learned much from Doctora Yolanda. After a year, she went back to study and become an anesthesiologist.

Years later, she was teaching in medical school. For many years, I sent special cases to her, and she either cared for them herself or channeled them to other doctors without charge. Doctora Yolanda knew what poverty was. I gave her many thanks and blessings. Sometimes on her own vacation time, she came back and cared for the sick in Quiechapa, always without charge. In 1972, we built a small clinic with six rooms and a bath. Besides caring for the sick from all the pueblos, we delivered hundreds and hundreds of babies, many of whom are now in their 40's.

We helped string electrical wires and improve the roads. The government promised to provide electricity if the people of Quiechapa would dig the post holes. The government brought the materials,

including the huge spools of wires that were rolled up the mountain, and provided dynamite for the holes. I carried boxes of dynamite in the back of the pickup truck. Today, you can't get dynamite like that. Only the government has access to it.

There were many things to occupy a missionary's days – Masses, confessions, baptisms, marriages and visits to the sick. Meetings and time are important to catechists, and difficulties are always present. In days past, all this could take two days. The sick needed medication, and there were babies to be delivered, all without electric lights. Candles or lanterns were the only light. The dirt floor was covered at times with paper. The ladies are very patient; they suffer, but do not show much pain. Life has been very difficult for them.

Once, three male catechists were asked to attend a meeting with other catechists of the diocese. This would take a good week. It required a day's walking to the meeting place and another day for the return trip. The other days were spent in studies with the bishop and other catechists. This was June, when everyone was waiting and preparing to plant corn.

I was amazed that the men went to the meeting and would miss the first planting of corn. They said nothing to me. Later I found out that it had rained. The catechists had arranged for others to plant their corn while they were gone. Thank the Lord there was enough rain and time for the others to plant their corn. The blessed corn would keep them alive during the tough months ahead. Others also planted for the poorest and sickest. These acts of charity prompted me to reflect on my own life. The Lord speaks in many ways.

On another occasion, a family was chosen to celebrate the parish's patronal feast day. But a terrible fire had started in the house a day before the celebration. Many men and women took it upon themselves to fix the house, working hard both day and night and even painting it. The family was saved embarrassment and had the house ready to celebrate the feast and give others to eat. These were the days of calm and peace in Quiechapa.

### **Trouble Comes to the Mountains**

But that was about to change. Trouble was brewing, though it didn't happen all at once.

In the early 1980's, drug cartels began moving their operations from northern Mexico to the remote mountain valleys in the state of Oaxaca. There was

quite a temptation for the people to cooperate with the drug lords. Typically, the Zapotec and Chontal Indians in Quiechapa grow just enough food to survive. They have very little to sell in the market, and even if they had a lot, the market is far away and requires transportation that's not readily available. They had no money to buy food, clothing or medicine. But by raising marijuana, they earned 10 times the income they would earn growing corn and beans, and it took a lot less work.

The Indians had little idea of the harm being done in other places by the drug trafficking. Even "Mexico" was a distant place for them. They were the ones who took all the risks in growing poppies and marijuana. The plants grew on the Indians' land, so if the government burned the marijuana, they couldn't grow other crops, and they could be imprisoned and couldn't feed their families.

Visitors from outside our pueblos began coming to visit, mostly at night. Daily flights of small planes came over the area. At night, the lights would go out. Trucks that had not been in the area before were now coming. Machine guns were being introduced in the area, packed in boxes and moved by dollies. I asked some men what the guns were for, but they didn't answer. I knew it could not be for something good.

Problems began. There were murders. Little by little, it became evident what was going on. At first, many people didn't know why the poppies were being grown, but it soon became clear why the planes were in the area. We were on the drug smuggling route. Marijuana can be grown anyplace, but poppies need a cool climate. The mountain climate in Tehuantepec is perfect for growing poppies for heroin.

Some men told me that their cornfields had been taken for the growing of plants to make heroin. Without their consent, water was taken from them. The message was very clear: if anything happened to the heroin plants, these men would be held responsible. They knew very well that this meant they could be killed.

For some years, five seminarians and one Oblate priest came from St. Anthony's High School Seminary in San Antonio each year during their spring break and would spend about three weeks in the missions. Most of the time, they would work in Quiechapa. In early February 1982, just before Lent began, five senior high school seminarians came to us, accompanied by Father Joe Lazor, OMI. We traveled by Jeep pickup from Salina Cruz to Quiechapa.

On a good day, it would be an eight-hour trip. On this day, it seemed at first like a normal daytime trip in the pickup and we were making good time going into the mountains. About 2 p.m., halfway up the 6,000-foot mountain on a very small trail, we came across a heavily loaded truck of freshly cut lumber, probably weighing 10 or 12 tons.

The truck stopped, and three women climbed down from the top of the load of lumber to speak to me. I recognized them. Nervously, they said that in their pueblo, Santo Tomas Yautaptec, a family with small children was being shot at by some men, who were threatening to burn their house down with the family inside.

I was shocked. I told the women to continue on the truck and alert the civil authorities in San Carlos about the situation. We left them and continued up the mountain. About a half hour later, we met another heavily loaded lumber truck, again carrying women on top of the load. Once more, the truck stopped and the ladies climbed down. As before, the women told me that of people and children being shot at and threats to burn the shack with the family in it. Again, I asked them to continue on the truck and report this to the officials in San Carlos. They left on the truck and we continued climbing up the mountain. I was confused, shocked and afraid. I said nothing to Joe or to the boys riding in the back of the Jeep.

My first thought was, "Don't get involved with this dangerous situation." I knew that some families had been burned alive in their houses. By now it was 3 p.m., and we had about another hour of travel up the mountain. We finally arrived at an intersection, from which one road led to Quiechapa and the other to Santo Tomas Yautaptec.

I explained to Father Joe what was happening and told him that I was going to Santo Tomas Yautaptec. I asked the five seminarians to get out of the pickup and to wait for us under the tree. Joe decided to go with me, although I told him he did not have to go because it might be very dangerous. I told the seminarians that, if we did not return by nightfall, they were to go down another small trail to a pueblo, to tell the people there that they were with the padre, and explain what had happened.

Warning Father Joe that it would be dangerous, I asked him to hear my confession, and I prayed: "Have mercy on me, O Lord, and forgive me all my sins. Forgive me all the times I have been inconsiderate to

others. Forgive me for my sins in my past life." Father Joe gave me absolution, and I commended myself to God and our Blessed Lady, Mary.

We had to travel about another 40 minutes on top of the mountain before driving down to the pueblo. About three miles from Santo Tomas, a crew of lumber workers told us they had been hearing shots fired down in the pueblo. I asked if some of them would accompany us down to the pueblo, but they said they could not go. They were not from the area and didn't want to be involved. They were here only to work.

I told them that Father Joe and I were going down to Santo Tomas. They said it was getting late and they wanted to leave. It was around 4 p.m., and our mountain would get dark very quickly. We drove down to the pueblo alone. When we arrived, we found nobody outdoors. Fear enveloped me. I knew people were hiding in houses and would not come out because of fear. The women we had met on the road had said the family being shot at was in the first house on the right as we entered the pueblo. I drove the Jeep slowly and stopped close to the door of that house, but no one appeared.

The poor adobe house had no windows, and only one closed door. As I walked to the door, it began to open. A man stepped halfway outside, calling, "Padre, Padre – pronto, pronto." I was at his side when loud gunshots were fired at him, almost hitting me. He fell backwards inside the shack. I ran inside after him.

Two teen-age boys had been shot and were bleeding, one in the face and the other in the chest. The mother and five young children were all screaming for help. I was terrified. I slipped and fell in the wet blood on the dirt floor. I didn't know what to do. The mother and children were hanging on to me and screaming, "They are going to kill us! They are going to burn us!" I could hardly believe this was happening to me. I knew that if I went outside, I would be shot. There was no choice. I got away from those holding on to me and went out the door.

On trembling legs that could hardly stand, I went to the driver's side, from which the shots had been fired, keeping my hands in the air. I couldn't see these people, who were behind nearby rocks. I called out to them, "In the name of God and the Blessed Virgin, I am the priest and I wish you no harm. There are people inside who are bleeding. In God's name, don't shoot. In God's name, don't shoot." I was beside myself, not knowing what to do.

The pickup had to be turned around. Climbing inside the vehicle, I tried to start the engine, but it was dead. This could not be happening, I thought. This wasn't real. Thank God the truck was on a slight incline. By rolling it a few feet, I got the engine to turn over and start. I backed the truck up to the door. We put a large blanket on the floor on the right side of the truck bed.

We carried out the mother and children, all of them terrified and screaming. Then we put in the three wounded men, still bleeding. I was terrified that we would be shot at. I feared that as soon as we pulled out in the truck, these men would jump on the back and continue shooting the victims. I shouted to Father Joe to jump in the cab and drive the pickup out, and he did, as I stood in the back by the tailgate. I still felt sure they were going to shoot us, but the Lord didn't let it happen. The Virgin Mother of God was working double time.

We moved on up the trail. It was after 5 pm, and the workers were already on their trucks ready to leave. The back of the pickup was a bloody mess. I tried to stop the bleeding with the gauze we had stored in the truck. The wounded men and the family were passed over to the bigger trucks. We moved to our turnoff on the road. The two trucks stopped, and I anointed the wounded men with the holy oils. The father died before arriving in San Carlos. By the next day, the two boys reached the hospital in Oaxaca City and underwent surgery. They eventually healed and later joined the Mexican army.

Meanwhile, when we rejoined the seminarians at the intersection where we'd left them, they were terrified when they saw the wounded victims bleeding. We went to the parish. After two days' rest, they and Father Lazor were taken to one of the pueblos to begin their ministry. Three days later, I was summoned to San Carlos Yautepec to give a statement to the district attorney about the shooting. I thought they wanted a statement about the shooting and the wounded, but they never asked about sending anyone to help us get this family out of danger.

I told them what I had done and then returned to the Mission Quiechapa. For three or four days, I was still filled with adrenalin. When the adrenaline wore off, I became nervous and irritated. I am sorry for the way I spoke to others. My words were not kind. My nerves were shot. This was not my way of living. This was a reaction to the shooting and to what had happened. What helped me in the mountains was my praying. I

had never prayed so much before in my life as I did at this time.

Deaths and drugs continued. Families were warned not to interfere with the planting of marijuana and the poppies for heroin in their fields. At night and alone, people would come to share with me what was happening. The newly elected man in charge of looking after the fields that belonged to the pueblo of Quiechapa would come to see me at night. He revealed to me that he had told some drug lords they could not plant any drugs on the lands belonging to the pueblo. He said he was going to the officials in Oaxaca to report the decision he had taken. Returning from Oaxaca, he came to me one night and asked for help. In Oaxaca, they had told him to be very careful.

Shortly after this, a truck came into the pueblo about 11 pm. They came to the one in charge of watching the lands. Men in the truck told him that the priest wanted to see him. He left with them and the pueblo heard nothing about him for two days. Then they learned he had been taken to another pueblo, tortured and murdered. His wife, seven months pregnant, came to see me and tell me what had happened. Because of fear, not many people went to get his body. Two months later, I delivered her baby, her thirteenth. Now the woman had all these children to care for and her husband had been murdered.

On another occasion, 16 children graduating from sixth grade had to walk, with about six of their fathers, to get pictures taken. They had to walk five hours, then ride a truck for another two hours to arrive at El Camaron on the highway. This was the closest place to get pictures taken. The children between 12 and 14 were graduating. It required one day to go and one day to return.

Returning home to Quiechapa, they were shot at several times in the afternoon on the trail. Some fell and others ran into the brush. Bullets were shot at close range over their heads. When they arrived home, most of the children came to the clinic to be treated for the bruises and cuts from the brush. I asked their fathers who had done this. They said they had been too far away and couldn't see that well. Several children were asked, and they knew who had shot at them: people involved in growing drugs. They were angry because the army had come and destroyed their drugs. This shooting was meant as a warning.

The people were afraid to travel and to go out after dark. The hauling of truckloads of drugs was a daily

event. Every day, planes were flying in with guns and leaving with drugs. The frequent killings of innocent people continued.

In one case, a man and his brother were being sought by the drug cartel. His wife and his five children had left their home in La Baeza in the mountains to hide in El Camaron, which is on the Pan American Highway. I knew the family and had baptized all their children. Sometimes I had eaten in their humble house in La Baeza. One afternoon, the children were left alone at the home in El Camarón. Six vicious killers, all armed with machine guns, went to the house looking for the father and his brother. Not finding the men, they shot the children with their machine guns. Four were riddled with bullets. The baby, sleeping in a chicken basket in the corner, escaped their notice and was the only survivor.

The irony of the shooting was that one of the killers had his wife in the clinic giving birth to a baby. This same killer was responsible for having 19 other men murdered.

I began keeping a list of those who were murdered. Families told me of the names and dates of the murders – and also, many times, the names of those responsible. I began keeping a list of all this information with places, names and dates. When the list grew to 150 incidents, I gave it to the proper authorities in Mexico City.

I advised my superior with the Oblates in Mexico, Padre Gilberto Piñon, OMI, and my provincial in San Antonio, Father Bill Morell, OMI, of everything I was doing, as well as Reverendissimo Arturo Lona Reyes, the bishop of Tehuantepec. They told me to be careful.

Whenever I met with officials in Mexico City, I was accompanied by one or two Oblates. Father Jim Lyons, OMI, was a great support. At times, he would meet me in Oaxaca at a hotel where we would meet with Mexican officials from Mexico City. Fr. Lyons and I would not stay together after the meeting. This was during the time of President Carlos Salinas de Gortari.

My brother, Bishop Michael Pfeifer, OMI, also was aware of what was happening and what I was doing. I myself was very aware of what I was doing and of the risk and danger. Many do not understand my position. My only concern was all those killed and the families they left behind.

I knew that I was risking death by giving information to the government, but the people I had come to serve were risking danger every single day, and they had no way to flee to a place of safety.

I was scared, but I also remembered who had sent me there, and the powerful lesson Jesus had given to every priest in the parable of the Good Shepherd: *The hireling flees when the wolf comes, but the shepherd stays to protect his sheep.* I knew there was danger ahead; the only question was where and when it would strike. It didn't take long to find out.

### Death Comes Near

Sunday, March 8, 1987, started out as a pretty routine day. I celebrated Mass at 8 a.m., ate breakfast, then left in the Jeep for San Carlos Yautepec, arriving about three hours later. I didn't plan to stay for the catechists' monthly meeting, so I told them they could conduct it themselves. I was bound for the city of Oaxaca for an annual retreat.

There were always about 30 catechists present in San Carlos. I visited some sick people in the pueblo, then prepared for the one-hour drive to El Camarón, taking 10 passengers. There, I ate lunch at a friend's restaurant whose owners always had something for the priests and would never accept any money. For many years, they had served all the priests who stopped to rest and eat lunch.

After lunch, I left for Oaxaca, about three hours' drive, and drove alone on the Pan American Highway. I thought about the retreat I was going to make. I had missed the community retreat and now would make a retreat in private. I expected it to be a good week and a good opportunity to rest, being away from the parish. But I never made it to the city that week, and the time was anything but restful.

About an hour's drive out of El Camarón, near Totolapam, the Jeep was climbing high in the mountains when a sudden loud noise startled me. At first I thought the truck had exploded. Then, as pieces fell from the truck's ceiling, I realized that someone had fired at me from the other side of the road. I could smell the gunpowder. My truck continued on the highway as if on its own, and thank God I kept on going.

When I realized that pieces of the roof were falling on my head, I grabbed my rosary to pray. Several miles down the mountain, near some houses, I pulled over

and stopped to examine the truck. Just over my head, I found 12 bullet holes in the roof.

I was near a pueblo, and I saw a government pickup assigned to offer assistance to motorists parked nearby. I stopped and asked the driver if he could call Oaxaca. We went to a little store, where he called his office in Oaxaca, but he got no answer.

Then two buses stopped, each loaded with passengers heading toward Salina Cruz. Seeing the holes in the pickup, some yelled out, "Es el padre!" Then a car I had passed on the road after the shots were fired at my pickup returned with four men in it. They had been held up by six men with machine guns at the same place where I had been shot at. I had seen them pass me but hadn't been able to stop them. They had been traveling too fast, and the curves were very sharp. I couldn't turn around quickly enough to catch up with them.

Other cars stopped to look at my Jeep. When they got several cars and buses together, they left as a group. That night, the news spread quickly about the *padrecito* and his truck having been shot at by drug people.

The next day, the attack was front-page news in Tehuantepec and Salina Cruz. One Mexico City newspaper carried the headline, "Sacerdote Baleado" (Shots Fired at Priest).

I had to continue to the city of Oaxaca, still an hour and a half's distance. Arriving there, I phoned my superior in Mexico City, Padre Gilberto Piñon, OMI. He instructed me to catch a plane to Mexico City the next day if possible. That night, I didn't sleep. I kept hearing the shots over and over again in my mind.

I arose early Monday morning. I had to get the Jeep to the repair shop. Fr. Gilberto had asked me to get pictures of the damaged truck. I left the truck in the shop, got the pictures taken and caught an afternoon flight to Mexico City. Fr. Gilberto was leaving by plane for San Antonio, Texas, and took the pictures with him. He also had some of the bullets that had been fired at the truck and had fallen out at the repair shop.

I didn't sleep that night, either. Tuesday morning, I went early to the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe and went to confession. Then I sat down to ponder the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe. I have no idea how long I spent looking there. I cried, and I said to her, "Mary, my Mother, please tell me what to do. I

must know." Inside, I was hearing, "*Don't be afraid. Go back to the pueblos. I am your Mother.*"

For some time more, I sat there, still crying. Then I returned to the Guadalupe (Provincial House). I phoned my brother, Bishop Michael, to let him know what had happened and what I wanted to do.

That Thursday morning, I was up by 4 a.m. and was ready to go back to Oaxaca after celebrating Mass. When I got there, the truck was ready. Again at 4 a.m., I left by Jeep for Quiechapa, traveling over the same road where I had been shot at. I prayed nervously as I traveled, thinking all kinds of thoughts: *What if they're waiting in the same place?* I stopped in San Carlos Yautepec. There were some men looking out, but they said nothing. I still had three hours to drive alone up the mountain.

In Quiechapa, when I arrived, no one said anything. They had heard of the shooting on the radio. Sometimes, the news travels faster on foot. Only one lady in her late 80's came to visit me. She said in her poor Spanish, "*Supe que usted sufrio un atrase en el camino*" (I know something happened to you on the road). When she left, I cried.

Saturday evening, I was blessed. My companion, Fr. Ernest Liekens, OMI, arrived on horseback after spending more than a week in some of our remote missions. That evening, I shared with him privately what had happened to me.

On Sunday morning, there were some children making their First Communion, but I don't remember much of what I said at the Mass. At the end, I asked the congregation to sit down. I began to explain what had happened to me on the road. All were very quiet and had faces down. As I began to share what had happened to me, many began to cry. I cannot remember if my people had ever seen their old priest cry before. This time, they saw and heard me cry. They knew very well what had happened. Out of respect, they were afraid to say anything. But our tears spoke for us.

The next day was Monday. After morning Mass, about 9 a.m., the church bells began ringing. They rang again a half hour later, and again at 10 a.m. I looked out the window and saw men and women gathering in front of the municipio – the town hall. Our house bell rang. The president and other town leaders respectfully asked Fr. Ernesto and me to accompany them to the meeting.

The president said to me, “We are aware and understand you suffered a shock on the highway this past week on your trip to Oaxaca. We know they wanted to do you harm.” Everyone was silent. After being quiet for a time, I was able to speak.

“Thank you for your presence and concern,” I said. My voice was not very clear as I continued.

“There is something I must ask you. Is my living here the cause and reason for them to come and hurt some of you? Please tell me and I will leave.”

But they said, “No, please stay with us.” My voice was already cracking. I was crying, and many of them shed tears with me. This encouraged me very much.

The days, and especially the nights, were rough times for me, as I always wondered, “Are they coming again?” I was driving the Jeep on bad trails, thinking they could be anywhere.

I had started carrying a small piece of a consecrated Host in a very small waterproof tin in my shirt. *Dear Lord*, I said, *If I go down, we both go down*. I felt better this way. Our dear Lord understood what was happening. At home and in the pueblos, sleeping at night, I moved away from the doorways. My time in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament was my support.

At this time, something occurred to me: *Many of the people I served have been shot at and some murdered. I am no better than they are. Why should this happen to them but not to their priest? Who am I that this should not happen to me?*

*The Scripture tells us about the hireling shepherd who runs away when the wolf comes instead of protecting the sheep.*

*When something serious happens to me, I can leave and go to someplace safe. But when something dangerous happens in the lives of the people, they have no place to go that is secure.*

I felt closer to them at this time than at any other time during my ministry there. Why should the priest be special and safe? I felt that all my life and everything I had done was in preparation for this moment.

In May, 1987, two months after the ambush, my brother and Father Bill Morell, provincial of the Oblates’ Southern U.S. province, met with United States

House Speaker Jim Wright and U.S. Congressmen Henry B. Gonzalez and Albert Bustamante, who represent San Antonio. Outlining the critical drug situation in Oaxaca, they asked these Congressional leaders to pressure the Mexican government to do more to stop the drug trafficking in Quiechapa.

As a result of this effort, Speaker Wright wrote a letter to Mexican President Miguel de la Madrid, bringing the situation to his attention. The letter read in part:

*“The incident involved Father Francis Theodore Pfeifer, who is serving as a Roman Catholic missionary in Quiechapa, State of Oaxaca. According to newspaper accounts and the enclosed letter from church leaders, Father Pfeifer narrowly escaped death in an attempted ambush when his automobile was shot at by individuals presumed to be involved with narcotics. For the past several years, Father Pfeifer has been telling his parishioners to resist drug traffickers.*

*“The Church has asked me to appeal to your administration in the hope that law enforcement in Oaxaca can be increased and that Father Pfeifer, who has completed nearly 25 years of dedicated service to missionary work in Mexico, can be given greater protection. It certainly appears that his life is in danger.”*

Archbishop (now Cardinal) Pio Laghi, then the Apostolic Pro-Nuncio to the United States, also joined in the effort to seek the Mexican government’s cooperation. In a May 27, 1987, letter to the Mexican ambassador to the United States, Jorge Espinosa De Los Reyes, Archbishop Laghi said he had received a visit from my brother, Bishop Michael Pfeifer, OMI, seeking his advice on the problem.

*“All agree this violence comes from the powerful criminal elements of the region, who resent the leadership he gives to his people in encouraging them not to cooperate in the dreadful drug commerce,” the pro nuncio wrote, adding:*

*“Needless to say, Bishop Pfeifer is very concerned about the safety of his brother, and I share such concern. I promised him that I would bring this matter to the attention of Your Excellency, and seek your advice and assistance.”*

I spent six more years in Quiechapa serving the people. Murders were still frequent, and heroin was still being grown.

So many people had been killed that we had asked the killers' families to turn in their weapons to us. I had collected about 12 automatic rifles and pistols. The arms had one thing in common: all had been used to murder others.

What were we to do with all these weapons? We found a solution. One Sunday morning, the church was crowded before Mass. From the sacristy, I approached the altar and asked the congregation to leave the church and gather in the front yard. They did.

Two large fires had been started there. When all were present, Fr. Ernesto and I arrived with two large gunny sacks containing the rifles. We dropped the sacks on the ground, where all could see that they contained guns. We had four large sledge hammers.

I asked the people to sing the hymn, "Miserere Nobis" (Have mercy on us). After the singing, I said, "These weapons have been used to murder your fathers, your sons and your women.

"As a protest against these murders, I have invited you to destroy the guns with the sledge hammers and then to burn the pieces in the fire," I told the congregation. "They will kill no one again. I will be the first to destroy, then Padre Ernesto." All the men and women were invited to do the same. The fires were now red-hot. I picked up a sledge hammer and smashed an automatic rifle, then threw it into the fire. Padre Ernesto followed.

The women were the first parishioners to come forward. Some were relatives of the murder victims. A few men came at first, then more. During the destruction of the guns, we sang the "Miserere Nobis." Then we formed a procession, marching around the yard and then into the church to start Sunday Mass. Nobody said anything to me. It was a quiet day.

Some days later, the army came into Quiechapa. The *capitan* asked people where the weapons were that had been used to kill people. They said they had been given to the priests but not to bother looking for them, adding: "*El padre los destruyó antes de la Misa del Domingo.*" (Father destroyed them before Mass on Sunday). I was expecting another visit from the *capitan*, but he never came. Again, nothing was ever said.

Sometimes, the generosity and courage of these simple people is amazing. One day, I heard the church bells ringing. It must have been around 3 p.m. – a

strange time, I thought, to be ringing the bells, but it was signaling an emergency.

A murderer was angry at me for having spoken out against the killings and the violence. On the high side of the pueblo, many women had gathered to stop him as he walked toward the church with his rifle.

The women stopped him and sent word to me not to go outside my home until he left the area. Perhaps he had been drinking or was on drugs. In any event, he left and did no harm to me, but I was afraid. Those brave ladies remained until he left.

A few stories further illustrate the sad situation in Quiechapa.

Preparation for marriage is almost always a happy occasion, but the preparation of "Gloria" and "Fidencio" ended in great sadness. They lived in the small village of La Baeza. The preparation day began as a happy day for all. The remote village was three hours' walk from San Carlos Yautepec. This was the Sunday, making the final day a week before the wedding. A small fiesta was in progress Sunday morning.

During the celebration, 12 men from another village arrived uninvited. All had AK-47 automatic assault rifles. They joined the party, ate, and after the meal, began shooting into the crowd, killing seven guests – six men and a lady – and wounding several others.

The bride was wounded in the head. Some of the dead were relatives of the bride and the groom. Everyone fled from the small ranch. The bodies of the dead were left for two days. The police came, and all the bodies were buried on the ranch. The officials did nothing to search for the killers.

A week later, the following Sunday, I had a meeting of catechists in San Carlos Yautepec. The wives and families of the victims came to see me and requested Mass for the dead. They could not return to the ranch which had been their home. They knew and revealed the names of most of the killers. Government authorities were also given the names. The ranch remained abandoned for many months. Most of the victims' relatives stayed away out of fear.

The last time I visited the ranch, only three people lived there. It was another ghost town. The only noise I heard was the wind howling over the small graveyard. I blessed the graves after praying for God's mercy and then left on my good horse, "Chis Pas."

From time to time, I would meet some of the wives and families in their new location. The stories were the same. There was fear and the local officials had done nothing. They always requested prayers, Masses and blessings, and much holy water.

After much waiting, the officials still did nothing. These people were poor, and this was the recompense of the poor. The whole area was controlled by powerful drug lords. The victims' families had not cooperated with them and so were eliminated.

On a happier note, the young bride, after moving to a different place, came to visit me. She was married and had five beautiful children – three boys and two girls. Gloria said to me, "*Padre, quisas no se acuerda per Usted me bautizó en mi pueblo cuando yo tenia meces de nacer*" (Father, perhaps you do not remember that you baptized me when I was only a few months old"). She saw me cry that day in front of her small children. When she was shot, I had sutured her face. The large scar will always remain with her. Her children are all teenagers now.

"Gloria" and "Rafael" (not their real names) were both born in the mountains of Oaxaca. At an early age, they had been sent away from their mountain village and raised mostly by relatives living in Oaxaca City or Mexico City. As a child, Gloria lived and mixed with different individuals, and from time to time visited the mountains, so I got to know her through the years. Now grown, she had come to visit me.

Our water, which is rich and very cold, came from under a high mountain as it had for centuries past. She explained that she had sought help from some men to bring the water to a new level so that more land could be used to plant corn and beans. Many people were interested in bringing water to the new area. We had called various meetings to study the new water supply. Gloria had brought a new tractor, the first I knew of in the area.

The new field and water supply was far from the parish. From time to time, I asked how the new area was progressing and was told after several months that it was growing a good crop of corn and beans.

Gloria had a three-ton truck and was hauling out the corn and beans, selling them in Mexico City and Oaxaca City. When I asked why the corn and beans were always hauled out at night, they said it was because it was cooler then.

One day, the government plane began to spray the new fields. They were full of heroin plants. Once the area was sprayed, it was difficult to grow any other plants for some time. I had encouraged the people to develop the new fields to grow corn and beans.

Gloria's life did not end well. The army had stopped her, and she was in jail. A new tractor was lost and a couple of new trucks and cars were removed. She had lots of money and friends. Her jail time was short and soon she was living with one of the drug lords in Mexico City. One day, her mother received word that Gloria had been murdered in Mexico City. Her body was returned to her pueblo, where Mass was celebrated for her. Her body was blessed and laid to rest with all the poor.

Rafael had also grown to adulthood. He drove a new truck and made many night trips. He was armed with pistols, and one day he had shot and killed three men. When Fr. Ernest Liekens and I returned from a retreat, we were told he had shot and killed three men. He said it was self-defense. He had been cutting into another drug cartel's territory.

One day, Fr. Liekens and I were returning from a meeting with Bishop Arturo Lona Reyes. We had left at 4 a.m. with a loaded Jeep pickup and arrived in the parish at the top of the mountains around 3 p.m. We were worn out, so after unloading the truck, we lay down to rest.

A half-hour later, we heard a loud knock. It was Rafael's mother. She said, "In God's name, come quick. Rafael, my son, has been shot and is very bad off." Leaving with her, we walked to a house on the edge of town. The door was open and Rafael lay on the floor, bleeding and with part of his face missing. I said, "Rafael, you are dying. Please, let me confess you and give you the holy oils." He made the motions and received the sacraments in the presence of his mother.

His mother begged me to take Rafael to his house. He would be safer there than where he was. Only one person wanted to help me carry him. Several brave ladies helped, and we carried Raul to another place. We were warned that he would be shot again.

Fr. Ernest walked on one side of the wounded Rafael and I on the other side. He was still conscious. Shots were being fired into the air, warning us that we were being watched. In Rafael's house, we started him on an IV solution. He was losing a great deal of blood. Our nurses remained with him all night

behind locked doors. The following morning, the Lord called Rafael.

When the men waiting to shoot him again heard the church bells calling out that he had died, they fired shots into the air. They left town on horseback and fired more shots celebrating their “victory.”

We buried Rafael in the little cemetery next to his sister, Gloria. The church was packed for his funeral Mass the next afternoon. I believe that many attended to hear their priest talk about all Rafael had done. During the Mass, I said nothing. After the blessing, I asked the congregation to be seated. I said we were burying Rafael. My own reflection was to ask myself what was it in my own life that had failed to help Rafael in his journey in life instead of talking about what he had done. How could I have been kinder and more helpful to him? I told them I believed each of them could ask the same question of themselves.

There was complete silence. Then we went to the little cemetery to bury him. The same merciful God who called and judged Gloria and her brother Rafael is the same merciful God who will call and judge me. May they rest in peace.

Except for the grace of God, there go I.

Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.

### **Mexico City**

By 1994, I had been on the Isthmus of Tehuantepec for many years. I had served at San Pedro Huamelula, Tequixistlán and Quiechapa. Finally, my superior, Fr. Vincent Louwagie, OMI, said it was time for me to move. I was not a young man anymore. It was with difficulty that I left my people on the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. Then I realized that the life of a missionary is to serve and then to move on.

A three- month retreat in Aix, France, was good for me. Our founder, Bishop St. Eugene de Mazenod had lived there. Then I returned to Mexico and was assigned to Mexico City. Everything was different. I had never lived or served there. I thought I would be there maybe a few months and then move on. Again, the Lord had other plans in store.

I served in one of the city’s largest parishes, Cristo Salvador y Senor, for almost 13 years, and I loved every day of it. There was daily Mass. On Sundays were my three celebrations, frequent visits to the sick

and the dying and many calls to bury the dead. There was time to listen to others and their life situations. After the celebration of Mass, I felt the Sacrament of Confession or Reconciliation was of most help to so many. Every day of the week, I heard confessions – sometimes for two hours a day. Weekends of Saturday and Sunday there was three hours each. During Lent, at Easter and at Christmastime, there were hours and hours.

Saturday was our time for baptisms. There were 12 or 15 or 20 or 25 each week. My days were complete. Sometimes, there were moments to spend with two other Oblates in the parish. So passed the time and the years in the parish of Cristo Salvador y Senor in Mexico City.

I said, “Ted, give the Lord a chance; He can do wonderful things.”

At first, I felt I should not make close friendships with anyone. That way, when I took leave of the parish, it would not be so difficult. But that was not a Christian attitude. The Lord has his own way of healing. Again, I found the same opportunity to serve and also to help many in their walk through life.

### **These Are My Thoughts**

Dear Lord,

Who am I? My dear God, what am I? I am created your servant. My God, I am only doing what you have already given me. In your glory and kindness, you have granted this servant your magnificent goodness to serve and to love you.

Thank you for the years you have granted me to serve your poor and abandoned. Thank you for the gifts you have loaned me. Thank you for each servant I have met on my journey through life. These thoughts I wish to express.

I ask your pardon and forgiveness for all my sins. I ask your forgiveness for not helping those who needed my time and help. Your forgiveness I beg for those whom I have given less than a good example. After such great kindness shown to me, I have been slow to pardon.

Begging you with humility, I ask pardon for all of those who have done evil to others and to me. May God pardon all of those who have murdered your sons and daughters. May they repent and also merit

your divine pardon. O dear Lord, you will call all of us, you will call me. Have mercy on us. Had they received all the graces you have given to me, they would have used them better. Dear Lord and Blessed Mary, Mother of God, thank you for my life.

The greatest love ever shown to me was by a poor Indian lady advanced in years. She was close to 80 years of age. One night about 10 p.m., some men went to her shack intending to shoot and kill two men they thought were hiding in her shack.

The woman opened her door in response to their pounding. They shot her several times and left her to die. I heard the shots. About 20 minutes later, two ladies came to call me. Senora Gloria had been shot and was bleeding all over. Could I please come?

I went with them and a good man, Rafael. Her body was full of blood, but she was still alive. We were afraid of the men who had shot her. They were somewhere close by. We carried her down to the little clinic. She was moaning and crying in pain.

We tried to help her at the clinic with great effort as she kept calling, "Padre, Padre, Padre." I said, "I am here," as I continued administer the holy oil. "I am here," I continued. She said, "Padre, Padre, I forgive them."

A few minutes later, God called her to heaven. This was Jesus Christ calling out to God, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they are doing."

**Francis Theodore Pfeifer, O.M.I.**

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