

Leaving all that is familiar – your home, your family and friends, and your culture – creates an environment that encourages profound reflection, new perspectives and personal transformation, says Fr. John Franck, A.A. '70. For many of the hundreds of Assumption students and alumni who have participated in the College's annual Mexico Mission trips, those changes have lasted a lifetime. This year the Mexico Mission program is celebrating its 25th anniversary.

"The Mexico Mission has been so extraordinarily successful because it provides an opportunity to deepen one's faith, one's understanding of self and others and one's appreciation of another culture," said Fr. John, vice chair of Assumption's College's Board of Trustees and a veteran of nine Mexico Mission trips. "Students experience a deep sense of community based on shared work and play, shared insights and shared faith. In advance of their trip, the participants coordinate fundraising efforts, then, after commencement, they travel and live together for two weeks. As missionaries, they come to realize Assumption's worldwide community when they experience the warm hospitality of the religious of the Assumption and the Assumptionists of Mexico at Basilica of our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City."



An important partner in the Mexico Mission program has been the V. Eugene and Rosalie DeFreitas Charitable Foundation, which has provided funds for the program to make the two-week trip affordable to students from all economic backgrounds. Over the past 12 years, the DeFreitas Foundation has supported the Mexico Mission program with grants totaling $160,000, providing our students with a unique third-world learning experience that enriches

their own faith while they serve others.

In 1986, then-Assumption Campus Minister Sr. Cecilia Hervas, R.A., brought students and staff to San Ildefonso in Mexico for the first time on what would be become the College's annual Mexico Mission. Holding true to the motto, "Our Mission is People," Campus Ministry completed its 25th Mexico Mission trip in May. "

Our brief stay on the inaugural trip was our immersion in the life of one of the most marginalized people of Mexico," said Sr. Cecilia. "As we lived those two weeks, our eyes were opened to the unsuspected treasures of the Otomi people. In their simplicity and poverty, they became our teachers. Their simple faith, their love for God and their devotion to La Morenita (the Dark one - our Lady of Guadalupe) spilled over into their daily life. We learned to sing their songs rooted in their experience as a people of God. By the end of our time we called each other by name, as we had become friends."

This year nine students made the trip, led by Vinnie Sullivan- Jacques, campus minister, and Bea Patino-Mancuello, area coordinator in the residential life office. "By attending Mass at the Basilica on our first day, the students were quickly able to witness the local culture and religion and get a sense of the strength of their faith," Sullivan- Jacques said.

Beyond introspection while immersed in another culture, the mission experience focuses on manual labor and interactions with local families and neighborhood children. Working together fosters a powerful spirit of community and solidarity. The tasks completed during the stay do not permanently change the places visited, but they change each student and connect them with their host communities.

"We accomplished some heavy manual labor during our stay to improve the worship space of a local chapel," said Sullivan-Jacques. "Members of the community treated us like honored guests."

The prominent role of faith transforms the mission experience into a life-changing event. The group celebrates Mass each evening and shares reflections on what they encountered during the day's work and play. "These experiences are transformative for many students," Fr. John explained. "They discover people with whom they work who, in spite of their poverty and their

lack of access to so many benefits available in the U.S., are joyful, grateful for the little they have, and filled with a gritty, tangible faith that is often startling. So many stereotypes are shattered. They show students that differences in education, socioeconomic standing, or ethnic background are secondary to other matters such as character, faith, family and friendship. Many students return committed to living a much simpler and more 'awakened' life."

After her first Mexico Mission trip in 2008, Rebecca Petty '10 changed her plans. Though she had been planning an upcoming semester abroad in England, her trip to Mexico convinced her to switch her study abroad location to Chile, where she could continue to practice her spanish. She finished her degree requirements a semester early to spend two months living in Peru and went on this year's Mexico trip as well.

"It literally changed my perspective on life, shocking me out of my small world perspective," she said. "It was amazing. I was able to communicate and form lasting friendships with the community members. Now, I have a renewed sense of excitement for my work as an Associate Missionaries of the Assumption volunteer in new Mexico beginning in August, and i can't wait to experience Mexican culture at work in the United States."

In addition to Campus Ministry, several faculty and staff members have participated in the Missions over the years. Laurie MacMath-Costigan, Ph.D. '91, a psychologist who works with underserved populations, participated in the 1989 and 1990 missions. She has been a guest lecturer at Assumption in the counseling psychology program.

"My Mexico Mission experience is present in my mind every day when i look at pictures of children I met there, which are displayed on my office wall," MacMath-Costigan said. "The Mission had a profound effect on my career choice, making it clear in my mind that I wanted to do something that provided assistance to those in need."

One lesson of many lessons that still resonate today is how often "when we think we are helping others, they are really the ones teaching us," MacMath-Costigan said.

"I learned how deeply faith can impact people and how resilient human beings can be, no matter what their plight," she said. "I also learned to appreciate all that I have and make it a priority to help others in need whenever possible. While these are only a few of the things I

gained from my Mission experience, they are lessons that have had a profound impact on my life. The pictures in my office serve as a reminder of what I learned and also of the great joy that came from being welcomed into the Otomi culture and community.”

Fr. John is not surprised by how deeply each of the participants has been affected by their experience over the past quarter century. “In so many ways, the Mexico Mission reinforces what an Assumption education is all about: transforming minds and hearts".

Mexico Mission’s 25th Anniversary - PDF version.

By Troy Watkins

Assumption College Magazine