

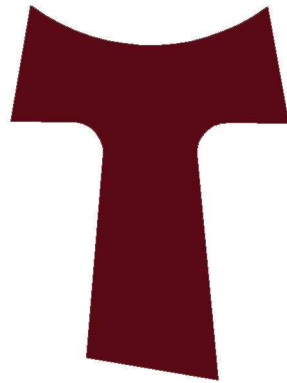
On one of several trips that I have made across the border to work with the poor of Mexico, I, and a small band of faith-filled activists from the Grand Valley, found ourselves living in cardboard boxes and tin shacks on a windy, cold and wet hillside above the Mexican border town of Nogales. We were in what most people in the United States would call a shanty town, a ghetto or a slum, but here the indigenous people refer to it as a colonia, a colony of poor squatters. We had come to this so called Third World environment, less than a mile from the Arizona border, to work with the locals in the building, repairing and improving a stretch of rocky, dirt road winding through the small, hastily thrown together colonia. The hard and dirty work was just one of the many reasons that had lured us to Nogales. We wanted to live and work with the poorest of the poor. We each had our own reasons for being there, but if pressed for an explanation as to why we voluntarily became one with the world's poor, I think our answers would best be expressed in phrases such as solidarity, with the poor; doing the right thing; etc. For me, it was simply, walking the walk. Of course, where we were was not one of the more popular tourist towns of Mexico. Why is it that multinational corporations, most of whom are based in the United States, have built large assembly plants in border towns like Matamores and Nogales? Why is it that these large factory buildings,

called maquiladoras, are poorly lit and poorly ventilated sweat shops that would not be tolerated in our country. And why can these companies pay their workers less than \$5.00 for a 10-hour day when a visit to the local grocery store clearly reveals that such meager wages could not possibly provide a decent standard of living for one person, let alone a whole family? And why do these factories have an employee turnover rate of 75% in a town where people are so very desperate for work, while the luxurious high rise offices and apartments of the managers/CEOs and their families, sit overlooking the shanties and homes of the underpaid workers? Do the CEOs really think that because a man or woman is poor and unskilled, he or she should sacrifice their health and dignity in order to survive? In spite of all of this, these "poor" people, among whom we lived and worked with for a few short days, were not only tolerant of us, they were genuinely open and loving toward us. Was it possible they understood what was in our hearts and accepted us as brothers and sisters, willing to share the cup of compassion? And why is it the celebration of the Eucharist, in the form of a flour tortilla, blessed, broken and shared by 30 unwashed souls huddled together against the night wind in a small and poorly lit shanty situated on a rain-soaked hillside in one of the many countless and forgotten colonias of this hurting world could seem so perfectly right and yes, holy. Did we

actually remember that this is the way it once was, people broken and hurting, coming together in union with each other and their God, to share their common faith? As Christians standing in solidarity with the poor, could we have been anymore aware of the real presence of Christ in our midst? And did our small group accomplish anything physical during our trip to Nogales. Well, there is a stretch of dirt road in a settlement that is better than it was before. And with cooperation and more hard work with pick and shovels, someday the water tank trucks will be able to negotiate that road, bringing drinkable water to the colonia. Other than that, I can't say we accomplished much. But I like to think that we planted a seed of hope among our neighbors. And I do know that for a brief moment in time, we had done the right thing, we had actually participated in God's work. Now, I ask only that I never become indifferent to the sufferings endured by so many of our brothers and sisters throughout the world and to always be attentive to the needs of others, placing their needs before my own.

As always,
PEACE!
Bob Borchardt, sfo
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*Let them esteem
work both as a
gift and as
sharing in the
creation,
redemption, and
service of the
human
community.
Article 16*



Working

With

the

Poor