



**First Marist  
Community  
in Mexico  
3-10-1981**



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## *First Community in Mexico (1981)*

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In 1981 filled with gratitude, the Mexican people celebrated 450 years since the apparitions of the Virgin Mary. The importance of this anniversary in the history of the Mexican people was marked by the opening of a beautiful new basilica dedicated to the Virgin of Guadalupe, built on the site of the apparitions at Tepeyac, on the outskirts of Mexico City.

It was no coincidence that the five Marist pioneers arrived on the 3rd of October of the same year (1981). We had come from five provinces on three continents: Sisters Myra Niland (Ireland), Andrena Mulligan (England), Denise Jegonday (France), Marlene Giblin (Fiji). and Rita-Marie Riddell (USA).



On arriving at the airport, we met Father Jacques Chavellier SM, parish priest of the parish where we were to live, and two seminarians. Although it was almost midnight, the priest very kindly made a short detour around the illuminated basilica and the Tepeyac hill. This significant and emotional moment will remain forever in the group's memory, all the more so because we knew at that moment that our home was only a fifteen minutes bus ride from the basilica.

A week later we had the privilege of returning to the Basilica of the Virgin of Guadalupe to participate in a special Eucharist organised and celebrated by Father Agapito Sánchez, SM,

Provincial of the Marist Fathers, to mark the presence and mission of the Marist Sisters in Mexico. It was a moment of immense joy and faith for all. Fathers, Brothers and lay Marists from neighbouring parishes, with the Provincials of the United States and Canada who were visiting Mexico, joined us on this memorable day.



The real journey of the pioneer group was about to begin. Most of us did not know each other before arriving in Rome for the orientation course.. The insertion of a group from various cultures, without a common language was going to take time, goodwill, and the ability to "let go" of each one.



But the difficulties we encountered were not matched by the joy of the people in having a community of "Mothers" in the area. This joy was evident in the enthusiastic welcome we received at Sunday Mass the day after our arrival. It was not important to them that we had almost no words to introduce ourselves individually or to thank them for the generous welcome and the feast they had prepared for us.

Father Jacques, the parish priest, asked for volunteers to help us with the language. Our dialogues with these kind women gave us an opportunity to understand the harsh poverty they endured as they struggled to support their children and families. Gradually we made friendships with these women who trusted us. We became familiar with the Ticoman area and

the outward aspects of Mexican culture, such as the rich variety of fruits, the condiments, especially the famous chili, recipes for cooking, and, of course, the indigenous dances.

However, we understood that we would need something more structured if we really wanted to master the Spanish language. We still remember the funny but difficult moments when we got certain words or phrases wrong. We finally found a course for each of us, according to our needs. Getting to the language school in the city was a challenge, especially during the busiest hours of the morning and afternoon. The metro, Mexico City's efficient and cheap transport, carried us, with hundreds of thousands of workers using it, despite the heat and congestion it generates.



The vast majority of the people on the periphery of the city had come there from the interior of the country, exchanging the lack of opportunity of the rural area for an equally hard life on the periphery of the city. The Marist Sisters came to live in one of these disadvantaged areas, in the colonia of Ticoman.

What distinguished our house from the others on the street was the colour of the outside walls: pink and cream. This house was ours for three years. Before our arrival the people from the parish had brought everything that was necessary to make it comfortable and

cosy. An outside staircase in the courtyard at the back connected the three bedrooms on the first floor with the two rooms upstairs.

The joy and enthusiasm recounted by Jeanne-Marie Chavoïn and the first sisters, in the simplicity of the first house in Cerdon in 1823, was repeated in the house of the Marist pioneers in Ticoman, Mexico in 1981. Like them, we also lived in solidarity with the people who shared their stories with us, their many sufferings, but also their hopes for a better future for their children. Their living faith in the maternal protection of the Virgin of Guadalupe and their ability to celebrate the simple joys of life despite their hardships helped us understand how Marist spirituality fits so easily into this culture.

To the extent that we could speak Spanish better, we could become more involved in the life of the parish: preparing the children for First Communion, helping and supporting the various age groups in catechesis, visiting and bringing the Eucharist to the sick and housebound. A

little creativity in the catechetical programme compensated for our language limitations. Who could forget the creative way Marlene integrated Mexican dances into her catechism classes with the children and youth. The drawings and images Rita used were an aid to the learning process, and made the children laugh, while communicating an age-appropriate message.



Andrena took a job in a bookshop in Claveria, one of the best known Catholic bookshops in Mexico and abroad, run by a Marist priest. Denise also made links with the French parish where every week she generously helped in the catechesis programme.

Another aspect of the Marist mission in Mexico was our work to make the congregation and its spirit known in other areas of the Republic. Both the Fathers and the Marist Brothers helped and encouraged us. When we had the

opportunity, we would visit some of the parents' parishes and the Brothers' mixed schools, where they would introduce us to the students in the more advanced classes and talk to them. Many times, they would mentor young people from their parishes or groups to have short vocational experiences with us.

Finally it was necessary to discern the next step in the formation process for the aspirants. Once again the Brothers helped us. Their novitiate was in the city of Morelia in the state of Michoacán. They offered us a house they no longer needed, in the same city, as a house of formation. We gratefully accepted their generous offer and Myra and Andrena were appointed to that community. Myra had already been appointed as a formator and Andrena took on a very demanding ministry in the local hospital and later as a physiotherapist.

The opening of this second community in September 1982, with some aspirants, gave us new hope and was the beginning of the next stage of the mission of the Marist Sisters in Mexico. The first novitiate began there, and the first profession of the first Mexican Marist Sisters took place in its chapel.

