Making Mexicans His Mission

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Body

THE security guard stared dully at the Mexican passport and shook his head no. He wasn't letting anyone into the detention center without a local address on his ID. Brother Joel Magallan, a Jesuit and self-appointed defender of New York's ***Mexicans***, smiled at the guard. It was a passive smile, but his eyes conveyed an inner resolve as cool as the mountain wind that blows in Zacatecas, his hometown in Mexico.

"The rules change each week, no?" ***said*** Brother Joel, who had used his passport to get into the detention center three times before. "What is your name?" he asked the guard. "I wish to see a supervisor."

The mood was ugly in the white concrete waiting room of the Elizabeth Detention Facility in Elizabeth, N.J., where the Immigration and Naturalization Service takes illegal aliens who have been arrested. A line of people was waiting to see detainees on a raw Saturday in March; they did ***not*** appreciate having to wait for Brother Joel's passport to be cleared by a supervisor.

Brother Joel did ***not*** know the three young men he was coming to see. Their uncle, an illegal alien who didn't want to risk a visit, had called him. The young men had been handcuffed in Newark Airport, straight off a flight from California on an unlucky Friday the 13th. The eldest was barely 21. They were from a Mexican village where the only work is digging salt out of the earth and selling it. Now they were imprisoned.

"Most of the Mexican people in New York are in the beginning of establishing this ***life*** here," Brother Joel ***said***, finally walking through the sliding steel doors. "Right now we ***say*** that they are ***not*** a Mexican community, they are just ***Mexicans***. My goal is to make them be a community."

The Roman Catholic Church sent Brother Joel to New York last July to help the city's Mexican immigrants do just that. The brother, who wears blue jeans and keeps a beeper and cell phone handy, spends his days meeting ***Mexicans***. He is organizing flower vendors in East Harlem into a cooperative and talking to teen-agers about avoiding gangs. Above all, he is trying to get ***Mexicans*** to join the Asociacion Tepeyac, with 30 branches already in churches around the city. The club's 300 members help ***Mexicans*** with everything from immigration problems to forming soccer teams.

Brother Joel, 40, is a quiet man, yet he has run afoul of some important people. He has offended some priests, who resent his presence in their churches. He has accused the I.N.S. of picking on ***Mexicans*** and the Mexican Consulate of ***not*** doing enough to help them; both deny his charges.

"He is mostly very shy," ***said*** one of Brother Joel's sisters, Emma Yabira Magallan, speaking in Spanish from her home in Monterrey, Mexico. "But he can also be very strong when there is a problem. He likes to fight."

To spend time with Brother Joel is to enter the complex world of Mexican New York. Estimates of the number of Mexican immigrants vary widely. Although one census survey put the number at close to 100,000 in 1996, Robert C. Smith, a Barnard professor and the director of the Mexican Migration Project at Columbia University, figures there are some 200,000. About half have arrived since 1990, he ***said***. And about half are illegal aliens.

Yet New York doesn't have a single Mexican neighborhood. One reason, Professor Smith ***said***, is that ***Mexicans*** have moved into predominantly Hispanic areas. Because many are illegal immigrants, they tend to lie low. Many are also young and plan to go home eventually.

As Brother Joel sees it, the ***Mexicans*** need the protection of a united community. "Right now they are alone," he ***said***. "If they come together they can use their talents to help each other."

The Rev. Bill Harder, a priest who ministers to ***Mexicans*** on Staten Island, ***said***: "It is essential for the ***Mexicans*** to have a ***friend*** like Brother Joel. They have to recognize that they have power as a community and don't just have to suffer."

Falling Wages For the Sweat of Their Brows

Inside the Elizabeth detention center, Brother Joel sat across from a young man in a tan prison smock. Separated by Plexiglas, they spoke through crackling telephones. The young man was frail, with a wispy mustache. He tried to pull a brave face, but tears were storming his brown eyes. "I just want to go back to Mexico," he ***said***. "It's too hard here."

Many other ***Mexicans*** in New York are also having a tough time, although a middle class is emerging. The men typically do construction work or cut vegetables in grocery stores. Many of the women tend babies or work in factories. The threat of deportation is constant. Advocacy groups ***say*** ***Mexicans*** often receive what amounts to ***slave*** wages, as well as beatings and other forms of mistreatment at work.

"We help the Latino community in general," ***said*** Monica Santana, the director of the Latino Workers Center in the East Village. "But 80 percent of the abuse cases that come in are from ***Mexicans***."

Professor Smith ***said***: "They are having a hard time. And the ***Mexicans*** who are coming today are having a harder time than the immigrants who came in before."

Weekday mornings at dawn, about 50 Mexican men in dusty sweatshirts and baseball caps appear along Port Richmond Avenue on Staten Island, where they wait for contractors to pick them up for day labor. A few years ago they got $10 an hour, they ***said***, but with so many new ***Mexicans*** arriving, the going rate is now around $5.

"The ***Mexicans*** are viewed as a commodity," ***said*** Father Harder, the pastor of St. Mary of the Assumption Church in Port Richmond. "People bargain for their work. It kind of makes you angry."

On a recent rainy morning, some of the men were complaining about falling wages. Most were under 20 and ***living*** alone without family, sleeping where they could and sending home around $200 a month. Many of the newest among them do ***not*** even speak Spanish. They speak Mixteco, one of Mexico's 100 or so Indian languages.

"It is so hard if you don't have Spanish or English," ***said*** a 17-year-old who gave his name as Margarito and ***said*** Spanish was his second language. "The boss can pay you even less. Sometimes they pay as little as $30 for a day."

Like Margarito, most of the local ***Mexicans*** come from a region of Mexico called the Mixteca. It is a dry, empty place a few hundred miles south of Mexico City that encompasses parts of three Mexican states, Puebla, Oaxaca and Guererro.

Father Harder ***said*** he had ***not*** been aware of the Mixtecos until Brother Joel pointed them out. Now the priest is trying to work with them. "They keep their problems inside and take whatever the boss gives them," the priest ***said***. "They feel helpless."

Most Mixtecos who ***live*** in New York are from Puebla. Professor Smith attributes this to the arrival in the city of Fermin and Pedro Simon, two brothers from Mixteca who were driven from Mexico City by a vacationing New Yorker in 1942. These two, Professor Smith ***said***, paved the way for the Mexican migration to New York.

In the 1980's, when Mexico experienced a depression, La Mixteca poured into New York. A 1986 law allowed some to gain citizenship and bring their families. Many ***Mexicans*** now ***live*** in the South Bronx; Jackson Heights, Queens; East Harlem, and Sunset Park, Brooklyn, as well as on Staten Island and in northern New Jersey and the Hudson Valley. But as relative newcomers, many ***say*** they often feel unwelcome.

Tension filled the rectory of Blessed Sacrament Church in Jackson Heights, Queens, last month. Four Mexican women sat stiffly around a mahogany table as the Rev. Jesus Cuadros lectured them in Spanish. Brother Joel was there, as was Msgr. Raymond W. Kutner.

Father Cuadros, who is of Colombian descent, was angry at the women because a Dec. 12 Mass in celebration of the Virgin of Guadalupe had been marred when a mariachi band failed to show up. The priest was also irritated that the ***Mexicans*** weren't coming to church regularly.

Brother Joel made the women's case to the priests. Despite the problems last year, the ***Mexicans*** wanted to continue to celebrate the Virgin with mariachis. They wanted more freedom to practice Mexican dance at the church and they wanted to make official prayer visits to other ***Mexicans***. The priests grumbled but agreed.

A few weeks later, Maria Cortez, who had called the meeting, ***said*** that things were better. "The Mexican people here saw that they weren't working hard enough," she ***said***. "And the priests saw that they would work harder."

About the same time, Monsignor Kutner ***said*** he was surprised to hear that the ***Mexicans*** felt unwelcome. His parish is about 80 percent Hispanic, he ***said***, and although most members are Dominican, he loves the ***Mexicans***. "The Mexican people are so sweet," he ***said***. "We love working with them." It had been his idea to have the Guadalupe Mass, he ***said***, and in his opinion, the problem lay ***not*** within the parish, but with Brother Joel.

"I saw him coming in as a rabble-rouser," Monsignor Kutner ***said***.

Brother Joel's sister Emma remembers him ***not*** as a rabble-rouser, but as a studious fellow. He is the eldest of nine children raised in an old colonial silver-mining town, some 400 miles northwest of Mexico City, by parents with strong religious and political convictions. Brother Joel's father was a postman. His mother was an organizer for the National Action Party, an opposition party in a country that has had single-party rule for decades. In 1992, his mother was running for mayor of a small town when she was killed in a car wreck. Brother Joel suspects her political opponents of foul play.

After attending college on scholarship, Brother Joel became the engineer of a tire factory. He was making good money, but he was troubled. "I began to see a lot of injustice," he ***said***. "The minimum wages were so low that people who worked hard couldn't pay their expenses." One day, he ***said***, he submitted a report that led his boss to dismiss a group of people to save money.

He decided it was time to change his ***life***, and at 23, committed himself to the Jesuits. He could have become a priest, but he decided instead to become a brother, which meant taking the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience but ***not*** being able to give the sacraments.

"People look to priests to baptize them and give them communion," he explained. "That is ***not*** what I wanted to do. I like to be in the process to educate people."

In 1994 the Jesuits sent Brother Joel to Chicago to study English and education. At the same time, priests in New York had formed a group to address the problems they were seeing among the increasing numbers of Mexican immigrants. They asked John Cardinal O'Connor, the Archbishop of New York, to bring in a Mexican cleric to help. Brother Joel was chosen by church authorities for the task.

Now he ***lives*** in a Jesuit boarding house on 98th Street between Broadway and Amsterdam Avenue and works with an assistant out of a small office on West 14th Street. A warm but slightly distant man who rarely prays in public, he likes to walk, especially where he can see trees. Sometimes he accepts dinner invitations from ***Mexicans*** he has met in New York, but his best ***friends*** are religious people back in Mexico. He misses them.

"I also am missing the mountains," he ***said***. "There are no mountains around here."

A Cold War With the Mexican Consulate

Over a recent lunch of pepperoni pizza in an apartment in Newburgh, N.Y., with a holographic image of the Last Supper above their heads, six women were discussing their arrests with Brother Joel. Most were out on bail and will have to leave the country soon. Many vowed to return.

"I feel discouraged," ***said*** Lilia Herrera, 40. "It is the same for all of us. This is so frustrating it kills the will."

As the women recalled, on Feb. 26, about 20 I.N.S. agents burst into a guitar-string factory in Newburgh, 60 miles north of Manhattan. The agents handcuffed workers, the women ***said***, and took them to the Elizabeth detention center. One woman was pregnant; a few were supposed to pick up children at day care.

"We weren't given food all night and all day for 22 hours," ***said*** Maricela Perfecto, 28. "Someone called for water, and she was told to drink it out of the toilet."

Lynn Durko, a spokeswoman for the detention center, ***said*** that no inmate would be left that long without food and that no one would have spoken to the women that way.

Although Brother Joel counsels many people on immigration issues, he isn't in favor of ***Mexicans*** moving to the United States, legally or illegally. "They are losing their roots," he ***said***. But he also maintains that ***Mexicans*** who come illegally are ***not*** criminals. Rather, he ***says***, they are driven by poverty so extreme that the law does ***not*** matter to them, and they should ***not*** be mistreated.

Brother Joel maintains that I.N.S. raids often include verbal and physical attacks and unnecessary use of restraints, and that the conditions in detention centers are poor. Some experts on immigration ***say*** the problems are a result of negative public attitudes toward illegal aliens and the strict 1996 Immigration Reform Act.

"This is inevitably what will happen when you criminalize these people," ***said*** James Haggerty, a lawyer for the Catholic Immigration Network's office in New York. "There isn't a policy of abuse, but the goal is to spread fear."

Brother Joel also claims that the I.N.S. targets ***Mexicans***, although they make up a relatively small percentage of illegal aliens in New York. He and the I.N.S. disagree on the numbers, but many immigrant advocates ***say*** the agency's methods do, in fact, lead to the arrest of more Hispanic than European aliens.

"Their efforts are directed toward organizations where they perceive there to be large numbers of undocumented workers," ***said*** Margie McHugh, executive director of the New York Immigration Coalition. "That has resulted in the targeting of Latinos."

But Mark Thorn, an I.N.S. spokesman, strongly denied that ***Mexicans*** are being singled out, and described agency raids -- which he calls "operations" -- as "civil" and "professional."

"We have no knowledge of the ethnic makeup of the work force in the businesses where we conduct our operations," he ***said***. "We are ***not*** targeting any ethnic group. Our focus, by law, is on the management of those businesses."

Immigration issues have also led to a cold war between Brother Joel and the Mexican Consulate. In the fall he sent the consulate a letter accusing it of failing to do all it could to help illegal immigrants. "We would like to have arrested people free as soon as possible after the raids," he ***said***. "The Mexican Consulate, sometimes they aren't ready to help people."

Jorge Pinto, the Consul General, replied that he has five people working full time on immigration issues. "We are ***not*** aware at this point of any lack of attention from the consulate," he ***said***. "I think it is sad to have blanket accusations."

At the detention center in Elizabeth, Brother Joel and the young man in the tan prison smock sat, silently looking at each other. Brother Joel needed to get back to the city, to see other people. He was trying to build a community. The young man had nothing to do except cool his heels until he could see a judge. Then, in all likelihood, he would be sent back to the tough ***life*** of his village.

Finally, Brother Joel got up and pantomimed a handshake, pretending that there was no Plexiglas between him and the young man. It was a throwaway gesture, but for the first time that morning, the young man smiled.

"Think back to when the Polish people or the Irish people came here," Brother Joel ***said*** a few weeks later. "They came with priests, leaders, and they made the next step in the United States. They were working together. We don't have that. The leaders are still in Mexico. The people here are disorganized. We need to help them help each other, one person at a time."

Virgin of Guadalupe: A Link to Home

The Virgin of Guadalupe is Mexico's patron saint, and when her feast day is celebrated on Dec. 12, there is mariachi music in the country's churches, and people take the day off.

Legend has it that in 1531, the Virgin Mary appeared three times to an Aztec peasant, Juan Diego. It was 10 years after the Spanish had conquered the Aztec empire, and the Virgin, who appeared with dark skin, told Diego that she loved native people, ***not*** just the Spanish.

"The importance of the Virgin of Guadalupe is that it managed to combine the European with the non-European and become a symbol of nationality," ***said*** Roberto Gonzalez Echevarria, a professor of comparative literature at Yale University, who is of Cuban descent.

The hilltop where the Virgin and Diego met was called Tepeyac, and Brother Joel has used that name for the Mexican association he is organizing, which he hopes will be a rallying point for ***Mexicans*** in the city. Each of its branches is called a "Guadalupano Association."

"We asked the people to vote on what name they wanted for the clubs," Brother Joel ***said***. "They chose this one."

To celebrate the feast day of the Virgin in New York, Brother Joel and the Archdiocese of New York are planning a parade of ***Mexicans*** on Dec. 12 that will end at St. Patrick's Cathedral.

"We would like all ***Mexicans*** here to take that day off," Brother Joel ***said***.

Professor Gonzalez ***said*** that as important as the Virgin is in Mexico, she may be even more powerful a symbol to ***Mexicans*** ***living*** abroad.

"The Virgin is an important link to their country," he ***said***. EDWARD LEWINE

Graphic

Photos: Brother Joel, left, bears witness. On 104th Street and Third Avenue, he counsels a Mexican flower vendor. (Rita Rivera for The New York Times)(pg. 1); The Virgin has become a symbol of nationality. Brother Joel wants to unite Mexican day laborers on Staten Island, top; flower vendors like Maria Vasquez in East Harlem, and restaurant owners like Jose and Elizabeth Salas of Staten Island, below with daughters Beatriz, Iliana and Karina. A sister of Brother Joel calls him "strong when there is a problem." He meets with teen-agers at St. Paul's Church in East Harlem. (Photographs by Rita Rivera for The New York Times and Underwood & Underwood/Corbis-Bettmann (inset))(pg. 11)

Chart: "HEAD COUNT: The Migration"

It is hard to know the number of ***Mexicans*** in New York because many are illegal aliens. The latest figures, showing about 97,000 ***Mexicans***, are from a 1996 Census Bureau housing survey done for New York City. Andrew A. Beveridge, a Queens College demographer, ***says*** that the Mexican population may be about a third greater. Robert C. Smith, director of the Mexican Migration Project at Columbia University, estimates that there may be 200,000 ***Mexicans*** in New York now.

Population Distribution:

Brooklyn: 24,439

Queens: 31,118

Manhattan: 17,038

Bronx: 22,336

Staten Island: 2,785

(Sources: Census Bureau)(pg. 1)

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Company: A-LINE BV (56%); ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH A-LINE BV (56%); US CENSUS BUREAU (84%); US CENSUS BUREAU (84%); COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY (59%); COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY (59%)

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