

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

June 6, 2008 at 4:38am

The radical witness of Houston's Casa Juan Diego; Tony Blair's new 'Faith Foundation'

by John L. Allen Jr.

All Things Catholic

NOTE: John Allen is in Miami Thursday through Sunday to cover the annual conference of the Catholic Theological Society of America. Watch Allen's daily updates on this site for regular reports.

* * *

In a recent *NCR* cover story I described a phenomenon in Texas I called "Evangelical transfer," meaning ways in which the state's strong Evangelical Protestant ethos shapes the Catholic experience. (See Texas: new Catholic frontier *NCR*, April 18.) This week, I want to describe another "evangelical" face of Texas Catholicism, this time in the sense of lives lived in radical witness to the values of the Gospel.

Meet Mark and Louise Zwick, founders of the Casa Juan Diego on Houston's West side, a remarkable center of welcome and advocacy on behalf of the city's mushrooming immigrant population.

In Catholic circles around the world, Mark and Louise Zwick are probably best known for the *Houston Catholic Worker*, a newspaper and labor of love in which they blend deep Catholic piety with keen social analysis. The paper is legendary for tweaking American Catholic neoconservatives, and anyone sucked into their orbit; in 2004, for example, the Zwicks lampooned the work of a certain Rome correspondent for the *National Catholic Reporter*, who, they felt, had been overly influenced by lunches in the Eternal

City with prominent Catholic neo-cons. (In charity, they wrote at the time, they would refrain from saying that I was "out to lunch.")

On the streets of Houston, however, the Zwicks are famed not for literary production, but for love in action. One Wednesday morning in mid-February, Mark was showing me around the property when a mini-mob scene developed. A group of Hispanic men had clustered outside awaiting "Marco," and one by one they came forward to ask him, in polite Spanish, for various kinds of help. I watched as Mark found a jacket for one of the men to wear against the cold, a pair of shoes for another, and explained to a third how to get eyeglasses from Casa Juan Diego's free medical clinic.

Louise told me that this experience of living alongside the poorest of the poor, struggling daily to help meet their material and spiritual needs, fuels Casa Juan Diego's social advocacy.

"We see how the displaced people live," she said. "They're the ones who are uprooted by those economics, and we feel we have to write about it."

In one sense, the Zwicks resemble so many other white couples - in the argot of the Southwest, "Anglos" - who've relocated to Texas from the American heartland. Mark grew up in Ohio, Louise in Pennsylvania; Mark has a degree in psychiatric social work, Louise in library science. The two arrived in Texas in the late 1970s in search of new opportunities. That, however, is where the similarity ends, because the opportunities Mark and Louise sought had nothing to do with suburban living or professional advancement, but rather service in the tradition of Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker movement.

Both Louise and Mark grew up Catholic, and both sensed the tug of the social gospel from an early age. In 1977, the couple and their two young children (at the time, a first and a third-grader) relocated to El Salvador, sensing that this would be a way to learn Hispanic culture and to experience another way of being Catholic. As it turned out, they arrived for the opening salvos of El Salvador's bloody civil war.

"We listened every day to the radio messages of Archbishop Oscar Romero," Mark said. "We assisted at the last Mass of Fr. Rutilio Grande," referring to a Jesuit and champion of the poor who was killed in March 1977. Although the couple was in the country for less than a year, Mark said, "It was really an intense religious experience, so we came back with the mindset that we would give our lives in service."

Advertisement

Afterwards Mark and Louise moved to McAllen, Texas, on the border with Mexico, to work with refugee and immigrant populations, and later relocated to Houston, working in a parish. Louise laughingly recalls that Mark used to say at the time, "If we had any guts, we'd start a Catholic Worker House."

The idea gnawed at the couple, and so it was that in 1980 the Casa Juan Diego was born. The original idea was to serve refugees from El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua who were streaming into the Houston

area because of civil wars in Central America.

"The first thing we did was to rent the ugliest building in Houston," Mark said. "That's all you need to do. People with no place to go will come."

Today, the vast majority of those served by Casa Juan Diego are still Hispanic immigrants, but now they're mostly from Mexico. They're no longer fleeing war, but poverty.

"NAFTA [the North American Free Trade Agreement, launched on Jan. 1, 1994] unleashed 1.2 million farmers in Mexico alone who lost their land," Mark said. "They began to pour in during the '90s, and from then on it's become predominantly a Mexican population."

The Casa Juan Diego complex includes 10 buildings that offer a staggering variety of services: there's a shelter for men, for example, and another for women and children; there's a food and clothing bank, which distributes between 10 and 15 tons of food a week; there's a full-service health clinic, including dental care; and there are residences for sick and disabled people who need long-term care. Casa Juan Diego also pays between \$500 and \$1000 a month to support 70 other sick and disabled people who live in their own homes.

Casa Juan Diego is also a resource center in a staggering variety of ways. Louise said they field requests that run the gamut from, "Where can I find a Mass in Spanish?" to navigating complex interactions with the legal system. For example, Louise said, not long ago a woman arrived with the following problem: "My son, who's 19, is the only means of support for the family, and he likes to drive fast. There's now a warrant out for his arrest, and I can't work because I hurt my shoulder. Can you help us?"

Louise said that, in her view, a particularly pernicious aspect of current American immigration policy is the way it often drives families apart. She offered the example of a Guatemalan woman who had arrived in Texas with her children, and was deported when she went to an immigration office to apply for an ID card. Somehow she showed up at the door of the Casa Juan Diego after returning to Houston, Louise said, almost entirely on foot, in search of her children, from whom she's been separated for more than a year.

Casa Juan Diego doesn't charge anything for these services, and it doesn't even invite guests to send money later on, once they've settled somewhere. That doesn't mean, however, that they ask nothing in return.

"We don't accept money from the guests, but we tell them they do have to pay," Mark said. "One day in the future when someone in need crosses your path, like a flash from Heaven you'll know that it's time to pay for Casa Juan Diego."

None of their current operations, Louise explains, were really envisioned at the beginning; rather, they've developed organically in response to need. As she puts it, "We don't write five-year plans." Support for long-term disabled people, for example, arose from the experience of a growing number of immigrants who are forced to take low-wage, high-risk jobs, such as working on scaffolding in Houston's booming

construction industry, and who have no protection if they get hurt.

"Every day we get a call from a hospital social worker saying we have this person who has no family to take care of him," Mark said. "He's a paraplegic, or he's paralyzed, or he just needs a few months to get on his feet. There's no government support, there's no disability, no Medicaid, nothing. We take care of him."

Louise said Casa Juan Diego also works with a large number of battered and abused immigrant women, who tend to be especially vulnerable because they're reluctant to seek police protection or medical care. That's true on all sides of the borders, Louise said, pointing to Tecun Uman, Guatemala, a small city where Mexico deports its illegal immigrants, and where desperate women sometimes offer themselves as prostitutes for as little as 25 cents.

Moved by repeatedly hearing immigrants describe these realities, Louise and Mark also helped create centers of hospitality in Matamoros, Mexico, across the Rio Grande from Brownsville, and in Tecun Uman in Guatemala, in both cases with the support of the local bishops.

In the spirit of the Catholic Worker movement, Mark and Louise don't do all this as limousine liberals who commute in from the suburbs. They live at Casa Juan Diego with their grandchildren and a daughter who's sick, sharing the lives of their guests, all the way down to meals and clothing.

Casa Juan Diego has a Mass every Wednesday night, and guests are invited to share their stories of how they arrived in Houston. Perhaps the most awful accounts, Louise explained, come from guests who have described hopping a train to cross the border. Many times, she said, they've watched a friend or family fall asleep atop the train, fall off, and be sliced in half.

In Texas as in other parts of the United States, immigration is a divisive issue. While it's tough to argue with the humanitarian emphasis of Casa Juan Diego, its operations nevertheless sometimes stir the waters for a simple reason: they're breaking the law.

"It's illegal to harbor and transport an undocumented person, which we probably do ten times a day," Mark said. (Technically, he can't be sure of that, since Casa Juan Diego never inquires about someone's immigration status, but it's nonetheless a pretty good bet.)

That has sometimes made Casa Juan Diego a magnet for protest. Last year, the anti-immigrant Minutemen staged a rally in the parking lot of a Jack-in-the-Box across the street. (Mark laughed that he put a brief note about the rally in an issue of the Catholic Worker newspaper, and not long afterwards he got a phone call from Jack-in-the-Box's legal department making clear that the chain wanted no part of the Minutemen's agenda.)

Mark said that Casa Juan Diego has enjoyed strong support from the local Catholic community, including retired Archbishop Joseph Fiorenza and Cardinal Daniel DiNardo. In fact, he said, the archdiocese includes the Zwicks among a set of speakers for an annual "missionary day," so that each year they're assigned a couple of parishes in which to make presentations.

"It's given us not only exposure, but in a sense permission," Mark said, though stressing that Casa Juan Diego is independent of the archdiocese.

Every now and then, Mark said, they experience some push-back at the Catholic grass roots, but usually it's smoothed over. Mark recounted how one parishioner had complained that he didn't want "those Communists," meaning Mark and Louise, to come to his parish. The pastor, Mark said, calmed him down by saying, "It's OK. They may be Communists, but they're our Communists!"

Not every Catholic, of course, will share the political and economic views espoused by the Zwicks. Some would argue that the spread of free-market capitalism around the world, what the Zwicks call "neo-liberalism," has created middle classes in places such as China and India, lifting tens of millions of people out of poverty. Others might part company on some particulars of immigration policy, arguing that efforts to protect national borders are consistent with the tenets of social justice. That's the stuff of legitimate debate.

What is beyond all dispute, however, is that few Catholics anywhere put their money, and their lives, where their mouth is as consistently and completely as Mark and Louise Zwick.

The web site of Casa Juan Diego is: <http://www.cjd.org>

* * *

In so many ways, Tony Blair is not your typical Anglican convert to the Catholic church.

For one thing, of course, Blair is the former British prime minister. Almost as atypical these days, however, is the fact that Blair does not belong to the traditionalist wing of Anglicanism, meaning Anglicans disenchanted with the ordination of women and homosexuals, the blessing of same-sex unions, and other liberalizing currents, and hence usually most likely to contemplate the "Roman option."

Instead, Blair espouses a theologically moderate, socially engaged Christianity. By the standards of British politics, Blair is a social moderate, and his largely permissive positions on abortion, birth control and embryonic stem cell research have drawn strong Catholic criticism over the years. (Some outraged English Catholics have gone so far as to charge that Blair should not have been received into communion with the church, at least until he recants.)

Last Friday, I attended a press conference at the Time-Warner Center in New York to present Blair's new "Faith Foundation," a global inter-faith coalition designed to mobilize religious leadership to achieve social good. Most immediately, the Faith Foundation intends to enlist religious believers in global efforts to eradicate malaria, estimated to kill one million people each year, primarily in the developing world, and the vast majority are children. A related aim is to combat extremism and terrorism carried out in the name of religious belief.

Interestingly, Blair's Faith Foundation counts a slew of prominent religious leaders among its advisors - Sir Jonathan Sacks, for example, Chief Rabbi of England, as well as Reverend Rick Warren, Senior Pastor of Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, California. Yet there's not a single Catholic, though promotional materials say that Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor of England will join the advisory council after he steps down as Archbishop of Westminster.

To call Friday's press conference "high-profile" is an exercise in under-statement. It was hosted by CNN's Christiane Amanpour, and featured opening remarks from former U.S. President Bill Clinton, who said he had come to "wish my friend well." Richard Levin, President of Yale University, where Blair will be a visiting professor, was also on hand.

Eboo Patel, founder and director of the Interfaith Youth Core in Chicago and another advisor to Blair's Faith Foundation, provided the day's sound-bite.

"The worst mistake would be to think that the fault line of the 21st century runs between Christians and Muslims, or between theists and secularists," said Patel, a Muslim. "It's between pluralists and totalitarians."

That line was picked up by other speakers, so much so that it almost became an anthem - with Blair and his admirers clearly on the side of the pluralists.

Blair was careful to say that his foundation does not seek "to subsume different faiths into one universal faith of the lowest common denominator." Nevertheless, it seemed clear that Blair's Faith Foundation reflects what one might call a "center-left" religiosity, with emphasis on tolerance, dialogue, and cooperation in the pursuit of humanitarian objectives.

What future the foundation may have is tough to handicap. From a purely Catholic point of view, however, it's at least worth noting that the church's most high-profile recent convert also seems a natural spokesperson for a more "progressive" or "liberal" form of Catholicism, at a moment when that constituency appears to be, in many other ways, on the ropes.

The e-mail address for John L. Allen Jr. is jallen@ncronline.org

Source URL (retrieved on 08/16/2017 - 14:32): <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/all-things-catholic/radical-witness-houstons-casa-juan-diego-tony-blairs-new-faith-foundation>

Links:

[1] <https://www.ncronline.org/donate?clickSource=article-end>