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'Let it begin with me': Parishioners work for peace in Ju·rez

by Joseph Kolb by Catholic News Service



Fr. Roberto Luna of Corpus Christi Parish in Ciudad Ju·rez, Mexico (CNS/David Agren)

CIUDAD JUÁREZ, MEXICO -- In a city that has become synonymous with violence and despair during a four-year drug war that has claimed more than 12,000 residents, parishioners at a small church are trying to change the image of Ciudad Juárez -- one person at a time.

Reflecting on the hymn lyrics, "Let there be peace on Earth and let it begin with me," Fr. Roberto Luna, pastor of Corpus Christi Church, urges the estimated 500 active parishioners in this impoverished and besieged neighborhood to live the life of Christ to the best of their abilities. He knows how daunting this task can be.

The neighborhood Corpus Christi is adjacent to the Juárez Valley, where the Sinaloa and Juárez drug cartels are waging a war that greatly affects the youth in the parish. Over the past year, Luna estimates that as many as 50 young people between the ages of 17 and 23 have been murdered, leaving survivors with feelings of anger, frustration and vengeance.

Luna's counteroffensive against these spiritually destructive emotions is immersion of his parishioners in church activities, where he develops a sense of community and teaches the tools of the faith so his people can survive, emotionally and spiritually. He is a jovial man whose pragmatic appreciation of the local street life contributes to his close rapport with parishioners.

One of his favorite ministries is the Saturday catechism program, attended by about 100 families. The day involves a potluck lunch in the fenced-in dirt corner lot of the church, followed by classes for adults and children. Luna sees the invaluable responsibility of the family as a deterrent to the violence.

"The family serves as the roots to a blossoming tree, and the more you keep feeding the roots, the stronger the tree will be," he said. "We're teaching love, peace, respect and tolerance."

Each Saturday, the families arrive at the church and receive a week's worth of catechism lessons. The parents then spend the week teaching their children, and assignments are discussed the following week.

"We are teaching parents ... who haven't even been baptized to go home and teach their children," Luna said. "Many then become enrolled in RCIA and continue the faith here."

Luna is especially optimistic about the teen ministry, which, given the drug and violent distractions in the neighborhood, is a sign of hope for Ciudad Juárez.

At the core of this work are 200 young people enrolled in the confirmation program. The priest knows temptations abound for the youth in the parish to join with the cartels.

With so many people in his parish affected by the violence, Luna finds one of the biggest challenges he faces is reconciliation.

"I see the faces of the families, the damage these young men did in terms of committing violence or other crimes against others, but the victims have to forgive," Luna said. "We're trying to break the cycle of violence here through reconciliation."

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One woman, who declined to give her name, told her story.

"Three years ago my brother was murdered, and it was hard to forgive his killers until I returned to the church," she said. "My entire family is going through this process of forgiveness, and we are all coming back to the church, which is helping."

In a cold basement with a concrete floor and cinderblock walls, parishioners, huddled in winter coats, hats and scarves, expressed a plea to have their city seen beyond the violence.

"We're trying to send a message of faith through the hurt in our society," a middle-aged man said during an open forum.

The majority of the 100 people in the forum said the church is beginning to make headway.

"We are good people, and people need to know that," said a man whose child was attending one of the catechism classes in a nearby classroom.

David Cano, a first-year seminarian, said the involvement he has seen among the parents has overwhelmed him.

‘It’s amazing how humble these people are,’ Cano said. ‘This is a close-knit community that has been deeply affected by the violence, but [parents] still want a better life for themselves and their children.’

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