

The face of refugees

Jesús Quintanilla Osorio

Personal contact with refugees helps us not only to see the people behind the need but also to better understand the obstacles they face.

I first met Melchora, a Guatemalan Mayan Indian refugee in Quintana Roo on Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula, more than 20 years ago. I was visiting the hospital in Chetumal where her son was being treated following an accident two months previously. Melchora told me about her family's plot of land that they cultivate in Kuchumatán, selling the produce at the nearby market in order to support the family.

It was nearly 4:30 pm and she had to leave so as not to miss the bus which ran only once a day between Chetumal and Kuchumatán. I stayed for a while, talking to her son, Victor Manuel. Aged 26, and born in Mexico, the young man was sunburned, with hands calloused by farmwork. Within minutes, Melchora returned, visibly concerned. The bus had left and the nearby hostel – used by people visiting patients in the hospital – was full. What would she do? How would she eat?

Victor had told me how difficult it was for his mother to visit him. The cost, the ever-pressing demands of the farm on which they depended for their livelihood, and the limited public transport were all obstacles to her visiting him more often. Moved by her worry at being stranded, I gave her fifty pesos so she could eat something.

I told them about a trip I had been on a few years ago to Maya Balam B, the site of a former refugee camp and the place where the first allocations of land to Guatemalan refugees took place in 2002 [see box]. Here a doctor from the Presbyterian Church was providing medical services for the refugees, while the team that I was a part of brought biblical teachings and contributions from the brothers. I recalled how on the night I arrived, the villagers greeted us with a dinner of meat and eggs, loaves of bread and hot chocolate. We slept in hammocks among the villagers and although they did not speak Spanish, we were united

by our faith, and there was harmony. The missionary Don Eulogio Carballo taught me to love the missions to people in need, especially those who had fled civil war in Guatemala to take refuge in Mexico.

When I said goodbye to Melchora, I felt much respect for her, and promised to pray for her family. You need to know the faces of the refugees in our countries, to understand all that they have left behind. Let us stand in solidarity with them, understanding that to be displaced means to live in another world. We should recognise their humanity as well as their vulnerability.

Jesús Osorio Quintanilla
chusino66@hotmail.com

Mexican missionary working in villages with displaced people.



In 2002, the Mexican state of Quintana Roo issued 322 land titles to former Guatemalan refugees who had recently been granted Mexican citizenship – the first time a state government in Mexico had donated land for former refugees.

The approximately 2,800 former refugees living in Quintana Roo at the time were among some 18,000 Guatemalans who arrived in Campeche and Quintana Roo states in late 1984 and early 1985 after fleeing civil war in Guatemala. Although many Guatemalan refugees eventually returned home, others chose to remain in Mexico.

Land titles provided to married couples gave equal rights over the property to both men and women. Widows and orphans received individual land titles.

