News
Ministry



CAMPO staff member Juan Cayetano Garrido shows Social Pastoral School participants how to aerate the large quantities of compost that are processed at the organization's demonstration site. "Sometimes there are a few cockroaches, but that's why we have chickens," he jokes. (Tracy L. Barnett)



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It's a sunny day in Oaxaca, and a crowd of faith leaders attending classes through the diocese's Social Pastoral School gathers around as Alejandro Torres explains how to use the sun to cook beans, squash or a cake.

Pens scrawl in notebooks as he talks about the solar cells that can power anything: a cellphone, a computer, a refrigerator. And excitement grows as he shows the group how the team at the Centro de Apoyo al Movimiento Popular Oaxaqueño (the Center for Support of Popular Movements of Oaxaca, or CAMPO) has constructed the attractive and spacious buildings of their demonstration center out of mud, sand and clay.

The Social Pastoral School, which launched earlier this year with a seven-month series of Saturday morning classes, is an effort to reactivate with local faith leaders the social mission of the church, which languished for at least a generation throughout the region.

But now, with more supportive leadership in the form of Archbishop Pedro Vázquez Villalobos, appointed in February 2018, the Archdiocese of Antequera, Oaxaca stands poised for change.



Pastoral agents from around the archdiocese attending the Social Pastoral School examine a solar oven at CAMPO. Solar ovens are designed using angles that refract and concentrate the energy of the sun and allow cooking without oil, sticking or burning. (Tracy L. Barnett)

The field trip to CAMPO, a local community empowerment nonprofit, came at the end of a series of lectures and discussions on a wide range of social themes. Lectures focused on church doctrines and encyclicals on social responsibility and the environment, while field trips gave attendees a chance to see those concepts in action and connect with people on the ground who employ them.

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"This is just a part of what we wanted to show our pastoral agents: that the social pastoral programs that are part of the church go far beyond giving a little bit of charity and taking care of the sick," said Sr. Pilar Chagoya Mingüer, one of the founders of the school, located in this bustling colonial city in the south of Mexico. "It

is putting knowledge within reach of the pastoral agents so that they can see beyond what a parish offers."

The school launched Feb. 9 with a packed classroom of 133 people from more than 30 parishes, some of whom had a four-hour bus ride before their Saturday morning class.

Many participants were already active in a social pastoral ministry in their community. Some had more than one commission, working to help care for the sick, teaching catechism or handling other duties within the church. All were recommended by their parishes.

Chagoya encouraged them to integrate the social mission into their spiritual work.



"We can evangelize through very concrete actions ... if I make a garden, from there, I am evangelizing," says Sr. Pilar Chagoya Mingüer, right. Campesino, catechist and environmental activist Antonio Joel Díaz Paz is pictured at left. (Tracy L. Barnett)

"Jesus is the best example," she said. "Jesus didn't give catechism. I believe that we fall short. We give a lot of catechism and don't act. Instead, Jesus came to a sick person, and he acted. ... With Peter's mother-in-law, right? He took her hand, and the woman stood up and began to serve them. That is, many things come into play. So I say: If the catechists who attend the school understand that the social has to be impregnated in our lives, then we will achieve a lot."

Fr. Martín Octavio García Ortiz, another of the school's founders and the archdiocesan justice and peace coordinator, said he has been waiting for this opportunity for years.

"It's been a long time — more than 10 years — since we could do social pastoral work so openly," he said. "We have suffered something like a winter, I would say, especially in the social pastoral mission, which had basically disappeared. Now with the new bishop, we have an opening for social pastoral work, and especially with this push that Pope Francis is giving. We have this opportunity to influence the reality of the church and the society in Oaxaca."

CAMPO, one of several organizations the group visited during the school's sessions, opened up a panorama of possibilities for food sovereignty and community ecological empowerment through social pastoral groups. Others taught the faith leaders about health care advocacy, including patient rights and alternative and traditional medicine; territorial defense from mining and hydroelectric projects; cooperative savings programs; accompaniment of migrants; and disaster and emergency preparedness.



Rufina Lorenzo gathers other peoples' trash — particularly snack chip bags and newspapers — to make piñatas. (Tracy L. Barnett)

A school is born

"It was very, very interesting how this school arose," said Chagoya on a break from the CAMPO orientation, where Torres demonstrated the energy-efficient wood stoves then discussed the basics of turning food waste into rich, natural fertilizer through different kinds of composting techniques.

The idea for the Social Pastoral School project came on a road trip to the Northern Sierra of Oaxaca, where Chagoya accompanied García Ortiz and Fr. Lionel Cárdenas, coordinator of the Diocesan Program for the Social Projection of the Faith, to give a workshop on the social pastoral program in the town of Ixtlán. The workshop was

enthusiastically received, and on the way back, García Ortiz asked what was next.

The ideas began to fly. A colleague took notes of their conversation, and that document became the draft for their proposal for a social pastoral school. They presented their idea at a regional meeting of parish priests and got support to go ahead. Despite having zero budget, they jumped headlong into the project.

Judging from the response of the students, the Social Pastoral School's inaugural graduating class is set to have a major impact, García Ortiz said. About 34 parishes have organized new social pastoral groups or reactivated or reorganized old ones, he said, and 100 people have been through the entire course, which ended Aug. 24. He's been reviewing the final projects of each of the groups, and he said he is impressed with the quality of the project proposals, a majority of which have to do with environmental issues or economic empowerment.

Just the act of creating project proposals has already had an impact, he said, particularly among those who are working in the *colonias*, the favela-type settlements that have clustered around the city.

"For example, to organize a project, you have to do an analysis of the reality," he said. "In doing that, they have to integrate more into the community. Just the fact that they go out to do a survey and ask questions about the reality in which people are living, that causes people a certain restlessness, and it gives us the opportunity to have a presence close to the people."

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"You are the beginning, you are the seeds; you have the moral obligation to transmit this on to your colleagues in the liturgy, in the other programs, to let them know that it's a worthwhile thing to do service work in the Church," Sr. Pilar Chagoya Mingüer tells her students after the tour of CAMPO's demonstration site. (Tracy L. Barnett)

Weaving a better future for their village

For Panteleon Montaño and Rufina Lorenzo, traditional carpet-weavers from the town of Teotitlán del Valle near Oaxaca City, the Social Pastoral School and the visit to CAMPO in particular opened a window onto new possibilities for their village.

"I was really called to the fact that you can work not just within the temple of a church and go to Mass and do the rosary and pray," Lorenzo said. "No, you can work in different ways depending on where you find yourself and seeing the needs of your neighbors. That's what the social pastoral mission is."

One of the biggest problems they notice in their village and beyond is the wave of garbage, especially plastic garbage, overwhelming the natural environment.

"For us as a community, it's very alarming," said Montaño, a father of three who is teaching his children to weave as his father taught him. "They have sent us audios of Pope Francis about the environment, the document *Laudato Sí*, and we're seeing the things that are happing because of the pollution we are causing. There's a rainbow of plastic in the rivers."

He and Lorenzo began a small social pastoral group in their village with three others, mainly to visit the sick. Now, they plan to use it "to raise awareness — about the waste we're generating, about recycling, about climate change and what we can do to help."

The two friends have already begun projects to minimize waste in their community and cover expenses of their local social pastoral group, particularly supporting their visits to people who are sick. Montaño rents dishes to community and church organizations for their events to keep them from using disposables. Lorenzo has been making piñatas out of throwaway papers and bags and now offers a workshop to teach others how to do so.

To Lorenzo, the Social Pastoral School — and in particular, the focus on the environment — gives a glimpse into what Christianity is really about.

"It has to do with showing love to your neighbor," she said. "If there's love, you aren't going to destroy Creation. You're not going to contaminate the environment. You'll take care of the water and the trees. You'll plant more, and you'll work for a better world. This out-of-control destruction of the creation of God, it's affecting everyone in general: the air that we breathe, the climate change. We're just promoting the destruction of the planet, not showing love for our neighbors.

"When we collaborate, we are helping with the pollution and all the destruction — and we are showing love for our neighbors."



A colorful example of the types of carpets Panteleon Montaño and his family weave. (Tracy L. Barnett)



Panteleon Montaño and Rufina Lorenzo in front of the traditional loom and spinning wheel that Panteleon and his family use every day to weave their traditional carpets (Tracy L. Barnett)

Graying warriors step up to the challenge

One of the things that surprised Chagoya in the beginning was that a large percentage of the attendees were retirees.

"There was no lack of criticism [from the parish priests]: 'Oh! Well, they only have people of the third age, they're just training them to die off, they're not going to really do any work.' It was a pretty hard comment," Chagoya said. "And [Cárdenas'] response was, 'Well, that's what you sent us.' "

But quickly, Chagoya said she saw these attendees' vigor and lucidity and their determination to make a difference in their communities. Some were highly educated, like a retired doctor, retired lawyers and an expert in labor law. Others

were wise elders with more traditional knowledge.

Chagoya recalled one woman who came from a village four hours away who arrived one morning with boots on. She had just come from a reforesting project in the hills above her village, where she had been summoned by the village authorities.

"We went from 4 in the morning, and I asked God to help us arrive on time," she told Chagoya.

She arrived on time.

Chagoya said she "would like to have that spirit of saying: 'I get up at 4 in the morning, grab my boots with my shovel, and I will reforest or do some other community activity' ... I say I want to, and then I don't do it. I have learned that from them, their great courage. So when I see them, and I arrive angry, then they take it away. If I get tired, they take it away. I see them and I say to myself, 'How many situations did they have to go through to be here at school, and in conditions totally different from mine?' "

One of the biggest challenges was to put together a school with zero budget. They were able to get the meeting space for free, but they had to come up with money for photocopies and other class materials, and some speakers, including priests, charged an honorarium or for their expenses. So the three co-founders put their heads together and created a small store to raise money.



"I am involved in the project of caring for nature — this gift that God has given us, from the furthest star to the closest little animal," explains campesino, catechist and environmental activist Antonio Joel Díaz Paz (right, with Jacinto Santiago, left), who has been working in his community of Tlacolula, Oaxaca, for 15 years to raise awareness about the environmental degradation of God's creation. The Social Pastoral School has given him ideas and direction to strengthen this work, he said. (Tracy L. Barnett)

Next year, they want to bring speakers from Mexico City, and they're thinking of organizing a big *kermesse* — a type of carnival with rides and games and food stalls — as a fundraiser, with every pastoral agent bringing a dish.

"We start from poverty, work with what we have, ask for solidarity ... It is not that we have nothing. There is very good will," Chagoya said.

The 2020 class of the diocesan Social Pastoral School will run from Jan. 8 through Aug. 29. Subjects will include solidarity economy; reconstructing social fabric; human rights; community life; "*buen vivir*" (an Andean concept of living well and in

harmony); *Laudato Sí*; mass media and communications; and pastoral perspectives to revitalize social action in the church.

[Tracy L. Barnett is an independent writer, editor and photographer specializing in environmental issues, indigenous rights and sustainable travel and the founder of The Esperanza Project, a magazine focusing on social change initiatives in the Americas.]

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