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Anna Wilgenbusch

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On a cold day in January of 2000, Sister Joaquína Hernández Pereira rode in the back of a truck, laden with supplies and religious habits, into a rural town in the mountainous region of Oaxaca, Mexico. She had a near-impossible mission ahead of her.

Joaquína and a few other religious sisters were sent to the town by the Servants of Mary, a Spanish religious order that has had a presence in Mexico since 1896, to provide medical care for six Indigenous villages and their surrounding areas.

The sisters were trained as nurses, but the needs of the villagers exceeded their training.
"We were (sent) there to be everything: doctors, nurses, healers … everything, everything," Joaquína told Our Sunday Visitor newspaper.

There was a particularly large need for midwives — a specialty in which Joaquína had no previous experience. Undaunted, Joaquína and another sister teamed up to deliver babies across the countryside. Joaquína learned as she went, eventually becoming an expert midwife.

During just the first two years that she spent in the countryside, she helped deliver 250 babies — often in dire circumstances.

Her memories of these births are especially poignant now as she suffers from a terminal diagnosis of intestinal cancer and several other severe health complications. She awaits her death in her convent's infirmary — a small white room with a single window — in the Colonia Nápoles neighborhood of Mexico City. Amid her suffering, Joaquína recounted the most memorable birth stories of her ministry.

The very first birth she attended taught her to expect the unexpected.

"The woman arrived from a village where there were no highways, so she had to come walking, but she was already more and more dilated," Joaquína said.

Eventually, villagers were able to put the woman in a truck to transport her to the clinic. But on the way to the clinic, the baby was partially born feet-first in the back of the truck.

"So the woman arrived to us with the little body of the baby outside the woman and its head stuck inside," Joaquína said, noting the danger of this position for both mother and child.
The sister who was with Joaquína immediately reached into the woman, put her finger inside the baby's mouth, and pulled the baby out by his jaw. Both mother and baby returned to their village healthy.

Not all the women whom Joaquína helped were happy to be pregnant. A state clinic arrived in the area in 2003 and began distributing contraceptives, which the villagers in the area readily used.

Joaquína recounted that when she delivered one baby, its tiny hand emerged first out of the cervix, holding a plastic contraceptive (device) in its victorious fist.

"It was something that made me think a lot because even though the parents used contraceptives, they had conceived," Joaquína said. "The baby arrived as though saying, 'I made it! Here I am!'"



Sister Joaquína Hernández Pereira, who trained as a nurse to provide medical care for six Indigenous villages in Mexico served by her order, Servants of Mary, recalls in an interview with Our Sunday Visitor newspaper how she had to become an expert midwife to meet the needs of villagers. Sister Joaquína, seen in an undated photo, said that after 53 years in the order, she is thankful for every part of her ministry, even the most difficult moments. (OSV News/courtesy Sister Joaquína) Editors: best quality available.

On another occasion, Joaquína helped deliver the lifeless child of a mentally ill woman.

"By the time we realized she was pregnant, the baby had already died inside her," Joaquína said.

Even though the woman did not understand what was happening, Joaquína still had to help the woman deliver the body of her baby — without the help of modern equipment or a cesarean section.

"It was a lot of work to deliver the baby because the woman did not collaborate with us," Joaquína said. "Normally in this case they would do a C-section and take the body out. But we could not do that."

Over many hours, Joaquína applied manual pressure to move the baby's body. Eventually, the body of the child was delivered, and the mentally ill woman survived.

One rainy day, a woman came to the clinic "on the point of giving birth," Joaquína said. Suddenly, the woman began to convulse with a preeclampsia attack as her blood pressure skyrocketed. According to the Mayo Clinic, preeclampsia can be fatal to both mother and baby. In the case of a seizure, a mother is usually rushed to an operating room for an emergency cesarean section, Joaquína said.

The nearest hospital was an hour and a half from the clinic — along narrow, mountainous roads that were under construction in some areas — but it was the only option.

They set off through the rain in a makeshift ambulance. The driver navigated the winding roads as two sisters in the back, one of whom was Joaquína, tried to keep the woman and her baby alive.

The driver did not see a mudslide on the road until it was too late. The vehicle spun, losing traction in the mud, and the back tires of the vehicle spun over the edge of the road.

"We almost went into the chasm. The ambulance almost flipped over," Joaquína said. "The ambulance was left half in the air and half on the ground."

Joaquína and the other sister climbed out of the ambulance to try to free it from the deep mud. The woman in birth remained in the back of the ambulance as it teetered on the side of the mountain. They gathered some villagers near the site of the accident, who helped the sisters heave the vehicle back onto the road.

Nine hours after they left the clinic, the sisters and their patient arrived at a hospital, thoroughly covered with mud.

But their journey was not over yet.

They had arrived at a private hospital, which Joaquína referred to as a "luxury" hospital. Encased with mud and exhausted from their journey, the sisters entered the hospital desperate for help, only to be turned away.

"Since we came all muddied, they didn't want to receive us because we were not suitable customers (for that hospital)," Joaquína said. "So we had to look for another place to attend to her."

Finally, they were received at a general hospital where the baby was delivered by C-section. The mother survived despite the long journey to the hospital and nearly impossible odds.

Joaquína calls the birth a "miracle."

"For these things you say, 'Wow, God really does want to work miracles,'" she said.

The baby who was delivered that day is about 14 years old now, Joaquína noted.

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As a 17-year-old girl living in Northern Mexico, Joaquína did not think she would make a good nun. She enjoyed doing her hair beautifully before she went to school in the morning and did not want to relinquish her hairstyle to the veil. Nor did she want to be a teacher like many of the nuns she knew.

Her call to religious life came, nonetheless.

As she got ready for school one morning, Joaquína heard a voice say, "And all of this — for what?"

"Who spoke to me?" Joaquína recounted saying. She remained at her bedroom mirror, frozen, for so long that her mother asked her if she was going to go to school.

"All of this," she realized, referred to her vain practices to improve her appearance. She began to pray regularly.

Soon afterward, her sister fell ill. To help care for the girl, her mother called the Servants of Mary, who lived just two blocks from their home and regularly cared for the sick in the area. Joaquína passed the walls of the convent of the Servants of Mary every day on her way to school but had never considered entering.

"When I saw the sisters, (I thought), what strange people," Joaquína said.

But when the Servants of Mary came into her home to care for her sick sister, Joaquína was struck by their warmth and charity. At that first encounter, one sister looked at Joaquína and asked, "Listen, don't you want to be like us?"

That very day, she visited the convent as an aspirant. Still a young girl, Joaquína said that an older nun took one look at her and said, "Let's see how long she lasts." Joaquína was not deterred at all — she knew that she was going to stay. A month later, on Jan. 9, 1970, she entered as a postulant.

After 53 years in the order, Joaquína said that she is thankful for every part of her ministry, even the most difficult moments.

"(Caring for the sick) is stressful in the moment because you have anxiety, nerves, worries, but after everything is over, well, you give thanks to God because you realize that he is working through you," Joaquína said. "We smile at the good things and we accept the bad."