



An encore for Jesus

Who are the women in their fifties and sixties leaving their often comfortable and privileged lives behind to minister in a prison in Tijuana, Mexico? / By LINDA PRESSLY

THE WALLS of La Mesa state penitentiary, with its watchtowers and barbed wire, loom over the surrounding streets in the city of Tijuana, Mexico. Inside, guards in balaclavas, automatic weapons strapped across their chests, patrol the walkways. There are the sounds of electric gates buzzing as they open and close, of walkie-talkies carrying indistinct messages. And the hot, still air carries the shouts of inmates playing volleyball in the yard: prisoners enjoying one of only two outside recreation sessions they get weekly.

On the ground floor another damp, concrete corridor leads to a single cell on its own. There is a narrow, hospital-like bed, a desk with drawers and a large picture of Jesus Christ on one wall. For 35 years, this was the home of Mother Antonia, an American divorcee and former Beverly Hills socialite who died in 2013. Mother Antonia relocated to Tijuana in the 1970s, and for the rest of her life committed herself to serving the needy – especially the prisoners of La Mesa. She also founded

a congregation of nuns – the Eudist Servants of the Eleventh Hour.

“I was surprised Mother Antonia was able to think of this as her home,” says Sr Viola, now leader of the congregation, standing in the austere cell. “But she loved it.”

Mother Antonia named the community after St John Eudes, a seventeenth-century French missionary. The “eleventh hour” refers to the age at which women join the order, because they do so in their fifties and sixties – in the eleventh hour of their lives, when other Catholic religious congregations will not take them. This is their “encore” for Jesus.

Sr Viola is nearly 84, and is one of the nuns who visit La Mesa every working day. But this was not the life she planned. A former employee of JCPenney, the American department store, and married for five decades, with children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren, Sr Viola was looking

forward to retirement in the US. Then suddenly, 16 years ago, her husband had a massive stroke and died.

“I was a little unhappy with Our Lord,” she says, in what is clearly an understatement.

Hispanic and a fluent Spanish speaker, Sr Viola looked for a job working with migrants. But none of the organisations she applied to would employ her, due to her age. Then she read about Mother Antonia’s work in La Mesa.

“I came to visit, and I knew this was for me,” she says. However, her children were against her becoming a nun, so she stayed in the US for another year. Sr Viola still

wanted something more. Her children began to appreciate that she was unhappy. So, when she wanted to return to work in Tijuana, they backed her.

Every day in La Mesa is different for the sisters. At the large, on-site chapel, the

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Prayers and banter in the women's section of La Mesa prison with Eudist sisters Ann Gertrude (left) and Viola (below)

women prisoners file in, dressed in grey, their hands held uniformly behind their backs – all the inmates are compelled to walk like this when they move around the prison. Sr Ann Gertrude, at 55 the youngest of the 12 Eudist Servants, welcomes and blesses the inmates as they enter. From Cameroon, she arrived in Tijuana via a nursing career and missionary work in New York City. But a documentary film about Mother Antonia made Sr Ann Gertrude cry:

“I was in tears, and I said: ‘Lord, are you calling me, what is this?’”

Propelled by the example of Mother Antonia, Ann Gertrude moved to Mexico.

“I saw misery in New York,” she says. “But I had never been around somebody who had no freedom, no one to visit them, and no one to pray with them.”

SR ANN GERTRUDE took her vows in 2020. In the chapel, she leads the service with Sr Nelida, a Peruvian who is 76 and joined the Eudist Servants after an accounting career in Los Angeles. The service is joyful. There is singing and prayer, with prisoners volunteering for the readings. Several of the women weep – tears of happiness perhaps, or a space to release sadness and regret. Under a regime in which inmates get time outside their cells so infrequently, for most of these women, a visit to the chapel is an event.

Maribel, one of the volunteer readers, is glowing.

“For me the sisters’ visits are a blessing. They mean a lot to me,” she says, smiling. “These women have left everything – including their families – and they’ve done it for the love of God.”

Maribel is 13 years into a 20-year sentence for kidnap. Her case is a reminder of the context in which the Eudist Servants have chosen to work. Tijuana is located right on the border with the US, and dominated by the immense, rust-red American fence that snakes across the hilly terrain. This is one of Mexico’s most murderous cities, in part controlled by organised crime groups that smuggle drugs and



The Tablet poem

after St Francis of Assisi

By Camille Ralphs

O you, let our need for more more-or-less
lessen, and let us not want so much
to be held, as to behold,
to be elected candidates, as to be candid,
to be openly adored, as to be in an open
door,
for it is entering one spinning room that we
will leave another;
but it is in entering this stanza that I re-enter
the others,
and it is to the played-out tune of all that’s
dying that I set these words, this life

Camille Ralphs is a poet, critic and editor at The Times Literary Supplement.

migrants into the US. Maribel was asked to look after a woman who was going to cross the border illegally. What she was unaware of, she claims, is that the woman was being trafficked. She says if she had known this, she would never have done it.

Before the inmates are escorted back to their cells, the sisters manoeuvre two large shopping trolleys piled high with toiletries, juice and doughnuts into the chapel. These are distributed, and there is spontaneous applause for the Eudist Servants of the Eleventh Hour.

There is so much gratitude within these prison walls for the social services provided by the sisters. On a visit to the cell block that houses male prisoners over the age of 60, Sr Nelida struggles across the compound with a bag of toilet rolls that is almost as big as she is. Outside the block, she waits with Sr Viola and Sr Ann Gertrude for permission to enter.

“They have to make sure the men have their clothes on. But I was married for 50 years so it’s nothing I haven’t seen,” says Sr Viola.

There is a long corridor, with cells off it. Each of them houses six men in bunks stacked three-high, with a small toilet/washing area behind a wall at the back. These are challenging living conditions, to say the least. As soon as the nuns enter, men are pushing their rosaries through the bars, asking for their beads to be blessed. Sr Viola has an emergency plastic bottle of holy water in her pocket and obliges.

“Every time they come, it’s like family because I don’t have any visitors,” says Jose.

The toilet paper is distributed, along with some sweets. There is banter, prayer and laughter.

“They’re my brothers,” says Sr Ann Gertrude. “They’re always happy to see us, and we’re always happy to see them.”

One of the men chats to Sr Viola about Mother Antonia – he says she got him his first dentures in 2005. And the need here remains great. Up and down the corridor, the sisters collect scrappy notes – there are requests for dental work, medicine, a blanket. And there is one from a man who is having trouble with his glass eye.

“We’ll send him to our eye doctor,” says Sr Viola.

At the end of today’s cell block visit, this seemingly indefatigable octogenarian is flagging slightly. And she is worried. With only a dozen sisters left in the order, and the average age somewhere in the seventies, Mother Antonia’s legacy might be under threat.

“We need new blood,” Sr Viola says, simply.

Linda Pressly is a journalist and documentary maker. Her documentary *An ‘Encore’ for Jesus* airs on the BBC World Service on Good Friday. For more information about the Eudist Servants of the Eleventh Hour, visit: eudistservants.org