Report #5

His Eminence, Albert Cardinal Meyer, S.T.D.

On the Parish of San Miguelito

Your Eminence

Much has happened since we sent you our last report on July 9, 1963. Please allow us to summarize under four headings the more significant events:

I. The Mission

Our people need and will need for a long time concentrated preaching of the Word of God. What they know is very limited and that, many times, way off the center of Catholic Faith. A good mission was clearly in order but first we had to clear many obstacles:

where - the barraca we use for a church has a 200 person capacity: not enough

when - the distances are great in our parish and when it rains, the roads are almost impassable: an evening mission would be unfeasable

what - the traditional mission concentrates on the four last things; good doctrine but usually far too individualistic

who - to preach the Word of God - essentially the call of God to unity in Christ by sacrificial love. Few, if any, priests down here have broken out of the mold of preaching individual salvation and moved on to the Word of God and the Pascal Mystery. Not one of them could do the latter in a simple enough but profound manner.

We attempted to solve our problems by arranging to use the lovely campus of Colegio Belen about five miles away from us; the Sisters loaned us their school busses for transport; we would hold the mission on three successive Sundays from 7:00 A.M. to 7:00 P.M. For a speaker we brought in a layman, Don Jesus Rodriguez, the chief catechist for the Cardinal's Committee for the Spanish Speaking in Chicago. Don Jesus is one of the finest preachers (lay or cleric) we have ever heard. He has had plenty of experience and an intuitive bent for good theology.

To sum it all up, the mission was highly successful: the first Sunday for young people 15-21, 350 attended; the second Sunday 215 men came; at the last mission 350 women assisted. We worked hard with Don Jesus preparing the material for the talks and the paraliturgy or liturgy after each talk. The effect was little short of

spectacular. He held all three audiences in his hand for hours on end with the most solid of doctrine, mostly by talking their language and using their thought patterns. For instance, his talk on Christ was a classic (we really should print it up). Instead of using meaningless (to them) forms like shepherd or king, he presented Christ as the great Revolutionary Leader (a concept fascinating to these people who are so interested in Revolution).

Results: Sunday Mass attendance soared. The number of men going to Mass went up to 150 - a true phenomenon in Panama.

Many couples came to us to have their marriages revalidated.

Many young men came to us asking: "Father, what must I do to be like Don Jesus and do the kind of work he does?" We believe no cleric, be he a Bossuet or a Sheen, could have had that particular effect on our men; it gives one an idea of the possibilities of using laymen in this apostolate.

II. Intensive Course for Lay Catechists

While Don Jesus was still with us, we invited thirty men from all the various sectors of the parish to begin an intensive course in Christian doctrine with an eye to forming them into adult catechists, Christian Community organizers, "lay deacons"--if such be the will of the Bishops and the Supreme Bishop. Twenty-six men came and have been coming ever since--five hours a week. The course is almost over now and we happily can report that we have formed a solid nucleus of trained laymen and that we learned a great deal from them of the Panamanian mentality. In a few weeks they will go out to begin their own adult discussion groups in the various sectors of the parish. One man is already teaching a class of twelve adults; many are also our lectors and commentarists for the Divine Liturgy.

We believe we have gotten a good start on one of the principal facets of our experimental plan. Virtually every soul (all 25,000) in our parish needs a solid ground in the Faith; unless we train literally hundreds to do this work, we can not hope to accomplish our mission here.

Interesting sidelight: three young unmarried men in college, all participants in the course, have indicated their desire to enter the Seminary.

III. The Fiestas Patronales

The biggest occasion each year in a Latin American community is the Patronal Feastday--in our case, that of St. Michael on

September 29. There is usually lots of dancing, games, climaxed by the big procession (carrying the Saint) and Mass on the feast day itself.

For several years, a few "enterprising" people in the area have put on the Fiestas - i.e., built the temporary toldos (dance pavilions), paid the priest to come for the Mass, bought the fireworks, etc.,--all for the "community" benefit but each year, strangely enough, they "broke even."

Many of the people wanted the Fiestas Patronales used this year to raise funds for our building project. So a Junta de Festejas of some sixty people, most of them men, was organized with Father Mahon serving as treasurer. The Junta worked very hard and managed to put up two large (one 60' x 130', the other 60' x 100') toldos. The "enterprisers" entered the field by building still two more toldos. By custom, only the Junta de Festejas can get permission for dances or games and we tried to prevent this commercial competition but got nowhere principally because this is election-campaign time in Panama in which the politicians will do almost anything to win even a few votes. So the stage was set for the big test.

How important was this Fiesta to us in our work? Besides making some money, there was a lot of worry about prestige. The average Panamanian strives desperately for community and prestige but fear and a strong sense of inferiority usually combine to make the first two impossible. Sure enough, half-way through the preparatory stages, as the debts began to pile up, the men had fallen into a state of bickering, carping and disunity. We called them all together and told them that our unity and faith in ourselves were far more important than money: "so if we're going to fail, let's go down together and like men; if we succeed, let's also do it together." The medicine worked and there was very little disharmony after that.

Well, the Fiestas Patronales were celebrated from Sept. 26 to the 30th. They were in every sense a success:

<u>financially</u>: our expenses ran almost to $10,000 and we got exactly that much back so we, too, "broke even." But we really did make money. You see, we built one large building which will stand as our church and center until we can build. When we demolish it, we can get about $3,00 from salvagable materials. Meanwhile, we can put on more activities to raise money.

<u>religiously</u>: 600 people (our largest single Mass attendance so far) attended the Community Mass. Everybody sang the Mass and dialogued with the Celebrant. (About 25 men communicated.)

In the afternoon (Sunday 29th) we had the procession. It was one of the finest ever seen in Panama and, in a country so devoted to processions, that's saying something.

socially: the men found out they could succeed by hard work and faith and discipline. They are delighted. Besides, they won a great deal of badly-needed prestige--every newspaper and both television channels gave wide coverage to the Fiestas.

politically: the local "enterprisers" had a political as well as a financial stake in the Fiestas. They suffered severely in both. It may be that their back is broken. On the other hand, the politicians are getting very friendly to us as they see signs of growing organization.

IV. The local Panamanian Clergy

We were privileged to meet all the native secular Panamanian clergy at the recent annual retreat. They impress us as being mostly young, intelligent, pious and open. They are not well molded as a group and like most Panamanians feel inferior and are fearful. They seem to like us as well as we do them and they are fascinated by our new ideas and methods. We meet every Wednesday--all of us together--to discuss pastoral problems. This work may easily be one of the most important we do here in Panama.

Several weeks ago, the clergy asked us to draw up a document outlining our pastoral plan so that all could study and discuss. I enclose that document.

Leo T. Mahon
John H. Greeley
Robert J. McGlinn

San Miguelito, October 9, 1963