

**Good night of the Provincials of MEG and SUO**  
**“Pastoral work on the frontier**  
**between Mexico and the United States”**  
**20th March 2014**

For one reason or another, certain locations are noted for having a larger concentration of peoples on the move. One such heavily trafficked place at present is the long border between Mexico and the United States. This US/Mexican border extends some 3,200 kilometers (5,000 miles) from the Atlantic coast to the Pacific. It is the border with the highest number of people crossing, as well as increasing monitoring strategies for the United States. It is one of the largest borders in the world for both legal and illegal crossings.

Border crossings to or from the United States occur at 23 locations, in only eight of which is concentrated 94 percent of the stream in both directions. These locations fall into three categories: border cities with the longest tradition of crossings (Tijuana -San Diego, El Paso - Juarez and Matamoros - Brownsville), intermediate border cities (Mexicali-Calexico, Piedras Negras -Eagle Pass, Laredo - Nuevo Laredo and Nogales), and new border crossing areas (Altar in Sonora, Ciudad Acuña- Del Rio and Reynosa – McAllen). The Salesian province of SUO has only one such community, in the border town of Laredo, Texas, with several other communities in California relatively close to Tijuana.

During the last three decades the border region of both countries has experienced major changes in its social dynamics, significantly affecting migration processes; there have been major changes in volume, in the direction of movement, and over time new forms of migration have emerged. One can identify four distinct migration streams, depending on whether from Mexico to the US or vice versa: 1) migrants who after working in North America are returning to their country, 2) Mexican " undocumented workers " who are apprehended in the United States and deported to Mexico by the "US Border Patrol," 3) residents of other parts of the country who were working temporarily in border cities or looking for work there and who are beginning their journey back to their place of origin (migrants North to South) and 4) inhabitants of other parts of the country who reach the northern border cities with the intention of working there or crossing into the United States for work purposes ( migrants South to North) .

Today's younger generations were born into a context of "walled" borders, since that is all they have ever seen or known. Young people crossing at border cities or listening to what they've heard of these cities, have an image of the border which results from the most current situation, namely: hardened immigration policies caused by the effort of Americans and their elected representatives to regain a sense of safety, especially after the unfortunate events of September 11, 2001, the characterization of the Mexico -US border as an opportunity for the Mexican but a danger to the Americans, especially due to the illegal trafficking of drugs, weapons, people and money.

For those who are considered young in our time, born since the mid 80's, the border areas between Mexico and the United States are experienced and perceived as areas of international tension, exacerbated largely by social trends and the policies of both nations. They are seen as areas of suspicion and of conflict, with walls that block attempts to cross. While border relations have not always been so troubled, neither will current tensions

continue indefinitely into the future for the youth of today. The emblematic line of demarcation fence/wall between Mexico and the United States is an uncomfortable topic.

The educative and pastoral proposal offered by the Salesians, both of SUO and MEG along the MEXICO -USA border, is intentionally concentrated in areas that are well populated, underserved, and strategic from the point of view of the movement of peoples. We systematically offer programs of education, social assistance, and evangelization. We have 13 oratories, 6 parishes (one of them on the US side), one school, and a food service project (el desayunador) which also offers social and educational programs for the most destitute immigrants, often recently deported and “dumped” into Tijuana. We have a significant presence for children and youth offering alternatives to the use of free time, with programs to help in their recovery and re-incorporation into school, and the promotion of expressions meant to preserve the cultural richness of border societies. In the face of the dynamics of social insecurity which have been unleashed in recent years, we work hard to tailor our offerings for education to peace, for the prevention of addiction, to prevent our young people from getting lured into organized crime, as well as a fraternal presence, full of Christian charity, for victims of violence. The witness of our religious life is also an important contribution to these border cities, where to live and promote an encounter with Jesus, to deepen our faith, both in its outward expression and interior life, requires a constant effort.

Since the beginning of the Salesian presence at the northern border of Mexico, we have counted on the support and presence of volunteers from the communities of California and Texas, either in short visits (summer job programs, Christmas and Easter) or who stay for more extended periods. Both provinces have had the opportunity to discuss and exchange opinions. We have exchanged in a more systematic way not only volunteers but also Salesians in formation. Some members of the Salesian Youth Movement of MEG have been collaborating with and participating in programs of mutual support of the Salesian Youth Movement of SUO.

Ever since the 2011 InterAmerica Team Visit held in El Salvador, the issue of pastoral education given at the border has been the subject of reflection, study and future planning between the province of MEG and SUO. Plans and collaborative projects discussed even the possibility of forming a bi-provincial international community at the border. Our challenge is to come together there not only as SDB, but also in synergy with the Salesian Family and the laity. The themes of the New Evangelization, education, human development, education to peace, family and human rights education, are all issues that open up avenues for collaboration between us. Because we are children of “Don Bosco the dreamer,” we can’t help but think optimistically about our social impact and about better living conditions for all, especially the young people of both countries, giving them hope for a more fraternal, just and human future, in which we participate in building that Kingdom announced by Jesus in the Gospel.