

# A Music Mission in the Dominican Republic

BY LOURDES AND MICHAEL MONTGOMERY

**A**s followers of Christ, most of us are aware of our call to be missionaries, expressed in such quotations as these: “As the Father has sent me, so I send you” (John 20:21); “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19); and “You will be my witnesses . . . to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). But what role, you may be asking yourself, can liturgical musicians play in the missionary world?

We spent two weeks in August 2002 teaching music in a Dominican Republic mission parish that has been supported for twenty years by the Archdiocese of Milwaukee’s Office for World Missions. Though we had some doubts at first about our role as missionaries, like Paul we realized that “the love of Christ urges us on” (2 Corinthians 5:14), and so we went to the Dominican Republic. Only 685 miles from our home in Miami, Florida, this country is ninety-five percent Catholic, but the Church here is very short on resources (and priests!). The main property of the parish we visited—Familia Sagrada in Sabana Yegua—is just minutes from the city of Azua and about seventy-five miles from the capital, Santo Domingo. Founded in 1496, Santo Domingo is the oldest city built by Europeans in the Western Hemisphere; Azua was founded in 1504. Ponce de Leon lived briefly in Azua, and even Hernán Cortés was said to have been a notary public in this city.

Though they are rich in history, Dominicans are not wealthy. Years of mismanagement and political corruption

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have taken a toll on the country. Sixty percent of all Dominicans are poverty stricken, and the unemployment rate is also sixty percent. The territory of Familia Sagrada encompasses a region of rural farming villages scattered across a hot desert plain. The crops of plantain (banana), sugar cane, and corn require irrigation by a system of canals.

Homes in the parish are simple. Some are constructed of concrete and cinderblock, others of wood slats with palm thatch roofs. Windows have no glass or screening (and thank goodness that Dominican mosquitoes are not as aggressive as those in Miami!). Homes with dirt floors may still be found.

The Dominican electric companies claim that some customers do not pay their bills, so they refuse to supply power around the clock; in fact, the lights may go off unexpectedly at any time, and so might the water supply, which requires electric pumps. Though the high temperatures are near ninety degrees each day, we never found a building that had air conditioning during our two-week stay. This made it very uncomfortable for two North Americans unused to such heat to do any kind of hard physical work during the day; fortunately, nighttime lows are in the mid-seventies, so we were able to sleep comfortably with the help of a fan, so long as



there were no power outages. Unfortunately, these outages are very frequent.

We had a frightening experience with a thatched-roof house while we were in the village of Los Toros: The roof caught fire while we were having lunch. The entire village—including us—turned out quickly to extinguish the *candela*, as they called it. Later that day, as we gathered in the open air to sing “Blessed are the poor . . . the meek . . . they who hunger and thirst” (Matthew 5:3–11), our doubts about our mission began to fade and our sense of purpose grew: We were confident that we were meant to be here.

## To Enhance Liturgical Music

Our purpose in visiting Familia Sagrada Parish was to enhance their liturgical music experience and participation. In the summer of 2001, Tom Tomaszek of Milwaukee had brought fourteen guitars to the community. On our visit, we brought two keyboards (that can be powered by batteries) and an electric bass (that can't). We also brought Spanish-language hymnals and six guitar accompaniment books from Oregon Catholic Press, and we wrote our own bilingual beginning guitar method book for this mission.

The pastor while we were there was affectionately called Padre Jeronimo (Father Jerome Thompson of Milwaukee), though a sudden aneurysm caused his death while he was visiting Milwaukee this past May, just before his scheduled return to Familia Sagrada. Padre Jeronimo explained that the parish had two types or groups of guitarists—the group that could strum chords by ear to accompany the choir and the group that could not. Neither group could read music. With this information, we prepared materials to teach them how to read music and play notes on the guitar and to help explain basic theory and harmony. We wanted this instruction to culminate in chordal accompaniment of liturgical song. We cannot emphasize strongly enough the importance of being able to sight read a melody in a third world rural setting like this: It is essential not only for supporting existing repertoire but for opening the door to new repertoire. (Because we in the United States can obtain recordings of new music as well as CD or tape players with which to listen, many of us don't depend for an initial evaluation of new repertoire on such basic reading skills.)

We had a fairly ambitious schedule for our two-week visit: guitar class each morning from 8:30 to noon and choir rehearsal each afternoon from 3:00 to 5:30. On alternate days there was an additional choir rehearsal in the evening from 7:00 to 8:30. We started each morning session with *Laudes* (morning prayer), and this ritual quickly got us all into the habit of using music in liturgical prayer.

To appreciate the difficult logistics involved in arranging our *taller* (workshop), you need to understand that the parish includes twenty-eight communities. The principal means of travel from one place to another in Sabana Yegua and its environs is walking; few Domini-



Lourdes Montgomery with some of the participants in the program

cans can afford a car, though many do own motor scooters. (And it is not unusual to see an entire family riding together on a single scooter.) To bring the flock to their daily classes, rehearsals, and Masses, we relied on Familia Sagrada's three pickup trucks—or *gua-guas* as they are called locally. This is not the kind of operation that two musicians can manage on their own, so a team that involved the pastor, three seminarians, a nun, and one of the community leaders took care of most of the logistics, especially of driving the *gua-guas* to gather the groups.

This meant managing several very complex schedules in order to make time available for our sessions and for related work. Padre Jeronimo's monthly schedule alone was a nightmare: He was on the go from 6:00 AM to 10:00 PM each day. He managed to celebrate at least one Mass each month in each of the communities, and, in addition to weddings, baptisms, and funerals, he also did the grocery shopping! (In addition to the outstanding assistance we received from the local team, we also want to acknowledge the tremendous help and support we received with travel, materials, and planning from the Office of World Mis-

sions in Milwaukee and from Oregon Catholic Press.)

## A Situation with the Guitars

On the first day of class, we realized that we faced a "situation": There were forty students and only fourteen guitars! We adapted our original theory teaching plan—hands-on with guitars—and began working without guitars on the rudiments of music for the first ninety minutes of each morning class. Using a blackboard, we taught the class about lines and spaces, pitches and note values, time signatures, keys, and clefs. By the second week, the class was able to solfege simple melodies—they even understood how scales are constructed from seconds, chords from thirds—and they could sing simple harmonies.

We did not give up on the guitars, of course. We worked with them during the second half of each morning class. As we said above, we hoped that the beginning guitar method we had put together before we got to the Dominican Republic would prepare our students not only to accompany their choirs with chords but also to read notated melodies of liturgi-

cal songs. Mary Frances Reza and other Hispanic musicians have been campaigning for hymnals with notated melodies. Such resources would help to keep liturgical music consistent in Spanish-speaking communities, and we were preparing our students to make use of such resources.

After the mid-morning break, a group of eight of the more advanced guitarists (whom we referred to as the “maestros” or “teachers”) worked apart from the class for about forty-five minutes on reading single-note melodies with notes of the guitar’s first position as well as with chords formed on two or three—and, eventually, all six—strings. Right-hand practice alternated between use of the pick and use of thumb and fingers. We introduced primary chords (I-IV-V—often the *only* chords in their songs) and scales in six keys. Finally, we explained not only major and minor chords but also sevenths, major sevenths, add nines, and diminished and augmented chords. Each of these “maestros” was then given a group of beginning guitar students to work with for the final half-hour of class. The plan was that these sessions, in which the local teachers would teach local students, would continue during the coming year, once we had gone.

## Goals for the Choir

We had several goals for our series of fifteen afternoon and evening choir re-



hearsals. One goal, obviously, was to introduce new repertoire for the liturgy, much of it written by Caribbean composers. Another goal was to coordinate existing repertoire. The parish includes twenty-eight different communities, and representatives of those communities were rehearsing together. At Padre Jeronimo’s suggestion, we worked for consistency in performing current repertoire, since many of those communities had developed individualized interpretations of tunes and even, in some cases, texts. A final goal, to make a good connection with the morning guitar sessions, was to encourage the more advanced guitarists to provide chordal accompaniment for their choirs.

Christ tells us that “whoever listens to you listens to me” (Luke 10:16), and these people are phenomenal listeners. Nearly everyone involved in the program—including the two of us—was amazed at the amount of information participants in the guitar classes and the choirs were able to absorb in the short time that we had. Perhaps we would have been less surprised at the accomplishments of these participants if we had remembered that it is, in part, the genius of their culture that gave us many of the rhythmic styles we currently associate with the Caribbean.

Some Americans tend to downplay the accomplishments of people in undeveloped countries, but we would refer such scoffers to the sample scores on pages 119 to 217 of Rebeca Mauleon’s *Salsa Guidebook* and the scores in volume two of A. M. Jones’s *Studies in African Music*. Ms. Mauleon presents an excellent overview of the nuts and bolts of Caribbean music styles, including merengue—the Dominican specialty. Mr. Jones was the first non-African to analyze correctly and document the complex rhythmic layers of African drum music. This music, brought to the Caribbean via the slave trade, is integral to Caribbean styles. Though he has been a professional symphonic bassist for twenty-five years, Michael is truly humbled each time he examines the rhythmic superstructures presented in the pages of these books.

## Reflections on Mission

A mission experience like ours will naturally leave the missionaries not only with a deep sense of

satisfaction but also with a strong optimism about the role of musician-liturgists in the Church’s mission. We also had several other thoughts to share.

First, when considering the missionary aspect of our music ministry, take care not to overlook the great need within the many immigrant communities of our own country. Our is truly a “pilgrim” Church, one in which the ranks of new arrivals are swelling daily. The United States ranks fifth among the world’s Spanish-speaking countries with an estimated population of twenty million Spanish-speaking people, according to the 1984 pastoral letter by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Hispanic Presence—Challenge and Commitment*. Most of those people, according to that same letter, live at or below the poverty level.

Second, traditional musician-liturgists often consider the guitar a recreational instrument, but this instrument has a strong classical tradition as well. It is at once a powerful and convenient tool for supporting musical liturgy and an instrument close to the hearts of most Hispanic cultures.

Third, though pastoral musicians may or may not be powerful speakers, keep in mind that we possess a large repository of musical prayer whose effectiveness we tend to underestimate. We shouldn’t.

Finally, Christ said to us that “the one who receives you receives me” (Matthew 10:40). The reception we received from the participants in our workshop as well as the enthusiasm they showed during all the activities were truly remarkable. But then, Dominicans are a truly remarkable people, as we learned. Our experience taught us that we musicians do indeed possess the tools we need to be effective missionaries, and we hope others will feel encouraged by these reflections, if they feel the urge to heed the missionary call.

*To make a donation to this mission, contact: The Office for World Missions, PO Box 070912, Milwaukee, WI 53207-0912.*

## References

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