

Southwestern In Focus
PUT SMILES ON THEIR FACES

By Bob Reyes
EPT Sundial 6/14/64

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There are many stories about Father Rahm. There are many awards and recognitions which have been given him which could not be detailed in these columns.

But it can be said El Paso is losing a vital individual.

Father Rahm will be honored at a community-wide testimonial dinner at 6:30 p.m. June 29 in El Paso Coliseum.

It will be one of the largest testimonials for an individual by El Pasoans in recent years, with men of all faiths joining together.

He will leave El Paso for his new post in Sao Paulo State in Brazil June 23.

Father Rahm was assigned to Sacred Heart Church as assistant pastor fresh from St. Mary's College. St. Mary's, Kan. more than 10 years ago. But he did not immediately start his campaign to help South El Pasoan.

"My main purpose was to work with teenagers and with the working man. I have had some success with the kids, but not as much with the working man. It was a matter of becoming too involved with the kids," he said.

Father Rahm became acquainted while bicycling throughout South El Paso, his prime mode of transportation for years.



AT HIS DESK—*The Rev. Harold J. Rahm, a member of the Society of Jesus, who founded Our Lady's Youth Center and many, other enterprises to help the plight of South El Pasoans, keeps up on his correspondence. Father Rahm, who has been a spiritual leader as well as driving force in South El Paso will be honored at a testimonial dinner Saturday. He will be leaving the City for his new post June 23 in Sao Paulo State in Brazil.—(Times staff Photo)*

He has gone through five bicycles. Two were stolen and he has worn out three. He painted his name on the last one "and nobody bothered it."

"It was very different then. The alleys and many streets of South El Paso were unpaved. There were no streetlights and the neighborhoods were pretty rough. But I endeavored to meet with many men of goodwill, good politicians and good businessmen so that we could work together to change this. I wanted to put a smile on the face of South El Paso," he said.

"I wanted to make the people of the area proud of their heritage, of their beautiful Mexican culture and to relieve some of the shock of their becoming American citizens

by helping them to enter in their new role as Americans a little bit easier,” Father Rahm explained.

FIRST TASK

But there was a task which demanded his attention first.

“For two years I focused my efforts on the many gangs. This was from 1954 or late 1955 to 1957. There were few gangs by then. They were either dissolved or they had changed into legitimate clubs. Since then there have been few organized gangs in South El Paso,” he said.

The year 1957 was the year in which some of his most effective programs were put into operation and which later blossomed into substantial contributions to people of South El Paso.

“It was our endeavor to provide social, cultural, civic, religious and athletic programs for the youngsters of South El Paso,” he said.

Through these programs he was able to “get the pulse of the area and to see what the needs were so that I could assist the people,” he said.

From this meager beginning has grown an enterprise which includes a staff of 22 in which 900 persons a day are helped through a number of agencies, including a hot lunch program, employment office and several others.

“I have the greatest men on my staff in the world—Ventura Irrobali, Joe Aguilar, Lalo Delgado, Sammy Rosales and Manuel Payan. They have been with me through it all, from the beginning,” he said.

LIKES CITY

Father Rahm believes that El Paso “is the most generous city in the world. It is kind and good and as a result, it has taught me to be kind and good. Whenever I have to go out of town I feel I homesick just as soon as I leave the city limits,” he said.

“In South El Paso I learned and tried to teach the people never to look down but up and never to lose- their self respect, but to be proud of their heritage,” he said.

Father Rahm taught himself to speak Spanish, by devoting one hour a day and trying it out on his toughest critics—the boys at Our Lady’s Youth Center, which he founded.

But now that he is so well advanced with the slang, which is unique in South El Paso, as well as formal Spanish, he was asked to set it aside until he learned Portuguese in preparation for his new post in Brazil.

“But how can you stop using Spanish here when it is so vital. It is impossible to do without it here,” he said.

Brazil has presented a major challenge for Father Rahm since “Sao Paulo is the fastest growing state in Brazil and they be one of the key regions in South America.

“We will try all over again to accomplish what has been accomplished here, primarily working with the head of the family, the man, since he is the axle of the Latin American family. We will work with the poor, whose poverty can not be imagined, and attempt many things that have been tried here with success—club work, recreational programs, and other organizations to assist people to assist themselves,” he said.

“We are past the 11th hour in Latin America. We need to move now and take some

social action. About 15 per cent of the people in Brazil practice a type of voodoo, many others have some other types of spiritualistic practices. There is only one priest for every 7,000 in Latin America as compared to one for every 1,000 in the U.S.," he said.

About South El Paso, Father Rahm mentioned that some of the greatest problems include the lack of job opportunities, low wages, lack of mechanical schools, the language barrier and others.

One of the major problems on which he delved was that of ruthless loan sharks.

"This problem is a horrible problem in South El Paso. The loan sharks have on occasion charged as much as 37 per cent on a loan. I think it is the job of local leaders to educate the people against these things," he said.

Because of his unique position in a unique area, Father Rahm was granted special permission by the Most Rev. S.M. Metzger, bishop of El Paso, to say mass in the homes and backyards of South El Pasoans.

"And I still try to visit one family in the morning and one at night," Father Rahm, whose day begins at 5:30 a.m. and ends at midnight most of the time, emphasized.

"You have to get out among the people. You have to," he said.

But at 45 the pace at which he has been driving himself may be catching up with him. Now he tries to take a "siesta" for about half an hour whenever he can.

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