The Westside of San Antonio, 1930s-1950s: A Glimpse into Catholic Social Action and Community

By Donna Morales Guerra

Father Carmelo Antonio Tranchese, S.J. (1880-1956, born in Italy), served from 1932-1953 as Jesuit parish priest at Our Lady of Guadalupe Church, 1321 El Paso Street, in the heart of the Mexican colonias. Father Carmelo—or as he was known, “El Padrecito”—and the Jesuits exemplified Catholic social action. Tranchese was beloved for his efforts to affirm the dignity of the Mexicanos of his parish and of the entire community; his support for the expressive traditions of Mexicano culture; his spiritual nourishment; and for his sociopolitical activity that was responsible in great part for building the Alazan-Apache Courts and establishing the Guadalupe Community Center.

Indeed, he was an immigrant in the aid of many immigrants.

On the Westside of the San Antonio of the 1930s-1950s, residents struggled against the insistent, toxic grip of poverty—the kind that makes people sick, hungry, and robs them of dignity. The depression years devastated the entire country. Conditions of poverty, though not as widespread or severe, linger still in the Westside of San Antonio, with the evidence of ongoing structural impoverishment, racism, and discrimination.

The poverty in the Westside was brought to the nation’s attention when in the 1960s preceding Hemisfair 1968, Charles Kuralt and the CBS television network included it in the 1968 television documentary report entitled “Hunger in America.”

This photo essay provides a glimpse of the part played in the 1930s-50s by Catholic social action, which improved conditions, and provided hope for the community.

Father Carmelo Tranchese and community, before the Alazan-Apache Courts were built, distributing food at no cost to community circa 1936

Father Tranchese and community. Before the Alazan Apache Courts were built, distributing food at no cost to community circa 1936

Father Tranchese has set up a grocery depot for starving Mexican families, whose wages were suddenly cut off when the pecan shelling industry refused to raise wages to meet the minimum set by the Pecan and Nuts Bill. Evolved by the priest, supported by Catholic Charity throughout the city and operated on a no-cost basis, this food depot is undeniably saving from starvation many of the poor families living in this Westside slum area in which the new Mexican housing site is planned. Father Tranchese is a member of the San Antonio Housing Board and an ardent and enthusiastic worker for the United States Housing Act.” — from back of photo

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Father Carmelo Tranchese, S.J. at church rectory. 1941

In cooperation with the late Rev. Carmen Tranchese, S.J.—known as the Father of the Federal Housing Program in San Antonio—and at his request, our Sisters opened a much-needed social center—the Guadalupe Community Center—in the heart of a large Mexican population on the West Side of San Antonio.

The depression and its immediate aftermath had played basic theme in the lives of these desperately poor Mexicans. Father Tranchese, who had succeeded in having a large area of the most disreputable slums cleared and replaced by Federal Housing units, appealed to Rev. Mother for Sisters to help him with drastically needed social work in his parish.” — Vita, Sr. Mary Victory Lewis

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Indeed, he was an immigrant in the aid of many immigrants.
The Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word (CCVI, San Antonio) had been teaching at Our Lady of Guadalupe parish school since 1912. In 1942, Father Tranchese spearheaded the creation of the Guadalupe Community Center (GCC), and requested that one of the congregation’s sisters, Sr. Mary Victory Lewis, CCVI (1887-1968) be appointed as its first Director. Sr. Mary Victory was one of the first registered dietitians in Texas, with multiple higher education degrees in nursing and extensive work in nursing education. She also possessed a zeal for public health, so that her many skills and qualities made her a favorable choice for Director of the GCC.

Sr. Mary Victory Lewis, CCVI (1887-1968), at the Guadalupe Community Center with children at mealtime, 1942. She was Director of the GCC for 14 years.

"Someday I hope to be able to write about the many enriching experiences that occurred during my 14 years at Guadalupe Community Center. During these years I received the title of the ‘firing Sister for the West Side poor’...as in a number of instances these poor people were grossly exploited.

As I worked for the poor I saw much hardship and suffering in their lives; yet, I was happy in being able to bring to them some solace and aid. When I entered the Sisters of Charity in 1911, I had hoped to be assigned to just such work." — Vita, Sr. Mary Victory Lewis

Gathering of Our Lady of Guadalupe School graduates
Mary Ramirez, Alicia Garza, Janice Celestino, Carlota Bazán, Mr. Enriquez, 1941

Our Lady of Guadalupe chorus musicians.

Alberto Juárez and Kino Rodríguez, Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish, basketball, 1941

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The men and women religious congregations of the Jesuit priests of the Society of Jesus and the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word, along with other local congregations, have been vital to the efforts for social justice on the West side. Their mandate has been to manifest the love and care, spiritual and temporal, of Jesus Christ among the most vulnerable, as well as to provide means for community self-empowerment. The Alazan-Apache Courts housing project and the Guadalupe Community Center on 1801 W. Durango Street are two locations created with these intentions.
This photo essay uses materials found in several archival repositories—Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word Congregational Archives, San Antonio; New Orleans Province Archives, Society of Jesus [as indicated]; and the City of San Antonio Municipal Archives [Courts newsletter]—to provide a glimpse into the community life of the times at San Antonio’s Westside.

In the corrales (small shacks with dirt floors, arranged close together with no plumbing or potable water) the abysmal living conditions lent themselves to the spread of 6th and disease. The Courts were created to demolish the corrales.

Of the three hundred deaths seventy-eight deaths from tuberculosis in 1934, sixty-nine percent were Mexicans. This situation comprised San Antonio’s major health problem in 1887 and comprises San Antonio’s major health problem today. It is the illegitimate progeny of greed on the part of the corral owner, ignorance on the part of the corral denizens, indifference on the part of the general public. How long must this blot remain? When will an enlightened and outraged public opinion step up and demand order?” —A Century of Medicine in San Antonio: The Story of Medicine in Bexar County, Texas, by Dr. Patrick Ireland Nixon, 1936

The Courts had their own newsletter, created by the residents.

Here are several excerpts from the July 1945 issue, that illustrate the kinds of information shared. Disease control, city programs, andalmost always news from the Guadalupe Community Center and Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish activities. There are also social pages, where the comings and goings of the residents are mentioned, usually with some humor. There is advertising for neighborhood businesses at the end of each issue. The newsletter is an important glimpse into the community life of the Westside.

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