

Father Joseph Uhen – Celebrating 20 Years in Piura, Peru

He arrived in Piura one August 22, 1993 and to date is pastor of Santísimo Sacramento (Blessed Sacrament) Parish. This August 22 will mark 20 years of being with us always doing work for the needy.

The Rev. Father José Guillermo Uhen (Father Joe), diocesan priest, pastor of Santísimo Sacramento of Piura in the time he has served in this parish, which now has a population of about 40,000 people, has managed to earn the affection and gratitude of Piura, for his simplicity, his people skills, for his hard work and tenacious commitment and for how he always serves with great joy and optimism in all the activities he has been doing in our midst.

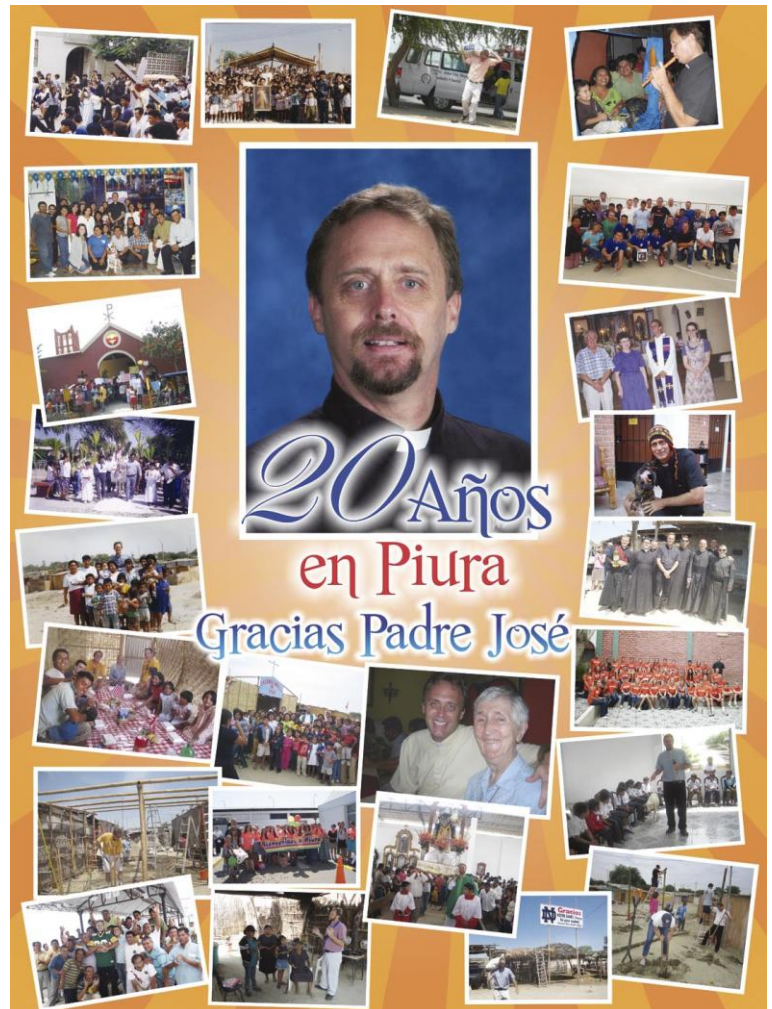
When Father Joe enters the altar to celebrate Mass, he does so with a grin, clapping and moving his body to the rhythm of the opening song, spreading to all the faithful, truly making them feel that the Mass is a party, a party with Jesus.

Father Joe is known for his jovial character and enthusiasm, his ability to adapt to Piura and peaceful life of the city, his sense of organization, his generosity, his dedication beyond measure to others, his deep concern for the family, for households, for the poor and marginalized, for women and children in situations of moral and material abandonment, for the elderly poor and abandoned, for the terminally ill, and for those who have fallen into drug addiction and need rehabilitation.

His great love for children and youth is reflected by the construction projects of schools, and in the Parish group participation in the Family to Family program.

The great personalities who have influenced his life: St. Francis of Assisi, Mother Teresa of Calcutta and Pope John Paul II.

His entrepreneurial spirit and generosity to help and assist those in need, as well as his huge capacity and dedication to parish work has earned an important place not only in the parish,



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but especially the heart of Piura who are grateful. We know some aspects of his life, works, concerns and projects.

Some important aspects of his life

From a home deeply Catholic formed by Robert Uhen, honest, hard working and Marge Block, loving woman and full of pity; he came into this world on May 19, 1958, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin in the United States. He is the second of six children; his older brother Daniel then Timothy (today a priest, also Opus Dei) and three sisters. His childhood was spent in this atmosphere of love, work and piety, which perhaps matured his priestly vocation.

His father became a catechist, sadly died of a heart attack in 1969, when he was eleven. His mother was left at home with six children to raise.

He attended primary and secondary private and Catholic schools in Oklahoma. He then attended the University of Notre Dame to study Psychology. His brothers studied at Marquette University, a Jesuit University. He also achieved a "Master of Spirituality" at the Jesuit University of San Francisco; a "Bachelor of Theology" at the Gregorian University in Rome, and a "Diploma in Biblical Studies" at the Franciscan Biblical University in Jerusalem.

His vocation was born in a deeply Catholic household. His grandparents had always wanted to be blessed by the Lord with the priesthood of one of the family members. His parents in turn gave life examples of a home strongly built on Christian moral values and constant prayer. In this environment Father Joe was maturing his faith in the love of God and neighbor, had serene and thoughtful reflections on life and death and discovered the call of Christ to follow and gladly accepted the Father's loving heavenly invitation.

The era in which he lived as a young man was a profound time of transcendence, of great uncertainty. The Second Vatican Council was completed in 1965. In just five years of his pontificate, John XXIII, Pope of peasant origin, had promoted a Copernican revolution in the Catholic Church; sponsored the liturgical reform, allowing the mass in the different national languages of each country in the world, with the celebrant facing the faithful; reinforced the evangelical principle of a Church committed to the liberation of the poor; and published the encyclical "Mater et Magistra 'and' Pacem in Terris", which updated the Church's social doctrine. John XXIII shocked the world and the church indoors when Vatican II convened (1962-1965) without consulting the Roman curia. "I wanted the wind of history to wipe off the dust on the throne of Peter", he declared. With all these changes it was difficult to determine what the priesthood would be like.

The people who influenced somehow in his vocation

Mother Teresa of Calcutta, founder of the Missionaries of Charity (1963) was a living testimony of the love of Christ for her total dedication to serve in the "poorest of the poor." Her example has been a challenge to the conscience of mankind. She was a great example of a really admired Catholic and was worthy of the Nobel Peace Prize, among many other awards she

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received in life. Like Pope John Paul II, her mission began each day before dawn, before the Eucharist. In the silence of contemplation, Mother Teresa heard the cry of Jesus on the cross: "I have thirst." That scream pushed her into the streets of Calcutta and all the peripheries of the world, in search of Jesus in the poor, the abandoned, the dying.

Pope John Paul II, the Pope who for 26 years set the tone for more than one billion Catholics worldwide and became one of the most influential figures of the twentieth century was a tireless traveler, friend of the young, exceptional communicator and selfless worker who fulfilled his duties, evangelizing until his last day. John Paul II called for the forgiveness of the debts of poor countries, called on Christians to be entrepreneurs, to practice solidarity because "it was a moral duty", and condemned the predatory nature of modern capitalism and inequality. The great communicator soon learned the meaning of the term "global village" and took advantage of the benefits that the media offered to perform its main task; the dissemination of church doctrines. He was another character that influenced Father Joe's priestly vocation.

Work with the Missionaries of Charity of Mother Teresa of Calcutta

In 1984, he had the opportunity to work with the Missionaries of Charity Congregation in "The Bronx" in New York, one of the poorest places, violent and very dangerous. The sisters had much respect for the priesthood. They talked with the priests. In this environment he saw the need to offer himself to God in the Priestly Ministry.

Oklahoma had a mission in Guatemala where they had killed one of the mission priests. Father Joe was aware of the violence against the Church and against clergy in Latin America. Peru was suffering the blows of Shining Path, who had killed eight foreign priests. The response to terrorism and chaos was the message of Jesus Christ and therefore, he responded positively as a way to show solidarity with the pain and suffering of their brothers and resources to bridge a country so full of riches to a place where there was hunger, misery and pain.

This grim scenario did not discourage the boy Joseph William, as he was well aware of what they learned in "Notre Dame: that 20% of the world has 80% of the goods of the land and 80% of the people in the world has only 20 % of the goods of the earth; i.e., 80% receive only a fraction. He was seen the 20% who enjoyed the fruits of the earth. Even as a middle class youth he had enjoyed everything that other young people of his time enjoyed; his sports car and all the amenities could be considered abundant resources. Faced with this reality, he thought he had to do something to reverse this situation of social injustice in the world, as did St. Martin de Porres, the patron of social justice.

His encounter with Father David Becherer

In Jerusalem he met Father David Becherer (former priest and pastor of Santísimo Sacramento Parish) in circumstances where he was about to retire. The Archbishop of Piura, Pastor Monsignor Oscar Cantuarias had commissioned him to find another priest to replace him in the

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parish. Father David had been in charge of the parish for 20 years. Fr. Joe was there for a week doing his sabbatical in Rome. Then without a moment of hesitation, Fr. Joe offered to come, for which the relevant documentation was quickly prepared and sent to the Archbishop of Piura, who very willingly accepted it.

He concluded his studies in Jerusalem and went in a boat to Rome, as did St. Paul. Likewise he finished his studies at the Gregorian University and then sailed to Peru.

Arrival in Piura

He arrived in Piura on August 22, 1993. He was ordained deacon in the Church of St. Martin and the April 1, 1995 he was ordained priest by Archbishop Oscar Cantuarias. He was assigned Pastor in the Church of Santísimo Sacramento, where he had the privilege of celebrating his first Mass.

In July 1998, when he took charge of the parish, the sanctuary was not completely finished. Its walls were cement blocks but were not painted and the size of the church was very small for a growing population increasingly like Buenos Aires. There was a ramp up and down to the sanctuary. The current hall of Christ did not exist. The entrance door was very small and there was no gate like there is today. People went in and out of the sanctuary by the ramp that led to the gate. There were some groups that entered the basement for meetings. It was really a pretty poor chapel. The entire space only included the chapel and basement. What today is the Friendship Hall where people can sit to rest, talk or eat were actually stores.

His work in the Parish

The Santísimo Sacramento Parish is one of the largest parishes Piura. It has a population of 40,000 parishioners. Father Joe found out that he was taking on a number of challenges and responsibilities when he took over the Parish and he has devoted his best efforts to change this picture.

As an anecdote, every morning the Lord woke him and deprived him of sleep. Then he got up, sat on a bench and watched the sanctuary and he imagined how he must plan and try to apply everything he had learned about the infrastructure that a parish should have to truly serve the Community. Soon the plan began to be put to work and the poor collection of the faithful began by putting the sanctuary tile floor down and gradually transforming all of the environments. In the beginning, he was slowly getting the necessary resources from others in the United States. Resources at the beginning were not many. He got in touch with his parish Christ the King in Oklahoma and St. Anthony in Milwaukee and then others such as St. John the Baptist in Oklahoma, and with their help he was able to get resources to help change the environments. Thus it was possible to build the towers. The Municipality of Piura in turn helped raise the walls and there was much noise, and this hindered the development of the Masses and parish life.

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In 2000 the Chapel of worship arose and changes were happening so gradually. This is how he was able to expand the sanctuary, build the Friendship Hall, offices, rooms for the priests and for the Missionaries. He was able to buy adjacent land to gradually increase the Presbytery. Work never stops in the Parish. Today, the Parish campus includes the Pastoral Assistance Center, a clinic and operating room, multiple rooms for Bible studies and lessons, etc.

The area of the parish extends from Sánchez Cerro Avenue, Gulman, Loreto to Palo Parado Chico, located past San Jacinto. In the whole area of the parish Father Joe never tires of building. Today the parish has 25 chapels, some constructed with fine material and others constructed with rustic materials. Some have been constructed with U.S. support and in other cases the villagers have built their own chapels with help from the parish.

Brotherly relations with American parishes

There are five American parishes which support the Santísimo Sacramento Parish Guild. These are:

Parish of Christ the King of Oklahoma
Parish of San Juan Bautista, Oklahoma
St. Monica Parish, Oklahoma
St. Anthony Parish, Milwaukee
St. Patrick Parish, Chicago

We also have the support of the Sacred Heart College of San Francisco, California, located where Father Joe's sister and nephews live.

Because of these relationships, the Parish was able to purchase the land alongside the Parish and was able to expand the clinic building, offices for lawyers and psychologists who provide free care and complete the construction of a mini-Coliseum where free concerts are given.

The Provincial Council of Piura has built the chapels of the peoples of "18 de Mayo", "José Olaya", "San Pedro" and "Victor Raul".

There are a total of 25 chapels in Santísimo Sacramento Parish; some are built in brick such as "The Transfiguration of the Lord" in the AH José María Arguedas, "San Antonio" in A. H. Jorge Basadre, "Our Lady of Perpetual Help" in the AH Chavin, "San Lorenzo" in A. H. Susana Higushi, "Juan Bosco" in Don Bosco AH, "Divine Mercy" in the village of Buenos Aires, "St. Joseph the Worker" in Le Legue and "San Jacinto" in the village of San Jacinto.

American Missionaries

Missionaries: Religious and laypeople who work in solidarity in their parishes and beyond to help those in need; especially to the poorest of the poor.

During the year, Missionaries come from various American parishes. They are carriers of God's love to the poorest of the poor following the missionary duty of the Church to make all men partakers of evangelization and re-Christianization of men, families, and the entire human society with a universal desire of union, brotherhood, solidarity.

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Father Joe travels once a year to the U.S. to thank them for their presence among us, making known the significance of communion and universality of the Catholic Church. This meaning is what allows this close relationship of brotherhood between Santisimo Sacramento Parish and the American parishes. While Peruvians and Americans are different people with different language, different culture, different customs, the Eucharistic celebration is always the same faith, the same God, the same baptism, the same communion. In his travels to the United States on Father Joe motivates missionaries to come to Piura and coordinates with the different parishes for their arrival at different dates.

In the Presbytery of the parish, Father Joe has built special rooms with a capacity for about 60 missionaries. So far today in August 2013, and this year we have received 538 missionaries from USA, Canada, Mexico and Germany.

The works undertaken by Father Joe:

- Mary's House: a shelter for abused or desperate women and their children where they are given a home with a living room, kitchen, bathroom etc., and mostly they are given lots of love and understanding.
- Construction of the chapel of San Miguel National College: for a population of over 3,000 male students, where students can receive counseling and spiritual guidance. It also has a giant effigy of St. Michael the Archangel, who is the patron of the city, too.
- St. Lucia Clinic: Missionaries of medical professionals, dentists, nurses, midwives, assistants and volunteers, who travel from the United States twice in the year between the months of May and August to provide care, free of charge to those in need and who do not have resources. There is also a clinic within the Parish where free medical care is provided for those who need it most; and a Pro-Life Office and Project Rachel office that provides spiritual and moral support to people who have been affected directly and/or indirectly with a desired and/or unwanted abortion.
- The John Paul II Pavilion in the village of Le Legue: This pavilion provides a gathering space for the villagers, especially the 100-150 elderly who meet monthly for a community lunch and activities.
- The Angels (Los Angeles) Hospice for the terminally ill. This place provides spiritual support and medical care to patients with serious, terminal medical conditions that have no family, have been abandoned, and/or require medical assistance that cannot be provided elsewhere.
- Help on food and basic needs for Orphanages and Children's Homes such as Saint Rose Home (Hogar Santa Rosa) and Mother the Redeemer Home (Hogar Madre del Redentor).
- Construction of the Christ the King School (Colegio Cristo Rey) in the AH María Arguedas and donations for school supplies and daily breakfasts for the primary school in the town of San Jacinto.
- Drug Rehabilitation Center and Alcoholics New Life in Christ Life (Nuevo Vida). A residential home for young people who have fallen into drug use where they achieve their recovery and reintegration into society.

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- Farmer Loan Program: Approximately 140 farmers benefit from loans to plant products.
- Family to Family Program: This program was initiated in 1999. There are now 1,600 families in many parts of Piura which benefit from monthly packages of emergency supplies, most families have U.S. benefactors. Help is not limited to economics, but it is achieved through the close relationship that develops and is expressed in constant communication and mutual exchange of letters, photographs, etc.
- Construction of houses rustic materials such as corrugated iron, plywood and mats.
- Loan of wheelchairs and crutches. More than 100 chairs have been loaned for those in need. The 70% pay nothing and others pay what they can.
- Daily breakfast for children: 16 soup kitchens provide a daily breakfast for 1,600 children. The hours are Monday to Saturday.
- Program Grants: Containers full of donations for our parish arrive 4 times a year from the United States. These containers include clothing, shoes, medical equipment, chairs, school supplies, furniture, toys, etc. As well as items from American families for their families in Peru.
- Spiritual Retreat House: "The Villa" in the village of San Jacinto: Beautiful atmosphere of peace, tranquility and spirituality that motivates the realization of the Spiritual Journeys. It has spacious rooms and dormitories with a capacity of 90 beds. The use is free.
- Construction of the school "Mother of Good Counsel": Opened three years ago, the school provides education to more than 700 children from all three levels, pre-kindergarten, primary and secondary.
- Construction of a cemetery "Santa Margarita" that may be available to the poorest of the poor. (Built, but not yet open for legal documentation)

And with the grace of God, he is expected to continue the construction of new projects always thinking of others, people who need it most.

Thank you all for your love and prayers and may God bless you.