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How To Serve The Mexican Neighbor

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GEOGRAPHICALLY, historically, consciously, America stands with her face to the East. Each year hundreds of thousands of visitors come trooping through her front door, and after making themselves at home, gradually become members of her household.

But there are neighbors who, with a peculiar friendliness, have entered the house through the back door. The line between America's domain and Mexico is for many miles only an imaginary one, and the million or more Mexicans who have come to us during the past decade have almost forgotten where it is.

Neighbors who enter by the front door come with a certain formality; but from time immemorial "back door" neighbors have been treated with a peculiar friendliness and intimacy. Just how can America be neighborly to the thousands who dig her copper, care for her oranges, and keep her railway lines in repair?

The basis of all real service is understanding; and America can never show a real spirit of neighborliness to the Mexicans until she knows more about their history, their temperament, and the handicaps against which they struggle. We, of Puritan ancestry, have a heritage of three centuries of freedom of thought and conscience; the Mexican has always lived under a system which has made liberty impossible, and which, through a misuse of the system of penance, has put a price upon sin. Popular education is a commonplace with us; in Mexico it has existed only in name. America has encouraged ambition in her sons; the Mexican has always been exploited both by Church and State. Frankness with us has become a vir-

tue; the inquisition, which fostered secretiveness, is still bearing its baleful fruit in the character of the Mexicans. But withal the American, if he would serve his Mexican neighbor, must learn that a smile and a friendly heart are the same the world over, and that no one is more appreciative of what is done for him than the Mexican neighbors toiling in our land.

This personal spirit of understanding is needed nowhere more than in the Church's effort for social and spiritual betterment. It is our constant error to think of the Mexicans as "Mexicans" rather than as men, women, boys and girls. Too often a community which decides that it has a "Mexican problem" fails to realize that it is simply facing the age-old problem of sin, ignorance, selfishness and superstition, localized largely in a group of Mexicans. Usually a meeting is called and it is decided to "do something" about it. This "something" frequently consists in appointing a committee, after which everybody goes home and goes to bed with the comfortable feeling that the problem has been solved. The committee thinks inevitably along mechanical and organizational lines. A missionary is employed; a hall is hired for gospel services; or a community or neighborhood house is opened. And then, having taken such philanthropic steps, the community, which is made up of individuals, pursues its course of narrow, selfish exclusiveness. The community cannot hire a missionary or a "social worker" to be Christian for it. Service is a personal thing, and it must be rendered by persons, not organizations. The churches, the missions, the neighborhood houses, the Homes of Neighborly Service which our Church maintains among the Mexicans form merely the framework upon which the individuals of a community can reveal their Christianity. What the Mexican really wants is kindness and understanding; these can be given only by individuals. Many

times the efforts of a consecrated missionary are nullified by the foul miasmas of racial hatred existing in the community. We can build churches and settlement houses and hospitals upon every corner of every block in every Mexican community, and unless American Christians live Christ in their daily contacts with these strangers within our gates, all our organized efforts shall be in vain.

There is an American woman in a little town in California who makes it a habit frequently to invite six or eight Mexican women to come to her home and have luncheon with her. She doesn't try to preach to them, nor does she instruct them; and yet with eloquence she both teaches and preaches. There are American families which have "adopted" Mexican families. Mr. Smith passes the time of day over the fence with Mr. Garcia. Mrs. Smith drops in for an afternoon call, or encourages Mrs. Garcia to come to her home. John shows Juan how to ride on a scooter, and Mary plays at dolls with Maria. And almost inevitably such American families who have decided to "be friends" with Mexican families testify that they have received far more than they have given.

But it is possible, also, to help the Mexican neighbor in his economic struggle. When he first crosses the line, he is ready to take any sort of a job which will buy beans and chili. His ideas of living are low; his needs are few. But the children immediately enter our public schools, while the whole family is thrown almost violently in contact with a higher standard of living. The children are ashamed of their rags and they want better clothes. They want money for movie tickets, in fact they want all the things which American children want. Contacts with American life, and standards of living, awaken ambition for better things in the hearts of our Mexican neighbors, and we serve them when we let them glimpse better things.

But this means that Mr. Garcia must have a better paid job, and American Christians can help him in several ways. They can insist that he receive an honest wage, that he be not exploited in the land of his adoption as in the land of his birth. They can help him by night schools and in other ways to secure a knowledge of English, as well as additional training which will increase his earning power. Lastly, they can insist that employers of cheap labor shall work out some plan among themselves which shall not make that labor a public charge during the periods of unemployment. Various industries, such as the cotton, the beets, and the seasonal fruits and nuts demand a large supply of labor during only a portion of the year. It is to their advantage to have too much rather than too little labor available. And, naturally, they are not concerned about how the Mexican family maintains itself between crops. This works a grievous hardship upon the laborer who has not been able to lay something by for the time of unemployment. Some plan must be worked out by the various industries dependent upon Mexican labor whereby this labor may be employed during the entire year. When public charity feeds thousands of Mexicans in Colorado for five months so that they can work for seven months in the beet industry, the Great Western Sugar Company is being subsidized out of the public purse. And this is something which the Company neither needs or desires.

And, lastly, we can serve our Mexican neighbor by giving him Christ. This can be made to mean something very trite, or it can be a real contribution to his life. Understood in the latter sense, it is the outstanding service which can be rendered the Mexican. Three or four centuries of ignorance, repression, superstition have left their moral marks. Quickly the Mexican learns better ways of living; sorely he needs moral character to give him the strength to live as he has learned

that it is right for him to live. For years he has coveted the fruits of religious liberty as he has seen them in the neighbor nation to the north; poignantly he needs to have his soul set free, that the blessing of liberty may have real issue in his life. These things only a personal faith in Christ can give him.

Restricted immigration through the front door has meant and will continue to mean increasing immigration through the back door. It may not be long ere every community in America has a "Mexican problem." God grant that when that time comes we shall have learned that Christian service means more than a "Program," and that living Christ accomplishes more than proclaiming Him in church or in rented hall.