

THE CHURCHES AND CHAPELS OF THE PARISH AND THEIR COMMUNITIES

Cristo Rey Salinas del Sur (9)



The very first chapel that I worked on was in Salinas del Sur (Southern Salt Works). When I first arrived there in 1967, this community, population wise, was the largest group of salt workers in the laguna; there were maybe a hundred and fifty persons, men, women and children, in the Salinas del Sur.

To be sure, there are other small salt works even farther south. Most of the salt works, including Salinas del Rey, have no 'official' name, and are variously known by one name or the other, according to the whim of the person speaking. For instance, Salinas del Sur is sometimes called Salinas de Chumba. 'Chumba' is the sobriquet of Jesús de la Rosa, by far now the most prominent merchant, as well as a salt producer and trucker, in Salinas del Sur. (See below *.)

One of the many who had small workings here was Sr. Jorge Flores. Sr. Flores had a small salt business in Torreón, but bought most of the salt he needed from other private producers in Salinas del Rey. It was he who initiated the building of a chapel here by providing the material and labor for building a brick arch for the entrance. The foundation for the walls was a trench filled with rock and lime mortar, which was not very costly. The walls were made of adobe, and I suspect that most of that was volunteer work. The lintels above the openings for the windows were used railroad ties. Sr. Flores' business was small and, with a young family, he could not contribute heavily toward finishing the chapel. The walls of the chapel were finished several years before I arrived, and were starting to weather from the infrequent rains.

(Later Sr. Flores became an invaluable help to me. When I would go to Torreón to buy materials for building, I stayed at his house, and Jorge would take me around to the various stores and businesses.)

When I first started going to Salinas del Sur we celebrated Mass in private homes or out in the open in someone's patio. At the same time we started some fund-raising projects, such as raffles, with me providing most of the prizes. Also, dances during which the women offered home made snacks for sale. And I contributed some funds. In the end there were enough funds to buy the lumber and the corrugated tin for the roof, and cement for the floor. In La Esmeralda I made the altar and a table for the sanctuary. The chapel was blessed under the title of Cristo Rey (Christ the King) because it was located in Laguna del Rey. Later I made simple benches for the chapel.

Soon after the chapel was finished Sr. Jorge Flores, who was very involved in the Cursillo Movement in Torreón, organized a Cursillo for the men in Salinas del Sur. The retreat was affected within an enclosure created by making a 'wall' of upright quites placed side by side in a shallow trench, and then the fill was tamped tight to hold them erect. There was a shade made of tarps where the lectures were given, and where the men slept on the ground at night. The meals were cooked in homes by the women and delivered to the participants. About twenty men participated in the Cursillo.

Later another and larger Cursillo was organized with more comfortable accommodations.

We continued to work to put in windows and a door, and plaster the inside and out. We also installed a false ceiling of stretched cloth to hide the rafters.

This type of ceiling is rather common. Maybe it would be better to say that it was rather common. Now it is much more common to install a false ceiling of Styrofoam sheets, which is just a little more work than the cloth ceiling, and so much superior. To explain the cloth ceiling. The framework for the cloth ceiling is quite the same as for the styrofoam ceiling, except that the squares are much larger for the cloth ceiling. The cloth that is used is sort of like a cheese cloth. Once the cloth is in place it is completely 'painted' with a much diluted animal glue. (The old brown, smelly hot glue that was heated in the double boiler. How many of you remember it?) When this dries it shrinks and pulls the cloth taut. Just the right solution must be used or else the cloth will tear. Once it is dry it can be whitewashed or painted.

Several years later a violent storm ripped several sheets of tin from the roof and tore the ceiling. When we repaired the roof we replaced the ceiling with insulating Styrofoam sheeting. The original wooden windows were in bad shape, and so were replaced with metallic windows.

A small sacristy was added. Later on I wired the chapel for electricity and bought a small portable generator and a solar panel plus battery for the sanctuary light. Next a modest bell tower with a bell. A cement-tile floor was laid over the first cement floor because it was starting to deteriorate. Finally a low wall of lime bricks was built around the church to keep at bay the burros and goats and pigs. Inside the wall several trees and oleanders were planted. All of this was done over a period of many years.

Just above, it was mentioned that the first cement floor of the chapel was deteriorating. In very many places in the parish, and universally true in the laguna area, there are certain extremely corrosive elements other than sodium chloride in the soil. Among the people the popular name for this is 'salitre', but it is not salitre by the strict definition of the word because it does not contain, at least I do not think it does, nitrate. Its destructive property is in proportion to the concentration of the element and the ambient level of moisture or water. Away from the laguna there can be spots several hundred feet across where, if the humidity is high enough, the ground appears to be damp. In some of these places the ground is almost bare even though close by the vegetation is normal. In extreme cases it can actually decompose concrete, and especially if the concrete is a weak mix. It will also travel twelve to eighteen inches up an adobe wall and decompose the adobes by making them and the plaster sort of powdery.

The chapel in Salinas del Sur was built close to the floor of the laguna, and so it was especially susceptible.

There were several intervals of several years each when another priest took over the pastoral care of the Laguna area, though I was always the pastor. One of these priests was from the southern part of Mexico. In the area in which he had lived there was heavy drug trafficking. Apparently he knew too much, and maybe he had reported. His life was threatened, and he thought he would be safer way up north out on the desert. But no. One afternoon several of the parishioners became concerned that Padre had not been seen all day. A lady rapped on the rectory door, but there was no answer. The lady's little girl heard Padre's dog give a low growl. They forced their way into the rectory and found Padre Cuauhtémoc neatly laid out atop the bed. He had been hand strangled.

It was now the early 1990s, and I was at the time again taking care of the laguna area while the other priest was on sick leave. In the meantime Salinas del Sur had prospered and grown. The chapel, even though it was repaired several times, was showing the effects of the salitre. The people approached me with the proposal of building a larger and better chapel, and using the old chapel for meetings and catechism classes.

So, a new chapel was planned and begun just a few yards to one side of the old one. This chapel would be built of cement blocks and with a structural asbestos/cement roof using the longest ones available. I agreed to cover the cost of most of the material for the chapel itself; the community would cover the cost of the façade, towers and vitro tile floor.

By this time heavy plastic sheeting (which comes in rolls) was becoming more available, and was coming more and more into use around the laguna to first line with plastic the trenches for the foundations, and also for below the floors to prevent the salitre from affecting them. This had been proven to be quite effective. Of course we used this.

The people, directed by a very active and capable lady, were well organized and I had very little to do with construction. In fact the other priest came back shortly after the foundations were started.

In the picture above, both the old and the new chapels are shown. It can be seen that the top part of the bell tower on the old chapel has been demolished so as not to detract from the new. To the left of the old chapel is seen the sacristy.

Construction here is so much easier than in La Esmeralda. Starting about six miles from Salinas del Sur there is a good paved road all the way to Torreón. Almost daily empty trucks come in to buy salt. These trucks are more than willing to bring in merchandise for a reasonable price. Right in Química all materials necessary for construction, including cement blocks, are available. The road was not paved into La Esmeralda until after I left.

A note on Chumba. The usual sobriquet for 'Jesús' is 'Chuy'. I do not know why, for this boy, 'Chuy' transformed into 'Chumba'. When I first came to Salinas del Sur Chumba was a strapping young man of about eighteen. About a year and a half later he eloped with Lupita, one of the daughters of the next door neighbor Blandino Estupiñán. Soon afterwards they legalized the marriage in both the civil and church forums. At the time Chumba was only a laborer in the salt works of his father, Miguel de la Rosa. Chumba and Marisa lived in two small dirt floor storerooms of Chumba's dad. (Fact is that most every house in Salinas del Sur, including that of dad, had a dirt floor.) Some time around a year later I was there in Salinas del Sur for the usual Mass. It happened that it was a cold dreary winter day. After mass Chumba and Lupita asked me to come to their place to urgently baptize their little baby girl who was seriously ill with a cold or the flu. They did not want to risk taking the baby girl out in the cold. I still have a vivid

memory of the distraught parents, the chilly dark room, and the smell of the kerosene cook stove they were using to add a bit of warmth. Much later the little girl, when her time came, also eloped.

It was at the house of Miguel de la Rosa that Mass was often celebrated before the chapel was finished. The porch looked out onto a large patio. Both the de la Rosa and the Estupiñán families cooperated to a good deal in the construction of the chapel.

Chumba was (is) a progressive go-getter, and Lupita is his perfect compliment. They started selling hard candy, bubble gum and peanuts as a side line through a window in the house. Like most every other window in Salinas del Rey, it was only a waist-high hole in the wall that was shuttered at night with a little wooden door. One good thing progressed into a better one ---- and so on. Now Lupita has by far the best store in town where there are found even wicks and glass chimneys for kerosene lamps. Only a limited part of the laguna has electricity, and there are ranches around the area. Her store is in a different and larger locality. She still sells through a window, but a much much wider one. Her store is for storing merchandise, not for wandering through and copping an apple. The window has a heavy door hinged at top, and serves as a shade for the customers.

Statistics show that Mexicans are one of the most cola drinking people in the world. Salinas del Sur has few other amenities. A large percentage of Lupita's take is from selling soft drinks. Now that there is electricity there, Lupita has refrigerators for cooling the drinks. Before that Chumba brought back block ice from Torreón.

I was never one much for soft drinks, but one hot summer day I was there repairing the doors to the chapel, and I was sweating and thirsty. Lupita came and brought me a cold coke. Never before or after was a coke so deliciously refreshing.

Chumba has several large trailers for hauling and selling salt and bringing back what is needed in the store. They have built the best house in all of Salinas del Sur.

Come to think about it, maybe there was some logic nicknaming Jesús 'Chumba'. The usual sobriquet for Jesús is Chuy. In Mexican slang the word 'chamba' means 'work' and usually in the meaning of hard unskilled labor. So Chu-mba would be a good description for hard working Jesús.

The fact is that formerly when everything from building the little dikes for making the evaporation pans, to shoveling the salt onto trucks for selling, working with the salt was all hard hand labor. In the flat barren laguna there was no shade from the hot summer sun, nor any protection from the chilly winter winds. Most of the men worked bare footed and with bare hands because they could not afford rubber boots and gloves. Their hands and feet became calloused and cracked. It was a hard life. Even now with tractors for grading the pans and harvesting the salt and front end loaders for piling and loading the salt, the environment is still harsh. Because there is almost a glut on the market, the margin of profit is small. This is especially hard on those who have only a small property and still do most of the work by hand labor. The wages for the ordinary hired worker are minimal. For these reasons many of those who hire out for this work for an extended period of time are low achievers.