

MICHAEL C. BARBER, S.J.
BISHOP OF OAKLAND



2121 HARRISON STREET,
OAKLAND, CA 94612
510.267.8316

BISHOP BARBER'S STATEMENT ON SPONSORSHIP OF MEXICO IMMERSION TRIPS NOVEMBER 4, 2015.

For a number of years a few parishes in the Diocese of Oakland have sponsored immersion trips to Tijuana Mexico for Catholic teenage volunteers. Our youth and their chaperones generously gave of their time and talent to help build houses for the needy. I applaud the Christian charity and concern for the poor that motivated these trips. However, circumstances have changed, and it is no longer safe for our youth to travel to this area.

On May 5, 2015 the U.S. State Department issued an official warning regarding travel to Mexico and the dangers involved. The following paragraph refers specifically to the area where our Oakland youth groups traveled:

Baja California: Tijuana, Rosarito, Ensenada and Mexicali are major cities/travel destinations in the state of Baja California - Exercise caution in the northern state of Baja California, particularly at night. Criminal activity along highways is a continuing security concern. According to the Baja State Secretariat for Public Security, from January to October 2014 Tijuana and Rosarito experienced increasing homicide rates compared to the same period in the previous year. While most of these homicides appeared to be targeted criminal organization assassinations, turf battles between criminal groups have resulted in violent crime in areas frequented by U.S. citizens. Shooting incidents, in which innocent bystanders have been injured, have occurred during daylight hours.

You may read the full travel advisory on the State Department website:

<http://travel.state.gov/content/passports/english/alertswarnings/mexico-travel-warning.html>

Because of the high level of violence and the danger involved, I have decided to prohibit travel into Mexico for all diocesan groups, whether for adults or youth. If the safety conditions change, I will gladly review this decision.

I want to make clear that this decision is specifically for official groups, parishes and ministries of the Diocese of Oakland. Individual clergy, employees, and parishioners who travel on personal business are not affected by this decision. But the diocese cannot sponsor trips that place our young people in unnecessary danger.

For the greater glory of God

In making this decision we are not alone. No Diocese in California is sponsoring youth trips to Mexico at this time. For decades Jesuit High Schools in which I taught sponsored trips to Tijuana to help build and maintain Catholic orphanages. These were excellent programs and many youth benefitted on both sides of the border. All such programs for youth have been regrettably suspended given the current dangerous situation.

This does not mean that we are absolved of our Christian obligation to help the poor. Quite the opposite! We are beginning a Holy Year of Mercy – and it is all the more important that we as Catholic leaders provide viable opportunities for our youth and adult parishioners to follow the call of Pope Francis to reach out in solidarity to our neighbor.

How can we do this more effectively? How can we provide opportunities for our youth and adults that foster a spirit of solidarity, that create bridge building, that foster mutuality? It is not so much “Doing something for others that they can’t do for themselves”, but “What can we do *together*”? Where can we bring our youth where they can learn from others and create an ongoing faith relationship -- rather than do a quick in-and-out visit? How many opportunities are there to form such relationships right here in our own ‘backyard’ of the Diocese of Oakland and the West Coast?

For example: There is the chance to build and participate in a summer sports program for youth at St. Mark’s parish in Richmond – providing service, hope and an ongoing relationship with the community. There are opportunities for “Urban Immersion” in Oakland supporting the just treatment of inmates, tutoring refugees with Catholic Charities, or serving meals with St. Vincent de Paul and Catholic Worker. Farther afield, in Los Angeles we can provide opportunities to visit and help with Homeboy Industries which support former gang members at Dolores Mission. We also can arrange to assist at the Midnight Mission on Skid Row and the Guadalupe Homeless Project. In Nogales Arizona there are opportunities to serve the humanitarian needs of deported migrants at the Kino Border Initiative. In Tacoma Washington our youth could help at the “*L’Arche* Community” which serves people with developmental disabilities. All of these projects were founded and are currently supported by the Catholic Church. And there are more.

Our diocesan department of Faith Formation and Evangelization is creating a steering committee composed of pastors and youth leaders to plan opportunities for our youth to put in practice their desire for service. Our goal is to channel the tremendous spirit of generosity that has motivated the trips to Mexico in the past into even better opportunities to learn from our brothers and sisters. Together we can give witness to our common faith – a faith that does justice. As Pope Francis reminds us:

Accompanying on its own is not enough. It is not enough to offer someone a sandwich unless it is accompanied by the possibility of learning how to stand on one’s own two feet. Charity that leaves the poor person as he is, is not sufficient. True mercy, the mercy God gives to us and teaches us, demands justice, it demands that

the poor find the way to be poor no longer. It asks — and it asks us, the Church, us, the City of Rome, it asks the institutions — to ensure that no one ever again stand in need of a soup-kitchen, of makeshift-lodgings, of a service of legal assistance in order to have his legitimate right recognized to live and to work, to be fully a person. (Pope Francis address, 9/10/13)

I look forward to working together as a diocesan community of faith to implement the Holy Father's vision.

Please contact Steven Lewis, Diocesan Coordinator of Young Adults and Evangelization, for more information or to volunteer to serve on the steering committee:
SLewis@oakdiocese.org; office: 510-267-8394. An FAQ Memo is attached with more specific information to aid pastors and parochial administrators.

Thank you for your spirit of communion and service with me and all our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Your servant,

+ Michael Barber S.J.

Michael C. Barber, S.J.
Bishop of Oakland