

# Eunecio

By Jim Creechan

Change was everywhere during 1967, but hadn't touched a small corner of Hidalgo where CIASP sent students to development projects. Pisaflores was a marginalized municipio at the top of the State with no electricity, no phone and no bridge over el Rio Moctezuma connecting it to the outside world. Even when a bridge was built years later and when electricity and phones arrived, the outside world remained filtered through institutions based in poverty and neglect. Hidalgo was, and remains one of the poorest of the Mexican States. Forces of forgetfulness produced an amnesia concerning Pisaflores, and news was slow to travel in or out.

The year before, I was spending some time with some children in rancho La Arena. We were sitting on Don Flavio's cobblestone patio watching stars, and a fast moving trail of a manned satellite was tracking across the sky. They thought it was a shooting star, and I tried to describe to the children that men were up there engaging in works of discovery. One of the children responded by looking across the valley where Pisaflores lay below and pointed to a hills on the other side where a few lights flickered.

"There are people living over there in rancho El Rayo, but we've never met them."

I was back the next year, but this time I was to be the leader of 100 students who would go back out to those ranchos to have similar encounters with those children.

We hadn't heard from Father Zepeda for some time, and now it was only a few days before the arrival of the first 50 *canadienses* in Pisaflores. In panic, I decided to go to Pisaflores while they visited Mexico City's Museum of Anthropology and Ballet Folklorico. I caught the bus connecting Pachuca with Mexico City's northern terminal and continued the 245 km up Highway 85 on a third class version with ordinary *Hidalguenses*.

The highway reached 1500 metres above sea level at Chapulhuacán where I got off at the juncture to Pisaflores. Many years later I was certain that Juan Rulfo envisioned this road when he wrote "*It rises or falls depending on whether you're coming or going. If you are leaving it's uphill; but as you arrive its downhill*". The road switches back and forth for 18 km on a downward descent to Pisaflores sitting at 247 metres above sea level. Fr. Zepeda owned a *rancheria* sitting just before a 90 degree turn called *El Capoline*. There, about 8 km below the highway, he'd built a little house overlooking the entire valley; he'd selected the spot to monitor *los de abajo*. When I found him, I discovered he'd been exiled from all of those places within his panorama. The Bishop of Huejutla had replaced him because of his political involvement and persistence in introducing change to Pisaflores. Two unknown priests were now administering to Pisaflores.

Fr. Zepeda was a gracious host and welcomed the news that *los canadienses* were still coming. He persuaded me that CIASP would still be welcome because of the hard work it did in the first 4 years— but he made it clear that I must descend the additional 10 kilometres to meet with *el paroco*.

Late in the afternoon, I continued along the dirt road leveled out of the mountain in 1965 by Fr. Zepeda's *union de campesinos* working side-by-side with *los Canadienses*. At road's end I waited for the boatman to finish his lunch and chatted with him about the tropical heat. He replied with a variation of an old Mexican joke "*it's so hot here, that the dead from Pisaflores come back to retrieve their serapes if they are sent to hell*". I paid the 10 centavo fare and crossed the narrow Rio Moctezuma in his hollow trunk *canoa*. On the other side I continued along the road to Pisaflores. I now remember that road by recalling that Rulfo had Juan Preciado say "*I could hear my footsteps on the cobbled paving stones. Hollow footsteps, echoing against walls stained red by the setting sun.*"

Fr. Emilio Delgado was a gentle person without pretensions, and his soft voice and small stature contrasted with Fr. Zepeda's larger than life presence. He introduced me to Fr. Miguel Nuñez, a freshly ordained city priest who exuded confidence and modernity. The personalities of the two men were very different, and I wondered if they had been placed there by the Bishop to keep one foot in the past while keeping a tentative one in the future. Much later, I came to love and respect Fr. Emilio when I traveled with him and he told me wonderful stories about Mexico's history. But at that first meeting it was easier to connect to Fr. Miguel because of his easygoing manner and youth. The two men were surprised by my announcement that more than 50 *canadienses* were about to descend on their municipality but they took the announcement in stride. They made plans for *los canadienses* to stay overnight in a small school beside the church when they arrived, they sent runners out to the ranchos where most students would spend 6 weeks, and they brought me meet Don Sebastian who could rent us a small house and who also owned the vintage truck used to transport the Canadian contingent down from highway 85.

Although it wasn't according to plan, everything was falling into place with an adaptability that we later came to describe with a phrase "*pues...ni modo*"..."so what...never mind".

If there were repercussions from the replacement of Fr. Zepeda, they weren't visible during this first encounter. I returned to Mexico City with the details of our trip; few among *nosotros los canadienses* realized that tensions between Church and State had touched Pisaflores and almost changed the course of the summer.

We'd avoided that crisis, but nearly succumbed to a second one involving a tug of war over a small waif of 8 or 9 named *Eunecio*.

My first visual memory of him was an improbably dirty face sitting on a small body covered with even dirtier clothes. He was in a crowd of village played kids playing outside of the small school where the entire group spent the first night in Pisaflores. Fr. Emilio and Fr. Miguel arranged for *las mujeres* to bunk on the

second floor of *la escuela particular* and *los hombres* would be on the first floor. Eunecio was one of several kids begging for pencils or paper while we unpacked Don Sebastian's truck. He was probably more observant and resourceful than the others, and he noticed that Jay Smith put a large notebook in his backpack and then put the pack in a corner of the first floor under a duffle bag.

The next morning, Jay woke me in a panic and reported that the money we'd brought to Pisaflores for projects and supplies was missing. By Canadian standards it wasn't a lot, about 5,000 pesos, but in Hidalgo it was the annual income of 100 men. Jay and I struggled to remain calm, but we worried that Fr. Delgado and Fr. Miguel would think us idiots. We were certain they'd conclude that 50 foreigners, speaking bad Spanish, had been dumped on them as part of Fr. Zepeda's malicious retribution for the Bishop's intervention.

We decided to tell Fr. Miguel first, since he was closer to our age. He was assigned to celebrate the early mass, and we waited at the back of *la capilla* in shock until we heard the final call for the forgiveness of sins and the resurrection of the flesh. The choruses of a *huastecan* nasal version of *bendito sea Dios* assaulted the air with an otherworldly sound and made it impossible to organize our thoughts. When Padre Miguel emerged, he was wearing his green vestments of celebration and hope, and two altar boys wearing long flowing white soutanes and surplices were at his side.

We were right about Fr. Miguel; he was a modern man of action and sympathy, but we had no idea that he was also familiar with the methods of Tomás de Torquemada or other Grand Inquisitors of New Spain. Jay told him that there was cash inside a missing notebook used for accounting and that more than 5,000 pesos were gone. We soon realized that Fr. Miguel possessed impressive skills and imagination.

Fr. Miguel didn't hesitate for one moment before he moved into investigative mode; he gave directions to the two altar boys to run down the plaza and ask shop-keepers if they'd noticed any unusual spending sprees. I don't know if Fr. Miguel was actually trained in criminal investigation, but he was obviously familiar with the adage "*follow the money*". The boys happily obliged and relished their role so intently that they ran off without removing their serving vestments.

We were amazed when the two boys returned within a half hour with a financial audit about the spending habits of a little boy called Eunecio. Apparently, the night before he bought a pair of new huaraches, a new sombrero and treated a few friends to shaved ice cones. No one knew how Eunecio came to have money since he lived alone with his mother while his father worked in another part of Hidalgo, Queretaro or San Luis Potosi for a large landowner.

Fr. Miguel moved switched into stake-out and arrest mode after hearing financial report; he sent the two altar boys to retrieve Eunecio. They seemed to relish this job even more and within 10 minutes Eunecio was standing before us with an escort of two altar boys blocking his escape.

Fr. Miguel moved into interrogation mode: he questioned Eunecio, using techniques that were surely borrowed from the manuals of the grand inquisitors. Fr. Miguel began with a standard lecture about heaven and hell, a reminder about the 7<sup>th</sup> commandment (*8<sup>th</sup> if you're a protestant reader*), reminded the little boy about the teachings of the catechism, and finished by telling Eunecio about a special place in hell filled with little thieves.

Eunecio protested his innocence with a quiet and soft reply.

Fr. Miguel turned up the heat and said reported hell is even hotter for *muchachos remisos*. The literal description of flames left Jay and I squirming in vivid imagination of a terrible future for this little guy.

Impressively, Eunecio remained immune to the pressure and held his ground. Perhaps the boat keeper was right that the citizens of Pisaflores came back from hell to retrieve their *sarapes*.

Fr. Miguel switched into full scale storm-trooper mode; he ordered the two avenging angels to visit Eunecio's house and search it. They enjoyed this escalation of responsibility even more and ran off to do their job. They returned shortly with a little more than 2,000 pesos in hand.

Confronted with the evidence, Eunecio claimed to have found money in a notebook that he'd found on the ground. He said he took the book to use the paper for school work.

Success. Fr. Miguel's tactics had generated a confession, even if only for the venial sin of theft to meet an obligation. Fr. Miguel felt it was time to move into mop-up mode and directed his holy duo to complete one final mission. They were to visit each store on the main plaza and produce a "final figure" representing Eunecio splurge on shoes, hat and shaved ice. In total, it was about 18 pesos; almost 3,000 pesos remained missing.

Fr. Miguel consulted with us, and we mutually agreed that Eunecio was a lone wolf who gave into temptation and was not part of a devilish plot. Fr. Miguel was confident that the pressure would continue, and the missing money would eventually turn up. He promised to spread the word to the 8,000 Pisaflores residents that Eunecio was to be watched.

Jay and I stayed in Pisaflores along with Toni Tomai while the remaining Canadienses went off to their host rancherías in the mountains above Pisa. There was enough money to fund the projects and provide supplies for a few weeks. We were content to wait things out, or make plans to replace the money if Fr. Miguel's strategy didn't work.

Things took a complicated twist the next morning when the authority of the Church was matched by the intrusion of the State. Perhaps it wasn't a full blown tug-of-war, but it certainly became a symbolic escalation of State power.

Toni, Jay and I were summoned to the Municipal office for a meeting with el Señor Presidente del Municipio, *Don Alcalde Maximiliano*. He'd heard about the theft, and was planning a civil event that was even more powerfully symbolic than

the one staged by an upstart parish priest just arrived from the outside world. Not only had Eunecio committed a *sin* but had violated several civil and legal boundaries. This was a matter for the State and not just the Church. Perhaps Maximiliano felt that the need to restore the balance of State and Church relations in the vacuum created by the removal of Fr. Zepeda from the scene.

El Presidente Maximiliano had summoned his council members, and the representatives from the various ranchos of Pisaflores had already gathered on the second floor of the municipal building when we arrived. We went up the steps to the council room located above the carcel and entered a narrow room where we saw the mayor sitting behind a large desk just slightly narrower than the room. The Mexican flag and a large picture of President Diaz Ordaz were on the wall behind him. Along the sides, about 12 or 14 *diputados* in white *campesino* shirts and *pantalones*, *sombreros* and leather huaraches occupied the narrow benches in silence. The three of us were ushered to the front and offered seats next to the desk. El Señor Presidente signaled to an aide to bring in Eunecio.

The terrified little boy, still unwashed, but now with clean streaks where tears had washed away grime, was pushed by two men to a spot in front of the mayor's desk. A small mestizo woman trailed behind and was seated opposite us; we later learned that this was Eunecio's mother.

The mayor began with a formal speech accusing Eunecio of theft under the Organic and Material laws in both the Mexican and Hidalgo Criminal Codes, and he suggested that it might represent an international incident when he announced that Eunecio's actions might disrupt Canada-Mexico Foreign relations. I don't remember if he said that the crime would interfere with the possibility of trade relations, but I'm certain he'd have mentioned this if he was aware of such things. Consequently, Maximiliano reported that this was a crime of the highest order and it therefore required an extra-ordinary meeting of the council. There could be no delay in dealing with Eunecio's crime.

El Señor Presidente reviewed the evidence for his *diputados*, and asked the treasurer to present a tabulation of Eunecio's spending. At the end of his report, Don Maximilian demanded that Eunecio deliver all remaining funds for the rightful owners "*los canadienses distinguidos sentado a tu lado*".

Eunecio had not been shaken the day before when confronted by a priest, and he summoned up the same strength in front of the mayor of Pisaflores and his full council.

Don Maximiliano quickly realized the inner strength of this boy, and he decided to up the ante. He was aware that he couldn't threaten hellfire and damnation, and he also had some evidence that it wouldn't have any effect. But he the authority of government, the ruling party and the threat of earthly sanctions in his arsenal.

El Señor Presidente shot a knowing glance towards Toni, Jay and me and sent a wink hidden from Eunecio by the placement of his hand. He turned back to the boy and in solemnous tone announced that the Municipality of Pisaflores, as representative of the Government of Hidalgo and authorized under Mexican Law

had no option but to pass the death sentence on Eunecio in order to preserve the social order. Maximiliano was a large man who could look threatening, and he waited for the words to sink in. A few moments later he solemnly opened a desk drawer where he extracted a rope knotted with a hangman's noose. The mayor signaled for an aide to put the noose around Eunecio's neck and throw the other end over a beam in the ceiling. The loose end of the rope was returned to Maximiliano's hand.

A look of horror came over Eunecio's face, but he said nothing.

The mayor stood up slowly, examined him from head to foot and then slowly tugged the end of the rope hanging from the beam.

Eunecio turned white and screamed "*se puede encontrar el dinero atras de mi casa...hay una piedra alla...esta abajo*"

"*The money's under a big stone behind my house*".

The mayor let the rope loosen and asked Eunecio if he was telling the truth.

The boy responded with several oaths to Jesus and Presidente Diaz that he hadn't lied.

The mayor let go of the rope, nodded to an aide who left the room and returned within 10 minutes holding a stack of crumpled *veintes* and *cinquentas* and a few loose coins. The money was placed on the mayor's desk and counted. The municipal treasurer separated it into denominations, made a list of the expenses incurred by Eunecio, recorded the information in a ledger, and then prepared a receipt in duplicate that he signed and presented to the mayor for counter-signature. He brought one copy of the document and all of the money to Jay.

About 35 pesos were unaccounted for, but Eunecio pleaded ignorance of that money. Since the average income was about 45 pesos per year in Pisaflores, there was still an unsolved crime equivalent to grand larceny. The mayor concluded that Eunecio should be locked up in a special jail, which also served as the second floor of a public school during the winter. El Señor Presidente assured everyone that the town would continue to look for the missing 35 pesos. He also announced the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* would accept it's responsibility for Eunecio and that send him to a *Centro de Re-adaptación Juvenil* where he would learn a trade. But meanwhile, he'd remain in isolation on the second floor across the street from the municipal building. His mother protested, but the mayor explained that the State knew what was best for Eunecio.

Toni, Jay and I were in shock for most of this time and uncertain how to react. If we were to be in that situation today, we'd probably think that we were caught up in a story of magic-realism. But at that time we vacillated in our emotions and reactions: we laughed nervously at the macabre twists; we hoped beyond hope that we'd really understood the mayor's gesture and attempt to clue us in to the charade; and most of all we wished that we spoke better Spanish in order to make a speech about the quality of mercy.

After the mayor's ritual had restored the rightful balance of power between Church and State, Toni, Jay and I retreated to our little house behind Don Sebastian's store where we could watch the school where Eunecio did his time from our back patio.

Jay bought a new notebook from Don Sebastian and rarely took it out of his pocket during the rest of the summer except when he needed to tabulate the expenses of supplies for the other students in the ranchos. That evening after the near-hanging, Toni, Jay and I bought a coca cola, a few *taquitos* and some *pan dulce*. Under the cover of darkness we crept across the street and passed it up to Eunecio using a lift basket constructed to a string.

Eunecio disappeared within a few days, but Jay and I are both convinced that we caught glimpses of him later later that summer near the shaved-ice vendors.

The missing money was never found and perhaps there are now rumours floating around Pisaflores about the missing treasure of the Sierra Huasteca.

Fr. Miguel and El Señor Presidente Maximiliano were both confident that they'd served the public good and demonstrated the place of Church and State in the scheme of things. The townspeople allowed them to think that they'd settled the affair and then interacted with *los canadienses* in the same ways as in all previous years, without any thought of the outside world.

The first week in Pisaflores ended and the power struggle never resurfaced. Los Canadienses were welcomed into homes for coffee, *calabaza and frijoles* and occasionally *aguardiente*; we worked together on a few projects; we played basketball in the plaza where our height was outmatched by the enthusiastic play of the locals; we frequently demonstrated our clumsiness dancing the *huapango* during the many fiestas after market; and we settled into that community where the outside world was slow to reach.

Eunecio's search for a notebook introduced us to the subtle battles for meaning in village life. Above all, it provided a way for everyone in Pisaflores to reassert their rightful place in the scheme of things. Life continued unchanged after the excitement of the first few days.

Eunecio would now be in his late 40's. Maybe he left Pisaflores with others who made their way up to El Paso or Brownsville looking for work. Perhaps he traveled east across the Sierra Oriental to Tampico to seek work in the Pemex refineries. Perhaps he ended up in a Monterrey factory that flourished with NAFTA contracts, or maybe he travelled south into D.F. to swell the population of that megopolis and gathers with friends at the restaurants serving *mixiote* and other Hidalgo delicacies to listen to recordings of *huapangos*. Perhaps Maximiliano actually helped him out, and perhaps he learned a trade at the *Centro de Readaptacion* and makes furniture sold in Culhuacán or Tamazunchale.

If Eunecio's alive, he probably returns at Christmas to visit his mother and tell her about his life in the world above Pisaflores. Perhaps he still goes to the Plaza to buy a shaved ice with his children. Eunecio's mother probably reminds her grand

children to mind their manners and to be better behaved than their father who was almost hanged because he loved shaved-ice cones.