

Bicycle Padre Still Working

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Harold Joseph Rahm was born in Tyler, Texas, a small town near San Antonio on Feb. 22, 1919, the third child of Dr. Robert E. and Minnie A. Rahm. In his book *This Terrible Jesuit* (2009), Rahm explained that his mother consecrated his life to the Virgin Mary when she suffered from diphtheria while pregnant and promised Mary that if the Rahms were blessed with a healthy son, he would become a priest.

When his parents divorced, Minnie became the sole provider for her six children. Harold Rahm would see his alcoholic father again only on his death bed. His father would become the future priest's "patron of alcohol."

His mother taught him to love nature, and he spent nights in a little log cabin she had built in the backyard. Rahm grew up like other boys, playing, riding horses, participating in sports. In high school, he took the tough classes while he and his friends went to parties, roller-skated, danced, took girls out for rides. His plan was to become a doctor.

He went to church mainly because his mother made him, but during one Christmas midnight mass, he "sensed the glory of God." Later, in his log cabin he was inspired to consider the priesthood one night while he gazed at the moon.

Although underage, he joined the Texas National Guard, and during a short break on maneuvers, his truck parked in front of a bookstore in a small town, Harold ran in asking for a book "about God." The saleslady brought him a book by a Jesuit priest and when he asked the price, he was informed it was part of a set. He bought the set, and a new plan for his life began to take hold. A short time later, he was at Saint John's Seminary in San Antonio, where he realized he wanted to become a Jesuit.

Jesuits are well known for education and the social apostolate. On Sept. 27, 1540, Pope Adrian VI appointed Ignatius of Loyola and others to preach and teach theology and the Bible. The group became known as the Society of Jesus, (S. J.), the Jesuit Order of priests.

On Aug. 15, 1939, Rahm took his first vows of poverty, chastity and obedience and began studying Spanish, desiring to work with Mexican people. He became devoted to the Virgin of Guadalupe early and has remained dedicated to her. He received a degree in languages at Loyola University in New Orleans and went to Spring Hill College in Mobile, Ala. for three years to study philosophy and science. He studied theology for four years at Saint Mary's Theological College in Kansas. While completing 15 years of study, Rahm became a Jesuit high school teacher in Tampa, Fla. One summer he spent in Ysleta, with the Mexican Jesuits, working on his Spanish.

On June 14, 1950, Rahm was ordained a Jesuit priest. It was only after his ordination that he learned about his mother's consecration. Having asked to work in a low-income area, Rahm was told that he would go to El Paso, Texas, and minister in the Chamizal Zone in South El Paso, territory claimed by both Mexico and the U.S. because of the meandering Rio Grande, a situation settled only in 1963.



Father Rahm, the "Bicycle Padre," is shown on a mural by Francisco Delgado located behind Sacred Heart Church. (Photo by Isabel Hernandez)

Just before midnight on July 12, 1952, Father Rahm arrived in El Paso as the assistant pastor at Sacred Heart Catholic Church, located at 602 South Oregon St. No one met him at the train, and he took a cab to the rectory. There he met Father Robert Gafford who welcomed him warmly, yet the young priest was sad in his new home. Father Rahm wrote in *This Terrible Jesuit* that he found it hard to thank God that night. "My room and mattress were not only worn, but very hot. There was no fan. I had studied Spanish, ... yet as a result of hearing loss, I had not made much progress."

The next morning he began to explore his new home, where many people lived in dilapidated apartment buildings with no hot water or electricity and few bathrooms. During his first week, Rahm began to meet the residents. The second week he decided to purchase a bicycle in order to meet more families in the neighborhood. In *This Terrible Jesuit*, Rahm explained, "By walking I could contact some fifty people daily. On a bicycle I could visit a hundred."

He soon recognized that the area, including a large immigrant population, had many social and economic problems, resulting from dire poverty and neglect. When Father Robert Gafford was later appointed Superior, he told Father Rahm that he would be responsible for work in the streets while Gafford would take care of duties inside church walls. Thus, Father Rahm spent his days in the *Segundo Barrio*, known in English as the Second Ward, an electoral division, attempting to help his parishioners with their needs. Their difficulties became his. He joined in street football games, attended weddings and birthday gatherings and became part of the daily lives of *Segundo Barrio* residents. Sometimes he celebrated mass in backyards in order to reach

those who were unable to attend church.

Noting there was little for young people to do on the streets besides get into trouble, Father Rahm worked with others in the community to develop a club for teens, which became Our Lady's Youth Center, opening on Oct. 1, 1953, in the Sacred Heart School yard. The organization was devoted to providing youth of any age a safe haven from the physical and moral dangers around them. Father Rahm realized that his parish was divided in half by different ruling gangs, and violence and drugs threatened to destroy the youth.

As he rode his bicycle one day, he stopped to ask a teenager where to find a man that could help with athletics. The boy mentioned Ventura Irrobali, known as Tula, celebrated locally for his basketball career at Texas Western College. Tula began helping the

priest one Saturday morning a week but soon joined Father Rahm in his work after seeing the large number of children who showed up to play various sports. City Recreation Director Robert Shipp helped furnish the sports equipment the programs needed and hired Tula as an evening recreation director, in addition to his day job with Southern Pacific.

According to a personal interview by Isabel Hernandez with Jose Aguilar, who worked closely with Father Rahm for 10 or 12 years and went on to become a community leader and Director of Project Bravo in El Paso, the hard working priest had noticed an old deserted building owned by the Knights of Columbus. The group gave him use of the first floor and basement, but because the building had not been used for 20 years, it had no window panes or electricity, floors were rotted out, plumbing needed replacing and there was trash everywhere.

Father Rahm had learned to use his considerable skills of persuasion to get businessmen, Catholic or

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A contemporary Father Rahm rides his bicycle through the streets. The message in Portuguese says, "The past is past, the future is uncertain, we can only build on the present. Only the present is eternal. So it is this moment that makes the difference." (Photo courtesy of Instituto Padre Haroldo, Campinas, São Paulo, Brasil)

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not, to help his work in the community. Donations flowed in as young people cleaned out the basement, an area that would be used for wrestling, weight lifting, Judo and boxing, a sport in which Rahm himself had participated. The building was repaired, the yard paved, basketball hoops and playground equipment installed. For 10 years, one businessman donated all electrical work and appliances that the center required.

Another, Leo Hines, donated materials to build a sandbox for the little ones, but even more helpful, Hines created the first Board of Directors for the center, according to an *El Paso Times* article by Nancy Miller. In *This Terrible Jesuit*, Rahm wrote that under Hines' leadership, 90 per cent of the donors that were solicited contributed monthly to the center and made it possible to hire Tula as the full-time director.

Rahm had organized various religious and social clubs for youth of different ages, such as the Club Guadalupano, providing social and spiritual activities for Bowie High School students; the Luises for young men who did catechetical work in the neighborhood; and others, all of which provided leadership opportunities for youth within the center.

In a series of articles written for the *El Paso Times* about the center, Nancy Miller extolled the fact that the clubs involved charity and community work and showcased the members' talents. She also indicated that youths of any denomination, race or creed were welcome at the center.

Volunteers such as Aguilar aided Tula in supervising the young people, while going to school and working themselves. Rahm and Tula also helped adults find jobs through the Guadalupe Employment Office and they opened a thrift store. In 1959, Father Rahm founded the Tepeyac Credit Union in 1959 "to give Southsiders an alternative to loan sharks," according to *Times* reporter Guadalupe Silva.

The center averaged about 250 young people every evening. Boasting a jukebox for dancing and recreational equipment of all kinds and offering free ice cream and soft drinks, the center began attracting gang members. Rahm wrote that they often were under the influence of drugs and alcohol, with resulting problems at the center, and attendance in the clubs such as the Guadalupanos dropped. Father Rahm saw that what he called the "rejected child" needed his attention.

In *This Terrible Jesuit*, Rahm wrote that in his parish in the 1950s, "Hundreds of kids were rejected. ... under the influence of narcotics, ... in continual trouble at school, with the probation department and with the police." Many of them had joined gangs. Father Rahm made it one of the goals of OLYC to work directly with the gangs, with the objective of diminishing gang life as much as possible.

In *Office in the Alley* (1958), Rahm wrote that the conflicts and tensions between the different groups of gangs had led to many stabbings with resultant incarcerations. Having knowledge of a gang fight one night, he and Tula went to the appointed place and attempted to dissuade two leaders from a knife fight. Before even he knew what was happening, Rahm seized the arm of one boy and "threw him over [his] shoulder. He landed on the ground, dumbfounded. ... How could a priest conquer a gang leader? The news exploded throughout the neighborhood." Rahm had gotten the attention of the gang.

Aguilar, fresh out of the military, was hired as the center's general coordinator; Tula directed all outdoor activities, and Abelardo "Lalo" Barrientos, future poet, activist and professor, began teaching and directing dramatic and cultural events. These three men, along with Rahm, were the center's leaders. Attendance exploded at the center, serving some "600



A young Father Rahm ministered in many ways in South El Paso. Image taken from *Office in the Alley*. (Courtesy of the Hogg Foundation of the Mental Health)

underprivileged teens and pre-teens on a daily basis," according to Rahm.

Our Lady's Youth Center became the core of the South Side and supervisors began to perform social work aggressively out in the neighborhood with the various gangs, attempting to gain their confidence, and turn the gangs into social clubs.

Soon, however, gang-related deaths hit home with a young man dying in Father Rahm's arms from a stabbing in November 1957. Rahm and OLYC leaders were determined to put a stop to this before the deadly game continued. Father Rahm went public and spoke about the tragic event on local television and newspapers and in personal visits told the gangs that the young man had forgiven his enemies before he had died. This heartbreaking incident led to a way to settle problems among rival gangs.

In a 1957 issue of the *Federal Probation Journal*, Elizabeth Zinn wrote about Father Rahm's "Night Court," established so that gang problems could be settled within the neighborhood between two individuals and not in the jail or the mortuary. Each gang was represented on a council, and gang members themselves became "judges." Individual warring gang members fought in the boxing ring, with or without gloves, in five three-minute rounds to settle disputes. "He once told gang members that if they were that tough, they should fight it out in the ring," Bernardo Villegas wrote in the *El Paso Times*.

Lesser punishments were meted out for other infractions. No one could enter Our Lady's Center if intoxicated, and the entire staff worked to make the plan succeed. It took time, lots of hard work and money, but Father Rahm was able to communicate with the "rejected" and reduce gang violence.

To further teach and bring joy to neighborhood children, Rahm established Camp Juan Diego in the Lower Valley on land donated by the Ivey family. It offered a camp experience for 30 to 50 children weekly, offering arts and crafts and nature activities. At first, the camp consisted only of a "small adobe structure but expanded to included barracks, a recreation room, classrooms and a swimming pool by 1964," according to the *Diocese of El Paso Centennial History*.

Rahm was a pilot, and regularly flew to Mexico, bringing food and supplies to the Tarahumaras, even

surviving a plane crash. This and the others discussed here are but a few tangible projects and services that Father Rahm, the leaders he trained and the community that helped them brought to fruition in the 12 years he spent in El Paso. His work here was influential, and in 1964, he was sent to South America and asked to repeat his success in Brazil. Before leaving El Paso, Rahm was told he could ask any priest to take his place; he chose a former student from Florida, Father Richard Thomas. Today the center is located on Paisano and Kansas Streets and is now known as Las Alas, led by Father Jack Vessels.

Father Rahm's work did not go unnoticed. Religious, political and business leaders as well as El Pasoans from other walks of life participated in a farewell dinner to say good-bye at El Paso County Coliseum on June 20, 1964. The headline in the *El Paso Herald-Post* said it best: the function was a "King-Size Thank You for King-Size Job." More than 1,000 attendees paid tribute to the "bicycle priest" according to the *Times* article "Speakers Pay High Tribute to Father Rahm at Dinner" by Ramon Villalobos.

Federal Judge R. E. Thomason said, "I have never known a man who has contributed more to the youth of this community than Father Rahm ... [H]is departure will be a great loss to the city and to the cause of reducing juvenile delinquency."

Since his departure, Father Rahm has returned to visit El Paso several times, where he has been welcomed with love and respect. In 1992, because of his admirable work with gang members, drug addicts and his parishioners in South El Paso, El Paso County renamed Fifth Street, now known as Father Rahm Avenue. City Council proclaimed January 9 Father Harold J. Rahm Day.

"In Brazil I primarily work in the drug world, including, 'Tough Love.' I serve on many commissions, both national and international. Our Center is internationally known and considered one of the best in South America," said Rahm in a recent email interview with Isabel Hernandez. Tough Love is a family rehabilitation program for those who are chemically dependent.

Rahm has been in Brazil for 50 years, working with addicts and the poor. One of his main projects is the center which rehabilitates drug and alcohol addicts in Campinas, São Paulo. He co-founded the Brazilian Federation of Therapeutic Communities in 1990, for alcoholics and drug addicts, and Casa Aberta, a home for street kids. In addition, he developed "Centro Kennedy," a center similar to Our Lady's Youth Center, where more than 50,000 teens have been helped.

In the interview, the 95-year-old priest said he wakes up at 4:30 a.m., practices Christian yoga, and holds mass and lectures, along with other activities. He eats dinner with different families, and on weekends teaches various courses in spiritual training or relaxation. It does not appear that this charismatic priest has slowed down.

The Jesuit priest mentioned that he has not visited El Paso recently but has not forgotten the Border City. He said in the interview, "I always try to help the poor and neglected. My story is that it is easy to write about spirituality; to live the same requires much grace from God. At times we do not cooperate."

Father Harold Rahm, S.J. will remain in the hearts and lives of the people of El Paso. He said that the happiest memories he has of El Paso are the result of Our Lady's Youth Center. Jose Aguilar commented in his interview that "Father Rahm was very charismatic. He would always get his way. Father Rahm was the one that took care of these kids since they had no other place to go. Because of him, a lot of youth were able to progress in life." 🚲