

## Merry Christmas 2022 from Nicholas Harding omi Brownsville, TX

Dear friends,

Greetings from very far south (on latitude with Miami, Florida).

I have been here since September and reluctantly accepted to be rector of the Cathedral. I like that we are right on the border---the bridge over the Rio Grande to Mexico is a couple blocks away....and there are many needy migrants and homeless.

At the Cathedral all of our eight Sunday masses are in Spanish, except one bilingual celebrated by Bishop Dan Flores, quite an impressive man, and one in English. We have a constant flow of people for confessions (everyday of the week except Sunday). We have a very active Pregnancy Center for young women.

The Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate have a long history here (including the "Calvary of Christ") in the whole Rio Grande Valley. Oblates designed and built the Cathedral 1856. It has seven lovely big bells. It was a refuge or haven for priests fleeing persecution during the Mexican Revolution. We have two mission churches: Sacred Heart and St Thomas. The diocese is said to have 1.3 million Catholics and only 100 priests.

Brownsville has quite a history (used to be part of the Mexican archdiocese of Guadalajara). The first battle of the war for independence from Mexico (1846) and the last battle of the Civil War (1865) were fought in this area.

It is interesting to visit Elon Musk's Space X on the coast. On my day off, I often go to tropical South Padre Island.

Downtown Brownsville used to be vibrant years ago but now (especially due to malls) many stores are boarded up.; numerous pawn shops and plasma centers; storefront *evangelico* churches. There are many *resacas* in the area, with nutria, alligator gars, lots of pelicans and ducks. Birds, not just people, migrate here in droves. Cost of living here is relatively low, e.g., \$8 for a haircut.

Matamoros, our sister town on the other side, is much bigger in population. There is a massive problem of narco-violence. I have had funerals here for several young men in their 20's. Recently, a mother of 7 asked me to pray for her oldest son (age 18) kidnapped in broad daylight in Matamoros with two other teens.

We gave a turkey to an *abuela*, Francisca who cares for her five grandchildren since her daughter is a drug addict, prostitute on the streets of Matamoros. All five have learning disabilities or autism- like conditions (oldest is age 11).

May you have a Holy Christmas experience and New Year filled with grace and blessings!