

FROM THE DESK OF FR. TIM

TRIP TO HONDURAS

Our trip to Honduras was in fact "long awaited". Since our Fall Fiesta was dedicated to helping with the needs in Honduras and we enjoyed the visit of Bishop Sole' and Padre Gildo, we have been preparing for our visit.

The Dioceses of Trujillo and Dallas have been companion or "sister" dioceses since the time after Hurricane Mitch in 1998. Each of the Dioceses in Texas has enjoyed such a relationship with a diocese in Honduras. This was motivated by the emergency situation that all of Honduras suffered following the devastating storm.

The degree of the disastrous effect of this category 5, 180 mph storm can be measured in several ways: Winds did horrific damage and the signs are still evident in the many roofless buildings that dot the landscape even eight years later. The most severe damage came as a result of the 35" rainfall, measured at La Cieba, 30 miles from the area that our parish has been asked to help. Official estimates claim that loss of life in Honduras was some 5,600 people, with 7,000 missing. The total official storm deaths in all of Central America was some 9,000. Unofficially, people say that the death toll was much higher, in the neighborhood of 80,000 directly due to the storm and during the 18 months that followed.



Damage to the infrastructure of the country is still evident. Most of the country's bridges were washed away and there are still temporary bridges spanning rivers. As well, those that have been repaired are showing signs of their being quickly and poorly reconstructed. A huge rainstorm occurred just a few days before our arrival and flooding was evident everywhere. It was a reminder to people of the devastation of some years ago, which left 500,000 homeless! A more dramatic reminder occurred in October of last year, when rain soaked hills produced another round of killer mudslides throughout Central America.



The economy of the rural areas will undoubtedly take many more years to recover. A great many of the people that we met are subsistence farmers. They have always lived in a fragile balance. A crop failure or a disease among their farm animals can leave them with no recourse. Just as the hurricane killed people, so it also wiped out their livelihood. The government and international aid agencies concentrated their efforts on urban areas. Rural people were quickly forgotten. The World Bank reports that 63% of the country lives on less than \$2 per day, and 45% live on less than \$1 per day. These statistics are for the whole country. In the countryside, the level of extreme poverty, those living on less than \$1 per day, increases to 62%. Honduras is a fragile and vulnerable country that is affected by weather, changes in the global economy as well as the charity of governments and peoples.

The focus of our trip was to rural and small town families. Two parishes were visited, even though to use the word parish here requires some adjustment. Parish organization is a very important part of Catholic life in Honduras. A pastoral plan has been developed that allows for extremely rural areas to receive a lay ministry and education.

For example, a parish is divided into sectors, perhaps as many six or more. Within these are communities, composed of four to a dozen or more families. Within the parish of St. Rita in Sava there are about 70 communities. Within the community is a chapel or meeting place where the people gather on Fridays and Sundays for a liturgy of the Word and catechesis. The priest travels from the central parish church



to each of these chapels. He is able to visit them only four or five times each year for Mass and other sacraments. I estimated that Padre Gildo puts about 60,000 miles a year on his four wheel drive truck. The villages are connected by poorly maintained four wheel drive roads.



I think our own experience with economic or employment trouble is that such things are isolating. We pull back from one another in embarrassment or fear. We may also find ourselves withdrawing from involvement with other people out of a sense of survival. We may do the same thing in times of illness or family crisis. This is not the case in Honduras. One of the most dramatically impressive characteristics of the little villages and chapels that we visited was the deep experience of community. People take care of one another to an almost extreme degree. In one community we were told that they pool all their resources and redistribute them according to their need. I was shocked to hear words from the Acts of the Apostles being lived out. "44 All who believed were together and had all things in

common; 45 they would sell their property and possessions and divide them among all according to each one's need." (Acts 2:44-45)

Our meetings with parishioners was very formal at first. Despite the discouragement of poverty and the lack of much more than an elementary education, an introduction of the parish and a detailed discussion was always conducted with great grace. At first, I approached these meetings with a sense of anxiety about how our parish would solve their problems. While those concerns linger, I found myself drawn into an understanding of their life. Even dependent on a translator, I can say without hesitation that I have found new friends. I forgot that they were poor or from another country and language. As Catholics, we were much more than the sum of our differences. We are one Body in the Lord!

There were a number of meetings and gatherings during our trip. We met with members of the leadership of Santa Rita in Saba, which even included music before and after the meal. One of the most dramatic gatherings was with the bishop and all the priests and religious from the diocese. We were reminded by the bishop of the relationship of brotherhood that we are trying to achieve. We shared the Mass together in the largest room of the diocesan retreat and training center. I was struck by the utter simplicity of the offering of the Mass. A tiny little rickety table was the altar and the chalice was donated by a parishioner in Dallas. I hope that for a moment as God looked down on us, that he did not see North Americans and Central Americans, Hondurans or citizens of the United States, Spanish speakers and English speakers, rich or poor. I hoped that all he could see was his children gathered to worship him.



Realistically, however, I know that this is not the true situation. The reality is that our brothers and sisters in Honduras are in need. We have vast resources to help them and we will not turn on our back on them!



HONDURAS: DISCOVER THE CHURCH

There will be a lengthy presentation of the Mission to Honduras on **Saturday afternoon, March 4th at 1:00pm** in the Activity Center. We will show a video of our trip and discuss the future of our efforts. All are invited. A nursery will be available by reservation. Call the parish office.

AN IMMEDIATE NEEDS ASSESSMENT

Rio Estaban – San Stephano

- Radio Communications with Diocese -repair or replace existing radio.
- Radio Communications within parish - solution here is unknown.
- Improve sustainable farming with purchase of farm animals.
- Financial assistance to help with transportation costs of parish catechists and leaders of communities.

Saba' – Santa Rita

- Water well for the dry season. Rivers are dry three months of the year and the local water system does not function at all.
- Repairs to rectory and church – everything needs painting!
- Financial assistance for parish operations.

LONGER TERM NEEDS

Rio Estaban – San Stephano

- Construct chapels in the communities where there are none. Radical protestant sects have invaded the area and are attracting people away from the Catholic Church in large numbers. They have dedicated large sums of money to construct modern churches. In many places the Catholic Church has no visible presence and no where to gather for worship or education.
- Construct a retreat facility as a regional education and training center. Rio Estaban is not the center of the parish. In the geographical center the parish owns land but has no resources to construct this center. This and other construction projects can be accomplished for very little money, approximately \$2.25 per square foot compared to U.S. housing costs at \$80 - \$200 per square foot. A typical 2200 square foot chapel can be constructed for \$5,000 in materials!



Saba' – Santa Rita

Saba is a more established parish but also needs numerous chapels. The area is mountainous and poor and shares in the needs for a more sustainable farming system. An order of nuns serve the parish community and are a valuable asset. They spend four days a week in the outer reaches of the parish, teaching and ministering to the people's needs. They desperately need a new four wheel drive truck. The one they are using is now dangerously dilapidated and a constant drain because of major repairs. The cost for replacing this vehicle is estimated at a little under \$20,000.

APRIL TRIP TO HONDURAS

We are in the planning stages for another trip to Honduras. We will travel with the Diocesan Team one more time to be sure than we have all the travel details worked out. After this, we will travel on our own, and according to our calendar. The focus of this trip will be to make some repairs to the rectory and church at Saba', make final arrangements for a water well, make preparations for bringing farm animals to Rio Estaban and repair their radio system. We plan to take 12 people, men and women. The cost for the trip is \$1,000. It will involve one week from Saturday, April 22nd until Friday, April 28th. If you have interest, please attend the March 4th discovery presentation on Saturday at 1:00 pm. (See above.)



DEBT REDUCTION CAMPAIGN

The mission to Honduras has certainly brought home the importance of creating financial freedom in our parish, freedom to respond. Debt can be one of the most crippling discouragements to saying "yes" to God. He presents to us challenges, and does so with a timing that is uniquely his. We can always argue that the time is just not right. "We have this debt and we have to take care of that first." On the contrary, here is a wonderful way to support the parish and participate directly in the future by making a pledge to the Building Fund.

So, what does the future hold? Many things. This is the way our God is. We do not live in a static community. We are constantly changing, constantly on the move. This is the nature of the Church. Many times we are moved to dream in directions that seem strange and incongruous with our needs. Vision is at the center of our life. We are constantly being called beyond the limits of our self-understanding and self-description. We hardly take a breath, and there is something new on the horizon for us. We cannot close our eyes to what God is calling us to see, a new opportunity for his grace working in our lives and the lives of those he is calling us to serve.