

ST. JUDE CATHOLIC CHURCH

Mission Extra

Sunday, May 21, 2006

A Report of Our Second Trip to Honduras

by FR. TIM CHURCH



ALLEN, Tex. - Seven people from our parish participated in this trip: Fr. Tim, Ken Melvin, Brenda Farmer, Robert Holladay, Jeanne Girsch, Beth Riley and José Morino. Fr. Fred Caldwell (St. Ann, Coppell) traveled with us and then worked in other parts of the Diocese. While this trip to Honduras followed only three months our first trip, we learned much more than we expected and shared some significant successes.

To recap the beginnings of this project within our parish, following the completion of our new Church, we felt a call to be more involved in helping people. We have been working in Mexico through our youth to Montemoraes and in an effort directed by the Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions and many other outreach efforts in our community. Nonetheless, we needed a new effort that was more challenging and, after looking around a bit, we joined the effort by our own Diocese that has a companion relationship with the Diocese of Trujillo, Honduras.

The very week that we made our desire known to the Diocesan leadership we were told that Bishop Luis Solé from Trujillo and Padre Gildo would be in our Diocese for conversations with Bishop Grahmann. It so happened that we were also

having our Fall Fiesta that week and so Bishops Solé and Grahmann, Padre Gildo, Deacon Charlie Stump and others joined our celebration. We designated the profit from this celebration to support our efforts in Honduras. We added to this other contributions and we had enough to provide for the transportation of delegates from our parish as well as initial project money.

Our February trip was an introduction to a relationship with two parishes. The plan of the Diocese was to allow us to choose which of these parishes we might join in a companion relationship. Because of the meager interest among the parishes of our Diocese we realized that if we made a choice this would exclude one of the parishes from any outside assistance. So, we chose to companion with both. We realize that this might be a burden but it is also a joy. Each of these parishes has unique gifts and needs.

Before we can introduce the parishes, we need to review the unique structure of the Church in Honduras. Most of Honduras is very rural and sparsely populated. There are only four or five major population centers in the country. The Diocese of Trujillo is slightly larger in land area to that of the Diocese of Dallas but where Dallas has over 1,000,000 Catholics and a general population of 3,500,000, Trujillo has fewer than 190,000 Catholics among a general population of less than 300,000.



Road transportation and communication are nonexistent in many areas.

To accommodate the life and structure of the Church in such a setting, the ten parishes of the Diocese are divided up into communities, what we might call neighborhoods. These are truly the lifeblood of the parish. Since the parishioners cannot travel to the parish center, on a regular basis Eucharistic ministers, catechists and “delegates of the word” are trained in the communities and provide for the majority of the

leadership and service. In the parish there might be thirty to fifty such communities. Ideally there are two priests in each parish who travel to these communities every one to three months. A majority of the communities have small chapels where fifty to one hundred people can gather.



Some simply gather in homes, on porches or in the open.

The constant training and education of the lay leadership of the parishes is a major aspect of parish life. On a regular basis there are gatherings of the lay leadership. The communities follow curriculum materials both for the children and the adults and the lay leadership prepare together for the gatherings of their communities. These communities also provide the basis for the pastoral care of the parish and as a side benefit have encouraged literacy and the standard of living. Some communities have formed various kinds of cooperative efforts including directly sharing their finances and forming small cottage industries. The people understand clearly that they are living the way that the first Christians did.

As we said before, our parish has been partnered with two parishes, St. Rita in Saba and St. Stephen in Rio Estaben. Saba is a town of about 9,000 situated in the Rio Aguan valley some 20 miles (direct route) south of the north coast of Honduras. The surrounding area is clearly agricultural with a host of small, family farms or plots of land used to raise cattle or subsistence farm products. There are also large corporate farms, many of which are completely mechanized and employ only a few people.

There are a few larger homes and some under construction, most of them being built by people working in the United States. Only a few of the streets are paved. Some public transportation is available but the vehicle of choice is clearly the

bicycle. While the city is dusty in the dry times and muddy during the rainy season, the interaction of the people is pleasant and even idyllic. Rusting tin roofs are everywhere, sidewalks are rare, and glass in the windows is a sign of prosperity. There is a municipal water system but not everyone is connected, the water is expensive and, at times is unreliable. Purified water is available at water “stations”. There are street vendors, shops and small grocery stores. A major highway runs through Saba and a very important bridge crossing the river, the largest in Honduras. (This bridge was destroyed during a tropical storm but has been rebuilt.)

St. Rita’s parish is centered in Saba. There are thirty communities that make up the parish, scattered through several hundred square miles. They are found in mountainous areas as well as in the agricultural valley. Some are found along four wheel drive “roads” and some have community chapels and some do not. One particular community continues to watch as their once beloved

chapel slips into a river that changed its course with hurricane Mitch (1998). Each of these communities is unique. Some are in more populated areas while others are loosely described as neighborhoods, a gathering of shacks and houses. One common group of neighborhoods is “on top,” in the mountains.



Housing is generally block wall and tin roofed, many of which are single room dwellings.

The geography of Honduras is fairly mixed throughout. It is composed of mountains that

range from one to two thousand feet above sea level, sea coast and interior jungles and valley farmland. While there are patches of jungle areas left, most of the area has been cleared for farms or pastures. The communities that are up in the mountains are among some of the poorest. Land is cheaper there and a few of them have banded together to purchase areas that they have turned into hillside farms. They grow corn and other grains as well as clear pastureland to raise cattle. They are proud people who have worked hard to scrape out a living on the land. They use horses for travel and work. Tractors are rare and the machete is the tool of choice for almost every task.



St. Stephen's is a much poorer parish, among the poorest in the area. It is centered on Rio Esteban, a tiny town of less than 700. A series of coastal towns and villages that are larger are included in the parish which stretches almost twenty miles into the mountains and as many miles west, up the coast. The description of the parish is similar to Saba but poorer and evenly more sparsely populated.

There is a community of Garufina in Rio Esteban. They have maintained their culture since the seventeenth century and, while a smaller than average number are Catholic, they add a particular cultural richness to the parish. Unfortunately, they tend to be even poorer than other people in Honduras. San Luis, Belfate and LisLis are three of the larger communities that are part of the parish. San Luis and Belfate have significant chapels and working congregations.



The Garufina are extremely interesting descendents of African slaves who were freed in a shipwreck.

One of the focal points of our trip was to celebrate two projects. In Saba we celebrated with the parish the completion of a water well. Our parish provided the financial resources for this. It was dug on the parish grounds and will provide water throughout the year. The parish will no longer be dependent on the municipal system which is unreliable and expensive. In Rio Esteban we had a little more work to do in understanding the need for a farm. This was an idea presented in our discussions in our last visit. The concern was that the parish has almost no income. It is supported by the Diocese but the population is so poor that it cannot make enough contributions to make a difference. In seeking a solution to this we need to add in the requirement of Bishop Solé that the parishes make every effort to become self supporting. Additionally, finding an enterprise that is not labor intensive would be a real bonus. The proposal of the community was to purchase approximately ten acres of land in order to raise cattle.

We had an opportunity to drive/hike to the site of the "farm". It is only a few hundred yards from the Gulf Coast and covered in a rich mixture of grasses. There is still a little clearing to do but within weeks the first group of ten cattle will be

pastured on the land. It is thought that twenty calves can be raised to yearling each year and that the parish will profit by about five thousand U.S. dollars annually. This, by the way is close to the annual income of the parish. There is some thought that the farm could be a model for other parishes.



Since it is not labor intensive and the market for beef is very good on Honduras, this could be successful in any parish. The parish is pastored by three Franciscan friars. We were reminded that the method of supporting the parishes in the first missionary establishment of the Church in Texas was raising cattle. (<http://www.nps.gov/saan/visit/MissionSanJose.htm>)

La Finca de San José (St. Joseph's Farm), as it has come to be known, potentially has another

part to play in helping the Church in Honduras. In our first discussion in February the issue of education was pressed. Generally speaking, rural children have a very difficult time getting beyond the fifth grade. Economic pressures and an inadequate system of public education are the causes. Teachers sometimes lack devotion to their work but most are simply not paid and become discouraged. While Bishop Solé and others are beginning to focus on this problem, a model will have to be developed. It will need to meet the needs of people in population centers as well as rural areas. Finding the resources for what could be expensive to build and maintain will be a challenge. It is possible that an expansion of the size of these parish farms could be the resource base for supporting parochial education. The focus on parochial education



It is not uncommon for children to only have a third grade education.

will also help to shield Catholic elementary aged children from the growing influence of Protestant sects who are “buying” children’s membership in their churches by promising them an education.

While the heart of this report has been the major concerns of our brothers and sisters in Honduras, there are many smaller problems that we hope to solve. Because of the great challenge of transportation, the priests’ four wheel drive trucks are worn out and the cost of repairs is quickly exceeding their value. Repairs need to be done to existing churches that suffer terribly from the weather. Additional chapels need to be constructed in areas that have never had them.



We are saddened to see brand new Protestant chapels funded by U.S. churches, while the Catholics meet outside or in huts.

One of the projects that we have undertaken is to provide one half of the funds \$1,300) to build a perimeter wall and gate around one of the chapels to provide security in a difficult neighborhood. We are seeking detail concern some major repairs to St. Rita’s in Saba. This will probably cost several thousand dollars. A notebook computer is needed in Saba as well as a small copy machine. We are going to completely reprint the religious education curriculum as it is out of print and there is nothing to replace it. This will probably become a major project for our JYM students and will cost several thousand dollars. Music education has been targeted as a way to keep their youth involved in the Church. There is a great desire for this but very few instruments. There need is for several keyboards and guitars. These are the instruments of choice. The priests need everything for their altars, vestments, chalices, sacramentaries, Bibles (Central America Edition), albs, small amplifiers and wireless microphones (for the larger churches). Spanish language devotional material, Catechisms and Bibles are highly prized.

Of course, the parishes need financial support. We provided \$13,500 for the farm land, \$2,700 for calves to pasture on the land and \$400 to complete the clearing. \$1,000 was provided to St. Rita’s to help with their budget shortfall. \$5,000 was given for the water well. We will be providing \$500 to put a roof on one of the chapels. One ongoing project that is worth mentioning is the construction of a radio communication system for Rio Estaben. There is no communication throughout the parish. Our current investment in this project is \$4,000. We have also made contributions to both of our parishes following our February trip. We have also asked for a disaster list, as the hurricane season approaches, so that we can accumulate materials. One of our scouts is collecting medical packs that will become part of this and the general store of materials that they need.



Our financial support of the Church in Honduras is provided solely by the contributions of our members. Several sizeable contributions have supported this project. The children of our parish contributed \$2,000 to their P.I.G.S. (People in God’s Service) project. These funds will be used to purchase calves to raise on the farm. Thank you to all who helped and will continue to provide funds to support our two parish companions. May God bless you.

