

## The Holy Spirit lends a hand to sister parish in Nicaragua

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We are just back from a visit to our sister parish in Nicaragua, the second poorest country in the Western Hemisphere.

Our parish has been going there for 8 years now. We visit every six months. About 40 people from our parish have been to Nicaragua. In the last 8 years, our two sister parishes have together built over 200 new houses for the poorest of the poor and repaired another 30 homes.

We have built an old folk's home which has eight beds.

We have purchased 10 acres of ground and started a subdivision for working families. These families have jobs, but not have land. Eventually the subdivision will have 55 homes. We also dug the wells and built a road in the subdivision.

We started a sewing program with nine treadle powered sewing machines. Until recently we paid a teacher to teach women to sew with material we bring from the U.S. Several dozen women have taken the course.

Our sister parish relationship also extends to support of the parish and institution. We have repaired the rectory roof, installed a sound system in the church, and bought necessary things like a refrigerator for the rectory and a motorcycle for the priests, so they can get to remote chapels and parish outstations.

When I say "we" have done this, I mean both parishes working together. This is not so much charity as "cooperation." Our parish in Maryland, St. John Vianney, provides money, encouragement and advice. San Juan Bautista in Limay, Nicaragua, provides knowledge of the local community, workers, volunteers and supervision and accountability.

It is truly a cooperative effort involving the priests, the people and even the bishop. There have been scores of people in both countries who have played a part.

I think our sister parish relationship is what Pope Francis wants the church to become: "a poorer church for the poor." I am convinced it is a model for a cross cultural church.

This relationship has been the work of the Holy Spirit. We did not "plan" it this way. It just happened.

About 13 years ago I asked my sister, Maureen, what she wanted for her 50<sup>th</sup> birthday. She said, "I want you to build a house in Nicaragua." Her parish, St. Vincent de Paul in Baltimore, was already been working in Nicaragua through an ecumenical group called Casa Baltimore. A small brick house with a dirt floor and metal roof cost \$1,800.

It took me a year to get around to sending the money for the house. It took another few months to get photos back to Maryland and up on our bulletin board. We put up pictures of the "before" and "after" houses of a blind woman and her daughter. I mentioned the house in a homily. After that mass a parishioner slipped me a check for \$18,000 and said, "Build ten more."

At first we tried working through others, but eventually we realized we needed to make a visit to Nicaragua to see for ourselves. I sent my sister, who is fluent in Spanish, and a parishioner who a native of Costa Rica, to get a look. They came back filled with enthusiasm for the prospects and parish relationship.

The next step was for the pastors to meet. Fr. Francisco Bayardo came to the U.S. from Nicaragua. At first we had different goals. He thought we should give "aid to the parish", i.e. help his parish as an institution. I thought we should aid "the people of the parish," i.e., aid to help the poor. We struck a balance, with a little of both.

The next year a group from our parish went down to Nicaragua. This first big visit was a mess. We got caught in torrential rain. Tragically Fr. Bayardo's mother died the day we arrived. My Spanish was so rudimentary I found it hard to communicate. But we decided to go ahead and decided to focus on housing. At the time many people were living in houses made of mud and sticks and plastic sheeting.

Eventually we fell into a pattern.

Every six months a group from our parish visits Nicaragua. We meet with the committee members from the parish in Limay, we bless the new homes and we discuss any problems. Over the years we have upgraded the houses a bit. The houses we build today are all brick, with terra cotta tile floors and metal roofs. They cost \$2,600.

Both sides work hard. We work hard raising money. They work hard building and improving housing.

In Nicaragua they keep a list of families who qualify for a home. Typically they have 50 families on the list. They visit each family and prioritize them by need. The poorest and the handicapped go to the top of the list. Sometimes the committee has to walk for hours just to visit one family.

The Nicaraguan committee there hires workers to build the houses. Currently there are two crews with three workers each, who are skilled in masonry and carpentry. Directly our project employs seven people. Indirectly we employ another four or five men at the local brick factory where the bricks and tiles are made for our houses. We buy locally made supplies where we can. One of the economic benefits of this project is employment.

Recipients of the houses are chosen by the committee in Nicaragua without regard to religion or politics. This might seem obvious to us, but in a country so recently torn by civil war and now divided by proselytizing by Evangelical churches, this is a delicate matter. Northern Nicaragua, where our sister parish is located, was terribly damaged by the Sandinista/Contra war in the 1980s. Many people lost family members. Feelings are still raw. There is still suspicion of the U.S. which funded and armed the Contras. In addition there is some suspicion of religion from the U.S., which has come in the form of Evangelical churches. The success of our project depends on absolute neutrality.

However, we do put up a plaque at each house saying that it is a gift from the Catholic Church. We also give each house a cross which is hung on the wall. Back in the U.S. we give each donor family a cross. Every time we bless a house we ask them for prayers and assure the new residents of our prayers.

Blessing of the houses is always the same and always pure joy. We ask the new residents to say a few words. They always begin by thanking God with the most profound words. Sometimes they sing a song. They tell us the most moving stories of homelessness and poverty. We often cry through the whole thing.

To me, this project has been nothing less than a miracle.

At the end of our first year, I was skeptical about our ability to continue. We held a meeting back in Maryland to discuss the future. One young man suggested that we set a goal of 100 homes. It seemed impossible. It meant \$250,000. We blew past that goal long ago. Now we are talking about 500 houses. In the last eight years we have raised and spent more than \$600,000 for our sister parish project. The Holy Spirit is truly in this.

We have no administrative expenses or overhead.

Anybody who goes to Nicaragua from the U.S. pays their own way or gets a sponsor.

Nobody can do everything, but everybody can do something. One tech savvy young man created a web page [www.providinghomes.org](http://www.providinghomes.org). Money has started to come in from around the USA.

Everybody in our parish gets involved.

Our youth group raises money by “walks” for Nicaragua. Several families have decided to give houses in Nicaragua instead of Christmas gifts. Two parishioners have committed themselves to buy several houses per year.

One family sold T-shirts to raise money. The yellow shirts have the English and Spanish words “neighbors, *vicinos*” on them. People in the U.S. who bought a T-shirt also bought one for someone in Nicaragua. Now you see those yellow T-shirts everywhere in Limay.

Even our little children in our religious education classes do something. They collect stuffed animals and dolls, baseballs and soccer balls, and children’s clothing.

This is our common great work in two parishes.

This project would not work without the enthusiastic support of the local bishop of Estelí, Nicaragua, Juan Abelardo Mata. He has visited our parish in the U.S. and he has also visited many of our projects in Nicaragua. This past trip he came with us to give a pair of crutches to a teenage boy suffering from polio. He also visited two blind women who had received one of our houses. One of the blind ladies would not come out to greet the bishop until she had put on perfume. To a blind lady the smell of things is very important.

This project would is rooted in prayer. Our trips to Nicaragua are like rolling retreats. We pray at every house. We pray morning and evening prayer. We go to mass every day. We pray night prayer just after we have an evening beer and discuss the highs and lows of the day. Some people who have gone to Nicaragua say that they have never prayed so much in their lives.

This project has changed my life. Ten years ago I would have been hard pressed to find Nicaragua on the map. After ten visits I feel at home there.

More than that it has brought me joy in the priesthood late in life. When we walk around town we see people we know and call them by name. We have countless friends in those 200 homes. We have blessed every one.

Every trip has its Holy Spirit moment, a moment when we see God’s hand our visit.

This year it came when several members of our group visited a family who had previously received one of our houses. Their nine year old girl had been run over by a bus and had lost her left leg in the accident.

God always sends just the right people. Our little delegation included a priest from a neighboring parish in Maryland, Fr. Jaime Hernandez who had lost his leg at the age of 11 when he stepped on a land mine in his native El Salvador. Eventually he came to the U.S. and became a diocesan priest. He walks and even runs, better than most people on his artificial leg.

He showed the little girl his own stump and leg. He told her how he had learned to walk and run again. We arranged to have her sent to the capital, Managua, for surgery and to fitted for a prosthetic leg. What are the odds that we would go to see a girl who had lost a leg and bring along a priest who had lost a leg. That hand of God was in that for sure.

The hand of God has been in this whole project for the last years. It has renewed by faith and restored my hope.

That is the work of the Holy Spirit for sure.