

## A Little Piece of Heaven... in Central America

*A reflection by Thomas McNamara, O.F.M. Cap.*

*“What then are we called to do as followers of Jesus Christ...as followers of St. Francis of Assisi?”*

I flew out with Deacon Miguel Romero from JFK to the Mission at Hondo Valle, Dominican Republic where Sister Jane Reilly, a Sister of St. Joseph from Brentwood, Long Island greeted us at the airport. After a six hour drive along the south coast, we traveled north along the Haitian border where the Hondo Valle is located. Every other month or so, the Diocese of Rockville Center sends a deacon and a priest, and others as well, to assist in the ministry of the parish that is spread out over several rural communities in southwest Dominican Republic.

Sister Jane, together with five lay persons, formed a team that assists in outreach and catechesis, sacramental preparation, and home visitations for the several villages and outlying rural areas of Hondo Valle. Father John Cervini from the Diocese of Rockville Center stationed at nearby Cercado celebrates Mass on Sunday morning in Hondo Valley, but the people in the many outlying villages never see a priest, a common occurrence for four centuries in Latin America.



Deacon Miguel and I visited, gave talks, anointed people, assisted in baptismal preparations and baptized. We also gave talks to groups of First Communion and Confirmation candidates and groups of parishioners about to celebrate their patronal feast of Our Lady of Fatima. In Hondo Valle itself, a group of people prayed a rosary novena in the early morning walking through the streets in preparation for the feast day. The people we met were very grateful to celebrate and learn more about their faith. So often they have too few opportunities to participate up close. We stayed at a very modern apartment suite that the parish owns in the downtown area of Hondo Valle. It had all the conveniences of a North American home including gas stove, refrigerator and freezer, toilets and showers, and access to clean drinking water. At night we slept under mosquito nets to prevent any possibility of insect bites that might spread disease. This apartment afforded us a peaceful space to study and prepare talks and is used regularly as a center for the various folks that visit each month to assist in the mission of the parish.

Parishioners in Hondo Valle regularly visit their doctor, dentist, or nurse in the offices contained within the church building. In addition to baptizing children, we weighed them to help the parish decide who needed additional nutritional assistance in the form of vegetable seeds for their gardens and vitamins that we carried into the country; and many thanks go to NBTY vitamins and Cathy Vitelle. Of note in Hondo Valle, which translated means “deep valley”, they were just completing the first cell phone tower and so Hondo Valle was about to enter the age of modern communication. Sister Jane mentioned, however, that she first had access to the internet via the public library before telephone communications arrived in town. Unfortunately, my taking pictures often became a focus of attention as people craned to see their image on the screen. And yes, this big gringo did stick out in the village. The thing that struck me is how young the people are there. There are so many youth and young adults out on the only road that connects one village with the next. Every curve in that road or overhang sheltered a few chairs and served as a meeting place for the groups of people that greeted us as we passed by; everyone talking, singing and playing pick up games.

On my last day there, I hiked an hour or two across some fields and a stream, and then up a mountain to baptize a group of children that gathered in a school house at the top. The mountain villages of La Pena and Los Hoyos, do not have electricity, but do have immense enthusiasm about their faith. Thanks to the tireless leadership of women like Lucia, the faith of these people is challenged to take root and grow in the face of great hardship. Most people raise their own beans and corn and some have coffee plants that they cultivate for the harvest and sale. One family insisted that we stop and sample some of the coffee that they were proudly packaging for sale in paper envelopes. Boy, was it strong, and in tiny little cups.

We celebrated Mass in Naranjo Dulce, which means ‘sweet orange’. There in a tiny, humble barn with a dirt floor next to the piles of harvested guineo and bananas, the locals set up a table and some flowers, read the scriptures, and then I had the privilege to help them bless and share the bread and wine consecrated as the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ our Lord. Striking similarity, I thought, with the barn in which our Savior came to this world some 2000 years ago. The glow in the people’s eyes led me to believe that not much has changed on this earth as Jesus continues to be made flesh in an earthy mix of faith and humility.

What then are we called to do as followers of Jesus Christ...as followers of St. Francis of Assisi? How are we called to respond to the needs that present themselves to us each day in our communities? My experience was perhaps more obvious, but we don’t need to travel to the Dominican Republic to visit people who long to hear the Good News of the Lord who came and continues to come to set us free. That is good news for people who can’t do it on their own. As Sister Jane reminded me, the people of Hondo Valle can’t afford the luxury of supposed “self sufficiency.” If they didn’t help each other, THEY WOULD DIE. I think that sometimes we who are materially blessed can fool ourselves into thinking that we don’t really need each other, because we can afford to do it for ourselves. Perhaps the freedom of the Gospel comes when we realize that we really do need each other in the Lord. That dependence is a gift.

*Our brother, Tom was born in Oriskany Falls, New York in 1958. He was invested on 04 August 2002. He was perpetually professed on 19 August 2002 and Ordained to Priesthood on 08 September 2007.*

