

# San Nicolas de Oriente: In the mountains of Nicaragua

After our first full week with the Mexican sisters in the Barrio Edgar Munguia and the surroundings of Managua, we set out by bus for the mountain country to the north. We are headed for the town of San Nicolas de Oriente, where the sisters minister to more than 20 scattered communities.

We drive through the lowland area stretching beyond Managua: dry, flat, dusty fields, often littered with plastic and refuse, occasionally a planting of rice, but mostly quite barren. The sun is glaring, the weather hot and humid. We pass a few sparse settlements of cement-block houses, newly constructed since the hurricane and floods.

Then, as we enter the foothills, the scene changes dramatically.

The rural mountain areas of Nicaragua offer a contrast to the city and the flat, monotonous area since the capital. The drive through the mountains gives a glimpse of the natural beauty of the country.



The air is a little lighter and cooler. Trees and vegetation are sparse, but there are sweeping views of distant peaks. During our four-hour trip, we see no busy towns and few signs of cultivation. Occasionally there is a house; rarely do we see people. Unemployment has driven a third of the men leave in search of work in places like Costa Rica.

The dirt road has been ascending steeply for miles when suddenly we round a bend and catch a glimpse of a cluster of small white buildings in the distance far below us. The town is nestled in a valley surrounded by steep cliffs and high mountains.



As we descend into the valley and enter the town of several thousand inhabitants, we are surprised to find that the two main streets are newly paved with gray concrete bricks. It takes only a few minutes to arrive at the Parish Church and compound where the Mexican Benedictine sisters live.

We are pleased to see a brightly painted water tower rising above the buildings, a gift to the parish community from funds raised by friends of Weston Priory who wished to offer help after the 1998 hurricane.

We are greeted with warm embraces and happy smiles. There are four Sisters serving in San Nicolas; Sisters Otilia, Margarita, Esperanza, and Rosa del Carmen. Three young Nicaraguan women are also living with them as candidates who are interested in joining the community of sisters.



Street near sisters' residence

The sisters came to San Nicolas in 1989 at the invitation of the Little Brothers of the Gospel who had pastoral responsibility for the parish. One of the Little Brothers of the Gospel, Brother Patricio, is an ordained priest who lives in La Garnacha, a small settlement about six miles distant. The sisters have accepted pastoral responsibility for San Nicolas where the parish church is located. They also visit and serve the outlying hamlets, most of which can only be reached by foot or horseback. They walk as much as eight hours to reach the most remote villages.



The church and parish buildings in San Nicolas are on a side street that, like the streets in the Barrio in Managua, is not paved. But instead of the occasional car and motorcycle that we saw in the city, the streets here are lined with saddled horses that are the more common means of travel in the countryside.

The church is an ample white stucco building with red trim, light and tastefully decorated with white and red hanging fabrics. The parish house

has a dining room, kitchen, dormitory for the sisters, and a large meeting room adjoining the dormitory unit that is to serve as lodging for the Weston brothers.

Much work has gone into the preparation for our arrival. Fourteen cots are neatly lined up in a row, each with a comfortable thin foam mattress and ample bedding. Carol and Jim Ludden from Seattle arrived some time ago and have been busily assisting the sisters in many ways, helping to prepare for our arrival. During their stay, they generously donate their time and skills to lighten the work.

At once we notice that the place seems airy. Airy indeed! Soon we are to experience the nightly high winds that cause the curtains by the open windows to blow straight out over our heads. The rattle

of the metal roofs drown out any other night noises, even the barking of dogs or the braying of donkeys!

A few years ago, hundreds of men, women, and children were huddled in these rooms while Hurricane Mitch raged outside. Because the parish compound is on a rise, the flood waters did not reach it. People from the lower parts of town and from surrounding villages were given refuge by the sisters. All communication with the outside world was shut off for several days and the people survived sharing the meager food supplies. Torrential rains caused mud slides, high winds brought down trees and many homes were destroyed.

The parish compound includes a few other buildings and a playground with basketball court and metal slide where children are always present playing ball or engaged in other activities.

On the water tower above the buildings, bold letters spell out "redes de solidaridad," (nets of solidarity). There is running water, now, and electricity, two showers, and an ingenious indoor-outhouse — all welcome improvements since the hurricane.



**The Monks of Weston Priory**

**58 Priory Hill Road, Weston, VT 05161-6400**

**Tel: 802-824-5409; Fax: 802-824-3573**