

Same place, different country: One brother's first impressions

JANUARY, 2001: We are 14 Weston brothers and four Mexican Benedictine sisters.

Again we walk the streets of downtown Managua. Again, to the public square in front of the old cathedral and the Palacio Nacional.



The old cathedral, Managua, January 2001

Again the 90-degree heat. Again the contrast with the frigid climate of the snow-covered Green Mountains, back home in Vermont.

But this time, the square is quiet. Except for the small gangs of young children wandering about, it's devoid of people.



Deserted square in front of the Palacio Nacional:
Gone are the crowds we saw in 1988

Areas of the square are chained off, so no traffic circulates. The steps of the cathedral are closed off with wooden barriers.

Damaged by an earthquake in the 1970s, the cathedral is unsafe for use. A wealthy U.S. businessman has donated the funds for a new cathedral, which stands in a field some distance from the center of the city.

In the square, most of the children are barefoot, their clothes ragged and unkempt, hands and faces grimy from rummaging in dust and dirt. They smile, laugh, and grab brothers' hands as they join the walk.

With their free hands outstretched, they plead with hungry eyes for food or money.

Down by the waterfront of contaminated Lake Managua, more children join in as the sisters bring out the sandwiches for the picnic lunch.

Now there is a modern mall nearby, with the variety of fast food selections we find in our U.S. cities.

Now there are maquiladoras, the modern factories owned by international companies.

Now there is a large new cathedral. Elderly and disabled men and women sit at the gate, reaching out with empty hands.

This is but a first impression, after an absence of 13 years.

We are reminded of the hope we read on the Sandinista sign in Managua on our first visit: "We Want Peace With Dignity."

In the days ahead, our Mexican sisters will introduce us to the new reality that is Nicaragua, 2001.



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