

San Nicolas de Oriente: A tough town, a cooperative spirit

SAN NICOLAS — After sharing our monastic morning prayer with the sisters, we assemble in the meeting room adjacent to our sleeping quarters. The room is spacious. A row of high narrow windows line the outer wall, letting in plenty of light—but their height fails to deter the curious young neighbors who scale the wall from the outside to peer down at the visitors from a foreign land.

Along the other wall of the meeting room stands a line of small, steel silos for storing millet, a principal crop in the area. The silos have been purchased by the parish organizations and are made available to local peasant farmers.



Men and women of San Nicolas gather in meeting room,
with steel millet silos in the back

Back in 1998, when the sisters informed us of the damage from Hurricane Mitch, we invited friends of the Priory to join us in sending financial aid. The response was far beyond what we expected or could have managed on our own.

With these funds, the sisters set up a revolving fund; people were asked to pay back as they could, without interest, so that other families could be helped.

The occasion for our community visit to Nicaragua was an invitation from the sisters and the people they serve so that they could express their gratitude in person and could show how the funds are being used.

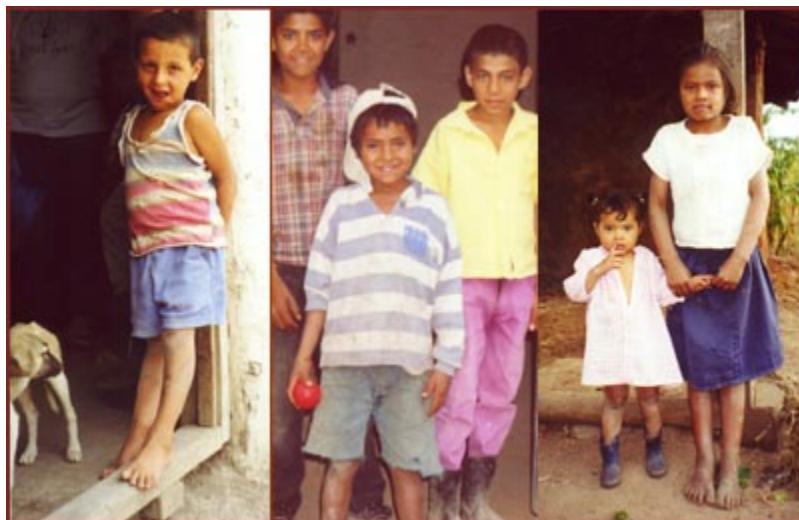
In fact, what we received during this trip was an eye-opening gift of cross-cultural understanding and a moving opportunity to witness the power of faith and human initiative. In the end, we joined with the sisters and the people of their town in prayers of mutual thanksgiving.

San Nicolas has always been a tough town. As we relaxed in the parish house dining room on our first evening, the Mexican sisters told us of how, in the late 1880's, a band of fugitives from justice had fled from the town of Leon into the mountains to find a hiding place that could not be easily reached by civil authorities. In the course of their wanderings, they came upon this rugged, scenic valley, hidden by towering mountains, accessible with great difficulty, and inhabited only by wild animals.

The land was rocky and the soil poor—just as it is today. Few crops could be grown for sustenance. Even the climate seemed unwelcoming with ferocious winds that whipped through the valley both day and night. It was the perfect refuge to avoid the clutches of the law.

In more modern times, thanks in part to the arrival of the Little Brothers of the Gospel, and later of the Mexican Benedictine sisters, there is less lawlessness and incivility. The people are better educated, more caring for each other, and now, in the face of Hurricane Mitch, they really seem committed to acting as a community.

The area around San Nicolas had not only suffered from Hurricane Mitch, but several years of drought caused the repeated failure of crops. The result was prolonged lack of food and necessities. For many residents of the area, the situation had become desperate.



Children of San Nicolas de Oriente

Children were coming to school hungry. Some were having a meal only every second day. Often they had no breakfast, even if they had to walk a long distance. Usually they carried no food for lunch. Malnutrition showed its effects, both as a health problem and as an obstacle to learning.

A new organization of men and women, now named 'Juan XXIII' (John the 23rd), determined to address this issue as a priority. They came up with the idea of constructing a facility where they could provide meals for the needy children.



Outside the Comedor el Campestre restaurant

Utilizing funds from the Hurricane relief, a new little restaurant called the Comedor el Campestre is the result of their united effort. Both men and women will be involved in preparing and serving nutritious meals to the children. Provision will also be made for older persons who are without resources. And hopefully some people with the means to pay will patronize the restaurant and provide income to support the project.

At the meetings we attended, the people expressed amazement that the help from Weston Priory friends came from ordinary working people in the United States and not from some big organization or wealthy benefactor. They saw in this an affirmation of the way the sisters were encouraging them, as ordinary people, to be mindful of one another and to leave no one behind.



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