

# In Me and Far Away: Viewpoints from Nicaragua

*Editor's Note: This is the conclusion of a series of articles on Sister Beatrice Ganley's trip to Nicaragua as part of the Witness for Peace delegations.*

By Beatrice Ganley, SSJ

We left Jinotega early in the morning to continue our climb up the mountain roads, sometimes reaching elevations of over 5,000 feet. On the way to our destination of San Sebastian de Yali, we stopped at a place called Sisle. Here we dropped off some clothing and supplies to a group of about 650 persons who had been tragically affected by the contra forces.

Last summer 22 families were relocated to a village called La Pradera. There they began to farm the land, to build houses, and to organize themselves. "We wanted to forget what had happened," they said. "We hoped to pick up the pieces of our lives and begin again."

Typical are Dona Maria Aguilar and her husband, Rogelio Lopez. They had been rootless for more than a year after the contras took their son, leaving them with four grandchildren to look after.

Witness for Peace observers told us earlier that in late June, 1985, La Pradera, located in a beautiful green valley 18 miles north of Jinotega, was a flourishing community. A health post had been set up, and also a school. Food was supplied, and an agrarian reform specialist was assigned to distribute land. Each family received 38 acres of personal land, in addition to the community fields. Because of its vulnerability to attack, the group was provided with a guard of 90 soldiers. When things seemed peaceful, this militia force worked in the fields along with the villagers.

On August 14, the militia guard was called out on a mission, and their replacements were held up in transit. Learning of this through an informer, a force of 300 contras moved into the surrounding hills, and at 5 a.m. on August 15, they fell upon the unprotected settlement. Most villagers escaped with their lives, but the town was completely destroyed. Rogelio Lopez, "carrying no arms, only his grandchild," was killed. The child survived, but did not speak for weeks.

Now these "desplazados de guerra" (persons displaced by the war) have taken up quarters in an abandoned school in the village of Sisle. Contras repeatedly threaten they are waiting for an opportunity to attack again.

"What motivates these forces to attack unprotected civilian settlements?" we asked.

"They don't want us to be productive, or to appear organized," was the reply. "If people are organized and productive, and if the Sandinistas are involved with the people, then the Sandinistas look good. The contras do not want the government to look good."

"We are afraid," said one woman, "that as soon as they see we are doing better, they will come again."

"We have lost everything," said another. "The contras think we are organizing for politics, but we are only organizing to work for our life."

Another added, "Go back and talk for us

so that we can have peace. As soon as we start working, they come and burn us out!"

Somber and silent was the mood on the bus as we continued our journey on the winding road to Yali.

I succumbed to the local bacteria, and the 60-degree incline of the hill approaching the home of Guadalupe and Casimiro Fuentes-Blandon seemed more like a 75- or 90-degree pitch.

I liked Guadalupe, and felt close to her; she responded to my primitive attempts to communicate as if I was speaking perfect Spanish.

That evening, our last in Yali, we sat in the dimly lit kitchen and heard the experiences of this 61-one-year-old woman who has learned how to read and write only within the last five years. We huddled close. Her grandchildren sat on the stools leading from the main room onto the dirt floor of the kitchen.

"It was a difficult time for me," said Guadalupe. "We were not allowed to study. There were neither schools nor money. My children did not go to school either."

We learned that she had given birth to 11 children, five of whom had died in infancy. In regions where sanitation is poor, children pick up diarrhea from bacteria and quickly become dehydrated. This one of the prime causes of the high infant mortality rate in Third World countries. However, the recent establishment of hydration centers in health clinics throughout the countryside has significantly decreased the infant mortality rate within the past six years. This has been one of the uncontested benefits of the revolution for the people of Nicaragua.

Guadalupe talked about her two sons who were local leaders of the revolution. In 1978, when the "frente" began organizing there, her sons became involved secretly. She admits that, as a mother, she had mixed feelings about their involvement. But in spite of her fears, she was proud of them because, she said, "it was justice."

She told us how little by little, she too became involved by providing them with food and by cooking for them and their friends. She was convinced of the rightness of the revolution. "It would change the government," she said. "And anything would be better than what we had. The Sandinistas promised a complete change."

After the revolution, the first development that affected her was the literacy campaign which had begun almost immediately in 1979. She and Casimiro both learned to read and write at that time. . . . I realized then that for those of us who have grown up with this skill, it is hard to imagine the significance of having newly acquired the ability.

Guadalupe asked me: "Where would I have learned with no one to teach?" And she added: "I feel a lot different than before. We used to have to sell our coffee for only half of what



Beatrice Ganley, SSJ  
Families draw strength from one another to cope with the rigors and dangers of life in Nicaragua. Three generations of a Jinotega family are pictured here.

it was worth. Now we can get a fair price. My children can study."

Then she began to break down as she told us about her son, who was killed in July, 1982. At the time, it had been six months since she had seen him. He died in an engagement with the contras on the Atlantic coast. Because this area is controlled by the contra forces, they cannot get his body back for burial.

After a few quiet minutes together, she urged us to "go back and discuss this with Mr. Reagan. We have a clean revolution. There is no persecution of religion. The children study, but in this war situation, it doesn't seem so important to them. How can they study in a war zone? If we lived in the countryside, (where their land is and where Casimiro travels on his horse to work each day) we would be killed!"

From the adjoining room, we heard Casimiro echo, "Correct!" He joined us and began to speak of his appreciation of being able to read, and of his endorsement of the entire "process" in his country. "Before this," he said, "we hardly knew who who were; we could not even recognize our own names."

On another evening, when he had been sharing with us his recollections of living under Somoza and of resisting Sandino's forces as a young man, I asked him and Guadalupe, "How did you manage with so many difficulties?"

Guadalupe said, "We had our faith in God." But Casimiro added quickly, "Yes, we always had our faith in God. But now we have a more practical hope in determining our own lives."

He continued in the same vein, "I, as a man, can enjoy life and see my children go through life. Call it 'communism' or what you will. It is our hope for the future."

"How can any country go forward under the aggression we experience now? We wait for peace. As fellow human beings, we hope you can take a message back so that we can work together," he said.

The following day, in Managua, we were at the U.S. Embassy presenting our conclusions and asking some questions of Michael Donovan, a staff member at our embassy. "Why do you think that delegations such as ours come here?" we asked.

He thought briefly and replied: "You are religious people, concerned about individual human beings and tend to think of things in terms of how they will affect individuals. The government cannot operate that way. We have to look down the road and determine what this government will be doing 10 or 15 years from now and try to counter that now . . . unfortunately, there will probably — I hate to say it — be a blood bath in this area."

"Why do we not sell wheat to Nicaragua?" we asked.

The response was: "We do not want to bail this government out. It is a totalitarian government."

Meanwhile, the people of Yali are building their new plaza and church; medical equipment purchased in the United States stands idle because, since the embargo, replacement parts are unavailable; and a new wing is being constructed on the orphanage in anticipation of the numbers of children who will lose parents to contra attacks.

And on Capital Hill in Washington the debate continues and the deals are made about the future of people in villages like Yali, Jinotega, and Sisle.

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