

Christian campers

A diocesan-sponsored family-camp program in Italy Valley offers hiking, homilies and a host of other features designed to create a unique vacation for families seeking an alternative vacation experience. Page 10.

Guns symbolize Salvadorans' plight



By Lee Strong
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — As they stand on duty, or even just walk down the street, soldiers in El Salvador hold their guns constantly in a ready position.

For foreign visitors, having guns continually pointed at them can be intimidating — or they can simply accept the guns as part of daily life in war-torn El Salvador.

Joe and Lillian Piersante journeyed to El Salvador for two weeks in October, 1988, to visit Santa Marta, a village resettled by refugees who had returned to El Salvador after years of living in refugee camps in Honduras.

Along with other visitors from Rochester, the couple found themselves regularly detained and harassed by government troops. At one point, they were prevented from attending a meeting of church group representatives, although they had received permission from the military high command. Guards at a military check point simply refused to let them through, in spite of the official documents, and they were forced to sit for two days, with guns pointed at them. The meeting ended before they could get to it.

"If they found you were there through a church group, then they really harassed you," Joe Piersante said. "We got a small taste of what the Salvadoran people, the poor, go through every day of their lives."

Rachel Studer was in El Salvador July 14-Aug. 7 of this year. Married to a Salvadoran, she had gone down to visit his family. She, too, had guns pointed at her as she walked about the streets of the capitol, San Salvador. But she wasn't disturbed by it. "I wasn't going down for political reasons," she said. "I was going down for family reasons and as a tourist. Nobody gave me a second glance. They seemed to be very uninterested in me."

Nevertheless, Studer also tasted what life is like for the citizens of El Salvador. "The majority of people there are as threatened by the left as they are by the right," she observed. "The great majority of people are neither the left nor the right. They just want to live their lives."

Studer and the Piersantes are among a number of people from the Rochester area who have visited El Salvador in the last year. The majority of those people have traveled as part of church groups seeking to help refugees return to their homes. Sister Kathy Weider, SSI, has been actively involved with the Interfaith Office on Accompaniment, which has been helping the refugees repatriate to El Salvador from refugee camps in Honduras. She has been in El Salvador four times — including the trip with the Piersantes.

"In each of the visits I've made," Sister Weider said, "it's common to be followed and to feel that the eyes and

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Church offers hope for nation under fire

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — When Father Nicolas Menjivar of El Salvador hears about a shortage of priests in the United States, a smile comes to his face.

"Sometimes I hear you have not enough priests in the diocese," commented the administrator of Holy Redeemer/St. Francis Xavier Parish. "But you have closer parishes than us, and that means you have more priests attempting to serve the people."

Father Menjivar speaks from experience. Before taking the administrative position at the Rochester parish last June, the priest oversaw Our Lady of Lourdes Parish in the Department of La Libertad, about 23 kilometers from El Salvador's capital city of San Salvador. Father Menjivar noted that his parishioners numbered 70,000, a daunting figure when compared to the population of the average U.S. parish.

Every Sunday, about 800 people would attend Mass at his church, but many of the thousands of people living within 25 square kilometers of the parish could not make the trip to the church. These people depended on 65 lay catechists, some of them eucharistic ministers, to fulfill their liturgical needs.

The catechists celebrated the Liturgy of the Word with the parishioners, Father

Menjivar noted, and were responsible for the parishioners' religious education.

Lay Catholics, most of whom couldn't afford Catholic education, keep the church alive in El Salvador, he remarked. "The majority of the people who help the church don't come from the Catholic high schools," he said. "The majority come from parish religious education. This is a sad reality."

"The Catholic high schools ... have very good people, but they also have to pay a lot for their studies," he continued. "All of the people want to go there, but private high schools are more expensive than public schools."

The vast majority of Salvadorans are poorly paid farm workers, Father Menjivar said, noting that his own family's livelihood centered on the yearly harvests of coffee beans, rice and corn. "I worked all day, from 7:30 a.m. to 4 p.m., for one half of a dollar."

Wages have increased slightly since his youth, but the 46-year old priest noted that inflation has eaten up any gains the average Salvadorans might have made.

To deal with their harsh life, many Salvadorans rely on Catholicism, Father Menjivar observed. "For us, the church in our country is actually like the heart in the body. It moves our spiritual life," he said.

Salvadorans often express themselves through such "popular" devotions as the



rosary and novenas to the saints, he said, noting that it was his own family's devotional practice that sparked his desire to be ordained.

Since the early 1970s, though, the church in El Salvador has witnessed a movement of Catholics who want their faith to not only help them bear up under the suffering, but to examine its causes and correct them if possible. Many of these Catholics created "basic Christian communities," a term coined to describe groups of people who meet regularly to examine their lives in the light of Scripture

and who then use the Bible to guide any subsequent actions.

Father Menjivar said that the base communities drew their inspiration in part from the documents released by the Latin American bishops following their legendary meeting at Medellin, Colombia, in 1968. Phillip Berryman described the conference in his 1987 book *Liberation Theology*.

"In ringing phrases," Berryman wrote, "the bishops called for Christians to be involved in the transformation of society." The most important aspect of this trans-

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Schools plan to be released; details unknown at press time

The Commission on Reorganization of Catholic Schools has scheduled a press conference for Thursday, Aug. 24, to release the final draft of its Catholic Community Schools Plan. Diocesan officials declined to provide any information on this announcement to the *Catholic Courier* prior to press time Tues-

day afternoon, Aug. 22.

The Catholic Community Schools Plan is intended to establish an organizational structure for all Catholic schools within Monroe County. The *Catholic Courier* will provide full coverage of developments in its issue of Thursday, Aug. 31.