



Even in Guatemala's cities, paved roads are a rarity.

Father William V. Spilly

Seeking the face of Central America

EDITOR'S NOTE: Fathers William V. Spilly, pastor of the Cayuga Team Ministry, and James B. Callan, pastor of Corpus Christi Parish, traveled to Central America Jan. 24 to Feb. 8 on a personal fact-finding mission. They describe their experiences and impressions in this special Courier report.

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Special to the Catholic Courier

Mexico City. Tuxtla Gutierrez. Quezaltenango. Esquipulas. Mesa Grande. Anguiatu. Antigua. San Cristobal de las Casas. Bachajon.

Most of these names were foreign to us as we planned a fact-finding trip with Father Enrique Cadena, a religious-order priest now working in Tuxtla, Mexico, but formerly a student at St. Bernard's Institute in Rochester. We had hoped to visit Nicaragua and El Salvador to ascertain for ourselves what roles our country and our church were playing, and to see the people and the lands of these Central American countries.

Unfortunately, we knew before we left the United States that we would not be welcome in El Salvador. After submitting the necessary documents to obtain a visa — proof of employment, financial disclosure, and academic background — the embassy in San Salvador asked us to obtain proof from our local sheriff or chief of police that we were "law-abiding, upright, peaceful citizens."

With this and other requirements completed, we thought we might have a chance to get into El Salvador, despite the civil war that was raging and that had intensified since mid-November. Two days before we left Rochester, the Salvadoran government informed us they needed more time to process our request — a diplomatic way of saying, "You are not welcome!"

As for Nicaragua, there was no way to get a visa in advance as we did for Mexico, Guatemala and Honduras. The only way was to go to the Honduran-Nicaraguan border and request one. Unfortunately, on the day we left, Jan. 24, the United States began military maneuvers in the Caribbean. The Nicaraguan government interpreted the maneuvers as tantamount to preparations for an invasion just one month before their national elections. We read of this situation in the Mexican press, and later found out that requests for visas from "Americans" were meeting with suspicion.

For Enrique, a Mexican, it would take two days to process a visa request to enter Nicaragua. For us "Americans," it would take at least two weeks and, if the visas were granted, they would cost \$25 apiece. So we did not attempt to get into Nicaragua.

We began our trip in a Volkswagen bug, winding our way through the mountains of eastern Mexico to the border of Guatemala. None of us had ever set

foot in the countries we were about to enter. Very few people, even from neighboring Mexico, travel into Guatemala, Honduras, or beyond. Very few have cars. Trucks carrying produce or machinery and old buses carrying lots of people make up a good part of the traffic in Central America.

Guatemala is a beautiful country about the size of Ohio, but teeming with volcanoes, mountain lakes and jungles. It contains part of the dense, rugged mountain chain that runs south from the Rocky Mountains to the Andes. The rich, volcanic ash has produced incredibly fertile land alongside scorched, arid desert.

Guatemalans presented a similar contrast between beauty and deprivation. The colorfully clad inhabitants of hundreds of Indian villages and *aldeas*, small villages, still speak local dialects derived from the language of the Maya, and still live in much the same way as their ancestors did thousands of years ago. Refusing to accept the culture of the Spanish who conquered their homeland, these Indians provided a glimpse into a fascinating, but troubled country.

Guatemala is at war with its own people. While we were there, the Guatemalan Bishops' Con-



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Thousand of Guatemalan and Honduran refugees have fled to Mexico City, Mexico, where many beg to survive.

ference warned in a pastoral letter of a national political and economic crisis manifesting itself in growing "discontent, frustration and fear."

The economic crisis, the bishops said, has led to social deterioration by contributing to an increase in hunger, illness and a housing shortage. The result is increasing desperation and frustration among Guatemalans — desperation and frustration that generate violence.

Since the 1960s, 100,000 Guatemalan people — mostly civilians — have been assassinated, and 40,000 have disappeared. Almost 500 villages have been destroyed, more than 1 million people have been displaced, and more than 200,000 refugees have fled to Mexico and/or sought asylum in the United States.

The Guatemalan bishops criticized the continuing political violence in the country, blaming both the military and its allies among the ultra-right, and leftist guerrillas who seek to overthrow the government.

We saw the military presence everywhere in Guatemala. Whether we traveled in the countryside or in small or large cities, the army, national police, local police or militia were forcefully present. They stopped us on several occasions to routinely check our car registration and passports. But they also invented problems that would ultimately earn them some money. The three of us came to learn that money saved us a lot of lost time and grief from being arrested and possibly put in jail.

Guatemala's human-rights record is the worst in the Western Hemisphere. Such reputable organizations as Amnesty International and Americas Watch, a New York-based human rights organization reporting on Central America for the last 10 years, have criticized the nation's government for failing to stop the killing, abductions and tortures perpetrated almost exclusively by the army and its allies. The infamous "death squads," recently associated with El Salvador, were actually born in Guatemala during the last two decades.

The Guatemalan bishops recognized the root of their country's problems as the "social injustice of the traditional structures which allow a minority to accumulate wealth and privileges, while poverty debases the immense majority, leaving them destitute of even the most indispensable social benefits."

We entered Guatemala and Honduras with more money in our pockets than the average family makes in one year: Average annual income is \$1,000 and \$900 respectively. Most of the people are illiterate, especially the women. Few children complete their primary educations. Most people live in unsanitary conditions, with few enjoying potable water. Two percent of the population in Guatemala owns 70 percent of the land. Most people who live in the

countryside do not own the land on which they live. After spending time in and around Guatemala City — the largest city in Central America — we embarked for Honduras, the poorest countries of the region. Just as we arrived, the newly elected president, Oscar Aguado Callejas, assumed authority in Tegucigalpa. With the change of government came a shortage of gasoline and rationing for our trip, and those of many others who owned motor vehicles.

We arrived in San Pedro Sula, the industrial capital and second-largest city in Honduras. The paved road between Guatemala and Honduras in these countries aren't paved, but the roads in these countries aren't paved, but the roads are in terrible shape. We had hoped some Maryknoll missionaries from the United States, but were unable to do so. Phone service is very limited, and mail delivery is non-existent.

Political violence is sweeping this country, with poverty running rampant. Thirty percent of San Pedro Sula's population is unemployed — and violence increasing. Porters of democracy or unionized workers. Church workers, union activists, perceived or active supporters of change, culture, disappearance or assassination.

In Honduras, the armed forces have controlled large sectors of the economy and the "elected" government, especially military aid increased during the last year — the same period in which Honduras has been able to exist along its borders with Nicaragua.

We spent five days in Honduras attempting to enter Nicaragua, El Salvador, and a Salvadorean camp at Mesa Grande near San Miguel. Requests were denied, and, traveling to Guatemala, we thought we would not see those who were suffering and who the government were doing about it.

As we approached the area near the Salvadoran border in southwestern El Salvador, we asked to see some refugees at Mesa Grande, the largest refugee camp in Honduras. We would take a minimum of several days to obtain necessary papers from Tegucigalpa. We do not have enough time to wait.

We drove six kilometers from San Pedro Sula to see the camp. The road was dirt, with several potholes and boulders sticking out. We stopped to take a picture of the camp from a distance in case we were not allowed to enter.

Slowly, we came to the army check post. Enrique got out of the car to talk to the officers in charge about who we were and what we were passing through on our way to the border.



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