

own the land on which they live. time in and around the capital of — the largest city in Central America — Honduras, one of the poorest of the region. Just the day before the newly elected president, Rafael Ángel Fournier, assumed authority in the capital, the change of government came with rationing and rationing that curtailed the lives of many others traveling by

San Pedro Sula, the country's second-largest city, on the only paved road between Guatemala and Honduras. Most of the roads aren't paved, but those that are in shape. We had hoped to contact missionaries from the United States, but unable to do so. Phone service is nonexistent and mail delivery is non-existent.

Violence is sweeping this once-quiet country, with a very high mortality rate — almost 70 percent. In San Pedro Sula's population was increasing and violence increasing against supranationalism or unionization among workers, union activists, and their supporters of change suffer torture or assassination.

The armed forces have long controlled the economy as well as the government, especially since U.S. aid ceased during the last several years in which Honduras allowed Contras to exist along its border with

several days in Honduras attempting to get to El Salvador, and a Salvadoran refugee camp near San Marcos. All denied, and, traveling back toward Honduras though we would not realize our purpose for coming to Central America: to see suffering and what our church were doing about it.

We reached the area near the Guatemalan border in southwestern Honduras, where we found the refugees at Mesa Grande, the camp in Honduras. We were told it was the minimum of several days to get there from Tegucigalpa. We did not expect to wait.

Several kilometers from San Marcos to the camp. The road was dirt-covered, with rocks and boulders sticking up. We took a picture of the camp from a distance not allowed to enter.

We came to the army checkpoint at the camp. Enrique got out of the car and spoke to the charge about who we were. He told us to pass through on our way back to



Children are numerous at the Mesa Grande refugee camp in Honduras.

Father William V. Spilly

Mexico, and that we would like to pray with these refugees, and possibly see someone who was in the camp in October, when a group from Jim's parish, Corpus Christi, escorted some refugees back into El Salvador (Catholic Courier: Nov. 9, 1989).

It was as if God wanted our visit to happen. By all accounts from Maryknoll superiors in the United States, local people in charge in Honduras, and the military's general mode of operating, we should not have been allowed into Mesa Grande. Yet Enrique came back to the car, now surrounded by army personnel loaded with machine guns and fixed bayonets, and said words that will stay with us for a long time to come: "We can go in for an hour. Can you believe it! We can go in for an hour!"

We proceeded as fast as we could to the nearest part of the camp, which houses several thousand refugees from El Salvador. These people, some of whom were born in the camp and others who've lived there for at least 10 years, have nowhere to go and no one who visits them, except a Maryknoll missionary who celebrates Mass every Sunday and a few Honduran officials who come to transact official business.

We were all amazed at the number of small children. Each of us had visited men and women in prison, but this was the first time we had ever visited child prisoners. Honduran officials don't want these refugees around. Many refugees themselves don't want to go home to fratricidal fighting going on in El Salvador. So there we were: American priests with Salvadoran refugees in the land of Honduras.

Word went out that three visiting *padres* were there, that everyone should come to the chapel for prayer. Since no one had any wine or bread for Mass, we decided to have a Bible service. Some of the young adults brought musical instruments to accompany the service, bringing tears to everyone present.

Having fled their country, these people felt very little hope. They shared their lives with us and we with them. Some had lost fathers, mothers or both. Others had lost brothers and sisters. Some had left their country with no relatives or family. Others did not know if any of their family members were still alive back in El Salvador.

Despite their situations, they wanted to know

about us, what we did, where we came from, what our parishes were like. For an hour-and-a-half — the high point of our trip — we prayed, sang, shared and cried.

Two weeks earlier, the bishops of El Salvador had issued a pastoral letter. They stated that "in the midst of the most difficult time there were signs of solidarity and of exquisite charity among neighbors, relatives and even strangers, and the violence gave rise, each time more strongly, to yearnings for peace which throb in the hearts of Salvadorans."

Our brief, but powerful encounter with these suffering brothers and sisters was a sign of solidarity. We felt the good engendered by our visit far outweighed the risks and dangers that seemed obvious to us and others. The final song the refugees sang was entitled, "When the poor believe in the poor, we will shout FREEDOM." We were strangers with them in Honduras. We were poor in knowing very little of the poverty and death that these people knew in their life in El Salvador and in this camp.

In his 1990 Lenten message, Pope John Paul II requested that each of us as Christian individuals and as parishes reflect on the problems of refugees and make them the subject of our common reflection. He said that "inasmuch as we are followers of Jesus — who himself experienced the condition of a refugee — and bearers of the Good News, we must consider the extent and seriousness of the problem and be sensitive to this appeal. Christ himself ... wishes to be identified and recognized in every refugee: 'I was a stranger and you welcomed me ... I was a stranger and you did not welcome me.'"

In the camp at Mesa Grande were several pictures of Archbishop Oscar Romero, the slain prelate of San Salvador. He was murdered 10 years ago March 24 while celebrating Mass. The Salvadoran refugees see him as their model of hope because he lived through so much of what yet they experience.

Archbishop Romero once said, "All situations in the world are good places to make saints." We believe he knew his situation, and the refugees of Mesa Grande and everywhere else in our world know theirs.

We in North America, in the Diocese of Rochester, have a unique situation as well, to make ourselves saints by helping the strangers in our midst.

Election

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reason and that, now more than ever, that reason could not be forgotten.

The people of the FSLN were in a state of shock.

They had not expected defeat. President George Bush had not expected it. The world had not expected it.

Many reasons have been offered to explain the Sandinistas' defeat, but two factors stand out clearly: the Contra war and the U.S. embargo

against Nicaragua. **Contra activity**

This war has been an unwanted fact of life in Nicaragua since the Sandinista insurrection and victory in 1979. The Contras ("contra" is a shortened version of the Spanish word for counter-revolutionary) were formed from fragments of Anastasio Somoza's National Guard, which fled the Sandinistas and reorganized in Honduras under U.S. protection.

The primary objectives of Contra activity have been to:

- target such means of production as plantations, cooperatives and grain-storage structures;
- destroy such infrastructure targets as bridges, roads, electrical plants and substations, storage tanks and schools;
- intimidate isolated segments of the population by kidnappings and murders in which the mutilated bodies are left for the people to see;
- attack the Sandinista Army and their supply bases.

The battles have worn on for 10 years, and the Nicaraguan people have grown weary. Moreover, the Sandinistas responded to Contra attacks by adopting an increasingly militaristic stance and expanding the draft. After a time, the military conscription became a bitter issue, especially among the mothers of draftees.

The embargo

The United States imposed an economic embargo on Nicaragua in 1985, placing a heavy burden on the economy and people of that nation. The effect of the embargo was not only to block trade between the United States and Nicaragua, but to cut off imports and exports with all U.S. client nations as well. Nicaragua also was re-

fused credit by the United States and nations with which the United States trades, and was denied access to the International Monetary Fund.

The embargo leveled a devastating blow to Nicaragua's already faltering economy. Combined with the effects of the Contra war, the embargo destroyed the Nicaraguan people's hopes for any sort of economic recovery.

A vote for peace

Prior to the election, Guillermo Selva-Arguello, the only opposition-party representative on the Supreme Electoral Council, had said, "If Ortega gets up at the rally on the 22nd (of February) and declares an end to the military conscription, he has a very good chance of winning."

Many observers expected Ortega to make such an announcement at the rally, but it did not come. Instead, the Nicaraguan president did make overtures to the Catholic Church and Managua's Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo. Then in an uncharacteristically emotional moment he said, "... and here, in the presence of all Nicaraguans and the world, I want to ask God to grant me the wisdom to make the right decisions."

Ortega's public prayer was not enough to convince the voters.

The reasons for the Sandinistas' electoral failure were perhaps summarized by two Nicaraguans — one a bus driver, the other a housewife.

"The economic situation in this country is a disaster, my friend," the bus driver observed. "We know that the United States has put all sorts of pressures on Nicaragua, but the United States is way up there — we can't do anything to them. But the Sandinistas are here and we know that if we vote them out, the U.S. will stop the pressure. The Frente people are not bad people, but they have to go, or otherwise the United States will sink us. It's as simple as that."

"I understand why the women voted the way they did. It was the mothers, the sweethearts, the wives," acknowledged the tearful housewife, who had supported the Frente. "So many young men taken away to the hills. You never know if they are ever coming back. It's been many years of this, and I understand. I am a mother, too."



Insight