

Priests robbed in Latin America

Rob Cullivan/Catholic Courier

Two priests from the Diocese of Rochester went on a Latin American pilgrimage Jan. 20-31 that opened their minds, their hearts and, unexpectedly, their wallets as well.

After riding on a bus from El Salvador to Guatemala, Fathers Dan Tormey and Peter Deckman, both former Bolivian missionaries, were among several passengers who were robbed at gunpoint by masked bandits who stopped the bus and boarded it.

"It was very unfortunate and very scary," said Father Deckman, pastor of the parishes of St. Michael's and Our Lady of Perpetual Help in Rochester. "I never thought a .45 was so big. It looked like a shotgun. Boy, if one of those guns went off, it would have been bedlam."

Father Tormey, a retired priest who lives in Canandaigua, said the bandits didn't seem like they were going to hurt anybody, but kept saying *dinero* — the Spanish word for money — and "everybody just sat very quietly, and everybody took out their wallets."

Likening the opening of wallets to what Catholics do during the offering at Mass, he added with a chuckle: "It was just like church."

However, the fear the two priests and their compatriots experienced was no laughing matter, and both men emphasized they simply got a small taste of what many people in Latin America suffer all the time.

"It gave us the opportunity to feel the pressure and insecurity of the people who live there," Father Deckman said. He added that he

was impressed by a Salvadoran woman on the bus who asked everyone to pray together after the robbery, a prayer that included a petition on behalf of the bandits.

Fathers Deckman and Tormey noted that the pilgrimage was designed by its organizers, the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers, as a series of visits to the shrines of several Catholic martyrs in Central America, all of whom were killed by government forces or their paramilitary allies after they publicly advocated for the poor. The 20 priests, permanent deacons and one religious brother who journeyed to El Salvador and Guatemala visited several sites that commemorated the following Catholics:

- Father Rutilio Grande and Archbishop Oscar Romero of San Salvador, both killed after speaking out on behalf of the poor during El Salvador's civil war between leftist rebels and the U.S.-backed regime.

- Six Jesuit professors, along with their housekeeper and her daughter, who were killed in San Salvador in 1989.

- Bishop Juan Gerardi, who was murdered three years ago after releasing a human rights report that placed most of the blame for atrocities in Guatemala's brutal civil war at the feet of the U.S.-backed regime.

- U.S. Father Stanley Rother of Oklahoma, who was killed by Guatemalan military forces in his parish, where several hundred Mayans were also murdered.

- Maryknoll Sisters Ita Ford and Maura Clarke, Ursuline Sister Dorothy Kazel and lay missionary Jean Donovan, raped and murdered in El



Receiving the ashes

During an Ash Wednesday Mass at St. Bridget/St. Joseph Parish in East Bloomfield, sacramental minister Father Peter Mandina and pastoral administrator Sister Diane Dennie, SSJ, distributed ashes to parishioners. Above, Father Mandina marks the forehead of Cindy Gales. At right are ashes used during the service.



Karin von Voigtlander/Catholic Courier

Salvador in 1980.

Father Tormey noted he knew Sister Ford from his days in Bolivia when they studied Spanish together.

"She was just a wonderful person, a lovely person," Father Tormey said.

Father Deckman first went to La Paz, Bolivia, in 1966, and was joined there by Father Tormey in 1972. The two priests worked together with other diocesan priests and Bolivian Catholics to found San Jose Obrero (St. Joseph the Worker) Parish in a slum on the edge of the city. Much as their priestly counterparts did in Central America, the two priests helped the poor to organize such efforts as credit unions to help them better their lives, Father Deckman said.

"We wanted them to have a little dignity in their lives, when the government wasn't doing it," Father Tormey said.

Both men said they were deeply touched by the stories of the Catholic martyrs in Central America.

"To be able to touch the martyrs, people who witnessed for the faith, gives me life," Father Deckman said.

Father Tormey said he was struck by how little seems to have changed in Central America, despite the end of civil wars in both countries they visited. The great gap between the region's haves and have-nots still exists, he noted.

"While it might not be as violent as a shooting war, the situation that perpetuated it is still there," he said.

He added that human rights officials with whom the pilgrimage participants met were still afraid of what might happen if they spoke out publicly. He noted that U.S. citizens should continue to call attention to the plight of such people.

"People who are utterly powerless in the system, they still need some accompaniment," he said.

Father Deckman said the trip was a spiritual boost.

"It just re-energized me to do what I'm already doing with a little more commitment," he said.

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