

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time
August 30 & 31, 2014

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Our Sister Community in Villanueva, Nicaragua

To view the video images that accompanied this reflection, follow (Ctrl + Click) this link:

<http://youtu.be/TEff347voLI>

In the first reading, the prophet Jeremiah reluctantly answers God's call. He says to himself "'I will not mention Our God, nor will I speak in Our God's name any more.' But then it becomes like fire burning in my heart, imprisoned in my bones; I grow weary holding it in, I cannot endure it."

In a similar way, I got involved with our Sister Community in Villanueva, Nicaragua somewhat reluctantly. I was not sure that God was calling me; I felt I already had enough going on. Yet, like Jeremiah, it became "like fire burning in my heart." I had been called to help lead a group from All Saints and St. Lucy's in February 2013. This past April, I returned to Villanueva with my daughter Sophie—as well as Gerri Hall and Kip Hargrave from St. Lucy's. The fire continues to burn within me. I would like to share with you what it is like in our Sister Community as well as the ministry that All Saints and St. Lucy's are supporting there. I would also like to challenge you to listen to the voice inside of you—that "fire"—that may be calling you to become involved in this ministry in some capacity.

Let's begin by meeting the members of "La Directiva," the four leaders of the Community: Juanita, Maria Antonia, Lucas, and Cándida. Kip Hargrave is also in the video clip.

Venceré Song

They begin each meeting or gathering with songs of praise. The lyrics of this song roughly translate to "I will overcome because God is with me. I will overcome and God will overcome. We will overcome in God's name." Of course, it sounds better in Spanish!

Map of Trip to Nicaragua

In the next clip, we'll get a glimpse of the town of Villanueva, including the building where the Brigadistas, the group that we support, have their center.

Brigadista Center and Town Plaza

One thing you can't get from the video is a sense of the heat. When we visited in April, it was just prior to the rainy season and was HOT!

Coming back to that idea from the prophet Jeremiah of the fire burning in my heart, I think the main reason I was compelled to return to Villanueva this year after my initial trip last year was the people. I had formed relationships with members of the Directiva—who we heard singing earlier—as well as my host family. This April, I was again able to stay with Maria Antonia and her husband Francisco at their home in the outskirts of Villanueva. I knew they had a daughter about Sophie’s age whom I wanted Sophie to meet. I returned to a familiar place. Villanueva is part of me now. I love speaking Spanish, and I love the food. It was good for my soul to be reunited with them and continue our relationship.

Let’s get a quick tour outside the house where Sophie and I stayed...

Maria Antonia’s House

Now that you have a brief glimpse of what it looks like in Villanueva, you might be wondering, what exactly is the role of All Saints and St. Lucy’s? Well, essentially, we support the Brigadistas, a network of volunteer health promoters who work in the various communities in the Villanueva region. The Brigadistas are lead by the four members of the Directiva we saw singing earlier. Here’s a map to give you an idea of the community network:

Map of Communities

The main mission of the Brigadistas is maternal and infant health, although they respond to other health issues as well. There are currently 94 Brigadistas (volunteer health promoters), 27 parteras (midwives) and 63 colbores (volunteers who give finger pricks for malaria and who open their homes to provide makeshift examination rooms when the Brigadistas come to weigh babies and provide basic health services). We visited one such woman in the community of San Marco I:

A Base House in San Marco I

The beauty of the Brigadista program is that it happened organically. It is not some government imposed program. It is by the people, for the people.

We might consider what it is like for our brothers and sisters in the network of volunteer Brigadistas who have answered the call to serve. Few of them have more than a basic education. And despite their lack of formal training, they responded. Perhaps it was reluctantly, as in the case of the prophet Jeremiah. Nonetheless, God had a plan for each one of them. And that plan became like a fire burning in their hearts which they could not deny.

The woman in the yellow shirt in the video is a leader in her community. She opens her house for members of the community, and not only for finger pricks for malaria. She has earned the trust of her community and they come to her with concerns about domestic abuse, STDs and

pregnancy. Other volunteers in the network weigh babies to ensure proper development, provide prenatal counseling and support to nursing mothers. Without these volunteers, these services would not be provided. And without the support of All Saints and St. Lucy's, the Brigadista Program would not have the funds to provide training and materials to its volunteers.

In this next video clip, we'll get a look inside a health outpost in the Bonete community which has a full-time nurse (sitting at the desk) who can respond to basic medical needs.

The Bonete Health Outpost

The primary mission of the Brigadistas is maternal and infant health. When it comes time for women to give birth, they are encouraged to spend their final days of pregnancy at "La Casa Materna" (The Maternity House). La Casa Materna is located across the street from the health clinic in the center of Villanueva, so it is easy for the women to be seen by doctors and to get professional care during delivery. Because the clinic has an ambulance, if there are complications during delivery, they can transport the woman to larger hospitals in Leon or Managua.

La Casa Materna

It has been 19 years since a woman in Villanueva has died in childbirth. Prior to the program, 5-10 children would die each year of diarrhea. Now, that is a rarity. This program is working, thanks to the tireless dedication of the volunteers and the leadership of the members of the Directiva, and the support from All Saints and St. Lucy's. We have made a commitment of \$6,000 annually from each of the two Syracuse parishes. This combined sum of \$12,000 each year represents the extent of the Brigadistas' funding. They do not have additional benefactors.

In what is probably my favorite of the video clips, we'll get a look at some of Villanueva's most vulnerable citizens who stand to benefit the most from this program:

Children Playing in a Community Near Villanueva

While we have no way of knowing for sure, it is quite possible that the adorable little boy in the diaper and only one shoe at the end the video is alive and thriving today because of the Brigadista program. Prenatal counseling, access to appropriate facilities for delivery, baby weighings to ensure proper development, as well as nutritional counseling all contribute to the well-being and health of the women and children of this community. They are still poor. They still face issues that affect their quality of life. But, in many respects, they are healthy and filled with joy.

The April 2014 Travelers with Members of the Directiva

“Los hermanos” (our Brothers and Sisters). Whenever we were introduced, we were always called “los hermanos.” The Brigadistas feel a strong kinship with the people of St. Lucy’s and All Saints, dating back to the days of Frank Woolever and St. Andrews. From the moment they first met us when we arrived, it was always, “los hermanos.” You, too, are considered sisters and brothers in Christ with the people of Villanueva. They are simply sisters and brothers you have not yet met, but with whom you share a special bond.

In addition to our financial commitment, we maintain the relationship with our Sister Community by making personal connections. It is for this reason that we need to continue to support our fellow parishioners in cultural awareness and assessment trips.

Is God calling you to be involved? Traveling to Nicaragua is not the only way to connect to this ministry and make a difference in our Sister Community. For one, your continued generosity during Villanueva fundraisers is critical for the future of this program.

Furthermore, on Sunday September 14 there will be a meeting at 1:30 for anyone interested in learning more about Villanueva or becoming involved in fundraising/finances, education/awareness or trip planning. The following Sunday, there will be a meeting at 10:30 for anyone specifically interested in helping with trip planning or traveling to Villanueva in January or February of next year.

Is God calling you to be involved? Do not ignore the fire burning in your heart.

On behalf of our Sister Community, thank you for all your prayers and support.