

Sister Parish Newsletter

St. Thomas More Catholic Student Parish/María Madre de los Pobres

February 2024



*View of the
countryside from
Finca La Leona*

REFLECTIONS FROM FIRST TIME DELEGATES

To be honest, we didn't really know what to expect. We had been on religious retreats before—was being a delegate going to be like that? As it turns out, not exactly, although there were some common elements, like where we would reflect at the end of each day where we had observed God's presence. We had been to Central America before on a vacation—was being a delegate going to be like that? Again, not exactly, although we did get to experience the beauty of the El Salvadorean people and countryside. Was it going to be a service project? Evangelizing? No, and no. We tried to be as helpful as we could, but honestly, the people we got to know did more for us while we were there than we did for them, and we certainly were not there looking to

convert anyone. What was the trip, then? It is worthwhile to remember the Delegate's Prayer that we were given before we left:

*Our first task in approaching
another people,
another culture,
another religion,
is to take off our shoes,
for the place we are approaching is holy;
else we may find ourselves treading
on someone's dream.
More serious still, we may forget
that God was there before our arrival.*



*The delegates and
Padre Luis
pictured left to right:
Mary Frances Ross
Padre Luis
David Couling
Rebecca Ladewski*

Simply put, our role there was "to be." To get to know the parish community at our sister parish of Maria Madre de los Pobres.

To meet and celebrate with the students that St. Tom's sponsors for their high school and college educations. To begin to understand the struggles facing their community and beyond and the ways that we can help. And just as importantly, to learn from them and bring our lessons back with us to strengthen our own lives, faith, and parish community at St. Tom's.

While in El Salvador, we had many opportunities to witness the aftereffects of a too-recent Civil War from the 1980s. Speaking as people who were born in the 1980s ourselves, it was sobering to see people our age who had lived through such a traumatic time. We learned about Saint Oscar Romero, the archbishop of San Salvador who spoke out during the war on behalf of the suffering people until his assassination in 1980. It has always been somewhat tempting to think of saints as individuals of a different era, so it was a little jarring to see a saint as modern as Sr. Romero. Another reminder of the Civil War came from our visit to the University of Central America for their annual remembrance of the martyring of six priests and two lay women in 1989. The theme this year was "No es posible anunciar al mundo la fe sin promover la justicia," which we will inelegantly translate as "It's not possible to announce your faith to the world without promoting justice." It was a powerful message and a reminder that the trauma of that time is still fresh in the citizens' memories today.

WHAT IS HAPPENING WITH THE SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM??

by Mary Frances Ross #

You may have noticed that last year we didn't recruit for sponsors for the Scholarship Program and we won't this year either. That doesn't mean that we are not continuing to sponsor students from our Sister Parish to realize their dreams of graduating from High School and/or University. Currently there is still sufficient money for at least 2024 in the Scholarship account and that is due to many different circumstances that came together, some of which are: Over the COVID years, the number of students studying declined because all their classes were online, and many didn't have access to a computer or internet connectivity in their homes or it wasn't their method of learning. We had a few years of large end of the year donations that increased our balance, everyone has been very generous. We have told the student coordinating

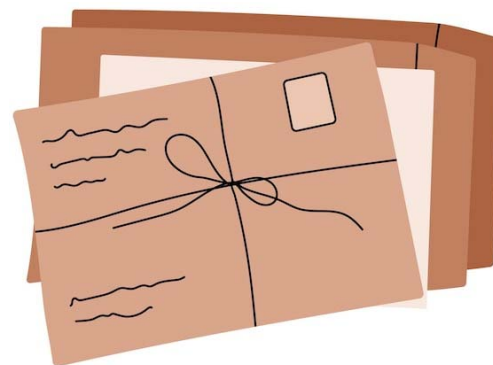


committee to increase the amounts of the scholarships, we covered some connectivity fees during COVID, they hired a psychologist to do all the formation meetings last year for the students, who like students in our own country have suffered psychologically from the effects of COVID isolation. This year the number of students studying is going up a bit, so the budget will also increase.

What we ARE looking for are people that are willing to have a relationship with and write to students. That is an area that got lost when we didn't recruit for sponsors and we would like to remedy that. One of the things that the students look forward to are cards from people here who CARE and support them. They get SO very excited when they get letters and are so disappointed when they don't get any. This past year some of the kids from CCD classes wrote to them and they were very touched. It is an inspiration for them to continue when they know that someone in the US believes in them, and even though we don't know them, we provide support. If you are willing to correspond with a student from El Salvador this year, please let Michele in the office know and she will pair you when we receive the list.

I hope that you are all enjoying good health and that God fills your hearts with blessings and love. I thank you for the beautiful card you shared with me, with the beautiful image of your church, and your blessings for my life and that of my family. I tell you that this year I entered University and I am studying my first year in college focusing on a bachelor's degree in Business Administration. It is very satisfying for me to be able to continue my higher studies and even more so for all your help provided throughout these two year that I have in the program and parish. I thank you infinitely for the love and support you give me. I hope to keep in touch to know a little about your life and your past times. Asking God to guide you and keep you always. Again, thank you for your love and all your help.

Amalia Margarita Cruz Rodriguez



A few letters received from Scholarship Students in response to the postcards that we sent in November. Check the bulletin board in the narthex for additional letters.

GETTING TO KNOW THE SALVADORAN STUDENTS CHOSEN TO VISIT US IN 2024

Since 1994 we have invited two students from our Sister Parish Scholarship Program to visit us yearly and share part of their lives and reality with us at St. Tom's. We haven't had a group of students visit since 2019, first because of COVID, then issues with nomination and finally the US embassy back up. The students applied for a US Visa back in June 2023 and the earliest interview appointment they had available was April 16th. 2024. We are praying they will be granted visas and are hoping for a May visit. The students chosen to come to visit are: Diana Carolina Flores Ramirez and Fatima Aracely Lemus Argueta.



Diana Carolina (pictured above on the left) was a student studying Psychology at the Technological University of El Salvador. She finished five years of classes and a specialization in psychology, and her and her colleagues successfully defended their thesis (while the delegation was in El Salvador). She is just awaiting a date for her graduation.

Fatima Aracely (pictured on the left, fourth from left) has finished five years of classes at Don Bosco University in El Salvador in the area of Graphic Design. The delegation was privileged to see her online portfolio.

She is interning and finishing up requirements for graduation. Both students are very hopeful and excited about coming to visit us, join us all in praying they receive visas on April 16!

A cordial greeting to my friends at St. Tom's in Kalamazoo. Hoping you are well. I extend good wishes to you. I want to express my most sincere gratitude for believing in me, for the trust you have placed in me, and for the opportunity to continue achieving my dreams of success in my career! Thank you for everything you do. May God continue to bless you greatly. I will always carry you in in my prayers.

Maria Elizabeth Ayala

Hello!

I hope this letter finds you and your loved ones well. By this means I want to tell you that I have successfully completed my university career and my specialization course as well. I am just waiting for my grades to be validated and soon I will have a graduation date. I greatly appreciate the brothers of St. Tom's for their support throughout these years. They contributed greatly to me finishing my degree. I hope that God rewards your life one hundredfold.

Sandra Leiva

Although there were reminders of the pain experienced by the people of El Salvador, it was overwhelmed by our experiences of beauty. Several of the students welcomed us into their homes and introduced us to their families. The outpouring of pride we witnessed on the part of the students' parents and relatives as their son or daughter attended school (sometimes the first in their family) was truly humbling, as was hearing the student recount their daily schedule to us, often consisting of waking up before dawn to work and/or transport themselves to school, spending all day at school, taking several hours to get home again in the evening after dusk, and then completing homework until bed. We were welcomed on a tour of the parish and got to see the great work being done in the clinic, the senior center, the school, and the godparenting program. The community members hosted a welcoming event for us at their chapel (see below!) and later in the week sat down with us and gave us the opportunity to ask them questions about their catechesis philosophy, some of which we will try to incorporate into our teaching at St. Tom's. These examples and countless others showed us a picture of the community as incredibly kind and welcoming and gracious enough to share their lives with us

Overall, it was a wonderful experience, and we cannot recommend it enough. The overarching question after any trip like this is, of course, "what now?" For us, the answer



Image of Christ carved into a tree at Finca La Leona

to that question is still up in the air. Do we hope to return as delegates sometime in the future? Yes, although exactly when is still uncertain. For now, our main call to action is to become more involved with our sister parish, and we would like to start attending our sister parish committee meetings. We will also happily talk about our experiences in more detail with anyone who is interested to know more—we would love it to have more delegation members travel in 2024!

Article submitted by
David Couling and Becky Ladewski



The alfombras at the University of Central America (made of salt or sand earlier that day!)



Welcome reception at the Cristo Rey Chapel

MISSION:

The Sister Parish Committee, led by the Holy Spirit, exists to facilitate the building of solidarity and the exchange of spiritual gifts and material resources between the people of St. Thomas More Catholic Student Parish and La Parróquia de María, Madre de Los Pobres in San Salvador.