

Workcamp in Nicaragua

An adapted version of "A battle for the souls of the poor", an article that appeared in the Catholic Herald, 5 September 2003.

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When Fr Camilo arrived at the dusty village of San Gregorio he was greeted by a leaking roof in his new church and a handful of old ladies at the first Sunday Mass.

San Gregorio, half an hour along dirt tracks from the town of Diriamba (itself an hour south of the capital, Managua), encloses some 1,400 souls, of whom at most 30 per cent are Catholic.

Not that all Nicaragua is like this. The Central American country in the main is still fervently Catholic, noted for its strong Eucharistic devotion and love for Our Lady. Every Thursday of the year every single parish has a Eucharistic procession, and the country's Catholics are proud to repeat what is a sort of national cry: “¡Nicaragua de María, María de Nicaragua!” (Nicaragua is Mary's, and Mary is Nicaragua's).

Yet years of Church persecution by the Communist Sandinista regime, unhealthy experiments in Liberation Theology by some Catholic theologians, and above all active work by some other Christian

organisations, have taken their toll on a Catholic population that is often poorly formed and with rudimentary education. Especially in rural areas, where a shortage of priests meant Masses were infrequent (until Fr Camilo arrived, San Gregorio was lucky to get a monthly Mass), those Biblical words have been proven all too true: “I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered”.

Some of these latter groups enjoy no real link to ancient, traditional Christianity, have poorly defined doctrine and organisation, and rest more on vague religious sentiment than intellectual rigour. The building opposite the church of San Gregorio is a case in point. Its proud name, “New Apostolic Church of Nicaragua”, bears within itself a blaring contradiction which its followers seem not to have noticed: if it is new, it cannot be apostolic.

Understandably, the Catholic bishops of Latin America are concerned. In Nicaragua the hierarchy has proclaimed this a Missionary Year, entrusting it to Our Lady of Guadalupe.

A year down the line, however, Fr Camilo's deep faith and hard work are beginning to bear fruit. The roof is now fixed and the Sunday Masses are largely full, as the Catholic faithful are gradually returning to practice and some of the fallen away are returning to the fold. The young priest realistically got working with what he had and turned the old ladies into active evangelisers, who carry out a marvellous apostolate ministering to the sick and elderly and seeking to "rescue" lapsed Catholics.

He enlisted help from the capital in the form of young zealous lay missionaries, who drive out

periodically from Managua to door-knock throughout the area and help run village retreats.

I was in Nicaragua accompanying a group of mainly British students on a voluntary service project in the village. The students are from Netherhall House, a hall of residence promoted by the Opus Dei prelature for young men studying in London. We were one of a number of groups from Europe and Central America who had gone out there over the summer months to lend a hand to the poor community with various construction and medical projects.

It is all part of an on-going rural development initiative promoted by members of Opus Dei in Nicaragua, in a bid to improve living standards and promote the faith in one of the country's poorest regions. Our mission was to build a number of latrines and to construct the

foundations of a new kindergarten. Latrines, while not being the most glamourous of edifices, contribute decisively to reducing infectious diseases. Their 3.2 metres of depth means they will last even a large family some 10 years. Meanwhile two young doctors from our group did paediatric work at the San José Hospital in the nearby town of Diriamba treating numerous young patients and trying to give basic lessons to parents in hygiene and health.

As we arrived, the final touches were being given to a basketball court laid just before us by a group of young Italians. Father Camilo has decided to call it the “Saint Josemaría Escrivá Basketball Court”, in gratitude to Opus Dei’s founder whose intercession he sees as vital in all the work, material and spiritual, that has been done in his parish. After us German students were due to arrive

to continue work on the kindergarten.

While the students dug, I visited families, Catholic and Evangelical, in a bid to support Father Camilo in his work. I went from door to door greeting all and informing about a forthcoming retreat in the parish. I must have visited over a hundred households in my two-week stay.

Nicaragua is the poorest nation in the Northern Hemisphere. Though the towns are slightly better off, in country areas like San Gregorio few if any dwellings have running water, and many are without electricity. Non-major roads are bumpy dust tracks and houses can be very simple stone structures, with minimal furnishing, or even precarious shacks made of bits of wood and corrugated iron. Malnutrition is common among the rural children, whose diet is usually a monotonous

repetition of rice, kidney beans and maize. Young children flocked around us at meal-times, partly to be with their new Gringo friends, but largely to share with us the meat contained in our sandwiches.

Quite frankly, the country is in something of a mess. And having been there last year as well, it seemed to me that things are not getting better. The country has been cursed with the bitter legacy of Somoza's dictatorship, the Sandinista regime, an earthquake in 1972, the more recent Hurricane Mitch, and depression caused by the world-wide drop in coffee prices.

The new political situation is basically democratic but, as the Episcopal Conference pointed out in a sombre message published while I was there, this democracy is "weak" and the country is living a state of "institutional intranquility due to the

continuous tensions among the State powers".

This is a not too veiled reference to the divisions in the country's ruling party, caused largely by the efforts of the current President Bolaños to prosecute his predecessor (and former colleague) Arnoldo Alemán for having supposedly siphoned off millions of dollars into personal USA bank accounts. This seems to have distracted the President from his electoral promise to create more employment and in many of the families I visited I came across men who were either unemployed or eking out a miserable living on the land to keep some food on their family's table.

In spite of so much hardship, or perhaps because of it, the Nicaraguans are a people of very deep faith, whatever their denomination. It is rare to find a bus

without either a picture of the Sacred Heart, the Divine Child or Our Lady, or some religious message. Imagine catching a double-decker here with the words “The Lord is my shepherd, there is nothing I shall want”, emblazoned all over it. To get your shoes fixed at a stand which says “God is Love” is the most normal thing in the world in Nicaraguan life.

They are a generous people too, and generous with God. Despite the poverty of San Gregorio, I was surprised to note that the vestments were of a better quality than those I often come across in Britain. I have also experienced this in other poor Latin American countries. It is perhaps a sign that the low quality of our vestments might well be a false poverty.

And above all they are a cheerful and resilient race, happier it seemed to me than the average Briton. Perhaps

this is due to their faith and the fact that the family, despite external threats, remains strong as an institution in Nicaragua. There were no Game-Boys or video games, so the children knew how to play. People were incredibly grateful to us for having come to help them. And signs of hope abound.

Democracy is fragile but alive. The Church is respected and listened to, priestly vocations are on the up, and Catholics are active again. Opposite the church of San Gregorio, the “New Apostolic Church of Nicaragua” is now hardly used. Its pastor meets there occasionally with his family and Fr Camilo has got his eye on it as a possible parish hall.

You can keep up to date on next year’s Nicaragua project by visiting www.nh.netherhall.org.uk (link below).

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