

St. Boniface Delegation – April 24 to May 1, 2006

By Joe Pirtle

This was my third trip to El Salvador and it was just as exciting as the first. Every visit I make seems more like going home than it does to visit. It amazes me how much this mission has changed my life and its perspective.

Our first full day was spent in San Salvador visiting the Cathedral, the hospital grounds where Monsignor Romero was murdered, and the University of Central America. We even had time to shop in one of the Artisan Markets. This visit, I had one purchase that I was determined to make, a flag of El Salvador. It is now proudly hanging in my home.

After a long day of excursion in San Salvador, we boarded the bus to Berlin. Of course, Alejandro gave me a 'hard time' for not studying more Spanish, but seemed encouraged at what I had learned since my last visit. The lack of fluency on my part is what drives me to continue to study more and diligently every month. Believe me, there is no lack of communication as so much is done through gestures, acts, and expressions, but I sure would like to sit and carry on a full fledged conversation without a translator.

The ride to Berlin is a time of relaxation and reflection, coupled with the brewing excitement in anticipation of seeing our brothers and sisters in Berlin, at the Casa Pastoral, and in our sister-parish – the community of El Recreo.

While in Berlin we were able to visit three marginalized schools and present them with some additional school supplies. It is such a joyous occasion to see the eyes light up in both the students and teacher's eyes. I feel as if we give such a small gift of books, pencils, and pens, and yet we receive so much back.

We also had another opportunity to visit the Women's prison. Most of the women are now familiar faces and yes, I have to admit that we are as well. In fact, I am known as "Mr. Blue Eyes." It is very special to be able to get to know some of these women. Even though we come from very different backgrounds, we all have one very special thing in common. The need and love of faith. Of course, we didn't leave without purchasing their handmade goods and we also were able to give each woman a gift of embroidery floss, material, shampoo and lotion. Such as simple gift went a long way.

We were able to visit a lagoon this trip. Milagro took us to see an old volcano of Alegria that is now a lagoon. It was so very peaceful and serene. We had a teacher of science within our delegation, and that was one of the many highlights for him.

Our two days spent within El Recreo were especially joyful. It is so great to be able to visit and really feel like you have a special bond and an extended family. Since I have become somewhat of a 'regular' many of the people remember who I am and I they. We are able to carry on some slight conversations on our own, but boy when we have the translator handy, the conversations just blossom.

I was very excited to hear from my friend Noe's mother that he has a job at the Geo Thermal Plant. I was very excited for him. Good work is hard to come by, so when one has a job, it is to be relished. Noe is 18 years old and works 7 days a week from

10 a.m. to 10 p.m. for \$11.00 a day. This really hit me hard and put my job in perspective. I was very happy for Noe, but a little disappointed that I was not going to be able to visit with him since he was working. My disappointment lasted only minutes as I was telling Noe's mother to be sure to wish him hello and congratulations from me as she told me that Noe knew we were coming and he asked for the day off. To my surprise, the next day we drove into El Recreo, Noe was there waiting for us. We had a very nice conversation and caught up on the past 6 months.

We were able to do something extremely special for all involved this trip that we had wanted to do for a long time. With the new Priest in Berlin, we were able to secure permission for Father Vince to celebrate mass at the church in El Recreo. What a special tribute and humble experience this was.

Another exciting part of the visit to El Recreo is that I was able to watch a football (soccer) game that was played between two different groups of the community. What a highlight. I was even surprised when they brought over a uniform and asked me to play. I graciously declined as I attempted to explain that my soccer playing abilities are slim to none. Nonetheless, the game was very exciting and to see such enthusiasm was very rewarding.

The biggest highlight of our time spent in El Recreo was spending an evening in the community and sharing dinner and handing out glow sticks. I have never seen so many people fed in such a short amount of time, but should have known that it would go off flawlessly as Cecilia knows her stuff. The glow sticks were provided by a member of our delegation and a friend of hers. What a site to see! We were able to stay into the evening when it got dark and seeing hundreds of people with all these glow sticks was an awesome site. As we were driving to head back to the Casa Pastoral and members of the community walked behind the trucks, it looked just like 'halos' following us. I close my eyes today and I can still see that sight and experience that peaceful calmness.

Each time I visit, I feel more and more at home. I feel as if the Pastoral Team and I are closer each visit I make. This trip was very exciting as we played many games of UNO. In fact, the Pastoral Team played too. Who knew that Blanca, Milagro, Alejandro, and Cecilia were so competitive?

There is such peacefulness about being there and sharing in the experiences, history, and triumphs. I feel as if I have another extended family and another home. In fact, Blanca has become a pseudo mother and Alejandro a brother. Of course, all members of the Pastoral Team truly are my brother and sisters. It becomes difficult to leave and come back home to my obligations here in the states, but the prayers, memories, and feelings stay with me everyday and keep me driving and working towards my next trip home.