

# Father Chuck's Challenge

Nicaragua June 2012

## Travelogue



Prologue  
June 11, 2012

Heading south today on our first missions trip, Kathy and I are at a loss to succinctly express our expectations. Although we have been schooled by Msgr. Schmidt and his team of experienced pilgrims (as he refers to them), it has only given us a framework to be filled in with our actual experience starting today. I have an idea that's the way it should be for first timers like us. If I'm hearing God right he is saying just trust in me on this one. In preparation, Kathy & I spent the last six weeks taking Spanish lessons but I fear that our rudimentary skills will fall short of the mark. This document represents our experience and feelings this week and through it we pray to inspire others to be first timers too someday.

There are twenty-one of us going down and we met most of our fellow pilgrims at a planning meeting held by Msgr. Schmidt and Connie about a month ago. Those we missed at the planning meeting we met at the airport in the wee hours of this morning. Besides Father Chuck's Challenge there are two other non-profits that collaborate on this mission. Food for the Poor (FFP) based in Miami and the American Nicaraguan Foundation (ANF) based in country. In Miami, we were joined by several members of the FFP staff who would be traveling with us. Monsignor Francis X. Schmidt is the force behind Father Chuck's Challenge both physically and spiritually and Connie manages everything. Their accomplishments together in God's service to the Poor have been remarkable and an inspiration for the rest of us to accept the "Challenge" of the late Father Chuck Pfeffer. Our group also includes Father Kennedy and Sister Arleen, stalwarts of our Church and spiritual leaders of our mission to Nicaragua. They, along with God's blessings and the companionship of fellow pilgrims will keep us in good spirits and prayerful intentions throughout our journey this week.

Our inbound plane from Miami is right on schedule. The announcement to prepare for landing in Managua, Nicaragua was just given by the captain. So now, the experience begins.

### Day 1 – Monday June 11, 2012

Our flight from Miami touches down around noon and we run the gauntlet of custom's approvals and work our way through the crowds to seven waiting SUVs that would be our mode of transportation this entire week. Including our own luggage, we brought 30 suitcases of donated items to be distributed to the poor in the villages we are about visit. We had lunch and met several people from the ANF staff who will be traveling with us.

Our objective today is to caravan over to the city of Jinotega where we will stay overnight. It's about a 2-3 hour drive and it will get us close to the new village of Santa Maria Goretti (SMG) which we will visit first thing tomorrow morning. Connie has planned our seating arrangements so that each day we will have a different vehicle and ride companions. Kathy & I were both assigned vehicle number 5 for today. That would be the last I would be with her in transit the rest of the week. It was a great opportunity for both of us to get to know our traveling companions.

After lunch we stopped for a brief visit to an agricultural research and training center near the town of Tipitapa. A cooperative venture between the Nicaraguan government and the International Cooperation and Development Fund (ICDF) of Taiwan, this Center's agronomists and scientists are providing improved farming techniques that the farmers of Nicaragua can use to dramatically improve yields, quality and reduce growing times. It was about an hour long visit and we walked away feeling good about the self-sustaining benefits to the Nicaraguan farmers and the prospects for economic improvement for all.

We returned to our assigned vehicles and headed off to the city of Jinotega. Jinotega was another two hour's drive up into the mountains of the Nicaraguan heartland. Beautiful vistas of green hills and lush valleys soon greeted us as we rose in elevation. About 100 KMs of our trip was spent on the Pan American highway going north from Managua. Small towns dotted the roadside as our caravan bisected the heart of the country's rural environs. Our attention was affixed to the sights and activity along the way. One road side farmers market offered a block long selection of colorful array of fruits and vegetables. Others we passed were holding out antler-like tree branches populated with various sized green parrots for sale for any passerby with the impulse to take one home. Cascades of children were meandering home from school and seemed to be inspecting the store fronts as they passed by. Finally, after traversing a series of mountain roads that had our drivers weaving around slower heavy laden trucks like a skier on a slalom run, we arrive in Jinotega.

The city itself was sizable and at 4:30 in the afternoon it was bustling with activity. The caravan of SUVs stopped in front of the Cathedral of San Juan Bautista (St John the Baptist) the home of the diocese of Jinotega. Across the street from the Cathedral was the city's central park. A quaint quadrangle for relaxing, strolling around or taking some eats from local food vendors. The environment was clean and well maintained. We felt welcome. Our plans were to celebrate Mass and then gather for dinner. Prior to Mass we had some free time to take a walking tour of the magnificent Cathedral. Entering the main body of the church Kathy and I stopped to decipher the Spanish holy words posted on the massive concrete walls of the church's foyer. Only needed a little help from our Spanish speaking amigos and we got it! Wow, those Spanish lessons are paying off already. As we proceeded into the nave of the cathedral a beautiful interior presented itself as the splendor of culture and faith merged into one. Long sweeping aisles ran the length of the church and pulled our eyes with them to the far end and the spectacular apse section. Each of the side aisles seemed as broad as a country road and contained many statues and adornments that were nothing short of works of art. The most prominent of all was the transparent base of the main altar which contained a statue of Christ and his cross situated nearly horizontal to the floor. Backed by mirrors the image and reflection made for a most stunning and memorable sight.



Mass was conducted in the cathedral's chapel which sat off to the left side of the nave. Msgr. Schmidt assisted by Father Kennedy celebrated Holy Mass. We sang all the hymns in



Spanish. It was not a problem. Father Kennedy had trained us well at the planning meeting back in May. Although we didn't get any awards for our vocals, I think Father Kennedy was quite proud of our songful prayers, a cappella no less! Joining us for Mass and dinner were three American missionary nuns who belong to Sangre de Cristo (Blood of Christ) parish right here in Jinotega. Sisters Roseanna, Charlotte and Dolores were happy to

see us and we them. They would accompany us on our travels most of this week. At dinner I had an opportunity to get to know them and their work with the people of Nicaragua. Their work of catechesis (the echoing of the faith) includes youth ministry, formation of catechesis, education and teaching the faith. Also joining us for dinner was Bishop Carlos Enrique Herrera who acquainted us with the mission of the Jinotega diocese. He also introduced the story of the late Father Odorico D'Andrea whose life work was so Christ like that he is now on the road to sainthood. We plan on visiting Father Odorico's memorial later on in the week. Prior to eating Msgr. Schmidt prayed a blessing of thanks and Sister Dolores offered a post script that went: "O LORD give bread to those who have hunger and hunger to those who have bread". I felt my life go on pause for a moment while I digested the implication.

After dinner we had a short roundtable Q&A with the leadership from ANF and FFP. Then took the short drive to our hotel and got our luggage off the truck and called it a night. It had been a long day and besides tomorrow's breakfast is scheduled for 6:30 am.

## Day 2 – Tuesday June 12, 2012

We start the day with a good breakfast, load ourselves into the SUVs and head out to the new village of Santa Maria Goretti. After a considerable drive into the hills we arrived at the town of Pantasma where we stopped at the Mayor's office for bathroom breaks and also to meet with the Mayor. As we made our way to the rear of this drab orange and pink stucco like building to locate the bathrooms, we traversed through various areas designated for typical city services and each one had a waiting to be serviced seating area that amounted to a wooden bench anchored to one of the walls. There was a modicum of business being transacted for this early part of the morning. Adjacent to these business offices was several relatively private offices for the Mayor, Vice Mayor and their staff. Mayor Salvador Blandon invited a number of us into his office for a bit of a welcome talk and the rest of us milled around outside. It was around 9 AM and the town streets were alive with activity under a bright and already warming sun. Some vehicular traffic shared the street in front of town hall with walkers and horse riders. The Mayor came out to street side and I had a chance to greet him and get him to spell his full name for me. With my fluent pigeon Spanish, that was as much as I could hope to accomplish. At this point it looks like everyone is ready to go to the village. Mayor Blandon would accompany us a short distance out of town to the new village of Santa Maria Goretti. As we would find out shortly the Mayor and his staff has planned a festive greeting for us.



Our SUV caravan stopped short of an inclined road of about 100m that stretched up to a higher plateaued area that wasn't entirely visible from the base of the ramp. First to greet us as we disembarked the SUVs was the cheery sound of music floating down from above. Moving to the front we could see a balloon decorated corridor made by the people of the village as they waited for us expectantly. The road had been covered by a light brown mossy grass precluding the muddy natural road from messing up our shoes. About half way up was an arch made of many blue and white balloons that resembled an entrance way to the village. Led by Msgr. Schmidt, we processed up the ramp to the applause of people on either side. The cacophony of sounds and emotions were a most enjoyable experience. In short order, we reached the top of the ramp to see



even more people gathered and waiting for us. A canopy covered area with rows of chairs was right in front of us where Mass would be said and speeches would be given. Sluing around I caught sight of the entire village with its new homes, community center, latrines and chicken coops. The new homes were built on small plots of land in back to back rows each fronted by a dirt roadway used more for foot traffic than motor vehicles. We would be able to explore a bit later on in the morning. Right now, it was the people and the many children that had enveloped us, shook our hands, smiled, hugged and expressed their sincere gratitude for their new lives. I felt a twinge of discomfort being the recipient of this shower of appreciation. Every donor was in my thoughts at that moment and I wished they all could share in the experience. As our visit went on we had opportunity to tell them all about the many donors that made this all possible.

It was time to be seated but there was so many people that quite a few just congregated around the covered area. The shade of the tent was a comfort from the already hot sunshine drenching the village. The Mayor called things to order and addressed all of us with words of welcome and thanks. Mass began and was led by principal celebrant Father Norvin Garcia the local parish priest along with concelebrants Msgr. Schmidt and Father Kennedy. It was a beautiful Mass of celebration and thanksgiving for us the representatives of all those who made life a bit more livable for these needy people. It was clear that their quality of living has taken a giant step forward. All the new homes come equipped with fresh water, a latrine, work tools (shovel, pickaxe, etc.) and a coop of three chickens. The whole of the experience so far has been so emotionally charged that it is really hard for me to put into words. These abjectly poor

people gave so generously with their love for us that it tugged pretty hard on all of our heart strings. After Mass a series of short speeches were given to express, from various perspectives, what the gift of homes from Father Chuck's Challenge means to the families and their community.

In rapid fire succession, we marched first to new home #26 for the ribbon cutting ceremony, then dedication of the new Father Pfeffer Community Center, giving special recognition to the parish of St. Maria Goretti in Hatfield, Pa. who has been instrumental in making this village of Santa Maria Goretti a reality. Parishioners and fellow pilgrims, Nancy and Americo, represented their Church's donations here with us in Santa Maria Goretti village. Plaques of appreciation were presented to the leadership of the organizations visiting today. The beneficiaries of the new homes gave a special gift to the ANF project manager who lived for a year at Santa Maria Goretti to supervise the construction of the homes. It may have been a coincidence or perhaps providence that his name was Israel. Each of us pilgrims also received a personnel gift and thanks from selected villagers for their new joy.

Lastly, came the blessing of homes. A subset of about 15 homes was selected for blessing. We made 3 teams of 4 pilgrims each to visit the families in their new homes. Each of us had a role to play. I was designated leader of my group which consisted of Kathy (photographer), Kris (Translator) and Father Kennedy (Blessing of homes). We all had the pleasure of getting to know each family and to understand the struggles they have been through. I presented each family with a Spanish copy of the New Testament and a colorful wooden cross. Our interactions with these humble people will assuredly be the most memorable. At one home we met the mother of two teenagers whose husband was killed two years ago and her family now depended on her for everything. She told us of her joy when she qualified for one of these new homes. She was choked with emotion and her face bathed in tears as she recounted her story, yet she ended by encouraging us along with her to trust in God's helping hand. She was beyond words grateful for us and what we represented. It hurt my heart.

Simultaneous with the home visits were other pilgrims whose assignment it was to distribute donated items we had brought with us (remember the 30 suitcases?). All families were visited for the distribution of items, clothes and home goods for the adults and trinkets for the children. Our ANF drivers took sandwiches and drinks to all homes so that everyone would have a good meal. During this time all the families had gone back to their homes. Most were standing out on their front yard (a small dirt area) as if a parade was about to come past. Instead it was just us they were observing as we went about our specific assignments. When my team finished with blessing the last home assignment we accommodated additional requests for blessing of homes. We were going free format now and comingled as much as we could with each of the families we encountered on our way back to the rendezvous point. With no more agenda items to concentrate on we silently reflected on the goodness of this celebration. We took lunch picnic style in a shaded pavilion area next to the village and for the

first time since we arrived had a chance to share amongst ourselves the experiences of the morning.

The afternoon was spent visiting smaller pockets of families in their new Father Chuck homes in the Nicaraguan areas of Loma Linda and Wale. These were homes spread out over a larger geographical area so we stopped many times this afternoon to try and get to visit as many families as possible in the time we had. On the way to Wale we stopped briefly at the site of an old ramshackle Catholic Church, the Church of the Divine Child. At the back of the property was the construction site for a new Church. Work was halted on the new one due to lack of funds and Msgr. Schmidt was asked to consider helping with donations to get the construction started again. These types of requests are typical fare for groups like ours since there is so much that still can be done to help. Jesus said “the poor will always be with you” and their needs as well I mentally added. At our first stop in Wale, we met the Hernandez family, father Byron and mother Petronila and their seven children. They explained that just two weeks ago they moved into their

new home. Both the inside and outside were pristine and the children very well behaved. I noticed that around the outside of the home had been constructed a flat stone walkway and to the rear a small landscaped area of plantings native to the area. I asked Byron who had worked to make this area look so nice and with measured pride, he said he had done it. Petronila told us how much her children liked going to



school and how disappointed they are when they can't attend. She expressed great hope and faith that with an education the children will have a better life.

A woman came out to us with a basket of baked goods. She had two kinds of cookies, rosquilla (donut shaped bread) and a sweet tortilla (a sugar cookie). The charge was 1 peso apiece. Many of us indulged. From here we stopped several times more visiting more families and adding to our experiences.

We all were pretty exhausted by the time we made it back to the hotel in Jinotega. After dinner Msgr. Schmidt led us in a reflection round table in which each of us expressed one of our most poignant experiences of the day. It was a good capstone to a very emotional and beneficial day for all of us.



Day 3– Wednesday June 13, 2012

We start out the day with a winding and bumpy ride to the town of San Sebastian de Yali where we stop at the parish of San Sebastian de Yali. San Sebastian appears to be a fairly large town that gives one the same city feel that we experienced in Jinotega. It's mid-morning and the streets are busy with people and traffic of all kinds. The day here is already in high gear. After a short "stretch your legs" rest stop, we join the parish's pastor, Father Sardino and Rene a social worker, for the short drive to the northern highlands area of Bijagual where Father Pfeffer's Village is located. This is an older village that was dedicated in January 2008 to Father Chuck Pfeffer whose "Challenge from Heaven" encourages all of us toward service to the poor.

As we pull up to the village center we see as before, the people are out to meet and greet us with welcoming fanfare. First building we come to is St. Eleanor's Clinic located just beside the community center where we will celebrate Mass shortly. This is one of two clinics that Father



Chuck's Challenge has donated. Like most of the other buildings, this was a small masonry structure with a front room used for a waiting area. I went no further in, but did nod hello to half a dozen women who were seated patiently waiting their turn. The medical supplies we brought with us will go to resupplying the inventories of St Eleanor's Clinic. Just to be clear,

these medicines are mostly basic things like aspirin, bandages, ointments, etc. While Fathers Sardino, Schmidt & Kennedy prepare for the Mass the rest of us spend the time cordially meeting the residents of the village and especially interacting with the children. Hardcopy photos taken last year were doled out to those children who could identify themselves in the picture. They were ecstatic to get a picture of themselves even if it was a year ago. I was beseeched by many youngsters wanting to have their photo taken with me. I made my way to a seat in the community center and rested my gear on the floor. Before long the young girls came up and tapped me on the shoulder to ask for more photo ops. Kathy was nearby with her camera already clicking in high gear so she obliged all requests. I really enjoyed my new found celebrity status and would take off my "Moosehead Lager" cap and place it on one of my new friend's for the photo. I got lots of giggles with that act. Especially when they ran over to Kathy to view the digital picture on the camera's screen after each pose.

Mass was another joyous celebration of faith and thanksgiving. There were so many people in attendance that not all fit inside of the community center. Many stood outside and peered in through the windows and doorway. Mid Mass the skies opened up and rain pelted down hard for about 20 minutes. Those outside went for cover or squeezed inside the building. We even got a few of the village's dogs coming in to escape the bad weather. After Mass we heard from a representative of the local mayor. She explained that thanks to Father Chuck's Challenge, one hundred and twenty new homes and two clinics had been built in this area. Her words were of thanks and praise for the efforts of all who make this possible. She explained how severe rain storms had wiped out many of the homes of the people relocated here at Father Pfeffer's village. The damaging rains took away everything they had. They came here with nothing.



After Mass we all went off into the community to visit homes. It was still raining and the walkways were muddy but it wouldn't deter us. We stayed about an hour more visiting homes and distributing gifts. At one particular home the family presented Msgr. Schmidt with a hand sewn white cloth dove as a token of their appreciation. Kathy was with him and captured the moment with a photo. As they were leaving the woman ran after Kathy and gave her a multi colored bird craftily sewn from old sock material. Kathy's an avid birder who will cherish this work of art more than the artist will know. Now how did this poor humble person know of Kathy's love for our feather friends? "God works in mysterious ways" comes to mind. In this village they have a herd of pelibueys (sheep-goat hybrids) that they communally share. We found their large pen in the back of one of the homes along a muddy hill side.

Two of our fellow pilgrims, Tim and his son TJ, are distant relatives of Father Chuck Pfeffer. My job was to get them into a photo beside the large Father Pfeffer village sign. With no time to spare, I rounded them up and Kathy took the shot in the rain. We said our goodbyes and hopped into the SUVs for the trip back to San Sebastian for lunch in the parish community room. While having lunch Father Sardino arranged to have some of the young ladies of the parish regale us with a dance. The youngest, about six years old, wore a rainbow colored dress that she danced in and gave us an eyeful of some intense cuteness.

We heard a lot about Father Odorico earlier in the week and today we stopped to visit his memorial in the city of San Rafael Del Norte at a place called Tepeyac, so named after Our Lady of Guadalupe (It is said Our Lady appeared on a hill in Guadalupe call Tepeyac in Mexico). We spent some prayerful time at Father Odorico's shrine and heard stories of his life and death.

Father Odorico was born Mar 5, 1916 and died Mar 22, 1990. The circumstances of his death have rapidly become lore. One day he came across a bolder on a back road and stopped to remove it. As he picked it up he had a heart attack and expired. It was some days later until Father Odorico's body was found and by then the corpse had already started to decay. Father Odorico lived a holy life dedicated to God and the poor. Anything people gifted to him he in turn gave to the needy. He never used a new habit but sowed patches on his old one. Same with his one pair of sandals, when worn down he took them to the shoe maker for repair. When he was prepared for burial it was considered only right to place a new pair of sandals on his feet. The Catholic Church is promoting him for sainthood and he is now recognized as "A servant of God". As part of the canonization process his body was exhumed seven years ago and examined. Under the direction of the Papal Nuncio and the presence of his good friend Father Rafael Rios, the casket was opened to find Father Odorico's body completely incorrupt and his sandals worn down to a state of disrepair. A miracle that strongly suggests the Church is on the right track.

The last place we stopped today was San Patricio village in San Ramon. This is an older village of donated homes that Msgr. Schmidt tries to visit each time he comes to Nicaragua. They were delighted to see him. I would guess that this section of the village contained around twenty-five Father Chuck homes. Before we could all disembark, the families poured out of their abodes and down the road to our location for a friendly welcome. Msgr. Schmidt and others enjoyed seeing many they had met on previous visits. Upon observing the swarm of residents moving our way, I noticed a woman struggling along and soon realized she was blind. She used a portion of a tree limb as a walking stick to seek her passage. I could read an intense desire in her expression to reach someone. It was Msgr. Schmidt and Connie she sought after and it was a wonderful reunion when they met up. The back story was one of her desperation at a previous time to impress upon decision makers her candidacy for a new Father Chuck home. With Msgr. Schmidt's advocacy, she qualified for a home in a subsequent batch of donations and with her husband have lived here in San Patricio ever since. As her friends from Philadelphia exchanged loving sentiments along that village road, I understood why she pressed through that crowd so vigorously and resolutely. She had a chance to embrace once again a friend who had changed the course of her life so substantially that nothing else mattered. As our SUVs pulled away, I could see her husband guiding her back up the road to her home. The intensity was gone from her stride and I suspect she was missing her friends already.

The goal of the leadership team was to have all of us back to our hotel by dusk each day. We would not achieve the goal this day. Arriving back in Matagalpa about an hour late, we went straight to the restaurant where dinner was planned. The parking lot was already filled and our nine vehicles bottlenecked the narrow entranceway. After considerable maneuvering, our skilled driver crew found a way to park the entire caravan. A large room off from the main seating area of the restaurant was reserved for us where we enjoyed a hot buffet style meal.

It was a short ride across town to our hotel. A spacious conference room at the hotel was our rendezvous point for reflection this evening. A newcomer joined us and Msgr. Schmidt introduced him as Horacio Vivas the new Chief Operating Officer of ANF. He took a little time to introduce himself and how he came to be hired as the new COO of ANF programs. He would travel with us throughout the day tomorrow. After about forty-five minutes of reflective discussion and prayer we adjourned for the night.

#### Day 4– Thursday June 14, 2012

After a good night's rest we assembled for breakfast in one of the hotels large and open portico type areas. The splendid views of the gardens we enjoyed from our balcony engaged us again through the transparency of the window laden walls of this very spacious room. Joining us for breakfast this morning was the Bishop of Matagalpa. We were honored to meet Bishop Rolando Alvarez as he welcomed us individually with a kind handshake and a broad warm smile. Short of stature, this man of God dressed smartly in his Bishop's black cassock with papal scarlet buttons and trim. At the end of breakfast Bishop Alvarez spoke to us first thanking us for the donation of time and monies for the poor of his country. Next he followed with a summary of his mission: Matagalpa is a diocese of the Catholic Church, he began. He quantitatively described the size of his diocese in these terms: 10,000 Catechists, 8,000 Coordinators, 49 Seminarians, 22 Parishes and 630 Base Communities.

A base community is a certain group of Catholics bound by geography or other local affinity (e.g. village). A base community could be as small as ten, the Bishop continued. It became abundantly clear to me that although many of us are not familiar with these subdivisions of the church, they are necessary here and are the vital components of Diocesan life. Father Chuck's villages that we are visiting this week are examples of such base communities. Bishop Alvarez tells us that he intends to visit all 630 base communities. So far, he has been to 125 of them. The visits last the better part of the day and he plans 3 to 4 visits per week. Do the math and it becomes obvious that this Bishop is dedicated to reaching out past the hierarchal layers of his Diocese to make himself directly accessible to all the faithful.

The Bishop explained that in Matagalpa there is such an intense need to help the poor with social and economic programs that the church cannot perform effective evangelization without encapsulating it within a program of social services. To that end, the Church's strategy also includes efforts to promote and preserve the environment with tactical projects that include reforestation, water filtration, animal husbandry and medical care. For example, the Bishop has established a goal to plant 30,000 trees per year. So far this year 15,000 newly planted trees are in the ground. Father Chuck's contributions to providing safe homes with clean water, latrines, tools and chicken coops, complements the local Church's strategy of social

improvement that in turn engenders collateral opportunities for introducing the good news of the Gospel and hope for a better life in Christ.

In leaving us, Bishop Alvarez expressed his sincere interest in sojourning with our team next year for a full day's visit to his diocesan communities, the villages made possible by Father Chuck's Challenge. Bishop Alvarez's words echoed within me and I felt a strong sense of purpose in what we all were doing.

With our luggage loaded and room checkouts complete, we began the caravan to the municipality of El Tuma La Dalia. We arrived at the Mayor's office in about an hour or so. Mayor Maryan Jose Ruiz Ribera welcomed us into his office which was a large room containing his desk and a long meeting table and chairs for 12-15 people. In popped the Vice Mayor whom Mayor Ruiz introduced as Socorro Hernandez. Refreshments of coffee and cookies were served as the Mayor, using a large map of his jurisdiction, showed us where the current and future villages, made possible by resources of Father Chuck's Challenge, were located. We planned to visit the new village of Nativity this morning and the sites of future villages this afternoon.

Nativity village was a short drive away just at the outskirts of La Dalia. As our SUVs turned the last corner the hill side dropping down and to our right displayed rows of new homes. The sun was already high overhead and shown down intently without many clouds to block its path. Its energy emboldened the various freshly painted homes before us. Each having one of four

repeating colors gave the hillside a pleasing grid of shamrock green, earth yellow, cyan, and violet. There was little plant life in the village proper, I imagine due to the clearing for construction work. The main road/pathway through the development resembled a farm road with evidence that heavy laden vehicles had been here and subsequently had been



somewhat contoured by the frequent rains. But today, for the pending celebration, the dirt areas were mud free. Down the hill to the far flatter end of the community sat the brand new community center and beside it was a temporary stage and seating area all canopy covered with the country's flag colors of blue and white.

The SUVs parked uphill and we all got out and started the march down to the community center, about 100 meters away. People from the village were streaming out of their homes and down in the same direction. As we all comingled, the exchange of affectionate greetings and fervent "Holas" began, as before we felt most welcome. Our team assembled at stage side and



paused to take in the views. The stage was generously large. On one end was the podium equipped with microphone and a lady emphatically speaking to the assembling crowd in Spanish. Across the front of the stage, were several rectangular tables strung together end to end. Behind these and to the back of the stage were two rows of seats beautifully adorned in lily white covers fastened with wide blue ribbons. The front table was to serve as both an altar and a place for the dignitaries to sit and the back chairs were for us, Msgr. Schmidt's pilgrims. We all took our seats except for our photographers, Kathy, Lou and Tim who knew they needed to stay mobile in order to capture sights in all of their digital glory.

Mayor Ruiz stepped to the microphone to welcome us and congratulate all the new home owners. Most of them had just taken possession of their home the day before. The Mayor expressed his gratitude for the four years of partnership between government and non-profits. In symbolic terms he equated the organizations to four legs of a table, each contributing to the success of the mission. The legs represent all levels of the Nicaraguan government, the ANF, the FFP and Father Chuck's Challenge. The Mayor reminded us that the Nicaraguan government has declared this as an area of extreme poverty and he thanked all of us for our solidarity. We are a humble and hardworking people, he said. At the conclusion of the Mayor's remarks the Mass began. Father Janlin Torrez, this community's parish priest, celebrated along with Msgr. Schmidt and Father Kennedy.

As Mass began I realized that my visual perspective was different here than at the previous times this week. We, the pilgrims, were facing the rest of the congregation. As I gazed at the crowd before me and them at me, I felt a stricken assuredness that I had come face to face with GOD's poor. Their children, their babies, their very lives were open to my understanding. As before the songs of the Mass were robust and spirited. A young woman sang while a guitarist played the melodies. Few others accompanied the one person choir. I wondered why? Although I didn't know the answer I was sure it was not irreverence. After all, I didn't sing along either, my Spanish was not that good.



I couldn't help but people watch from my elevated perch on the stage. Teenagers in small groups hung around the perimeter of the seating area. Mostly, young boys trying to assert their desire for independence yet they watched and appeared to be listening. A peso for your thoughts, I wondered. Three royal blue shirted police officers stood off to one side of the stage

seemingly unconcerned yet, I suspected vigilant in duty. I for one haven't felt unsafe at any time during this trip.

Father Torrez took to the microphone for his homily and talked boldly to the assembled. So much so it snapped me out of my surveying mindset and locked my attention on to his message. He urged all to consider the life of St. Anthony of Padua who we just a couple of days ago celebrated his feast day. Father extolled St. Anthony for his ability to preach. He was so popular, he said, that even the fish would come to hear him preach. We all know St. Anthony as the patron saint of lost things but Father portrayed him as a great advocate for the poor. It occurred to me that the physically lost and the poor are synonymous in GOD's world. St Anthony, Father continued, made a habit of giving every hungry person he met a piece of bread and that his stash of bread that he distributed from never ran out. Reflecting on this Father Torrez urged us all to help those who are needy. He asked rhetorically, how can we be content with our own lives and the gifts we have, if our brothers do not even have a roof?

As the Mass was drawing to a close, I focused this time on a man who was diligently working on repairing a house across the road that ran alongside the stage area. He was no more than 20 meters away yet seemed unaffected by the throng of people, the singing and the sound system blaring out the words of Holy Mass. Although he seemed oblivious to the goings on, I imagined this was meant for him to hear. To have it get stuck in his brain as it had in mine. Forgive me for supposing the will of God but, I nevertheless hoped it so.

After Mass had concluded the speeches began. First up was a woman who represented the entire group of new home owners, the beneficiaries of our donor's charity. We give thanks to God, she began, for our daily strength and for all the donors. Our dream of having a dignified home has come true. It was a sentiment of thanksgiving, quiet joy and faith. One by one speakers took to the podium to express in their own words the goodness of this day. An entertaining heritage dance group of three couples performed during a brief intermission of the presentations. Formalities ended with the ribbon cutting at the door of the community center building dedicating the new Nativity village and its Archbishop Carroll Community Center donated by its namesake Catholic High School located in Radnor, Pa. Here with us, representing Archbishop Carroll High School were fellow pilgrims George and son Greg and representing Nativity B.V.M. parish in Media, Pa. was pilgrim Norma.

Blessing of the homes came next and I assembled my team, got our supplies and headed off to our designated homes in the village. As before it was truly our pleasure to meet these families, hear their stories and pray with them as Father Kennedy blessed their new home. Above all, they were extremely grateful and thankful. I can't imagine anyone more deserving than these people who by our standards have nothing. In house #83 we met a family whose children ranged from age 3 to 21. The youngest little girl caught my attention as she clung to her mother's dress. Very cute and when she smiled two big dimples popped out on both sides of her grin. She wore a white shirt with lettering on the front that said "Beverly Hills Polo Club".

I wondered if she would ever comprehend the irony. Each home was given a Spanish copy of the New Testament and the painted cross before we departed.

It was near noon and time to go so we said adios to our new friends and climbed into the waiting SUVs for a ride to a place called La Sonbra for lunch. This place was one of Nicaragua's Eco lodges high in the forested hills. The afternoon's agenda consisted of visits to future sites of new homes and villages. Work has already begun in planning and fund raising under the project name of Corpus Christi, which upon completion will establish three new villages totaling 150 new homes. We will be able to visit two of the three new village sites today. Our first stop is in the area of Estrella where 50 new homes are planned to be built as part of the Corpus Christi project.

Coming to these new project areas gave us an opportunity to get a view of the "before" conditions and to survey the landscape. At the Estrella site our caravan let us all out on a long stretch of dirt road. As we walked down the road to our right were a line of dilapidated homes stretching off into the distance and to

our left was a large soccer field. The field was grass covered with a bit of casual water resting on its far end. In the field we observed several horses grazing and a young men's soccer match being played with neither activity bothering the other. Beyond the field was another batch of the same wearily constructed homes. Our cavalcade drew much attention as



most families came out of their homes to check us out. Kathy was asked by Msgr. Schmidt to document the area with her camera so we walked the perimeter together, she capturing the views with me documenting them in descriptive terms and linking them to the camera's assigned picture number that Kathy would periodically call out.

About a half hour ride away was our next stop in the El Tuma area. The second Corpus Christi village of 60 homes is to be built here. The terrain was hilly in contrast to the flat ground of our previous site. Most of the current homes here, about 25 of them, were situated on steep hillsides and the path up to them was quite muddy and horse trodden (you needed to watch where you stepped). It was difficult trudging up the pathway and several of us tumbled down into the muck as we traversed the hillside. The homes here were even more fragile and open to the elements. It's hard to see how the occupants could stay dry inside when the rains come. Barbed wire marks the property boundaries and also serves more functionally as a clothes line. Outside of a few patches on the hilltops, this is a heavily wooded area lush with vegetation growth, in some parts quite thick. It was so much so that the dwellings downhill from us are



almost obscured by the density of ground cover. The people welcomed us as we stopped to look more inquisitively at some of the properties. Sister Arleen had been one of our group who lost their footing and had fallen near one of the homes. Her experience, which she recounted for us all that evening, speaks volumes for the compassion and willing sacrifices of these poor people. Thankfully, Sister was not hurt but the mud

had covered her hands when she reached out to cushion her fall. The woman of the nearby home came with water and washed Sisters hands clean. What moved us all about this lady's act of kindness was the realization that these people do not have a handy source of clean water, they have to port it from a distance for their essential daily needs. For her to give up this precious resource for a stranger was a remarkably sacrificial thing to do. To think we came to help them! I have had enough of these experiences this week to make the differentiation between who is helping who quite suspect.

After completing the photo documentation of the area we said our goodbyes and headed back to Managua from where we began our pilgrimage four days ago. Our mission was complete except for the rainy three hour trek back to Nicaragua's capital city. A hot meal and a final reflection of the days experience, an evening prayer and off to bed ahead of a 4 am wakeup call for the early flight home.



## Epilogue

Kathy and I don't know why we were drawn to those couple sentences in our Church bulletin inviting us to join this trip to Nicaragua. We had never heard of Father Chuck's Challenge and for some reason were compelled to pursue finding out more about it. After the first phone call to Msgr. Schmidt and a flurry of emails chock full of information from Connie, we were on board. It was a great experience in which we both benefited spiritually. We found these poor people to be loving and humble as they struggle in life. If one was ever tempted to think that the one who has more material things is the happier person then I would say they have never met the poor of Nicaragua. Our challenge to those who read this report is the same as Father Chuck's challenge. Help the poor, meet them in their world and your rewards will be substantial.

