A Report on the

Visit to the Honduran Mission in Guaimaca 
Honduras

By Parishioners of Sacred Heart and St. Brigid Parishes, 
Lexington MA

February 18-26 2008

Frank Bellini
Cindy Bellini, RN
Dr. Alex Bingham
Jeremy Bingham
Brendan Casey
Leo Casey
Paul Laffey (El Capataz)
Max Laffey
Cathleen Russell
Mary McDonald
Allie McDonald
Thomas Clouqueur
Sabina Lucke
Jess Fiola

Honduran Mission.org

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Summary

For the tenth time in the past 11 years, parishioners from Sacred Heart and St. Brigid Parishes of Lexington, Massachusetts journeyed to Honduras for a week to support a Catholic mission there. It was the fifth year in a row that the visit was to the Honduran Mission in Guaimaca.

The Honduran Mission is supported by the Diocese of Fall River, MA which provides a diocesan priest to staff it and by the Dominican Sisters of the Presentation, whose Mother House in the United States is in Dighton, MA. Our primary contact for our work is Srs. Maria Ceballos, and Marta Lopez, OP and parish support in particular from Corpus Christi Parish in Sandwich MA and Mount Carmel Parish in Seekonk MA. Groups also visit from Stonehill College, UMass Dartmouth.

This year we had 14 in our group, which included 6 teenagers. Our work included:

- Capital fund-raising for our trip which provided almost $12,000 to take with us and another $9,000 in residual contributions after we returned,
- The outfitting of 62 high school students with shoes and sneakers, the latter donated by The McDonald’s extended family – the girls are from outlying villages without high schools housed by the mission at their new facility, the Centro Marie Pousspin, the mission school,
- Engaged directly with the girls at the school making jewelry-making, running a movie night and built a ping-pong table.
- Transport and delivery of medical supplies from local contributions and at-cost meds form Bird’s Hill Pharmacy in Needham
- 4 days with clinical work targeting respiratory patients,
- A day of medical home visits,
- Construction to complete sleeping quarters for 4 nuns on the second floor of the new school chapel
- Painting of the walls in the new school chapel in preparation for its dedication,
- Providing methods and help for sun-dried tomato production at the mission farm

Preliminary plans to visit again in 2009 are already being prepared.
Background

Groups from Lexington began visits to Honduran missions in December 1999 when Fr. Nick Spagnolo, CSS, took a group of 6 from Lexington to Mission Honduras in Flores, near Comayagua, Honduras. We were following groups from Fall River MA, and Bourne and Sandwich MA who also visit Honduran missions.

Founded by Fr. Emile Cook, OFM a Franciscan, Mission Honduras (http://www.missionhonduras.com/) is primarily a school opportunity for Honduran orphans. Established with 12 orphans and a teacher in 1973, and named APUFRAM (Asociación Pueblo Franciscano de Muchachos y Muchachas), in Honduras APUFRAM now consists of:

- 2 boys orphanages,
- 2 girls orphanages,
- 6 junior high schools,
- 5 high schools,
- A vocational school (including a superb furniture-making shop),
- Dormitories at two Honduran universities,
- A battered-women’s shelter,
- A facility to house up to 35 visitors
- A palm nuts farm, and
- A restaurant.

Over 1500 children have passed through this program. These include 4 who became Franciscans, following in the footsteps of Fr. Cook. There are currently 1000 children in these programs and it is expected that they will have a significant impact on the future of the country. APMFRAM has also recently expanded to the Dominican Republic. We took one young man, German Ordoñez, age 17, to the US in 2002-3 for surgery that helped him to walk, staving off a debilitating muscular disease. He now lives and works in Flores with his wife and young child.

After four visits to Mission Honduras in Flores (1999, 2000, 2001 and 2002), in search of more medical service opportunities, we began a relationship with Sr. Maria Ceballos, OP, of Honduran Mission (http://www.honduranmission.org/). A parish-based mission, Honduran Mission is based in Guaimaca Honduras as the parish of St. Rose of Lima with a total population of about 30,000 people and an area of about 830 square miles that includes both cities and mountain villages. Appendix 1 contains a map we made last year for the parish including outlying villages. We have now visited Guaimaca five times in February 2004, April 2005, and February 2006, 2007 and 2008). These visits are likely to keep us returning to Guaimaca often for the foreseeable future.

We have developed very helpful contacts at Corpus Christi Parish in Sandwich MA and Mount Carmel Parish in Seekonk MA, great supporters of the Honduran Mission project. Janet Kirsch, our travel agent with All Ways Travel in Sandwich has been to both Flores and Guaimaca over many years. Pam Potenza and Louie Ledoux help coordinate visits and donations to Guaimaca for Mount Carmel Parish and are great resources for information and help.

Among our most significant impacts for these missions have been our medical clinics, school supply programs, equipment donations, construction and financial support. Among the parishioners in Guaimaca and surrounding areas are over 60% who are poor by third-world standards with a high percentage in extreme poverty. For several years, Dr. Janet Magnani has accompanied us. While Janet was unable to come with us in 2008, our doctor, Alex Bingham, and
nurse Cindy Bellini did clinical work on respiratory patients, illnesses that are particularly acute in Honduras, and doing visits to homebound.

There is a key philosophy at the mission that keeps us involved there. No charity is provided to people who are not in need. When people can pay, they are asked to pay in keeping with what they can afford.

Impacts on our own community included the first-time mission visit for 4 of the 6 teens (meaning that 2 were returnees) in our group. A former teen visitor with us, Emilie Coakley, Señorita Pelo Rojo, plans to lead a group to the mission from Mt. Holyoke College next year. Kathryn MacInnis-Diaz in school at Tufts University has also expressed an interest in volunteering again.

Our 2008 trip was planned starting in November 2007.
Fund Raising in Our Parishes

We are fortunate to live in a prosperous community just west of Boston, MA, and to have 2 parishes in Lexington, MA to help support our efforts: Sacred Heart Parish and St. Brigid Parish.

We ask annually for contributions, explaining that 100% of the money reaches Honduras and be used at the mission where we serve. The response this year was overwhelming, 20% more than we had ever before collected, over $12,000. In addition, our parishes’ youth will participate in a “30-Hour Fast” in March a fund-raiser that will provide another $1-2000 to be donated to the Honduran Mission.

In the past, we have helped with financial donations for water projects, licensing a parish food coop, and coffee farming projects. We typically hold some of the donated money back until we have seen what projects are in need after we arrive. This year our financial power was such that we could underpin whatever we wanted during our visit. We bough lumber and school shoes for the girls; we bought medical supplies for the parish clinic in Honduras, a more effacement process than buying in the U.S. for those particular meds. Our need for wood, building tools, and supplies for the sisters’ living quarters was readily fulfilled.

This generosity prompts our heartfelt response and the enthusiastic and passionate response from mission staff. We have come to expect an overwhelming community response, supported by outside help. In the past, it has been incredible. This year it was truly overwhelming.

Our “missionaries” all provide for their own travel, room and board costs for the trip, about $1100 each this year.

The big surprise came in July when residual contribution (we usually get a couple of thousand that way) amounted to over $3500 in extra contributions. But then our Youth Minister, Megan Chenaille, ran another 30-hour fast by our parishes’ teens. Choosing the Honduran mission to support this year, and asking parents to contribute in any way possible, $5500 rolled in. I cannot tell you what this means to the mission and Srs. Maria and Marta, its managers. You contributors are a gift straight from heaven and have made the nuns at your sister parish in Guaimaca Honduras so very happy.
The Centro Marie Pousspin

Five years ago Sr. Maria showed us a vacant lot about 5 blocks from the main mission in Guaimaca.

Her dream was living quarters for girls from outlying villages who had no hope of schooling beyond grammar school. In 2005, we helped to put some of the finishing touches on first-floor rooms for 15 girls who arrived from their villages the day before we left for home. In 2006, there were 43 girls at the school, as there were last year. This year there are 62 girls in five classes.
We were also asked to provide sneakers for girls. The extended family of the McDonalds, Mary and Allie (mother and daughter) raised funds to provide all those to the mission. They also worked, along with Kathleen Russell to successfully match all the girls to their respective sizes. That was a magnificent contribution. We didn’t get a good picture of them in the new sneakers this year, but here is one that gives you the sense of the need: a little dance class in St. Paul’s gazebo at the school.
In addition, each student in Honduras needs a uniform (among other essential supplies including their own desk in public schools!) to attend school. The mission has a sewing coop that provides these uniforms at a price commensurate with a family’s ability to pay. But the push to make those from scratch for all the girls was running tight to the deadline of the chapel dedication ceremony. Here are results and Cindy helping one of our oldest friends among the girls, Mary, with a little basting.

Sr. Marta, who is school principal and responsible for all the girl’s day-by-day needs, provided us with great opportunities to get to know and interact with her charges. Our teens took particularly good advantage of the chances to make good friends. They engaged with the girls at the school and played soccer games with local boys.

Cindy and Frank paid a visit to the grandparents of Jenny Lopez, one of the CMP girls (featured in the picture below from a previous year), who was killed at age 15 last summer.
School Jackets

Many of the girls at the school come from mountain villages where the typical balmy temperatures of this tropical country often get much lower than those in the inter-mountain basin where Guaimaca resides. For that reason and to help establish the girls sense of belonging to a exceptional institution, we were asked to get hooded jackets for all 62 girls. Our best deal came from Tricon Sporting Goods in Lexington who were not only sympathetic to our cause but also helpful with prices and prompt in delivery. We gave them a group photo of the jacketed girls. You might see it at the store.

Other families in the poor barrios get visits from people in groups like ours to determine needs and distribute supplies.

One contributor gave almost a third of the cost of jackets for 62 jackets.
Medical Support

The medical mission of the Honduran Mission is critical to their day-to-day ability to provide essential services to the poor. For the past two years money from our fund has been used to help support a Honduran physician, Dr. Korina Ferrari, who grew up in Guaimaca and is giving back to her community by working a greatly reduced salary at the mission. Dr. Janet Magnani who again provided the bulk of this donation for us again this year.

We were able to bring a physician with us in 2008, Dr. Alex Bingham, who has a specialty in allergies asthma and pulmonary problems. Such problems are rampant in Honduras where wood burning for heat and cooking combines with inadequate ventilation to cause large numbers of asthma cases. Alex saw over 50 cases over the week, prescribing acute treatment and advice on use of saline nasal sprays and elimination of allergy sources from living environments. Alex also taped a TV show on this topic in Guaimaca (yes, even many malnourished have TV’s).

We were able to bring down over $2,000 worth of medicines donated thorough Alex and bought $ worth of additional meds for the program in Honduras.

Several years ago our group introduced Honduran Mission to the Catholic Medical Mission Board (CMMB: http://www.cmmb.org/), an organization that provides a range of services to the world’s poor. While the mission clinic did not need a large donation of prescription meds from CMMB year, it has provided a resident RN to mission last year and again for 2008.

There were also several home visits this year supported by Dr. Alex and Cindy Bellini, as well as a group from Minnesota State University nursing school who were on a 6-week outreach program to serve the mission.
Construction Work

We were favored again this year with Paul Laffey and his son, Max who regularly do construction work. Paul is a contractor and carpenter. We put their expertise to good use doing finish work in the nun’s new quarters above the chapel. Paul provided both direction and allowed the scheduled completion for visits by sisters from Dighton including Sr. Marina, the Provincial Superior of the OP order.

Doors were coated and hung; windows frames and windows installed along with wood trim.
Updates

In 2005 we funded a license for a food coop for the parish. This was needed to help with the distribution of food that was going to waste because of lack of market opportunities and to help several coffee growers to pool resources and sell more of their crops. In 2006 there were 20 families who were members. There remain 60 members in this thriving enterprise.

The Sewing Coop continues to be a productive enterprise. The women workers are now provided with sewing machines to work from their homes, a much more productive system. We carried down one new sewing machine from the Fall River parish. They try to use a specific brand and model to allow parts to be readily interchangeable. If you would like to donate the money for a new machine, that would be most welcome. Each machine puts another woman in business. Our donations of materials, needles, and zippers, etc. get used and are very gratefully received. School uniforms for the poor are the most significant product of the coop.

Sr. Maria’s nutrition program is continuing and results from a soybean mixture for children that supplement their meager diet. We also fed oatmeal to the folks waiting for clinic appointments.
Lessons Learned

We had a trio of young men in our party detained by authorities one evening. While we try to instill proper behavior and cultural morays into all in our group, listening and catching the music behind the words of instruction is as important and the directives themselves. Fortunately a Honduran friend helped out, relieving the situation.

We flew through Houston this year, a mixed blessing. We will try to get into the Miami route again next year.

We do need to have all travelers committed by early December for our February trips. Look for our announcements if you have any interest. The minimum grade for youth is high school sophomore. Unaccompanied travel for teens is possible if we you well enough.
The Farm

Two years ago, Sister Maria told us about the pending donation of 200-acres of farmland to the mission. Last year we saw the first crop, a great one, come in for a profit. This year the yield was equally good but the tomato market has sagged. The staff asked for ideas. Cindy responded with a procedure for sun-drying tomatoes and the work was on. Our test drying in the farm’s greenhouses worked very well and rapidly and the process was immediately adopted for this year’s crop. A better way of slicing is sought. Of course, some people got very tired working the farm.

How ‘bout them tomato plants?
Future Plans

Plans for the Mission always emerge from Sr. Maria. Some work out, some do not but progress is always in the offing. Maria’s hard work to try to make each a reality is always rewarding.

This year we talked about an agriculture school for boys at the farm. A mile or so north of the center of Guaimaca that 200-acre property has lots of options. We also discussed a retreat house construction project there – it is a beautiful pastoral setting.

With the chapel just finished and the population at the CMP school expanded into the 60’s, it was clear the it would be another year before any more major projects would be considered. However, we do have an offer from an architect for the design of a retreat center and we will follow through with it.

A memorial to the son of Ted Dingley of Fall River was provided at a chapel entrance. Louie Ledoux of Fall River will build the altar for the new CMP chapel this year. It will include a memorial plaque for Peter Bellini, who met Sr. Maria in Lexington the summer of 2005. Speaking personally, Cindy and I are so grateful for your support that has prompted this remembrance for us.
These young ladies pray for you daily.
The Parishes of Guaimaca and Orica, Francisco Morizon, Honduras

Places we have visited, had clinics or seen mass or weddings and baptisms in are in yellow.