

Bishop Hicks' Column

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TRAVEL LESSONS



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"WHAT I DID THIS SUMMER" is usually the first essay of the school year for students. My own essay would include a trip to El Salvador, staying at Nuestros Pequeños Hermanos (Spanish for "Our Little Brothers and Sisters"). NPH was originally founded in Mexico, by Father William Wasson in 1954, as a home to care for orphaned,

abandoned and at-risk children. He created a safe place where children could thrive within a culture of unconditional love and faith at its core. Currently, NPH nurtures children and transforms lives in nine countries in Latin America and the Caribbean.

With permission from Cardinal George, I worked as a priest as the Regional Director of our NPH homes in Central America from 2005 until 2010. Last month, I returned to El Salvador, and as I walked through the enormous doors, the aromas of handmade tortillas mixed with the cow farm next door instantly filled me with memories from five years of service there. I instantly smiled and thought to myself, what a blessing to be back here! I knew, of course, I would be sacrificing many of the creature comforts of home during my visit.

While I was there, NPH celebrated its 24th anniversary of operating a home in El Salvador. We began the day with an early Mass, and I was uplifted knowing the tradition of full and active participation in the liturgy still exists there, as over 500 children enthusiastically sang and responded to the prayers.

After Mass, everyone changed out of their "church clothes" and into their "play clothes." By 9 a.m. it was already 95 degrees, so I, too, decided to change out of my black suit and roman collar and into a T-shirt and sandals. It was a good decision because the day's next activity was an hour-long Zumba/salsa class! Did the bishop Zumba and salsa? Yes! However, trust me when I say that I lacked all skill and grace while doing it—it was an exercise in true humility that also got my heart pumping.

The rest of the day was filled with games and soccer tournaments as we basked in each other's warm friendship and lively conversation. The highlight for the children was being served hotdogs, a bag of chips and a can of pop for lunch. While you may think this is rather basic food, these children are accustomed to eating rice and beans daily, so this was a wonderful and welcomed treat.

After my morning holy hour the next day, I waited for the daily ritual of the water trickling on at 6 a.m. After showering, I dressed in my black suit, roman collar and pectoral cross and got into a pickup truck to drive across the border to Guatemala—a trip that should have taken about two-and-a-half hours. However, because of the condition of the roads scattered with potholes and fallen trees, the drive took almost four hours.

I arrived in the town of Santa Rosa de Lima to ordain Juan Carlos Pirir. For the past four years he has been a seminarian studying for the Diocese of Joliet. After completing his studies, I ordained him a priest there in his hometown as he was surrounded by his parents, siblings, relatives and just about everyone else from the town.

Before and after the Mass, fireworks were launched. And outside of the church, with its large choir and sacred music, the spirit of fiesta filled the air with booming music along with colorful balloons, banners and decorations. It was an amazing celebration and reflected the deep faith in that community, which formed Father Juan Carlos Pirir and fostered his vocation.

Back in El Salvador, a strong storm came through and knocked out the power my last night there. But instead of being upset by this inconvenience, I was thankful for the rain which cooled everything down, including me.

As I went to bed, I thanked God for keeping me safe during my travels. I asked for special blessings upon the dear children of NPH and upon Father Juan's proud family and supportive community. My "summer essay" would thank God for the comforts we enjoy "back home" and often take for granted: our safety, food, water, electricity and our parish communities.

Do enjoy the rest of your summer!

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