

# LA FAMILIA

## The Domestic Church



*Left: Caritas Pastoral Staff member Mario Rene Franco (on right) and his family in front of their home; Right: A family sells items in the market in Chiquimulilla*

In a section of the Santa Rosa Diocesan Plan labeled, "Build Communities that Are Alive and Dynamic," the plan focuses on the importance of family: *"The family, as a community of life and love, is the "Domestic Church" where we learn to recognize, from infancy, the true source of love and life which comes from the God, the Father of all."*

Catholics in every country believe that the family, or the "Domestic Church," is the most important unit of society. It is where values are taught, and prayer and dialogue take on new meaning. In Guatemala,

the importance of family was apparent as the delegates were introduced to families and communities throughout the Diocese.

The newsletter this month is all about *la familia* – the typical challenges of the Guatemalan family unit, the parish family, and reflections on one particular family, Roel Peralta's. We hope you (and your family!) enjoy reading them.

The season of Advent is a wonderful time to think and pray about the example of the Holy Family, as we celebrate the

birth of our King, as well as the Feast of the Holy Family on December 26th. We hope these articles and the upcoming holy days of our Church calendar will continue to help strengthen our Domestic Church here in Skillman.

In the words of Pope Benedict XVI's 2005 Christmas message, "May Christ's love guide every people on earth and strengthen their common consciousness of being a "family."

Happy Advent!

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*God calls all Christians to a life of service and justice. The Catholic Community of St. Charles Borromeo strives to live its faith in solidarity with our brothers and sisters in the Diocese of Santa Rosa in Guatemala, as we collaborate in creating just communities through long-term sustainable relationships.*

## Family Challenges

Perspective. Sometimes it's good to have a new perspective. With this in mind, how do the challenges that face a Guatemalan family compare to our own?

Before I answer that question, however, I want to start with a conclusion. Despite the many challenges that face the Guatemalan family, I can tell you that there is something very special about how the Guatemalans handle their challenges. Yes, they know the challenges exist and they do work them into conversations here and there (mostly when asked) but they don't dwell on them. Time after time, there was a look of hope and happiness on their faces as they related their difficulties. I think this hope and strength came from their faith - their faith in their family, their community and their religion. This is probably the most important perspective of all.

Some of the challenges seemed

similar to American families while others were quite different. For instance, Guatemala is challenged with high unemployment as we are but in order to find work, many families become separated. It is common for the father of the family to depart and move to another part of the country to find work or moreover, to leave the country. Considering travel is difficult and expensive, families may be separated for months or years with minimal contact. Even for those that do have jobs, employment can be a challenge. For instance, the diocese recently relocated the offices of the Pastoral Services from Chiquimullia to Cuilapa. Our hosts, including Roel, Luis and Freddy all live in Chiquimullia so after this relocation, their commute increased to over an hour. Now an hour commute doesn't sound too bad but the travel is through the mountains and can be

treacherous at times. We took the trip twice. The first time we were in a minor accident and the second time we were confronted with parts of the road being washed out from heavy rains. Moreover, one of the diocese staff members was killed while traveling to work while we were in Guatemala. Again, no one complained but the worries and anxiety for the families must be significant.

Another challenge is education. The government handles most grammar school education up to 6<sup>th</sup> grade. Beyond 6<sup>th</sup> grade, however, it becomes the family's responsibility to send their children to school. The challenge is the expense, making sure kids are fed while at school and the location of the schools. Since there are not as many schools after 6<sup>th</sup> grade, the school may not be located in the

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*"This way they have shoes and they can go to school"*

Since I've been involved with the Guatemala Solidarity Partnership I've been asked, why go to Guatemala when there are so many people closer to home who need help. It's true: there are so many individuals right here in our local community, who live in ways that would surprise us if we only knew.

Three years ago my family had the good fortune of getting to know a young man from Guatemala who lives in Princeton with his wife and two young children. One day when talking about his family, he mentioned that his wife had three older children from a previous marriage who live

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## The Peralta Family

*"Have you ever considered moving so that you can be closer to your job?,"* one of us asked Roel, one of our hosts during our week in Guatemala. It seemed like an ordinary question at the time. Several days later, as my eyes were opened to what family means in that beautiful culture, I had a chance to reflect on it.

We had just learned that the office he works out of had recently moved from Chiquimulilla to Cuilapa, a distance of about 30 km. On a clear day, this drive takes about an hour. At night or in the rainy season, the road can be dangerous and the time to traverse it can be long and unpredictable.

*"No, my home, my family are all in Chiquimulilla,"* Roel simply answered. *"How nice,"* I thought. I did not think about that until a few days later when we were guests for dinner at his home and had a chance to meet his family. That evening, I saw firsthand what family means in Guatemala. Roel's family included not only his wife and two small daughters, but also his parents, two of his brothers and their wives and children, as well as a niece and a nephew living with him so they could attend secondary school. Other siblings were living in similar households in the same small town. I could not help but wonder if our innocent question had seemed incomprehensible to him. *Move away from this for the sake of convenience to his job?*

As we made our way through the small town, Roel seemed to know everyone. A wave here, greetings there. Everyone seemed to know everyone. Friends



*Roel and his two daughters*

seemed like family. And then, we arrived at his humble home. Roel was bursting with pride as he introduced us to his family and welcomed us. He was sweet and gentle with his two little girls as they clamored to be held by him. He was a relaxed and warm host, and as we ate and talked we were privileged to glimpse some of their everyday family life... a grandpa rocking his grandchild to sleep in a hammock, the joy with which his mother cooked for us, the animated conversation of one brother's family in an adjacent room, and the ordinariness of a nephew riding a motor bike into the home and through the area we were gathered in before he disappeared into another part of this home to safely store his bike.

The next day, on a drive over bumpy roads, Roel told us a bit more about his family. He explained how they all help each other according to what they have. When his grandmother was ill, those who could help pay for her care did so. When someone is out of work and low on resources, the others sustain them. Somehow, amidst great challenges and poverty, the family survives. They each contribute what and when they can. They do not do it to be a hero or to hold the family power. There are no paybacks, no keeping track; just keeping care of family, in a way that was completely genuine and humbling to witness.

Roel's home and family are truly in Chiquimulilla, abundant with love and sharing. No wonder he is there to stay.

## The Parish Family

Similar to our own Parish, the people of Santa Rosa are connected to their churches through their common religion. The profound difference, however, is that they actually live their everyday lives as though the church is their family. They interact with their church community similar to how we in the United States interact with our extended families.

The spirit of the parish family plays out in many of the routine functions of the church and home life. Meals, celebrations, and daily activities are the center of a family's being. Often times the men and women are directly involved in many facets of the church's activities. Families show up together to worship, to participate, and to work together



*Four communities in the parish of Oratorio gather in the church of Ceiba Gacha for a community meeting.*

to even build the churches that they attend.

Because poverty is so great within this area of Guatemala, many of the people who are part of the parish council must ask their families to sacrifice wages in order for family members to attend church councils. The sacrifice is born by the families in order to continue the traditions of the catholic community within the individual villages, illustrating how dedicated the individuals are to the continuance of the church and the people that it serves.

We have a lot to learn from this way of being. Even in their poverty and the challenges – they share their faith openly with the commitment to preserving the Catholic faith for all who are members.

*Kathie DeChirico*

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in Guatemala with her mother. "Wow, that must be hard for her to be so far away from them," I said. "It's ok," he said. "They talk on the phone, and at least this way they have shoes and they can go to school."

His words brought home for me the idea of solidarity; the idea of understanding another person's unfortunate situation and standing with him to change it. Why seek justice in Guatemala? Because injustice is everywhere, and "everywhere" is here.

*Mike Connolly*

## My Burden Is Light

*A story from Ethiopia*

The road to Egypt was long and the journey was wearisome. Joseph walked in front to show the way, and Mary walked behind with Salome, who had followed them to Egypt.

Sometimes Mary carried the child on her back, sometimes on her shoulders, and sometimes in her arms, and sometimes Salome carried him in turn.

Mary would set him down on the ground to walk by himself, and he would walk a little way at a time, holding the hem of her skirt. Then he would lift up his arms, as children do who ask their mothers to carry them, and Mary would pick him up and kiss and carry him again.

Joseph's heart grew tired because of the length of the road. "I am too old," he said. "I cannot go."

But Mary put the child into his arms, and Joseph lifted him onto his shoulder, and he forgot that he was tired. He kissed the child from his head to his feet and went on again, with new strength.

*Similar to this story, many of the parents we met in Guatemala found their strength in two main sources of life: Christ and their children.*

## Nuestros Hermanos y Hermanas

### (Our Brothers and Sisters)

If you've heard anything about the St. Charles trip to Guatemala, you have surely heard about the hugs. They were abundant and sincere, and they certainly were a highlight for each one of us.

What affected me more than the embraces, however, were the words spoken in my ear during our hugfests. Although I do not speak much Spanish, I did understand the word uttered most frequently: *hermana*.

I was their *sister*. I was being welcomed into a family that I had not yet met. What a blessing! As I write this article, I cannot help but think about the Thanksgiving holiday that has just passed. Just like those classic large families that gather for the holiday, it was an eclectic group of family members in Guatemala. There were those who were quiet and shy, and others who spoke for what seemed like twenty minutes. There were children who came skipping, and an unforgettable older woman who could barely stand who somehow made her way to us.

It felt absolutely natural for me to use the word right back at them: "*Muchas gracias, mi hermano.*" "*Mucho gusto, mi hermana.*" I didn't just say it out of respect, or because I knew how to say it in Spanish. I truly felt that I was their sister. Just like with my own siblings, I felt that I could share stories, hopes, fears, burdens, anxieties, and lots of laughter with them. They were my brothers and sisters. That is the profound truth of the faith that we profess – that our brothers and sisters are located all around this world, because we are all children of one, loving God.

Although it is incredibly difficult to consider faceless strangers our family members, we hope that our pictures and stories are beginning to make that challenge a little easier so that one day, when a Guatemalan delegation visits St. Charles, we can joyously and sincerely welcome our brothers and sisters.

Katie Onka

*Be on the look out  
for next month's  
newsletter on  
Gifts and  
Gratitude*

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family's village. As the child becomes older and wants to specialize in a certain vocation, the challenge of finding the appropriate school increases even more. A teenager may need to move away and live with a relative while attending a desired school.

Finally, faith can be a challenge for the family. We spent a good amount of time with Father David who is the pastor of the Church of the Sacred Family. Father David's parish is quite large with 16 small churches and 22 other villages that don't have a church. Because there is only one priest for these approximately 40 different communities, there is a significant challenge to the family. For instance, we attended a Mass in a very remote area in which a priest had not visited since Easter. After the Mass, the sacraments of Baptism and First Holy Communion were celebrated. We could tell there was significant excitement and appreciation from the community, especially the parents but it must have been difficult to wait so long. Another aspect of the challenge comes from the laymen and laywomen that are needed to support the Catholic Church. We heard a story of a man giving up a day's wage to travel to the Church of the Sacred Family for layperson training. Giving up a day's wage was significant because it meant his children were not fed for part of the following week.

The end of the year is a good time for perspectives. Said another way, it's a time to count one's blessings. In Guatemala, despite the challenges, it appeared families counted their blessings every day. That in of itself is a worthwhile perspective.

John Sudol

### THE GSP CHALLENGE

This month's newsletter is all about family, so the GSP Challenge is to **spend more time with your family**. *Sound too simple?* Remember, your family includes your siblings, children, spouses, and parents – but it also includes your parish family, your brothers and sisters in need in Trenton, New Brunswick, etc. Your challenge is to be more deliberate about recognizing you are with family members, and treating them as such.