

# GIFTS & GRATITUDE



*Pictured on this page are gifts given, gifts received, and overwhelming expressions of gratitude from both Guatemalans and Americans.*

When the delegates began sharing their stories from the trip, a consistent theme of gratitude emerged.

The newsletter this month offers some of their reflections on gifts that were exchanged, the gratitude they witnessed, and their own sense of gratefulness for what they experienced.

Enjoy!



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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.*

## A Surprise Gift

What surprised me about the trip to Guatemala was the gift of genuine friendship that we received. We were going to learn about the Diocese, the people, and the culture. Although I knew, and even hoped, it would not be completely “academic”, I was not expecting the gift of true friendship that grew and that I now hold close to me. I expected to care about these people I was to meet, but I never anticipated how much I would care, the depth of the relationships that formed.

Roel, Luis and Freddie met us at the airport and greeted us like we were old friends. It was a wonderful and warm greeting, and as kind as they were, they were still strangers. This changed quickly. They, along with a few others who also worked for the Diocese of Santa Rosa, were our hosts for the week we were in Guatemala. They guided us throughout each day, helping us to see the ways

of their everyday life. What they helped us to experience and understand was limitless. We experienced food, worship, family life, local culture. They explained how the church is organized there and they told us

about the education system. They drove us, keeping us “gringos” safe on both the fast roads of Guatemala City and the dirt roads in rural villages. What at first looked like just one more aspect of their Diocesan job, was actually a gift to us. The time they spent with us exceeded their usual workdays and so, meals and time to relax with loved ones were set aside for us. In a culture where family is so central this was indeed a gift. They shared more gifts: their



*(From Left to Right): Lorena (our CCST guide and translator), Freddie, Roel, and Luis*

personal stories, hours of talking, prayers, meals, meeting their families. We came to know each other at a level deeper than I had ever imagined. We witnessed their challenges, joys, struggles, and we shared ours with them. Hearts and eyes were opened. What else but sincere friendship could evolve?

*Laura Heil*

## Being Grateful

Did I tell you how grateful I am for being part of the initial Guatemala Delegation sent to the Diocese of Santa Rosa?

Sure, I was excited in August after learning that I was one of five individuals picked to go on the first trip. I did all of the responsible tasks I had on the “trip list” that insured I was prepared for the adventure:

- Shots ✓
- Hiking Books ✓
- Cell phone ✓

But, grateful, that is what I find myself feeling daily now as we share the experiences and the vision with our community at St. Charles, for our hosts from the Santa Rosa Diocese in Guatemala, for the people of the villages that we remember in our prayers, and for the individuals who cross our paths in the ordinary tasks of our day.

The warmth of this gratitude fills me as our “fivesome” shares stories, plans our next event or newsletter, and hosts impromptu get-togethers.

We have our secret stories that only we can relate to in a conversation or phrase. We laugh from the heart at the scenes of our experiences that get re-played in our minds eye, and we share more hugs each time we gather and continue on our journey.

So, if you see one of us smiling ever so humbly, we are just living in a constant state of gratitude for being a part of this initiative.

*Kathie DeChirico*

## A Culture of Gratitude

I've heard it said that you cannot be grateful and unhappy at the same time. Nowhere was that ever more apparent to me than in Guatemala, where despite great hardship, there was more happiness than any of us expected. There is a culture of gratitude for the seemingly simple things: time together with friends and family, song, a new day and simple gifts. So, while each day brought challenges to many we met, their culture of expressing

gratitude created a contagious and uplifting spirit of hope and peace.

I'll admit, as a let's-build-something kind of guy, I went to Guatemala thinking that most Santa Rosa parishioners were expecting us to deliver something material that would improve living conditions. The initial listening and understanding aspects of establishing a long-term solidarity partnership with Santa Rosa would be a test of my will to pick up some sort of construction tool. But by the end of the first day, it was clear that they were grateful simply for our presence. Everywhere we went we were met with some form of warm welcome and a sense of gratitude. And when they learned it was my birthday several days into our stay, a celebration for me was woven into their joyful ways as seamlessly as if I had lived there all my life. There were several birthday events that included songs, handmade gifts, a homemade cake and many personal happy birthday wishes. It was my most celebrated birthday ever!

What I came to realize about gratitude after meeting our Guatemalan brothers and sisters is how it can lift the spirit of a community and bring us all a little closer together.



*The Pastoral Council at Sacred Family Parish celebrates Mike's birthday!*

*Mike Connolly*

## Once In a Lifetime...

It was Thursday, September 23 and our last day with our new friends from the Church of the Sacred Family. We ate lunch at a local restaurant and while eating, it poured. Actually, it was pouring so hard it was difficult to hear parts of the conversation as the rain pelted the metal roof. After lunch we drove to the Church and walked through a small courtyard to a large room, which was similar to a parish center. There we found many beaming smiles.

The children of the parish had prepared a play for us. It was filled with song, and it was clear that the

kids were putting their hearts into the performance. It was a true joy to watch and a rather soothing moment

during a trip that was hectic at times. For several moments, I think we all forgot about our upcoming drive back to Guatemala City and our flight the next morning and simply enjoyed the time with the children.

When the performance concluded, the parish center became quiet. We could tell the kids were up to something else but it wasn't clear what yet. Then small groups of children began separating from the large group and calling out our names

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## Psalm of Gratitude

Does the Bible have anything to say about gratitude? You bet! The Book of Psalms has some of the most beautiful expressions of gratitude. They remind us of our experience of who God is, they challenge us to recall our need for Him, and they allow us to recognize who we are in the context of God's creation. The Psalms below are just a few that express gratitude, and spark some memories from Guatemala.

***You brought a vine out of Egypt. You planted it and it took root and filled the land. – Psalm 80:9, 10***

Although I have been to hundreds of powerful liturgies in Skillman and beyond, nothing is more powerful to me than participating in a Mass in a different country. I clearly remember that first Mass in Guatemala – what we saw, smelled, and heard. But in addition to all of those incidentals, I remember the most profound feeling of absolute wonder and awe for our God.

Here we were – thousands of miles from home, in a small village with people and things that felt very foreign to us – and yet, that liturgy was familiar. The Word of God was proclaimed, the community came together, and the Eucharist was shared.

***How numerous, O Lord, my God you have made your wondrous deeds. – Psalm 40:6***

There was one afternoon we spent in Chiquimulilla with a man named Mario as our guide. Mario lives in the area of the town that was badly hit by Tropical Storm Agatha, so he was chosen to give us the tour of the damage. He showed us a barren stretch of land, covered with volcanic ash and pumice (from the volcano eruption the day before Agatha). He showed us a river and pointed to where houses used to line its shores. We went by fallen trees and roads with creeks running through them. And then, Mario joyfully introduced us to his family. His friends and neighbors waved and offered their greetings. He took us to his church and proudly showed us the statues that mean so much to the

community. God's works are incredible and inexplicable.

***Let us bow down in worship; let us kneel before the Lord who made us. For this is our God, whose people we are, God's well-tended flock. – Psalm 96:6-7***

Raised in the United States, I have always appreciated the "can-do spirit." There is this intangible aura at our core that says that if we try hard enough, we can make things happen. It was a foundational belief as our country took shape, and it has seeped into our beings.

Although it is somewhat indescribable, there is just a different aura in Guatemala. And from where I stood, it was beautiful because it reflected a belief that God truly made them. It was not just that God gave them life, but God gave them *everything*. There was this profound sense of gratitude for all that God has blessed them with. Further, they know that they cannot save themselves – and that there is nothing wrong with that. They admit their helplessness before God and turn to Him for strength in their weakness. Through *Him*, all things are possible.

***Shout joyfully to the Lord, all you lands; worship the Lord with cries of gladness. Give thanks to the Lord, bless his name. – Psalm 100:1, 4***

Shout and cry. When was the last time you shouted? When was the last time you cried? What the reason? It is natural to shout in frustration and cry in despair, but do we ever save those emotions for gladness and gratitude?

In Guatemala, the music at liturgies, although perhaps not perfectly on pitch, was created by people shouting to their God. The tears that welcomed us in some communities were cries of gladness and appreciation. These emotions were contagious, and they left me with a better understanding of the popular Guatemalan phrase: "*Gracias a dios.*" ("Thanks be to God.")

Katie Onka

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one by one. We were receiving gifts from the children. This is one of those moments when you feel a lump in your throat. The gifts varied and they seemed to pick gifts out that were personalized for each of us. Most of the gifts were handmade. I received two gifts from Karen and Julissa. One was a small statue of a man with a cell phone and briefcase. It is also a penholder for my desk. I look at it every day. The second gift was homemade. It was a letter glued to a piece of foam with some glitter as a border. The hook on the back of the foam was from a soda can – simple but effective. The message was in English and read as follows:

*At first, we want to thank God for having you in our country, as well as in our church.*

*Your visit has been a blessing that joins our communities and promotes brotherhood.*

*On behalf of our church members and specially the Teen and Children Mission, we want to wish you a happy trip and a blessed return to your home.*

**GOD BLESS YOU IN ALL POSSIBLE WAYS.**

Soon we were told we needed to get on our way for our drive back to Guatemala City. It was a wonderful way to end our trip. I don't think I will ever forget that afternoon.

*John Sudol*



## THE GSP CHALLENGE

This month, we challenge you to express your thanks every day. While eating a meal as a family, go around the table and share one or two things that you're thankful for. At least once this month, write a note or a letter to someone who means something to you. Be conscious of the ways you have been blessed and remember to pray those prayers of gratitude and thanksgiving.

*Be on the look out for next month's newsletter on **the Mass!***

*Also, be prepared for a special event in early April! Check [www.borromeo.org](http://www.borromeo.org) for more information.*