

## **Desde Guatemala 11**

The Queen of Spain came to offer aid and comfort to the victims of hurricane Stan. Her Majesty received a lot of press coverage during her brief visit – touring the areas most affected with the wife of the President of Guatemala and giving out toys and games to the orphans and children.

The torrential rains have gone now replaced by the "time of wind." Children can be seen flying kites like children I imagine all over the world. Watching the children one forgets momentarily the struggle to strive.

Three words keep coming to mind at this time: solidarity, charity and justice.

During the past month the media of the world have focused their attention briefly on Central America. First, the eruption of the volcano Santa Ana in El Salvador, next hurricane Stan affecting the Pacific, then tropical storms plummeting the Atlantic and finally a 6.0 earthquake in Guatemala. All these things occurred at the same time! Thousands of buildings were leveled, farms and crops destroyed and many lives lost. Families all over this small country are mourning their dead and the loss of their homes and possessions and hope. The food supply in the highlands will last another four months then there will be famine in the area.

It was announced in the paper yesterday (Nov. 17, 2005) that some 285,000 people in the area are in clear danger of having no food. They are all poor Mynas Indians and live off the fruit of the land and were awaiting the harvest in November and December. They had some domestic animals but these are gone now too. All of this has been destroyed and it will be at least another year before they can rework the land to plant crops. The U.N. is urging massive relief efforts on the part of the world community. It was announced by the Guatemalan government that they have received \$4 million in relief from the world community so far and they need at least another forty million. Members of Catholic religious orders met last Saturday again to plan on ways to get what food there is to the affected people.

Despite all the natural calamities of recent years it is important to remember that in Central America most of the suffering and poverty can be traced back not to natural disasters but rather to social injustice and the cruel exploitation by systems that do not allow the poor to advance out of their poverty to improve their lives and living conditions. In Guatemala City for example thousands of families live in areas that are unsafe and dangerous. Houses are built "covaches" (cardboard or tin shacks) on the edges of rivers and ravines ie. "barrancos" that are unsafe and very dangerous.

When the recent tragedy struck the international press for a brief moment applauded the rapid response of the developed countries in sending planes and ships laden with aid. The press called this aid "solidarity. " But I wonder what this solidarity is? It is impossible to judge the motivations of private individuals but the history of the developed countries of the world gives reason to pause and ask questions. People ask if this outpouring of aid was simply another effort to hide the existing injustice in Central America caused by the international policies imposed by the developed countries. This aid or "solidarity" is needed now but it is not needed in the long term, rather what is needed in the long term is justice and restitution. If there were justice there would be little need for this type of solidarity.

The Christian virtue of charity seems to be activated in times of great tragedy, sometimes eliciting great acts of philanthropy. The soup kitchens in the U.S. are always blessed with volunteers and donations around Thanksgiving and Christmas and usually during the rest of the year struggle to make ends meet. This seasonal charity always seems strange to me because I believe that charity and solidarity are not seasonal but constitutive of the ordinary life of a follower of Christ.

We Christians have the Word of God and the tradition of the Church to guide us in our knowledge and practice of charity and justice.

These teach us that what God has gifted us with belongs really to all. We are simply administrators of the riches that God has bestowed on us and will be held accountable for our use and administration of these gifts. Thus, it is taken for granted that in extreme need the fundamental right to life supersedes private ownership. *Matthew 25:32ff. , 1 John 3, 17 etc...* St. Paul took up collections in Asia Minor, Greece, Rome, Spain, to help the poor of Palestine.

In the 4<sup>th</sup> century St. Basil wrote: "Who is the robber? Don't forget: the bread that you don't eat belongs to the person who has no bread, the clothes that you don't use belong to the one in need of clothing, and the shoes you don't use belong to the man without shoes..."

Here in Guatemala the people have a saying: "primero Dios. " Jon Sobrino, S.J., from El Salvador has written a new book. Its title in English is Where is God? I would highly recommend it your reading.

...desde Guatemala  
Bill Farrell, S.M.