

Daily Journal

Deacon Bill Eckert

Parish delegates traveled to San Wenceslaus, our sister parish in Bogota, Colombia. Each delegate kept a daily journal about their experiences, their ideas and thoughts about future trips.

Roll Columbia

First off, in all honesty, I was quite reluctant to go to Bogota this year. I associate the city with drug cartels, kidnapping and violence. In addition, we were just starting a new semester at school and I didn't want to get off to a strange start with my students. Therefore, I did the best I could to put off the decision and arrangements until the last possible moment.

Here's what I found. We are truly a universal Church united by faith even as we are divided by language, distance, economic fortune and opportunity. The people of our sister parish lived in conditions that defy description, yet they are the same as the people of our parish in their deep faith and their desire for a better world for their children. They were warm in their welcome and exuberant in their hospitality; they helped us to feel connected to our faith no matter how far we were from our home and comfort zone.

The parish is vibrant with life, service, faith and abundant joy. Fr. Libardo sets the tone with his boundless energy and steady service. While the patriarchal Church makes him a bit of an overly centralized source of authority, the laity of the parish, especially the women who come from very humble families, are the engine that make things run. This core of lay women seem to be everywhere at once holding the parish in their hearts and keeping things going on a day to day basis. They are remarkable.

The community that surrounds the parish is very poor, as poor as anything I've experienced in our country, but the barrio that they serve that is just up the hill from this district is many times poorer still. The homes are a ramshackle collection of wood and corrugated metal hung together by wire, brackets and faith. The people there struggle with a haphazard infrastructure serving their needs for electricity, water and garbage. It's not a pretty sight, but the people's lives are the true support system of this place.

The school that supports several hundred children of the barrio serves as a sign of hope for the community, educating the young in order to transform their lives and the life of their families. This school provides hope for a better tomorrow. The facility appears to be rather simple on the surface until you realize what it provides for the poor; then you see what these children, who might otherwise be discarded by society, provide for the world – a new hope, a new dawn. This is when you recognize the beauty of Bogota, its people.

Like any modern city, Bogota is a place of contrasts. There are areas of extreme poverty abutting areas of wasteful abundance. The society is broken down into 6 classes: from the ones who are living in abject poverty to the ultra-rich who live in gated, guarded luxury. The barrio sits next to million dollar mansions on a hillside overlooking a rather poor part of the city. In other areas there are high rises and super malls built for the rich and upper middle classes. The area of the barrio and the community around the parish offer a very different existence to those places.

Regardless, the members of San Wenceslaus are rich in faith, hope and love. The experience of living in their midst and worshipping with them will stay with me forever. I am grateful that I was talked into this adventure traveling out of my comfort zone with three superb men from St. Patrick's. Truly, we were blessed.