



Driving in Venezuela

Fr. Larry Hubbard, one of the pioneers at our Venezuelan mission, shared a great story that exemplifies driving here in San Felix. Riding with a fellow speeding down Dalla Costa, the main avenue, they came up to a red light. The driver glanced both ways and barreled on through. After doing the same at two more red lights, he slammed on his brakes on approaching an intersection with a green light. Fr. Larry was stymied and asked if he knew that red means stop and green means go. He nodded. "Then why did you stop on the green?" He responded, "I saw my brother coming the other way, and he's a worse driver than I am."

Venezuela has official driving regulations just like every other country in the world, but there is a different set of "unofficial" rules of the road which most people follow instead. Here are a few examples:

Forget about stop signs. City planners figured out long ago that no one would pay attention to an 8-sided red sign with the word ALTO on it. Instead of stop signs, streets within neighborhoods have lots of speed bumps, sometimes two or three to the block. Colloquially known as "policia acostado" (policeman lying down) or simply "policia", these raised asphalt strips across the roadway will do a number on the suspension and underside of a car as well as the heads of those inside if you go over one too rapidly. With policia, who needs stop signs?

Should I stop at a red light? First of all, many semaphores are non-functional, but where they do work, there are certain unofficial rules to be followed. At intersections with equally busy streets, red lights are generally respected. At unequally busy streets, a red light on the busier street is considered more of a precaution. Slow down just enough to be sure no one is coming the other way. Why waste your brakes and your time for nothing? Besides, stopping with no cross-traffic could result in being rear-ended. Obviously, any vehicle on the less busy street needs to proceed with caution, regardless of the color of the semaphore.

If I break down in the middle of the road, should I call a tow truck? Of course not. Call a few friends with tools and basic mechanical skills to come over and work on your car or truck right where it's at. Put some branches in the road behind your car as a warning. As long as people can get around you, everyone is cool with this.

Obstacle course allowances. Those of you who have driven Minnesota roads during pothole season can easily understand this one. Along with a wide variety of other roadway irregularities, we, too, have potholes from broken water and sewer lines under the streets. They begin as springs seeping up through cracks. Over time, the springs become rivulets eroding the ground away. If the hole becomes large enough to cause significant damage, people stick long branches in the hole as a warning or fill it with old tires. Then there are open manholes whose covers have been stolen and sold as scrap metal. They don't get replaced any more than the potholes get filled. People know where these obstacles are located, however, and drive accordingly.

Which way should I go on a one-way? While the answer seems obvious, it really depends on how much time taking a short-cut on the wrong way might save. To keep people from crossing into the opposite lane, almost all major streets are divided, but the center island often continues without a break for several blocks. To save some time, drive up the shoulder or outside lane against traffic. No one seems to be bothered by it.

What about speed limits? While there are speed limits, the unofficial rule is you can drive as fast as you want or as fast as your car will go. That latter note refers to the many decrepit vehicles incapable of reaching normal road speed. Were they in Minnesota, they would be resting in junkyards rather than being out on the streets. They cough and sputter their way along so slowly I often pass them on my bike. Sometimes they stop for a breather in the middle of the street before continuing on their way, one more obstacle to add to the list.

You may think that all this makes driving here more dangerous, but, in a way, it is actually the opposite. In Minnesota, folks get lulled into presuming other drivers are following the rules and become surprised when the unexpected occurs. Here in Venezuela, people assume the unexpected to be the norm and drive accordingly. Having gotten used to it, I like driving here. How I'm going to do when I return to Minnesota is another matter.

Points to ponder

Have you ever driven in a foreign country? What differences did you notice? Did you like it?

The Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis has staffed and supported parishes in the diocese of Ciudad Guayana in Venezuela since 1970. These "Did you know?" papers are designed to give you a better understanding of life in Venezuela and to strengthen connections between the parishes of the Archdiocese and their archdiocesan mission during our 50th anniversary year. Please direct any comments or suggestions for future papers to Fr. Denny Dempsey at ddempsey@churchofstdominic.org or 651-368-7324.