



## The Domino Effect

Wham! Flashing a big grin of satisfaction, he slapped his domino down on the table and slid it into position. On any given afternoon, a group of neighborhood fellows gather down at the corner where they while away the hours playing dominoes. They are just one of several such groups enjoying one another's company, the shade of some overhanging trees, the gentle afternoon breeze, and maybe a bit of liquid refreshment, as the game continues until the setting sun calls it quits for another day.

The game originated in ancient China and made its European debut in Italy, brought there it is believed, by missionaries returning from the orient. Having invented fireworks, kite flying, and lots of games, ancient Chinese aristocrats apparently had a lot of leisure time on their hands. For the uninitiated, a set of dominoes consists of twenty-eight 1"x2" rectangular tiles with a line dividing the face into two square ends, each of which has from zero to six dots arranged in similar fashion to those on a die, one unique domino for each possible combination of zero to six dots. As with playing cards, there are a variety of ways to play dominoes.

In the most common game here, four players each draw five tiles. You can play with just two or three people, but with plenty of guys hanging around, four is the standard number. The remaining eight tiles are placed in the "boneyard", so called since tiles were initially made from ivory or bones. The player with the highest double places the first domino. From there, each player, in turn, adds a domino matching the number of dots on one of the open ends of the line. If he can't make a play, he must draw from the boneyard until he can make a move or pass if the boneyard is empty. When a player lays his last tile, he receives points for the accumulated number of dots on the remaining tiles of his opponents. If no player can make a move, the game ends and the player with the lowest dot count wins, receiving the sum total of dots on his opponents' tiles minus his own.

While there's plenty of conversation and laughter before and after a game, I am impressed by the seriousness afforded a contest of dominoes by players and onlookers alike. There are a couple expressions associated with the game here: "el dominó lo inventó un mudo" ("dominoes was invented by a mute"), and "los mirones son de palo" ("those watching are as wooden sticks"). Aside from the slapping of the tiles, a game of dominoes has all the ambiance of a Cistercian monastery with little or no talking until that last tile is laid.

Dominoes are not only used for such games. People also like to see how many they can stack in towers or more elaborate structures before they collapse like a building being imploded. Another common pastime is standing dominoes on end in a series in which each falling domino strikes and topples the next in a chain reaction. The "domino effect" image has been applied to many events in a cause-effect series. Following World War II the term "domino theory" referred to the spread of communism in Southeast Asia, drawing the United States into the war in Vietnam to try to keep more dominoes, neighboring countries, from falling.



Here in Venezuela another domino effect has been playing out for the past several years. The oil-dependent Venezuelan economy rides on the teeter-totter fluctuations of the market. From \$28 a barrel in November 2001, prices rose to an all-time high of \$166 per barrel in June 2008. Unfortunately, most of the profits ended up in pockets of the powerful rather than production and maintenance of Venezuela's industries. Oil prices declined but hung in the \$60s and \$70s for the next several years. In 2014, however, just months into Nicolas Maduro's presidency, oil began to drop precipitously. That same year marked the beginning of a three-year drought, crippling both agricultural and hydroelectric energy production. The ensuing economic crisis resulted in shortages of food, medicine and basic necessities coupled with astronomical inflation. People began to flee the country. Over five million people, one-sixth of the population, have left since 2014. Desperate for revenue, the government began taking over one industry after another, bleeding them to death, and crippling the economy even more. Lots of dominoes have fallen in this process. How many more will fall is anyone's guess, but one thing is for certain. There will be no winner when Venezuela plays its last domino.

### Points to ponder

Have you ever played dominoes? What domino-like cause-effect series of events come to mind for you?

*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 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary year. Please direct any comments or suggestions for future papers to Fr. Denny Dempsey at [ddempsey@churchofstdominic.org](mailto:ddempsey@churchofstdominic.org) or 651-368-7324.*