



The Market

San Felix's city market is situated at the edge of the downtown district near the banks of the Orinoco River. As with similar markets in thousands of cities across Latin America, the original market consists of an old concrete building primarily housing fish and meat vendors surrounded by the equivalent of three or four blocks of small semi-permanent open air stalls lining a maze of narrow walkways. Over time the market grew like a plant sending out tendrils, with rows of tiny stalls extending into the neighboring downtown area lining both sides of the street as far as ten blocks away.



In times past, those seeking a location for their stand in front of a store arranged it with the owner. I am told that such arrangements are now controlled by mafia-type bands who collect security money from both street vendors and store owners alike. Such groups have control over the limited supply of gas at some of our city stations where they collect a service fee for access to the pumps. They control everything from gas to electricity to computer access in a few towns south of us in the gold mining region of our state. They have their own system of vigilante justice which they deal out severely to offenders. With the assistance of several national guardsmen and police patrolling the market with guns holstered and rifles slung over their shoulders, the market is a remarkably safe place these days. It is not unusual to see adults and even children weaving their way through the crowd carelessly holding huge stacks of money in their hands in plain sight.

With more than 500 stalls, there are understandably many carrying the same assortment of items. Most common are those selling corn and wheat flour, beans, cooking oil, sugar, salt and the like. Others offer a wide variety of fresh vegetables. Some have stacks of fresh fish or chickens on the counter. Others specialize in spices. There's a lot more besides food of course. There are lots of clothes booths which tend to be concentrated together in certain areas. If you want to see if something fits, the street is your dressing room. There are mini-bottle shops which offer some rather strange concoctions along with basic beverages. Many stalls specialize in just one item like toothpaste or cigarettes, shampoo and toiletries, car parts, used hand tool tools, used cell phones (even thieves need a place to sell their ill-gotten goods), and the list goes on.

I went down to the market the other day to buy some photocopy paper and mouthwash. Although we were officially in the stricter of our "one-week-on-one-week-off" cycle of government-imposed restrictions for social distancing, you wouldn't know it from the crowds. If you've ever been to the Minnesota State Fair on Labor Day, double that concentration of people trying to move about, and you will have a pretty good idea of the congestion. In the slow-moving stream of shoulder-to-shoulder people carrying bags and packages, stopping to make purchases, workers pushing merchandise-laden carts, and the occasional driver who mistakenly thought people might move out of the way to let him through, you definitely need both patience and time if you're going to get much accomplished on a visit to the market.

With all the hubbub of the crowd and cacophony of vendors advertising their wares, one word rings out above the din, repeated over and over again in staccato fashion: "¡Dólares, dólares, dólares, dólares!" Moneychangers are everywhere. Many stalls have signs indicating that they buy dollars. The US dollar has become the preferred, though unofficial, currency of Venezuela. Since July 2019 the exchange rate of the bolivar has gone from 12,000 to 514,000 to the dollar. That would be comparable to the purchasing power of the dollar dropping to a bit over two cents in that same period. Most transactions here in the market are done in bolivares, so, unless whatever you're buying comes to exactly \$5 or \$10 or you don't mind not getting any change back, you may want to convert some dollars into bolivares. On the other hand, if you've had a good day at your booth and accumulated a stack of bolivares, you'll probably want the security of going home with dollars in your pocket. Who knows how much less your bolivares will be worth tomorrow?

Points to ponder

Have you ever been to farmers' market? What about the State Fair? Do you like the excitement of the crowds?

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.