



## Blind and Blessed

Laying down a strong rhythmic intro on his guitar, Javier called the congregation to stand and join him in the opening song. It was his third Mass of the day...nothing unusual for Javier. Need someone to lead music for a Mass or some other event? Call Javier. If he isn't busy teaching groups of kids in our barrios to play the cuatro, on his shift as DJ at a local radio station, or at his job as professor of culture at a center downtown, Javier is ready and willing. Only thing...you need to pick him up or arrange for someone to walk with him. You see, Javier was born blind.

Hector Javier Manzana Díaz entered the world, the second of four kids in his family, on a typically warm Venezuelan January day in 1979. "Was being blind much of an impediment for you growing up?" I asked him. "No," he replied, "I never knew anything different. It was my normal." And normal it was with no special treatment in his family. "I did everything my brother and sisters did." He particularly liked playing hide and seek. "I couldn't see them, so I figured they couldn't see me!"

Javier attended a special school for blind children where he learned to read and write in braille along with other basic studies. It was his always positive enthusiastic nature and love of music from early on, however, that gave more definition to the Javier he would become. "My mom was musical," he told me, crediting her as his inspiration. By the time he was twelve, Javier had mastered the cuatro, the Venezuelan ukulele, with its complex rhythms and was accompanying music groups at competitions. It was his Confirmation shortly after his 19<sup>th</sup> birthday in 1998, however, that catapulted Javier into a life of service to God and the church. He took his sacramental commitment seriously and began playing at Mass every weekend. "That's when I learned to play the guitar," Javier told me, and play the guitar he did, not only at church but also accompanying the priests with monthly mini-rallies at each of the local public schools.

For several years beginning in 1999, our mission sent groups of young people to Minnesota presenting the music and dance of Venezuela with concerts at parishes and schools throughout the archdiocese. Javier was a member of the group in 2003, 2006 and 2010. In between their nearly thirty concerts during a month-long visit, the groups crammed in as much of Minnesota life as possible. They sang on stage at the State Fair and the Mall of America. They led the Star Spangled Banner at Target Field, and partied with the Venezuelan players after Twins games. They enjoyed many a great meal at parish festivals. But what stood out most for Javier was riding the rollercoaster at Valleyfair. If you have ever ridden a rollercoaster with your eyes closed, something I never had the courage to do, you can imagine what it was like for Javier. "Sure, I was scared," he admitted, but his smile told me he would do it again in a heartbeat should the opportunity present itself.

There was a blind fellow at St. Pius X in White Bear Lake where I served in the early 1980s who had lost his sight from an explosion during the Korean War. "Father," he told me one day, "in a way I can see people better than you can." "How is that?" I asked. "Before I was blinded, I paid a lot of attention to people's appearance. That doesn't distract me anymore. Now when people speak with me I see them as they are in their heart."

That is true of Javier as well. It doesn't matter to him what a person looks like. Lacking sight, he has greater insight into people's true character. Given the challenges he faces, there's another gift Javier has developed as a compensation for his blindness...he has the best memory of anyone I know. His instant recall of lyrics and chords for hundreds of songs is remarkable. So is his memory for dates and events. I am amazed at his voice recognition and how he seems to remember the name of everyone he's ever met. "I thank God for everything in my life," he said in summary, "for all the good things and the difficult ones as well."

"What message would you like to share with the folks in Minnesota?" I asked him. "Tell them how thankful I am for their great hospitality, receiving us in their parishes and homes and caring for us. Tell them that I pray that God always bless them as they blessed us."

### Points to ponder

Close your eyes and imagine what it would be like to be blind. How well do you think you would adjust? Do you think you would develop other skills to compensate as did Javier? Are there other challenges you do face?

*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@churchofst dominic.org](mailto:ddempsey@churchofst dominic.org) or 651-368-7324.*