



Leo González

Leo González appeared on the scene on May 10, 1966, the third and final child born to Leonardo González and Cipriana Rodríguez who came to their marriage with 5 previous children on dad's side and 9 on mom's. As the youngest and smallest of 17 kids in the mix, Leo had to be a bit loud and aggressive to claim his place.



Ask folks around here to describe Leo and you'll get a smile, a sigh or a laugh followed by "mischievous", "joker", "loco", "loud", "stubborn" and "challenging". After a brief pause, however, they invariably add "caring", "dedicated", "hard worker", "generous" and "faithful". Leo is a wiry, witty, engaging character... definitely a character...with an enormous heart. About those first reactions, it's what Leo calls his "street persona". He loves to banter and verbally spar with everyone. It's a quality...better said "talent"...that he has honed over the years, something he holds in common with Jesus who spent hours similarly

engaged with the scribes and Pharisees. Recall the time Jesus seemed to slight a Canaanite woman by comparing her to a puppy begging for scraps under the table? Rather than feeling disrespected, she read into Jesus' tone, and perhaps a telling smile, that he was instead inviting her to a play verbally with him. She joined the game, and her response won both Jesus' admiration and the healing of her daughter as requested. Those astute enough to catch Leo's tone know that, as with Jesus, his words are never a put-down but rather an invitation to spar verbally for which those who play are likewise rewarded. That people enjoy doing so is evident. People love to banter with him. Sitting in his home talking with him one evening, I noted that every single person, young and old, passing by outside looked in to give Leo a wave and a shout out.

Leo lives in Los Sabanales where his family moved in 1971 when he was five years old. He attended the neighborhood elementary school and then transferred to a technical industrial high school downtown. In his second year there, Leo had a run-in with one of his professors...a matter of political differences, he told me...for which the retribution was a grade of one point out of twenty, 10 being passing, on a required technical drawing for a woodworking project. Given the prospect of Leo having to repeat the course with the same teacher, his mom wisely transferred him to another school where he graduated with flying colors.

Being the center of Venezuela's steel and aluminum industries, Ciudad Guayana's production plants and subsidiary companies were constantly in need of skilled workers. When INCE (National Institute for Cooperative Education), a government-run vocational training center, offered a welding course onsite in his neighborhood, Leo enrolled. Leo followed up that course with a few advanced programs and a work internship. Leo had found his niche and was on his way to becoming an expert welder and steel worker.

In a previous article, I wrote about a competition in the early years of our parish to determine the dividing line on land dedicated for the church and for sports. Two teams faced off on either side of a large steel cross, trying to move it forward against their opponent. Where the cross ended up would be the dividing line. It was teenage Leo who made that cross and then saw to it that his cross was securely planted and cemented in place.

That cross was not Leo's first active role in the life of our parish. He was in the first group of young people to be confirmed here, and he took his confirmation commitment seriously. The fledgling parish had two youth groups, one on either side of Dalla Costa, the main avenue. Those on the east side in Leo's neighborhood of Los Sabanales competed against those from Guaiparo on the other side to see which group could come up with the most and the best activities. "We were like brothers," Leo said, "always fighting with each other at home but solid at events with other parishes." Leo had a Jeep and would go around giving a ride to as many people as possible to bring to those events. It was not uncommon in those days to pack 15 or more people into his Jeep. "Our dad was very particular with whom we rode," a few members of the group told me, "but if Leo was driving there was no problem. He was the only one our dad trusted."

The story of Leo González will be continued in next week's article.

Points to ponder

Are there similar "characters" in your family or parish who make life more interesting for everyone else?

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@churchofst dominic.org or 651-368-7324.