



## The Bodega

Back in the 1950s and early 1960s, before supermarkets super-sized, before Cub, Aldi, Whole Foods, and Rainbow, folks in Minnesota went to stores like Red Owl, Supervalu and Piggly Wiggly for the best prices in groceries. For those living any distance from such stores, however, shopping there required a bit more planning than it does today. 24/7 service was still years off. Stores closed on Sunday, and most only offered “evening hours” once a week. Few families had more than one car, and that was usually gone with dad at work during the day. So, people did much of their grocery shopping at neighborhood stores, commonly called “corner stores” since that was where they were usually located. Growing up in south Minneapolis, there were no supermarkets close by, but we had two grocery stores on the corner, a meat market, a bakery (an olfactory paradise) and four more corner grocery stores within three blocks. The slightly higher prices were offset by the convenience and more personal service.



the bodega across the street from our house

Here in San Felix, people do most of their grocery shopping at large open-air markets where, with lots of stalls to choose from, prices are most competitive. Few families have cars, however, so getting to and from those markets requires walking some distance or juggling shopping bags on overcrowded buses. So, when it's just a few items you need, folks go to tiny neighborhood stores called bodegas, of which there are seven within two blocks of our house, not counting street stands selling fresh produce and fellows who walk the streets pushing wheelbarrows shouting out “fresh fish” or whatever they are selling. The best stocked bodegas carry up to 60 different items (the average-sized Minnesota supermarket carries more than 40,000 different products). Smaller bodegas may stock just 10 items or less on their shelves. Hard to make a living or draw many customers that way.

We do our major grocery shopping every couple weeks at the big market, but we go to the bodega right across the street when we're out of eggs or corn flour or when Fr. Greg wants a large bottle of Coca-Cola to treat visitors. It's convenient and we have a line of credit there. They do a good business there, no huge sales but lots of customers buying one or two items at a time. Whenever I look across the street, there are usually one or two people in line. I say “in line” because you don't actually go *into* a bodega. The cashier counter is protected and all the merchandise secured behind steel bars.

Some people pay with cash, but that is increasingly less common. Due to Venezuela's hyperinflation, denominations of currency with which people made their purchases a year ago have become worthless, and there simply isn't enough printed money in bigger denominations to go around. Not even banks have much cash on hand, and people wait for hours in long lines to make cash withdrawals. Rather than checks or cash, salaries are paid by direct deposit into employees' accounts. A sign reading “Hay punto” at a bodega indicates that people can do money transfers from their bank accounts for purchases there.

Smaller bodegas can't afford to get into the system and are limited to cash only. They have little stock and little business. So, you might wonder, why do so many people convert the front of their house into a bodega? Not thinking how the potential customer-to-bodega ratio goes down each time another one opens, folks simply figure someone else is making money with a bodega. Maybe I can as well selling to friends and neighbors. There is another problem for kind-hearted folks trying to run a bodega in our poor barrios. It is difficult to not extend credit to neighbors who are starving, even knowing that their promise to repay will never be more than a good intention soon forgotten. Some parishioners with a bodega in one of our poorer barrios agonized over this. They couldn't say no, and their bodega became a financial drain. They eventually shut it down and turned it into a shop making clothes. They still don't make much money, and sometimes people end up paying for a little girl's outfit with public service, but in the end it is easier to say “no” to someone wanting a new outfit than to someone who hasn't eaten for a few days.

### Points to ponder

How would you do running a neighborhood bodega? How would you deal with people who can't afford to pay?

*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.*