



Going Home...with a word for my fellow priests who continue here

For the past 15 months I have been writing this series of weekly articles highlighting similarities and differences in the lives of people here in Venezuela and back in Minnesota. Life can be full of surprises, but barring some unforeseen delay, I will be departing Venezuela by the end of this week. Before returning to Minnesota, however, I wanted to share a word about the life and ministry of diocesan priests here and invite your support.

Some may think it a real sacrifice for Fr. Greg and me to live and work here. There are a few challenges, but in reality we are very blessed, especially in comparison to our fellow priests. We have a comfortable house, a big tank of water that gets us through those days when the city's pipes are dry, a generator for when power is out in our neighborhood, internet and telephone service most of the time, a good cook and plenty of food. While some fellow clergy share such blessings, it is not the case for all of them and definitely not to the same degree.

There is one blessing in particular, however, which none of our local diocesan priests share, and that is the financial support and security which we enjoy as priests of the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis. Any support the local clergy receive comes from their parish collection. Given Venezuela's economic woes, a worker receiving around \$5 a month can hardly feed his family. Giving even a little to church entails a real sacrifice. And so it takes a near miracle, even more so with churches having been closed due to covid, for contributions to cover the parish's basic expenses much less put any spending money in the pastor's pocket. I noted recently in a conversation with one of the younger diocesan priests that he looked like he had lost some weight. He certainly didn't need to do so. He told me he had lost about fifteen pounds in the past few months. "I'm not getting enough to even pay for the wine and hosts for Mass," he lamented. When parishes are unable to even provide food for their table, many priests depend on their own families to meet such basic needs.

A few years back, a few people started up a program through the parish of St. Victoria in Victoria, MN, to provide a bit of financial support for diocesan priests in the diocese of Ciudad Guayana. It's not a program of our archdiocesan mission or organized through the archdiocese, but having seen the needs of the local clergy first-hand, I wanted to join the group in this important work. We are looking for individuals, families, groups and parishes interested in supporting one of thirty or so priests and deacons pastoring parishes here with monthly contributions of \$70. Of that \$60 would go to the individual priest or deacon and \$10 to a general fund for emergency needs of diocesan clergy. If you are interested in learning more or would consider supporting one of the priests or deacons, please contact me at ddempsey@churchofstdominic.org or get in touch with Deacon Ray Ortman at St. Victoria who has been working with this program since its inception rortman@stvictoria.org.

Although my life is easier in many ways by comparison to my Venezuelan counterparts, there are a couple areas in which they have an advantage. When my visa expired in October 2019, I joined the ranks of the "undocumented", prompting some of my Mexican friends in Northfield to laugh and comment, "Welcome to the club, Padre!" One effect was that I can't open a bank account. Oh well, the last time I made a purchase was buying bananas about five months ago. It's nice to not actually need money. Another effect is not being able to get a driver's license. Keeping our personal vehicles and those of the parish in good running condition became problematic. Then with the gas shortage, filling the tank went from an outlay of pennies to around \$8 a gallon at black market prices. Fortunately, I didn't really need a car and haven't driven one for the past 15 months. Between walking and biking I get around just fine. I get lots of exercise, and have better contact with folks who constantly shout greetings as I go by. "Got enough gas?" they joke. "Sure thing," I respond, pointing to my stomach. "I've got a full tank!" Go any distance around these cities and you're likely to come upon police or National Guard checkpoints. Drivers get stopped to inspect all their papers. With the bike I never get stopped. I just give them a wave and smile as I go by. Nice!



In front of our house with my trusty bike

I doubt it will be that easy getting through customs and security leaving Venezuela this week, but, God willing, all will go well. With a wave and a smile, I'll be on my way and back on Minnesota soil this time next week.

Points to ponder

What do you enjoy most about traveling? What gives you the greatest anxiety about travelling?

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. Join us to celebrate the 50th Anniversary of our Archdiocesan Venezuelan Mission with a Mass at Pascal Baylon in St. Paul at 4:30pm Saturday October 2nd.