

CORE NARRATIVE STORIES

We have included here two of the Core Narrative Stories that we received. These will give a sampling of the rich reflections missionaries wrote about their own ministries as well as the stories of local people with whom they work.

STORY #1 By Dennis Leder, SJ

INTRODUCTION

This Core Narrative is based on an interview with six residents of San José Las Rosas, a community on the periphery of Guatemala City. The neighborhood has existed for more than thirty years and it began as a subsidized residential project. The participants in the interview were: A laywoman active in community advocacy; four young adults (two women and two men) who collaborate in the parish while working during the week (and in some cases pursuing university studies); a Guatemalan Sister of the Holy Family.

San José Las Rosas is one of four neighborhoods in a large parish. From 1982 until 1996 it functioned semi-independently under the care of the Maryknoll Fathers. The Maryknoll priests followed a traditional sacramental model of parish ministry while encouraging lay participation through parish councils and commissions.

In 1987, the Sisters of the Holy Family of Helmet began working in San José Las Rosas. Their main task was to work with youth, organize women's groups, and coordinate sacramental preparation.

Because of diminishing numbers, the Maryknoll Fathers terminated their work in San José in 1996. The archdiocese appointed a substitute priest from the community Verbum Dei, whose policies differed from those of Maryknoll and the Holy Family Sisters. The new priest was subsequently removed, leaving a divided community and a vacuum in pastoral care. In 2002, the Paulist Fathers took charge of the community and have had success in unifying the divisions in the parish and renovating a theology that has tended to be traditional and based on popular devotions.

Over the last twenty-five years, the efforts of evangelical groups in Guatemala have attracted many families to the non-traditional churches. These efforts combined with material assistance found a receptive atmosphere in the aftermath of the devastating earthquake of 1976. The non-traditional churches were also seen to be a safe alternative to the persecuted Catholic Church during the thirty-five year internal armed struggle that left the country deeply wounded, divided, and distrustful.

PART A: LOCAL PERSON'S STORY

STAGE 1: FRAMING THE NARRATIVE

Prior to 1990, the mood in San José Las Rosas was stable. The war in Guatemala was felt to be somewhat remote and there was a sense of community both in the families and in the neighborhood. Prices for food and clothing were reasonable; mothers tended to spend most of their time at home; those who had access to television noted that the programs fostered unity in the family.

Paradoxically, as the national conflict began to be resolved in the early 1990s, the community began to sense less security in their neighborhood. Gangs started to form among youths whose opportunities for employment and education were increasingly limited. Many youths had been left to the care of family members when one or both parents immigrated to the United States. Without adequate parental supervision, these youths became easy subjects for gang membership. Others, who had spent some time in the North, were returned to Guatemala only to bring along many of the signs of gang life that they encountered in the North. Some youths from Central and Latin America, who had been apprehended in Mexico on route to the United States, were returned to Guatemala where they remained. Their precarious situation made them susceptible to gang affiliation.

What was once a tranquil neighborhood quickly became a place of heightened awareness about security. With little confidence in efficient police protection, petty robbery on the local buses, and an increasing presence of weapons in the hands of local youths, the community residents began to enclose themselves in their homes and in many cases surround their districts with gates and security guards.

While the economic status of all the communities around San José Las Rosas is basically similar, the more established neighborhoods were the ones that tended to heighten their security and the effect was to increase a sense of division, resentment and distrust between these districts and their poorer neighbors.

After 1990, the community members noted the availability of more products in the markets, but at higher prices. The influx of foreign goods tended to create a social division making national products less valuable than imported goods. This trend continues as new commercial centers open throughout Guatemala with attractive goods that are inaccessible to communities like San José Las Rosas.

The availability of high-priced consumer goods has produced a spirit of anxiety (especially among the young) to acquire goods that appeal to them and promise to improve their status among peers. In a relatively modest community like San José, this spirit fosters ways of easily obtaining the necessary funds even if it involves unlawful activities like robbery or involvement in the drug trade. While the influence of the drug trade is less evident in the community of San José Las Rosas than in other areas of Guatemala, it was noted that the problem is a part of Guatemalan society today and in the community there do exist cases of participation in drug sale and distribution.

The negative effects of globalization have not abated in San José and the community includes the following sectors as the protagonists:

- Parents of families who have and continue to migrate to the United States.
- The affluent sector of Guatemala whose goal is to arrange profitable business negotiations oftentimes at the expense of the less affluent.
- The youth who frequently succumb to the identity-bolstering membership in gangs or the allure of quick profit through unlawful activities.
- The national and local government, which has traditionally used its power for personal enrichment and has been generally incapable of responding to social needs.

All of the above has resulted in a strong sense of individualism, competition, and consumerism in the community of San José Las Rosas.

STAGE 2: UNDERSTANDING WHAT HAS CHANGED

While more products are available for the consumer, the local currency in Guatemala has less value than in years past. Properties in San José Las Rosas, which initially were intended for families of modest means, today are beyond the reach of the same people who purchased them thirty years ago; the services that the community members provide haven't enjoyed the same increase in value as the land on which they live. Part of this problem is the result of certain mass-produced imported goods that tend to be of a better quality and at a lower cost than local goods.

One of the members of the neighborhood is a carpenter who works in mahogany and cedar. In addition to the high cost of these materials and their potential for lucrative export, the furniture that this carpenter produces can be purchased at lower cost in the large commercial centers.

Another trade that is common in the neighborhood is tailoring. This service has also been undermined by current practices. Some clothing stores offer mass-produced imported goods at bargain prices; other stores import containers of second-hand clothing from the United States, which are sold at a fraction of their original cost. In an environment where salaries are low, work is scarce and the local currency is devaluated, it is not surprising that the consumer looks for products that will last and be at the lowest prices possible.

While the young are less responsible about their way of spending, being more attuned to fashion and image, the adults of the community tend to be more pragmatic, centering on food and public services like electricity, water, and telephone.

Families tend to be less integrated than in the past. The separation of family members is common. Migration to the North where parallel families are often formed is a frequent occurrence. Even families who remain in the same home in the neighborhood often find that uneven work and study schedules result in little time spent together. For years the television has been a source of entertainment in neighborhood homes. Today many families have more than one television in the home and access to cable networks is both necessary for clearer reception and easily accessible. The result is a reduction of social interaction in the family and a bombardment of foreign values and propaganda.

Computer technology has opened new areas for relationships through e-mail messages and conversations over the Internet. While most families in San José don't have computers in their homes, many students receive training in the computer and are familiar with the basic technology. Adults are less prone to invest time in computer use, but young people in the neighborhood often rent time for use of a computer, and they note that the prices for such rental become less expensive and therefore the service becomes more accessible.

With the privatization of the national telephone system a number of telephone companies have begun operation in Guatemala. In less than a decade the difficulty of obtaining a telephone line has disappeared and the presence of cellular phones is commonplace on all levels of the society. It goes without saying that modern technology has increased communication, but there is little proof that the technology has improved the quality of relationships.

Institutions in general tend to inspire little confidence in the community. The Church and some non-government organizations have more credibility than the local and national government, which is usually seen to be bureaucratic, self-serving, and oftentimes corrupt. The most effective form of interaction with the institutions continues to be the use of social pressure (marches and demonstrations). In this regard, the people of San José don't see much change from the past.

Migration is a daily reality in San José. With the presence of foreign products in the local shopping centers and the lure of a better life in the United States continuously visible on television and in the cinema, most people dream of spending some time in the North where the dollar is equal to eight times the local currency. Some people are in constant migration, going to the United States to buy second-hand automobiles for resale in Guatemala. Others go and return without having achieved the expected economic benefits. In all cases, the contact with the North American culture usually has an adverse effect on values like hospitality, collaboration, and simplicity that have characterized the best of Guatemalan culture.

Technology has benefited the educated class; in San José it has meant the displacement of workers and the decreasing of opportunities. With a minimum education (and a fragile education system as a whole), potential workers must seek employment in maquilas (the large factories for the production of export goods) or as security guards, street vendors, or taxi or bus drivers. A local economy with artisans, known and esteemed by the community, is disappearing.

While the changes in the neighborhood of San José have not been encouraging, the adults are optimistic about the new spirit in the parish, which is due to the pastoral work of the Paulist priests and the Holy Family Sisters. The young people feel that their own age group are not particularly interested in their faith. Their main concern is a job and a decent salary. Even the evangelical churches are seen as a type of social club where one has an identity and a degree of prestige.

STAGE 3: EVALUATION OF THE IMPACT OF THESE CHANGES ON LOCAL PEOPLE

A certain resignation exists among the six people who participated in our conversation. The forces at work are more powerful than their capacity to respond. While all six participants are active in the local parish and one is constantly involved in social projects for the neighborhood, they all mention the effects of consumerism on their lives and they all feel the precariousness of life in San José where violence and division has replaced a formerly tranquil atmosphere. The fact that they maintain their social and religious commitment in spite of adverse factors is due in great part to the sense of community they feel in the local parish and the quality of theological reflection that the local church provides.

The participants are generally more informed about occurrences in the world outside Guatemala. With more information at hand they experience intellectual curiosity and growth and develop critical thinking. Although they acknowledge the force that the North American culture exerts on their lives through television and cinema, they are also able to analyze the enormous pressure from the North in terms of their own reality, their own values, and their own needs. They are opposed to Free Trade agreements with the United States because they have seen how international trade with the North has traditionally been unbalanced and used to exploit both the natural resources and the people of Guatemala. Their precarious economic situation makes them resentful about new trade agreements that will further diminish local business and increase a servitude to the North.

While there exists a basic distrust in the United States government, there is also a certain admiration for the North American people and an easy acceptance and gratitude for North Americans who have come to Guatemala as missionaries.

The participants in our conversation mentioned the following signs of hope:

- Increased communication opens the possibility for more unity on a local and international level.
- Global awareness of gender issues questions the typically male-oriented attitudes of Guatemalan culture. While the inclusion of women in all spheres of society is still in its initial phase in Guatemala, there is a growing consciousness about equality that promises benefits for the family, the Church, and the nation.
- There is an increased awareness of the role of laypeople in the society and in the Church. A traditional concept of authority is giving way to a new notion of interdependence.
- People begin to take seriously the need to protect the environment.

STAGE 4: REFLECTION OF THE LOCAL PERSON'S EXPERIENCES

The residents of San José Las Rosas generally feel little peace with their current situation. They understand “globalization” as a negative term that implies destruction of cultures and the exploitation of the environment. They admit ignorance about many issues connected to globalization like the long-term effects of genetically produced crops. They

feel that globalization means that small business will be unable to compete with multinational firms. Their lack of peace and impotence leaves them with an internal struggle.

PART B: MISSIONARY'S INSIGHTS AND VIEWS

STAGE 1: INSIGHTS

In the community of San José Las Rosas, the last decade has produced a debilitated economy, the separation and division of the family, increased violence and the deterioration of human values, a preoccupation with wealth and goods. In spite of these negative effects some members of the community maintain an uncanny ability to commit themselves to change. In large part their positive attitude is due to their affiliation with a church community built on hope. They maintain a sense of humor in the midst of adversity and their on-going formation in the church gives them the resources to participate more fully in committees and community outreach projects. If mission work was once considered a process of evangelization in strictly religious terms, from the outside, it is today a slow process of inculturation and solidarity, a process of accompaniment and empowering of the local communities. I would say that the person of mission in today's world is a catalyst rather than an importer.

Globalization has made us conscious of a larger world community. Unfortunately, its benefits tend to serve the interests of the powerful. Rather than providing a respect for diverse cultures and solidarity with developing nations, global changes have tended to neutralize small cultures and form them in the model of the dominant culture.

The effects of globalization have inspired new attitudes due to an increased availability of information. New sources of knowledge and formation, attention to gender and the protection of the environment have been positive dimensions of the changes. At the same time these new attitudes are seriously limited by economic changes that are unfavorable to the mass majority.

A mission work of accompaniment and solidarity oftentimes finds itself at odds with national and international priorities. I don't believe that we have yet found a common voice to question the negative aspects of globalization while empowering the communities in their positive attitudes and values. Like the six people interviewed, I often feel impotent before the global changes and left to deal with the effects of decisions made from afar.

STAGE 2: IMAGINING THE FUTURE OF MISSION

I believe that inculturation will be increasingly important in the mission activity of the future. It is not so much knowledge of the culture as an insertion into the culture that allows for a true solidarity. In addition to having a clear, critical, and up to date religious formation, the person of mission will need professional skills that can be of influence on a national level. This calls for a careful balance between accompanying and empowering the communities and being a protagonist, with skills in areas like education, communications and the arts, architecture and urban planning, health, economy, the

sciences, psychology. I see a difference between a missionary activity that promotes local development projects and one that finds a voice on the national level to promote social transformation. I envision a mission activity in the future built on interdependence on the level of local communities and among other missionary endeavors. If global change continues to neutralize cultures and fashion them to the model of the dominant culture, a future missionary activity will be an increased awareness and care for the spiritual riches found in the adopted culture and a revitalized liturgical celebration of those riches. In summary, I would shape the future of missionary activity in the following ways:

- Inculturation as insertion into the culture and not merely knowledge of the culture.
- A religious formation that is clear, critical, and up to date.
- Accompaniment and empowerment of local communities.
- Professional skills that can influence social transformation on a national level.
- Interdependence inside the culture and among other missionaries.
- A spirituality that is nourished by the local culture and expressed in the liturgical celebration.

I don't believe that one can be at peace in mission activity today without having affection for the people and the culture where he or she works. I would tell someone entering the field of mission to be attentive to that. I would tell them that their skills are vital, but that patience is essential. I would remind them that they will always be foreigners on the mission, and that they should be who they are; while valuing their native culture, their own values and norms can be enriched by contact with another culture. I would tell them that being in the field of mission is a constant reminder of our common human bond and of our true identity as pilgrims.

STORY #2 By Sr. Eileen McKenzie, FSPA

[The following narrative is a result of email exchanges over a period of several weeks between Sr. Rosemary N., a Cameroonian religious currently living in the Northwest province of Cameroon, and myself, currently residing in Minneapolis, Minnesota.]

Sr. Rosemary's View

So many changes have taken place as a result of globalization...where should I start? Well, let's just look at electricity. Before we had electricity we used bush lamps, but only if there was money for kerosene. Otherwise, we burned twigs to see what we were doing. Those who had money used candles. No reading or studying was done at night unless one was sitting by the open hearth –but its flickering flames were not good

for the eyes. People developed bad eyesight from the smoke and flickering of the fire. Usually sleep started with nightfall, especially for children since there was nothing to distract them except the stories adults told them. Since we were not able to do much in the night, families entertained themselves with story telling. This kept them quite close together. Relationships within families continue to be the same, except the TV has disrupted some family relationships. This is because children now escape their homes in the evening to go to homes that have a set, and they miss the chance to learn the culture and to be educated on morals through story telling. TV has had a big impact on our society. It has brought about a greater awareness of what is happening in the world and exposes us to different thoughts, cultures and lifestyles. It has even introduced us to the use of western clothes, which are very inexpensive and we are able to buy them easily, causing our traditional wear to become less used. Imported videos also influence people in their beliefs, even causing people to question their religious values.

We have been introduced to many different nationalities from around the world and they are all giving their input on how to advance the Cameroonian life. Because of globalization, we have been introduced to the telephone, radio, cell-phone, television, and Internet, making our isolation non-existent to the outside world. New relations have developed because of easy communication by email, cell phones and easy means of transportation. Transportation used to be just by foot or, if able, on horseback, with few taxis. Now it is done by public transport and the number of taxis has continued to increase. I myself migrated to the U.S. for three years to get a BSN (Bachelor's of Science Degree in Nursing) so that I could come back and be of better help to my fellow Cameroonians. People have come here from America (as you did), England, other European countries, Russia, and other parts of Africa to share knowledge with us through teaching, nursing, spiritual ministry, and tourism. I have certainly been affected from sharing other cultures and forms of knowledge. There is an awareness that is lacking when one does not get to interact with people of other cultures. Some of the changes are consistent with my religious values. For example, my faith grew when I went to the U.S. Before my stay there, I thought that there was not much devoutness in America, but when I was there, I realized that most Americans have everything they need but they still search for God. I discovered that many young people not only go to church

but they participate actively as Christians. The spirituality centers, retreat houses, religious seminars, hermitages, perpetual adoration all impressed me very much.

Our country has suffered, and still does, from a lot of young people migrating for jobs to the developing countries. Some go for studies and do not come back home because they have found a more comfortable life in the new country. Families of married men and women studying outside the country have become disrupted, especially when studies take too long. Many other people move from the villages to towns because of accessibility to more amenities. Lack of jobs is still a problem and so means of producing a living are difficult. My brother, for example has gone to Yaoundé for a few months to try to see if he can get a temporary job to earn some money to be able to feed and clothe the family and take care of their health needs. Many of those dying of HIV/AIDS are coming back to the villages from the towns. Tourism is another type of migration that has ruined our culture in recent years. The influx of many outsiders in my area has caused certain things to be more expensive. Those who buy suffer and those selling them benefit.

Over all, however, I think that having been introduced into what we have so far, Cameroonians can only look forward to many more changes. Many would like to explore and improve our situation when they see what is available in other countries. So, we can only go forward and not backward.

People are happy and proud of the changes. Many schools are encouraging their youths to visit the internet for research. In this café I can see many young people. Some are sending letters to their parents, others are researching and some are just learning to use the web or listening to music. Take the internet away at this stage in Cameroon and many will cry and life will become paralyzed. At every nook and cranny you see young and old talking on the phone, sending and receiving messages. Communication is so easy and makes life really feel good. Having been introduced into what we have so far, Cameroonians can only demand more from the government and pray that it fulfills the promises made to the people on poverty alleviation, development and many other things.

I am very comfortable and at peace with the changes, because I have been personally helped by them. As I told you in my last letter, I can now talk with my mother,

meanwhile before I only did it once a year when I visited home. I write to you often now more than I could in the past. I have no problem with the changes, rather, I want more.

My View

I went to Cameroon, West Africa as a 25 year old Lay Mission Helper in 1995 and returned to the U.S. in 1998. My time in Africa changed most of my perceptions. I went as a teacher, but it was I who was taught. I went to share my understanding of Jesus and while there I was introduced to Wisdom. I went to witness for the Church and I was inducted into to a powerful display of tradition, ritual and community that was already woven into a profoundly spiritual culture. I went to share the skills I had as a result of living in the most technologically advanced nation on Earth and I learned just how limited and oppressive my Western world is. I spent over three years in a foreign mission basically being instructed in Good News. When I left Africa to return to the U.S. six years ago, it was not a homecoming – it was a commissioning. Quite honestly, I cannot think of another county that needs conversion more desperately than my own. When I left Africa I thought that my goodbyes were quite final. Little did I realize how the effects of mass communication would enable me to not only keep in contact, but to nurture relationships that I thought would eventually end from erratic global communication. I could not foresee myself connecting with my Cameroonian friends on a regular basis as I do today. This has undoubtedly impacted my “mission” to my own culture.

I like to think that my approach to “mission” now is most characterized by *sharing* - sharing time, skills, resources, passions, tears, stories, traditions, values, friends and experiences. I share with people living in America, in Cameroon and in other parts of the world. The global changes that have taken place in the past 5 years have made this approach both easier and more difficult. Mass communication has made connecting with someone on the other side of the world as easy as the double click of a mouse. However, the fast pace, the ever-widening gap between the rich and the poor, and the abuse and oppression of people in developing countries is deeply disturbing to me. Because of globalization, and my part in it, I am aware that as I take part in the over consumption

that defines the American lifestyle, I help to perpetuate the suffering of others all over the world. My frequent contact with friends in Cameroon reminds me of this on a consistent basis. One friend recently wrote to me: *“Only a few people can benefit from all these innovations due to the poverty level in Cameroon. Only a few people can make \$2 a day or can have 50 F CFA a day. All these multinational corporations – banks and other institutions - are causing imbalances between the rich and the poor and tremendous debt. They also undermine the authority of the state because the state has to tow the line of these multinationals, or else forgo some social benefits to the detriment of the poor.”*

The above are aspects of globalization that are in direct opposition with my spiritual values, and while there is an undeniable cry for justice in our globalizing world, I find that there *are* spiritual components of globalization that are conducive to my beliefs. One is that change is constant, calling us to continual conversion. Another is that we are all One – we are members of the Body of Christ and what affects one part of the body affects the entire body. Am I at peace with the current situation and my role in it? As I reflect, the image that comes to me is the “peace” a woman feels in between labor pains. At times I feel deeply peaceful; resting in faith that something new is being created that has the potential for life beyond our expectations. Then a contraction comes – 9/11, Afghanistan, Iraq, friends dying from AIDS, political and personal oppression, addiction, abuse – and I feel confused, helpless and in pain. In this image I am, at times, the woman bringing forth new life. Sometimes I am the new life being born. Most of the time I am one of the small strands of muscle cells in the abdominal wall, contracting in response to the stimuli sent to me from other members of the Body, all of which are a part of the birthing process.

In shaping the future of missionary activities I would place emphasis on the “missioner” being strongly rooted in Gospel values and committed to a life of learning how to love as Jesus taught us: by sharing life with those around us. The advice I give to people entering the field of mission today are the words attributed to St. Francis of Assisi: “Preach the Gospel at all times – use words if necessary.”