

At the beginning of 2015 the Assumptionists opened a new international community in Colombia, consisting of two Chileans, Fr. Esteban Monsalves and Br. Juan Nuñez, and one Congolese brother, Jean-Aimé Kakule Virivusiga. After settling into their various new responsibilities (Esteban as superior of the community and regional delegate of the provincial for Colombia) and Juan and Jean-Aimé as students in theology, they decided to spread their wings this past Christmas and get involved in a heavy dose of pastoral ministry in rural settings. Juan traveled to our community high in the Andes Mountains of Ecuador where he lent a hand at our parish. Jean-Aimé accompanied a group of missionaries to two farming villages in the mountainous region of Boyacá (central northeast Colombia bordering Venezuela) and Fr. Esteban to northern tip of the country. What follows is a short description of Fr. Esteban's experience.

"We arrived on December 13 in the state of Riohacha bordering the Caribbean Sea. We thought we would be working along palm-lined beaches with salty breezes. Wrong! In fact we ended up in an arid inland region known as Guajira where the diocese hoped that we could help a fairly underserved population to prepare for Christmas.



There were twenty of us in our group made up by one Assumptionist and one Little Sister of the Assumption and lay volunteers, mostly university students, some with vocational interests. On

our arrival, the diocese also asked us to bring along with us 18 seminarians. Our entire group divided into two contingents so that we could better manage the four villages in the Guajira region.

We were afforded a wonderful welcome by the native population, the vast majority of whom belong to the Wayúu tribe. We were housed by locals in modest rooms with a bed, a fan, and a bowl of water for washing.

Rising early, we spent long hours going from house to house to preach the gospel, visit the sick, bring Communion to shut-ins, and end the day with processions of the faithful culminating in a pre-Christmas novena. In most of the adobe houses people sleep on hammocks. We ate with families who outdid themselves to prepare us typical local plates."

Since Fr. Esteban was the only priest on the mission during the 11-day visit, he would go from village to village celebrating Mass, hearing Confessions, and anointing the sick. Sometimes a village had a chapel but some did not and he would celebrate Mass in the open or in a makeshift chapel (a tarp as a canopy to protect from the sun or the occasional downpour). The Wayúu accepted Christianity only after many years and there are still primitive vestiges of the previous animist religion. The misión culminated in a midnight Mass in one of the villages with more than a thousand colorfully dressed people in attendance, featuring Christmas hymns and a post-celebration meal with traditional dances.