

By Matthew Chua

Before I left Boston for Mexico City two months ago, I cracked an off-joke to Fr. Donald, which he did not find too amusing, that I might just find a wife in Mexico and live there. What I did not expect was that my experience from the Mission of the Mexican Assumptionists to the rural mountain communities of Veracruz was to reflect, so providentially, Jesus' own words in Mark 10:29-30.

Jesus said, "Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel,·who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life.

In the mountain communities of Veracruz, as a missionary, I lived off the love, warmth and affection of the people. Although they were, by modern economic standards, very poor, they were truly rich, and I was graced with simple and beautiful relationships with very simple and beautiful people. So much so, that the people treated me, and the other missionaries, as sons, brothers, sisters, and mothers in their homes. Going from house to house, meeting families, children and youth, we ate a lot of food, had a lot of conversations, both serious and comical, had a very privileged insight into their personal and spiritual lives and were just able to "BE" with them. Also, conducting discussion sessions, or " *platicar*" in Spanish, with the children, youths and adults gave us great opportunities for dialoguing and sharing with the people in a structured context of Christian faith, hope and love.

It is hard for me to put in words the joy, peace and love that I shared with the people of Veracruz and my fellow missionaries, so here are some pictures with descriptions to paint a thousand words. So don't worry, Fr Donald, I didn't find a wife in Mexico. Instead, I received a divine taste of Jesus' hundredfold gift of houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands from the people of Veracruz. Haha!

Week 1: The community of Fresnal



Being a missionary has taught me that you have to be extremely flexible with your time. In the start, there was a lot of waiting, and while waiting for our respective community representatives to arrive and pick us up from our base community of Naranjal, we took an opportunity to do some sightseeing in Cordoba.

Basically, each community we stayed at shared the task of feeding us missionaries between different households. This was a wonderful community-bonding strategy as we, the missionaries, became a novel and shared icon for the community's focus. The people were often very much at ease with our presence and it allowed us to engage in dialogue with them at a very intimate level. Particularly for me, it was very special to see the way that the people lead their lives, with all the warts and beauty of life, and with my rudimentary Spanish, it was enjoyable to talk and play with the family's children.

Each weekday, the most challenging part was dealing with the little children during the "platicar" sessions for the "niños" of the community. In small groups of 2 or 3 missionaries, handling 20 to 30 children for a mixture of Cathechism lessons and fun and games required no small amount of relying on grace. Amidst the fighting, crying, pushing and shoving on the children's end and feeble attempts to organize and calm them down on our end, it was evident that, in the end, we

really did share a grace-filled time together, such that it was a challenge for us to escape the children's endless hugging on the last day. The fun and joy I had with the children were one of my treasured gems from the mission.

Weeks 2 & 3: The community of Nexca



For me, this community, which was so high up that the chapel that we stayed in was often enveloped in the clouds, was my favorite community. Of the 3 communities I stayed in, this was the poorest one, with hardly any of the basic infrastructural essentials of modern, cosmopolitan living. But what they lacked in that sense, they made up, more than abundantly, in the sense of simplicity and grace.

The children of Nexca are much poorer than those of Fresnal, and being high up in the mountains, there was more of a tranquil "spirit of the mountains" that permeated them. It was much easier to handle them with simple games, and to enjoy it with them at the same time! Their happy and beautiful faces were a strong source of warmth for me in the rain and cold of the Nexcan mountains.

On the second weekend of the Mission, the Assumpionist brothers held a one-day retreat where all the different missionary communities gathered at a central location with the participating youths of the respective communities.



