

San Lucas Mission

Winter 2011

Parish News

Planting and Traditions of the Cofradia

~ by Fr. Greg ~

During those first years of struggling to learn, my day usually began with Mass then turned into a “walk around town” to greet the people at least with a smile and a *buenos días*, and simply to get a feel for the place. Often Don Max would fall into step alongside me and begin to speak quietly in that melodic baritone voice he was blessed with.



Often times his conversation fell into the history and practices of the *Cofradia*. This brotherhood of men and women had carried on the religious traditions over the centuries. They see themselves as representatives of the people, and Don Max was no exception – a fine “wisdom person” in the Mayan tradition. The Mayan way of celebrating their lived religion is a combined religious/social communal encounter. Days for celebrating were usually chosen around important agricultural moments during the year. The coming of the rains is an important time for celebrating, usually in the form of a respectful request of the Creator (God) to send His Blessing (the rains) to Mother Earth. Earth was mother, woman, because she produced food that sustained life.

Guatemala is in a part of the world where the agricultural year is divided into two seasons: the rainy (mid-May to October) and the dry season (October to May). With virtually no rain during the dry months it is easy to imagine the joy and hope that the coming of the rains bring. From the dusty landscape emerges Mother Earth’s gift of green life and plants.

There is an interesting custom that deals with the planting of corn in January and February during

Parish School Begins Again

~ by Madeline Snider ~

On January 17, over 700 students, parents, and teachers crowded onto the basketball court at the Parish elementary school, ready to inaugurate the *Colegio’s* 44th academic year. As *Colegio* Director Rosa Arteaga introduced each teacher, applause and gleeful cheers went up from various corners of the student body. The requisite and congratulatory speeches, prayers, and anthems ensued. All of this pomp and circumstance was suffused with a true sense of excitement and pride. And proud they should be: the colegio is a special place representing years of dedication and the hard work of many.

While public education exists in Guatemala, it is overcrowded and staggeringly underfunded.

Private education, on the other hand, is prohibitively expensive for many families in the San Lucas community. The intent of the Parish *Colegio* is to offer high-quality education at an affordable cost: a preferential option for the poor. Each family contributes five quetzals monthly (approximately \$0.65 USD) for their first child enrolled, and less for each subsequent child simultaneously attending the Parish school. While this is a mere fraction of the cost of most private education, families still make a meaningful contribution to their children’s



Inside



Christmas in San Lucas ~ by Katie Sullivan

By February, decorations, lights, and wreathes have been taken down in North American homes and stored in the attic, but how does San Lucas celebrate the Christmas season? People begin their celebration of *Nochebuena* (Christmas Eve), the biggest night of the year, by sharing a traditional meal of *caliente* (a hot fruit punch) and *tamales* or *chuchitos* (cornmeal stuffed with meat and sauce). After this special time with their families, everyone ventures out under the red and green streamers lining the streets to join in the *bulla* – ruckus – in the central park.

Just after dark, the first of the long anticipated festivities begins. And the *castillito* – the lighting of the castle – does not disappoint. Sponsored by some of San Lucas' wealthier families, a house constructed of metal piping is covered in fireworks and sparklers, all of which are set off in a twenty-minute show of light. As the smoke clears, the baby Jesus and his parents are revealed resting inside the structure.



The excitement continues with the coming of the *torito*. Men wearing *sombreros* laden with fireworks perform an elaborate dance tempting another costumed as a bull. They make their way through the streets, offering entertainment to those unwilling to venture out into the chilly December night, until at last the *posada* (procession) they are leading brings the figures of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph to shelter in the church.

The celebration does not truly come to its climax until midnight. All of San Lucas steps outside, fireworks in hand, waiting to ring in the birth of Christ together. And at the stroke of midnight, as a procession arrives at the church, the town explodes into a cacophony of noise and color. This *bulla* is not limited to San Lucas alone. Standing on rooftops one can see towns across the lake disappear into the smoke of the night's fireworks. A burst of

light penetrates the mist from time to time, reminding everyone else that they are not celebrating this holiday alone – it is more than just a community event.

Parish School Begins Again ~ cont'd from pg. 1 ~

education, thus taking ownership and agency in the process of their development.

Though the cost of attendance is relatively low, the faculty and staff at the *Colegio* work tirelessly to constantly improve educational standards. Following national guidelines that incorporate recommendations of the 1996 Peace Accords, the curriculum includes a wide array of subjects: math, science and technology, Spanish, communications, Kakchiquel, natural sciences, social sciences and citizenship, productivity and development, religion, physical education, art, music, and English. Additionally, all students have access to the school library. Working with limited resources – largely without textbooks and worksheet templates – the teachers must be creative and resourceful to get their students' wheels turning. Teachers try to animate the class by coaxing their

students out of their chairs, working in groups to share ideas, and collaborating on projects and activities.

In spite of the challenges before them, both faculty and students have put forth a bold and ground-breaking effort in this experiment, and the community has benefited greatly. Last year a Montessori Center opened, offering a creative new approach to early education learning that works with and within the local culture. Parents and teachers have responded with excitement and enthusiasm, and enrollment in the program is coveted. Since the initiation of the Parish education program over four decades ago, thousands of students have begun their academic careers at the *Colegio*. Many were the first in their family to study, and countless others have gone on to become members of a respected first generation of indigenous professionals in the community.

Parish Nursery ~ Erin Yates

Ask Efraín Morales Jacinto how many different types of plants he has in his nursery, and chances are you will never receive an exact answer. Putting aside the fact that the variety of plants in the garden is constantly shifting in this busy garden, the sheer number of plants is astounding. “Un montón” – a ton -

Efraín will say, waving his hand over row upon row of tiny seedling bags and up towards the trees thick with coffee and citrus.

For Efraín, more important than the quantity produced in a growing season is the yearly cycle in which his plants replenish the earth and in turn nourish new life. His compost heap is just as significant as the beautiful roses that bloom orange and red within a single bud. “Es un ciclo,” he describes, “Las plantas vuelven a la tierra y la tierra a la vida,” (“It is a cycle. The plants return to the earth and the earth returns to life.”).

Because a different variety of plants thrive during any given season, Efraín and his colleague, Julio Chumil Yoxón, work every day year-round to water and maintain the

plants. Once the plants have been nurtured to maturity, they are distributed to various Parish projects and serve different purposes. Many are planted around the church, Women’s Center, clinic, and the school for aesthetic purposes, providing a calm environment and shade. An herb garden has also been planted around the Women’s Center for practical and medicinal use.

Efraín and Julio’s work in the nursery may not have the impact of the work of a doctor or teacher, but you will see the fruits of their labour everywhere. Their garden serves very important purposes: honoring Maya tradition and respect for nature, as well as honoring the dignity and right of all people to not only enjoy spaces that are not merely functional, but also beautiful.



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the full moon. Now January and February are dry months – the height of the dry season. What was it that brought some to plant corn seed in the dusty mountain fields? The wisdom people would speak of the way “it used to be”: that the rains would come for a short time in January/February when one could plant selected corn seed. The corn would sprout and hold until the coming of the daily rains in May. With the “head start” from the early planting, corn could be harvested sooner.

The harvest is another important celebration time. I remember large nets (*redes*) were stuffed full of ears of corn,

dried on the stalk, weighed up to 125 pounds. The nets were tied carefully then loaded onto the farmer’s back. On top of the bulky load were tied small branches from pine trees or some flower found blooming in the hills. At times you could hear the tinkling of a small bell, also tied to the net, to announce the coming of the long awaited harvest. The corn was then brought from the fields to the patio at the front door of the house, and when all the corn was piled high, extended family and friends were called together to share the joy of the harvest. Someone led the prayer of gratitude as songs of grateful joy rang out. When those who played musical instruments, like Don Max who played the saxophone, came to celebrate, the prayer somehow seemed even better.

For now, we watch farmers carry their seed up the mountain, watch for the rains, and await that blessed time of year to come.

Matching Contributions

Did you know you can double your contribution to the San Lucas Mission every time you donate? Many companies, organizations, or institutions will match an employee's contribution to a non-profit organization. The San Lucas Mission is a registered 501(c)(3) organization and has already partnered with companies to double contributions to the people of San Lucas.



To find out if your company or organization offers matching gifts to non-profits like the San Lucas Mission, contact your human resources department. If they do, tell them to contact us at:

info@sanlucasmision.org

We'll get the ball rolling on our end to make the most of your support and compassion. As always, thank you for showing your solidarity with the people of San Lucas.

~ www.sanlucasmision.org ~

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Preferential Option for the Poor

~ by Chris Mitchell

The theological commitment to a Preferential Option for the Poor emerged from the conference of Catholic Bishops in Latin America in 1968. This idea holds that the moral test of a society is how it responds to the poorest and the most marginalized. As an integral human development organization, the San Lucas Mission's primary goal is to respond to the needs of the most vulnerable of our community.

A Preferential Option for the Poor promotes the principle of serving the Common Good: the suffering of the poor wounds society as a whole. We are obligated to work together for the betterment of all so that, as a collective, we share in God's love for all. Working for social justice and serving those in need is an act of love itself, thus we are called to ally ourselves with the most marginalized and work with them. Saint Ambrose says that "the world is given to all, and not only the rich," so we are thus required to give extra attention to those with special needs. We must examine how our lifestyles, policies, and social institutions impact the poor, and work together for social change that provide dignified options for those who suffer.

The Parish of San Lucas focuses on serving all of the community: we do not discriminate on the basis of religion, race, ethnicity, gender, or otherwise. Our mission is to promote social justice and provide services to the poor who need them most. Many San Lucans have historically been mistreated, abused, and marginalized, and we do not believe that access to healthcare, education, and food security should be denied to anybody under any circumstances. Therefore, our programs are available to people based on a family's ability to pay; many receive schooling and clinic services free of charge.

Ultimately, our goal is to further social justice within our community and to stand in solidarity with the poorest and most marginalized of society. As followers of Christ, we are challenged to advocate for the poor and speak for the voiceless.

