



MISSIONARIES IN ACTION

DOMINICAN MISSION FOUNDATION

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The Only Truth Is Within



Fr. Timothy Conlan, O.P.

Greetings Mission Friends:

It wasn't that long ago that I said, and was convinced, that "education is the only way to bring about the economic, political, and social changes so desperately needed in this poor and violence-torn country of Guatemala." Apart from my work in the parish on weekends with Masses and weddings, I have for years run the program of *Jovenes Arriba* (Upward Youth), providing young people with scholarships and skills to continue their education leading to a job in their area of interest. These are full scholarships that can cost me \$2,000 a year, more than an average family of four here in Rabinal could make in a year. A thousand students graduate each year from high school and junior college and maybe 100 from universities in the area, and I have always had the luxury of selecting needy students who have good enough grades to be ready in two years to pass the entrance exams for the state run bachelor's degree

program—one that charges no tuition but provides the best basic education for university entrance. I have always been able to rely on our web page or Facebook or our local radio announcements to spread the word about our scholarship opportunities. Lately, response had become increasingly dismal, however. Certainly the results did not reflect the extent of the poverty that exists here.

So a couple years ago I took the time to go out to high schools and junior colleges myself, speaking enthusiastically to the young people, spelling out the simple qualifications and the array of careers our scholarships could lead to. I was ready to answer questions, but there were none. I had applications to hand out, but no takers. When someone offers a complete scholarship toward a bachelor's degree in junior college—tuition, room and board, and supplies for 2-3 years—one would think it would attract many applicants, but the truth is I had to coax two high school students from the farthest village to apply. No one else applied even though I spoke at ten schools, making personal contact with them and their teachers. This year only four came to apply after so much promotion (*See p.2*).

It seems people have lost their expectation that education will create a better future, which until just a few years ago was a widespread assumption. The problem is that Rabinal is one of the poorest areas in the country, principally for lack of rain for the crops since it is an agricultural area, and there are simply no jobs to be had. The options for the future of most students here include joining the local police or army patrols, dangerous jobs that pay a pittance; working in the field picking coffee beans or cutting sugar cane for months at a time in the sweltering heat at slave wages; joining a gang or a cartel that promises a "get rich quick" scheme; or escaping to the U.S., usually illegally and having to live in constant fear.

Recently a father of one of my students came to tell me his son had abandoned the barber training I had set up for him, somehow borrowed \$10,000 from his brother in the U.S. to pay a "coyote" to get him to New York, a sanctuary state, and in three weeks had started a construction job at \$15.00 an hour. (A good boy, he even sent me back some of the scholarship money I had given him.) That is the immigration reality: The border is porous and money talks.



The drug lords get paid well and they control who crosses. (A good question for another day is who else in the immigration chain gets paid off?)

Given that reality, it is hard to convince young people to stay here if they can find money to pay the “coyote” or get on a caravan. Most can’t put together that kind of money, though, and so even though they would like a more dignified and comfortable living situation than their parents, many choose an option I hadn’t yet mentioned: staying home and doing nothing, living off their parents’ already sub-par income.

I applaud the students who finally did apply, but when they came to our center they were like deer in the headlights, so timid that they were afraid to speak, and seemed quite unsure about their choice or their future, characteristics I have been noticing more and more. **Indeed I have become keenly aware that there has been a sea change in the way young people here view the world.** It made me aware of a problem with our youth which I try to get at with the following reflection, one that perhaps many of you will recognize as equally troublesome in the U.S.

Look Out, Not Down

Are you a member of the cult of the god of curiosity?
Are you aware of being his slave,
Chained to your information device to search the world for new secrets?
Do you rush to your device at every opportunity of the day or night?
Do you really care what the people around you did today,
Or only what new information they found on their device that you didn’t find?
I ask because it seems it is the rare person who is not in that cult.
Is there anyone left who looks out at the world more than down at their telephone?

We live in the information era, they say.
Are you striving to absorb an abundance of information, reaching out to a god
Who shares his empty inner secrets with those who become his followers
By giving up the limited, ordinary, and mundane but tangible and knowable realities
Available in our everyday life and experience,
In order to strike out for the unknown limits of infinite knowledge
In the world of virtual reality on the Internet?

Are you carrying around your information device like gang members
Carry on their foreheads the tattoos that identify them as members of the cult of death?
Is your device a sign of your devotion to the god of curiosity
Who promises us true freedom if only we enslave ourselves by seeking every lead
To find the ultimate semblance of the face of this god in the smallest tidbit of data
Somewhere in the virtual universe that we have at our finger tips?

And by honoring it as the incarnate truth,
Willingly sacrificing our health, dialogue with our friends,
Time devoted to our path in life or work or family
In exchange for becoming aware of whatever is going on everywhere else,
We worship the infinite network of human interests, so that we are the most informed
That we can possibly be and can share in the absolute fullness of the god of curiosity
And in his cult as members of his church of the Internet.

However we only have a limited amount of time
To hear or learn about it all during the course of a typical life.
If you take on that goal, you must realize you will come to your end before you exhaust
The never-ending stream of messages, photos, videos, voices, songs, jokes, or memes.
And then what is your reward, good and faithful servant?
Would you be allowed to meet the god of curiosity? Would you recognize his face?

Look around you and see the drones busy filling in the holes
Of the puzzle of factoids that make up the daily diet of information.
Wake up and realize there is a higher inner reality in the heart, where the true God lives.
Learn to read the hearts of your companions, your family, friends, neighbors,
fellow believers and non-believers.
Like Abraham left behind the land Ur of the Chaldees
Or Moses left behind the false sun gods of Egypt,
Look for the face of the true God in the flesh and blood faces of the people of the world.
Spend time looking for his Word in their faces in order to DO what his son,
Jesus our Lord, told us:
Love your neighbor as yourself and do it all for the Love of God—
Not for the god of useless, often false, information but for Him who is Truth itself.

I am not a social scientist and have not studied the effects of the Internet on youth today, but I have heard of several of those studies in the last two years **linking the high use of the Internet with the high incidence of suicide among teens**, many concluding that the limitless hours spent alone with their devices and the resulting lack of personal contact causes feelings of isolation and deep depression. And the bullying phenomenon—or even just the scary possibility—of being “cancelled” for one’s beliefs or use of words, often without a chance of redemption, intensifies one’s timidity, lack of self-worth, and depression.

As I reflected on my experience in visiting those ten schools this year in order to offer scholarships, I was amazed at how passive students seemed and how uninterested they were in thinking about the future of the world or their place in it, in spite of the fact that the future in this society should be very worrisome for anyone with a head on their shoulders.

What is quite clear and needs no study, but rather simple observation, is that **young people are immersed in their phones at every possible minute of the day and without boundaries**. (And how much time they are on their phones here in Rabinal is probably even less than in the U.S. because the youths here have to scrimp and save to buy time on the phone.)

It is as if they have the whole world at their fingertips, and it is easy to access, so if someone advises them to go knock on

doors to ask for work or do some self-reflecting on their abilities and priorities in order to choose their educational path, they are paralyzed to act.

Because of their unsupervised use of the Internet, with its meaningless chat rooms and self-centered personal profile sites, teens are delayed in finding their unique identities, distracted from true self-reflection. Such technologies as social media, digital games, and cyberspace shortcuts rarely require the use of imagination or creativity, critical thinking or genuine communication; indeed such skills are stifled and discouraged. **If there is any hope of beating off the media monster, besides limiting the hours and sites of Internet usage, it is in learning by the example of role models who encourage and celebrate their individual differences and unique abilities.**

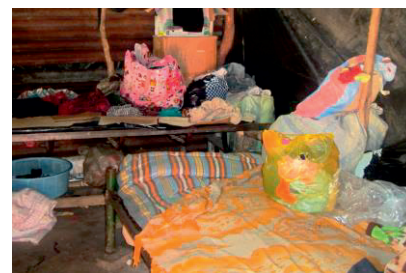
I have always sought to be such a role model and to encourage my students’ parents, as poor and hard-working as they are, to do the same, scratching out time for their teens, providing limits and consistency and loving attention. My program, in which I will keep plugging along, is geared to helping young people choose an alternative to slave labor or the gang life, escaping the country or staying home and turning their brains and bodies to mush through their devices. I don’t promote a more luxurious life style but rather a life that achieves happiness from love and devotion. A career is not just about getting a job and earning more money but rather learning self-realization, self-

determination, and discipline; learning to work toward better marriages and raising responsible, loving children in a virtuous way as Jesus and the Church teach us; becoming capable of participating responsibly in a democracy, making choices to improve it, helping to make their community a desirable place to live rather than one to flee; and **seeking truth rather than mind-numbing information.**

God willing, I’m not going anywhere anytime soon. But as always, we need money to run our programs. We get by on a shoe string—we are moving into a smaller office as I speak—but, as you well know, the cost of everything keeps rising. Please send any donation to the Dominican Mission Foundation. If you mention that it is for the mission in Guatemala, every bit comes to me. And pray for us here. Life has gotten much more difficult with the uncertainty of the future.

In Christ’s peace,
Fr. Tim

**Guide me, Lord,
as I disciple my
children and
prepare them for
the battles they
face everywhere,
including their
own hearts.**



I usually go with my secretary to visit the homes of my scholarship students. It might be helpful for those who contribute to my mission to learn about their living situations—the kind of houses they live in, what the neighborhood is like, where they cook and eat. The town of Rabinal has paved streets in the three block square center, but within 150 yards of the central plaza, the bumpy and rutted narrow dirt paths take over. It is a farming community, so people protect their fields and give as little as possible space to roads. Houses are built as close to the road as possible so that they have more space in the grounds around the house.

Each of these indigenous families is different, but let me take one girl and give my first impression of her house and living situation to help you get somewhat of a typical picture. We went to the girl's house on a dirt path where there was no place to park until we found a turn-out. We climbed up an embankment on a few broken steps, passed through a narrow path between two low-roofed adobe houses, and entered an open area, probably 35 yards wide, surrounded by several more houses, all connected since the residents are related. People were sitting in the shadow of trees, shucking corn or cooking over wood fires, their chairs and tables dilapidated and weathered. A random assortment of old or broken items was strewn about and off to the side was a large black pig, lying in a mud puddle and tied to a tree.

The girl's house was at the back of this "compound," only eight blocks from the center of Rabinal but still considered rural, with a dirt floor beneath a corrugated metal roof like all of these houses. The kitchen is a tiny room where they store food stuffs, cook, and eat. The stove is on a raised area with a grill for cooking tortillas and other food over a wood fire. There is a wash basin but no faucet. There is no indoor plumbing, refrigerator, or hot water. Chickens were wandering through the kitchen area, typical of these lowland rural houses as well as those in the mountains. The parents have a room off the kitchen area and connected to the cooking area are three small rooms for their six children, aged 1 to 20. The bedrooms are about 8 feet long and 5 feet wide with a cement floor; each child has a half of a mattress and cardboard boxes for their clothes. Our student is a 16-year-old, tall and thin, big eyed and very shy. I asked to see where she studies and where she would keep the laptop computer that we will lend her. In her room with a half mattress and cardboard boxes surrounded by piles of clothes (no closet or hangers anywhere) was an 18 inch wide desk. There was a window with no glass and a door opening draped in a flimsy cloth.

Surprisingly, this family is not considered poor since the father is a brick layer or carpenter. Most houses now are built with cement blocks or adobe, but he still gets occasional odd jobs since many workers have left for the states. The mother is a tiny woman but full of vim and vigor with a bright glint in her face. She gets up at 3am and cooks bean-filled tortillas called *tayuyos* and the girl goes to the open-air market in the town plaza at the crack of dawn to sell them, a chore she started at an early age.

When I got home that night, I decided to give the family a few items I had: a steel bunk bed which I have used over the years for my students studying away from home in order to save space and rent; mattresses, mattress protectors, pillows, and blankets; and a bureau with four drawers. The girl's mother was appreciative and got someone with a truck to pick up the items.

This girl graduated high school and will receive a scholarship for a two-year bachelor degree which will cost us about \$1000 each year. She will get a bicycle to help her get to school, a computer and a year-long computer course, books, and money for school projects and some food and supplies. She will attend a state school, so there is no tuition cost. The goal is for her to keep up her grades and go on to the university. One criterion of the \$1000 scholarship is that her family matches that amount. I only cover \$50 a month for food, which is less than \$2 a day. Indeed, it's less than what we pay for a coffee in the U.S. The family here covers remaining food costs as well as clothing, medicine, and other supplies.

We have calculated the most frugal annual budget and adding the criterion for the family's matching funds has greatly helped stretch our funds. That your contributions go a whole lot farther here is also a huge help. Some say I'm a bit too frugal, that the lives of these kids and their parents are already full of sacrifice, but our goal is to get as many students as possible onto the best path for each one's particular aspirations and abilities.