

**2ND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME**  
**CELEBRATING OUR LORD OF ESQUIPULAS**  
**January 16, 2011**

Yesterday was the feast of Our Lord of Esquipulas (the black Christ) and today we celebrate with our sisters and brothers in Esquipulas who have had thousands of visitors this weekend. I am humbled and grateful to share the story of our sister parish relationship in light of today's readings.

Our sister parish in Nicaragua takes its name and the Jan. 15 devotion to the Black Christ from the Church of the Black Christ in Esquipulas, Guatemala. For Central Americans, this basilica is second in importance, in pilgrimages and pleas for healing, only to the shrine of the Virgin of Guadalupe outside Mexico City. It is also the place where the Central American Presidents met in 1986 to begin the Peace Accords. In 1595, a statue of Christ on the Cross, carved from dark balsam wood was installed in the church. It is not known specifically why the statue is dark. Some have conjectured that it is the smoke from candles over many years but the wooden skin under clothing would then be white and it is not. Perhaps the carving was the influence of surrounding cultures or perhaps the artist wanted Christ to resemble the people of the area. In the week culminating on Jan. 15 and during Easter week about 100,000 people flock to the basilica and stand in long lines just to have a few seconds in front of this image to adore the Black Christ. *It is traditional that one never turns one's back to the Christ. That is why people leave the area of the Cross **walking backwards**. Yes, walking backwards with eyes fixed on Christ!*

In Nicaragua, there is a procession to honor the Black Christ for several days before Jan. 15. As the procession winds through the hillside and passes by villages from Matagalpa on the way to Esquipulas, some people from each community join the procession. It swells to thousands by the time the procession arrives at the square outside the church of Our Lord of Esquipulas. There are prayers and the celebration of the liturgy and the small town of about 7,000 feeds the thousands of visitors during the next couple of days. I would find this impossible to believe had not our 1997 delegation actually witnessed this holy, joyful celebration.

The idea of seeking a sister parish relationship arose here at St. William in the mid-80s as a natural outgrowth of the deep concern of this community about the violent policies of the U.S. Government against our sisters and brothers in Central America. We had protested these policies and even decided to become a Sanctuary Church to give refuge to some fleeing from the persecution there. Father Jim Flynn and Jim Butler led our community in these stances.

Because my brother, Dan was then pastor of Our Lord of Esquipulas in Nicaragua and came home at least each year to see our mother, we didn't need to look far for a possible parish. After some discussion of the sister parish concept, one Sunday in the mid-80s after liturgy, members of our community lined up to sign a covenant relationship with our sisters and brothers at the parish of the Black Christ in Esquipulas, Nicaragua. It included prayer, communication, sharing resources and visiting one another. None of knows the exact date but we believe it was in 1986. Dan took this signed covenant back to his parish. First he met with the delegates of the Word who served in the 14 or more communities far from the town. Then it took him about a year and a half to take the covenant to each community by truck, horseback or walking. With the help of the delegate in each community, Dan explained our hopes. After that time the community there signed the covenant and sent it back to us in 1987.

Communication was a problem especially during the early years. Until a few years ago, there was no telephone line in the town of Esquipulas. And in the mid-80s, there were no computers or cell phones. I tried to keep up communication with Dan during our family's monthly calls to him in Managua. Then I shared the progress and later the needs of the people with our community here.

As we reflect on today's Gospel, it seems that the people in Guatemala, in Nicaragua and we here at St. William were heeding the call of John the Baptist, "Behold the Lamb of God." "Look at him!" With our eyes fixed on the Christ who comes as Eucharist, we began this relationship. Like the people who walk backwards with eyes fixed on Christ and those who fix their gaze on the Christ they carry in procession, for almost two years, our covenant was one of prayer.

Because we committed to share resources, we have tried to respond to the human needs in Esquipulas. From the beginning, we assisted parents with tuition for their children, assisted with school supplies and bibles for the delegates as well as catechetical materials, some larger tuition and silos to hold their grain. In the Jubilee Year of 2000, the assistance to the clinic was initiated as a result of a parish meeting. A little boy's skin illness due to malnutrition about 2005 led to the beginning of the Organic and Nutrition Projects. Whenever our committee has struggled with communication, funding, or other difficult issues, we have always stopped to remind ourselves that our basic commitment is a covenant of faith and prayer. How enriched we are and have been by the faith of the community there. "Behold the Lamb of God!"

We have fulfilled our commitment to visiting one another through the joy of delegations to and from Nicaragua. I have the image of one long procession from here to Esquipulas and back with our eyes on the Black Christ. From the time I visited the parish with my mom in 1986, there

have been 10 delegations through August of this past year and others who have visited Esquipulas. I ask those who have visited Esquipulas and those who plan to go next year to stand that our community can offer a moment of silent prayerful gratitude for the connection you have strengthened or will continue. In 1999, 2002, 2004 and 2009, we have had the privilege of having delegations from our sister parish to visit us. We have experienced how they have opened our hearts and deepened our faith, leaving us always longing for the next group who may come.

Paul reminds us in today's second reading of his call to be an apostle. The almost 25 year journey with Our Lord of Esquipulas has called forth many apostles among us including the committee members, the delegations, you and so many others who support by prayer and donations. The committee I know would join me in especially thanking two of these: David Hulefeld who has led our committee since about 1995 and Felix Garza who has spent hundreds of hours on translation and has been the core of our communication efforts. We are also grateful to you, our Pastoral Team: Sharan, Anne and John for your constant support.

In the first reading today, the Suffering Servant receives the promise that he will be light to the nations. In St. William's sister parish relationship, we have experienced the light of Christ shared between the parishes of two nations in ways we could never have imagined. We stand in amazement at the power of God's work from a simple ordinary beginning and we give thanks. As we focus on the Black Christ today and on the Eucharistic table where this community first signed its covenant with the parish of Our Lord of Esquipulas, we hear anew John's call, "Behold the Lamb of God." "Keep your focus on Christ, the Lamb of God in the 25 years to come!"

Julie Driscoll, SCN