

Guatemala Reflection — Melinda Smith



It was a week like no other. So many facets of my life came together in one place, at the same time, connecting and coexisting in such a beautiful way.

In March of this year I once again traveled with my husband to San Andrés Itzapa, Guatemala. Our home parish, St. Thomas More, has been in a relationship with the Carmelite Sisters of the Holy Family and the residents of San Andres for 30 years. Phil and I have been taking Notre Dame de Sion High School students on Guatemala Spring Break Mission trips for the past 6 years.

One reason I feel called to do this is because our own daughter graduated from Sion in 2001 and I have always felt a special connection to the school. Having come from another Christian faith tradition, the Sion charism's ecumenical and interfaith priorities provided a welcoming and inclusive environment. My connection to Sion grew stronger after meeting Sr. Audrey Doetzel when she moved to Kansas City and we became fellow parishioners. As our friendship grew it became apparent that my life's call had similarities to the charism of Sion. She invited me to consider Associateship with the Congregation and provided educational and spiritual formation that led to my initial commitment in 2013 and subsequent renewal in 2016.

Prior to this year's trip, Audrey offered to contact two Sisters of Sion in the Central American region, who were born and raised in Guatemala, to see if they would like to join us and share this experience. The Sisters were excited about this opportunity, so it was on March 11 that I met Clara Gutiérrez Menchú and Alejandra Vasquez outside the Guatemala City airport.

It was beautiful to watch Clara and Alejandra slide seamlessly into the newly bonded group of Sion students, teachers and parent chaperones. We worked side by side with the Mayan people, building stoves and pigpens and laying cement floors to cover the dirt ones in the tiny huts the people called home. We visited the homebound and provided a carnival for the children who attended a school for the physically and mentally handicapped. We met Mayan women who had bonded in a Women's Group that provided them life skills educational opportunities which, in turn, built self-esteem and increased their confidence.

It was at our evening reflection, the night before the Sisters were to depart to visit their home villages, that all the events I have previously described came to full circle. Clara and Alejandra arrived dressed in their Mayan clothing. They, too, had experienced and survived the Guatemalan Civil War that had taken so many Mayan lives and left those behind in desperate circumstances. They knew what it was to be a Mayan woman in a culture that looked down on them for being just that ... a Mayan and a woman. They were the people we had traveled to Guatemala to serve. Yet, at the same time, they were us. They, the vowed religious of the Congregation of Our Lady of Sion, had founded the school of which we were a part. By living and sharing their charism during the six days we had spent together, we had been transformed into the Family of Sion in the heart of San Andrés Itzapa, Guatemala.

Melinda Smith,
Sion Associate

