



The Catholic Key

Guatemalan nuns visit KC to raise funds for building project

By Marty Denzer
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Marty Denzer/Key photo

Madre Marina de Prado and Hermana Santos Aju Tum in front of a dogwood tree at Robin McGinnity Connelly's home in south Kansas City. Madre wears a plain brown habit.

KANSAS CITY - The two tiny nuns juggled luggage and navigated through jostling strangers through several airports and onto connecting flights as they traveled from Guatemala City, Guatemala, to Kansas City. They were exhausted by day's end, so tired they nearly fell asleep during dinner that night.

The following day they slept until almost noon.

Madre Marina Prado, 75, and her traveling companion, Hermana Santos Aju Tum, 37, are visiting Kansas City for several reasons. First, because they were invited by members of several area parishes, including St. Thomas More Parish in Kansas City, Nativity and Cure of Ars parishes in Leawood, Kan., and St. Paul Parish in Olathe, Kan. The timing of the invitation was good because Madre Marina, who underwent back surgery 11 months ago at Saint Joseph Health Center, has been feeling some pain again and planned to see a doctor about it. The third reason is most important to Madre Marina. She hopes to raise interest in a multi-purpose convent/monastery/orphanage she wants to build in San Andres Itzapa, Chimaltango province, Guatemala.

Through a translator, Mary Raple, Madre Marina told The Catholic Key that she was born into an upper class family and grew up in Guatemala City. She studied nursing and was working as a nurse "when God asked me to do this service."

When she was 29, Madre Marina joined the Carmelites, normally a cloistered religious order. For over 20 years she served and nursed the sick in the cloister. She had always loved the indigenous Mayan Indians of San Andres Itzapa, however, and she petitioned the pope to allow her to separate from the cloister and serve the poor. After some setbacks and several revisions to the document, Madre Marina traveled to Rome in the early 1980s to receive final permission from Pope John Paul II to found a separate, uncloistered Carmelite order whose members live and work among the indigenous people of San Andres.

She has lived in San Andres Itzapa for 23 years, 22 of those years as "Madre." Many Kansas City area Catholics are familiar with Madre Marina and her convent, Carmelo de Nazareth, from service and medical mission trips to San Andres Itzapa.

The lives of Madre Marina and "las hermanas" (the sisters) are "dedicated to serve the indigenous people, to help them raise themselves up to their potential," Madre Marina said.

Her "proyecto magnifico" is an outgrowth of this dedication. Madre Marina wants to rebuild parts of Carmelo de Nazareth that have deteriorated. She also wants to build a new multi-purpose complex closer to Antigua, a city about 30 minutes from San Andres.

Architectural drawings for the complex show separate living quarters for the religious sisters and brothers, a home for the elderly and orphans, a chapel and retreat area, and a large combination orchard and garden.

She is passionate about her project, "a garden of God's love."

"Las hermanas y los hermanos' serve the villagers to teach them how to stay in the village and not emigrate to the city." Madre Marina fears that "those who move to the city (Antigua or Guatemala City) would have to learn thievery to survive, or starve."

By teaching them to grow fruits and vegetables and raise chickens for meat and eggs, Madre Marina and the sisters hope to help the villagers learn to care for themselves. Their hope is to educate the entire person, body and soul.

The indigenous Mayan people are a lot more involved and better educated now than they were in 1996, the end of Guatemala's 36-year civil war. They have awakened from oppression, she said.

The Mayans are still marginalized, despite the impact of improved education and cessation of guerilla warfare and a military presence, she said. There is very little money for necessities. The sisters in the convent embroider and sell vestments and altar cloths, and run a religious gift shop to earn income. An elderly priest pays room and board at the convent. And the sisters paint posters explaining religious events, such as the 2002 canonization of Saint Hermano Pedro de Betancour, or the ordination this year of San Andres Itzapa's first indigenous priest. The sisters painted posters explaining a priest's vestments. They also made "road rugs": painted sawdust strewn through the streets and traced with designs of flowers.

The parishes in the Kansas City area help a great deal, she said. Carmelo de Nazareth convent receives a \$1,000 quarterly stipend from St. Thomas More Parish, she said. Cure of Ars parishioners pay room and board for their mission trips, and the sisters receive assistance from other parishes. Religious sisters and priests, as well as children and families are sponsored through Christian Foundation for Children and Aging.

Madre Marina and Hermana Santos were scheduled to speak at weekend Masses at Cure of Ars, Nativity and St. Paul parishes, and at CFCA, and attend a wedding, several dinners and other social events. They plan to return to Guatemala on June 9, sleeping on the plane.

Tax deductible donations can be sent to St. Thomas More Church: Memo Madre Marina Prado to be deposited in the U.S. Bank account held in her name, 11118 Holmes Road, Kansas City MO 64131.