

Reflections on Nicaragua | June 20, 2007
A letter to the USF community

Dear Colleagues:

From my window seat on TACA flight 363 from Managua, Nicaragua to San Francisco, I could barely see the outlines of Lake Nicaragua and the contours of the northern mountains. From 30,000 feet, Nicaragua is indistinguishable from its Central American neighbors. On the ground, one sees why Nicaragua in 2005 replaced Haiti as the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere. The Leadership Team spent the past week learning about what Nicaraguans call *la realidad*. Rather than a detailed narrative, this letter offers some salient experiences, impressions and images from our experience.



Perhaps our most poignant conversation was with a student solidarity group from *El Arenal*, a small cooperative farming community outside of Managua. Each of the youths spoke about the nearly insurmountable difficulties of obtaining a college education when their families earn just under \$100 a month and barely survive on subsistent farming. They told us how they get up by 4:00 A.M. in order to walk to the highway in time to catch the bus for the 1.5 hour ride to the Jesuit University of Central America in Managua [UCA]. They generally do not return before 9:00 P.M. One young woman said she was just one course shy of obtaining her law degree. She does not have \$600 for the final “diploma class” that would qualify her as a lawyer, so she has temporarily dropped out of school. She explained how in the course of her studies she had to switch to an exclusively Saturday class schedule because she needed week days to earn bus fare her family could not afford. Once she arrived at the UCA for 7 A.M. classes, she went the entire day without books or food, because she had no money for either. She is determined to complete the one remaining course that will give her the law degree she needs to secure land titles for the members of her community. None of us doubted that she will somehow succeed. Every single student had similarly inspiring stories and an equally strong determination to complete his/her college education, no matter the obstacles. We left *El Arenal* deeply impressed by just how hungry these young women and men were for a college education because of the opportunities that education opens up for them and their communities. These people really “get” the whole concept of the common good, even if they don’t use that language.



On Wednesday, June 13, we met with Eddie Perez, a former Sandinista guerilla and UCA graduate, now director of *Dos Generaciones*, a Non Governmental Organization [NGO] that works with the children whose families live and work as scavengers in Managua's municipal garbage dump. We visited the site and stood amidst mountains of garbage to watch people of all ages "mining" for recyclables and "edible" food. We saw cows grazing the area and saw and smelled the carcinogenic gases released by spontaneous combustion within mounds of rotting refuse.

The contaminated milk from those cows is sold in the market just outside the dump's entrance. We were introduced to one of the worker-residents, Moises, who stood mutely by while Eddie called our attention to the ghastly conditions that marked the lives of those whose homes are nestled amidst garbage heaps and on the edge of a stagnant body of water that serves as a breeding ground for mosquitoes. These people distinguish good days from bad days by the amount of garbage that will be dumped in their "yards." The realization that, globally, more people live like this than not, gives substance and urgency to USF's mission of educating leaders who will fashion a more humane and just world for all.



We spent time at UCA listening to presentations from various faculty and administrators. I was struck by echoes of USF in the mission statement of UCA which speaks of "the formation of a new generation of Nicaraguans, profoundly ethical, capable of facing and resolving the national problems and those of the region in the search for a more equitable society." UCA has a number of independent institutes that promote research to support projects with and training workshops for the more vulnerable sectors of Nicaraguan society. One such project, *Nitlapan*, aims at opening markets abroad for small home-based craft workers in leather, wood or ceramic in the town of Masaya. USF hopes to be such a market and is actively exploring ways to do so.

In the course of our days in Nicaragua, we met with a cast of remarkable persons and dealt with a variety of issues and questions too complex for this letter, e.g., whom does the Central American Free Trade Agreement [CAFTA] benefit and whom does it hurt; the pluses and minuses of micro-lending programs in a severely underdeveloped country; the lasting aftereffects of the terrorist campaign [*Contras*] against the democratically elected government of Nicaragua that was directed



and funded by the United States throughout the 1980's; the divisions within the Catholic church over its responsibilities for empowering poor communities to pursue their fundamental human rights to food, shelter, health care and education; the effects of immigration on the families and communities of the sending country; the impact of International Monetary Fund and World Bank policies on the Nicaraguan economy. After a week of point and counter point on these questions, we realized that these issues are

complex and multi-faceted, that there are no “silver bullets” and that what is best for the United States may not be good for Nicaragua.

This experience gave each of us a profound admiration and respect for the sincerity, commitment, perseverance and hopefulness of those with whom we spoke, whether government bureaucrats, teachers, project managers, NGO workers, entrepreneurs, artisans, Jesuits, business persons, hardcore Sandinistas, college students or professors. Hope does not come cheaply in Nicaragua and what hope there is lies in people – not natural resources or cheap labor – but people who have completely given over their minds and hearts to the near impossible task of creating economic, political and social structures that respect and promote the dignity and well-being of every Nicaraguan.



People often ask me, “What do you hope to accomplish with these leadership immersion experiences?” I do not expect new programs or anticipate immediate changes in university policy and procedures as a result of such experiences. What I hope for is an increased sensitivity within the leadership of the university to the heart-breaking struggles of the 3 billion people in our world who try to live on less than \$2 a day and a heightened awareness of this global perspective within which we educate our students. This perspective invites them and us to embrace and

respond to the hopes and dreams of the vast majority of the world whose constant struggle is simply to stay alive for another day. The Spanish word for this is *conscientizacion* – a process for developing a profound personal awareness of the world that we live in and of our responsibility and capacity to change that world for the better.

From 30,000 feet, one country looks pretty much like the other. To see *la realidad* of the poor and vulnerable, we must leave the Hilltop. It is axiomatic that what we see is determined by where we stand. To stand amidst the poor and those who work with them, if only for a week, is to see and experience reality as the majority of the world do. From that perspective there is no more urgent work than ours – educating our minds and hearts and those of our students to create *la realidad* that allows all men and women to realize their full human dignity and to enjoy a fair share of this earth’s goods.



Sincerely,

Stephen A. Privett, SJ
President