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Nicaragua: A Church in the Swamps (Part 1)

BLUEFIELDS, Nicaragua, FEB. 28, 2010 (Zenit.org).- Nicaragua is a country that has been ravaged by civil war, dictatorships and natural disasters. Today it is one of the poorest countries in the Western world.

Capuchin Bishop David Zywiec is the auxiliary bishop of the Vicariate of Bluefields, which serves almost all of the eastern half of the country, including what is known as the Mosquito Coast.

The 62-year-old prelate is a native of East Chicago, Indiana, and he recently spoke of the life of the Church in Nicaragua with the television program "Where God Weeps" of the Catholic Radio and Television Network (CRTN) in cooperation with Aid to the Church in Need.

The transcription of the interview will appear in two parts. Part 2 will appear Monday.

Q: Bishop can you tell us, how did a Polish-American ended up in Bluefields, Nicaragua?

Bishop Zywiec: My grandparents were the ones who came over from Poland about 100 years ago. I was interested in becoming a priest and I was attracted to the Capuchins. They seem to be a very happy group.

I went to the seminary and I heard stories about the missions in Nicaragua, and so I volunteered. My superiors responded, "We need you there." I was ordained in June 1974, and in January 1975 I was in Nicaragua.

Q: What was your first impression when you arrived?

Bishop Zywiec: When I arrived I was a little surprised. I came with a classmate of mine. We came driving down in a jeep that was a donation. We were bringing it down to Nicaragua and I thought we'd get a kind of heroes' welcome.

But the thing is, about a week before we came there was a kidnapping and the president imposed Marshall Law and a curfew in the country. We didn't know that. So, we arrived at about 9 p.m. We are crossing the border right before it closed.

The other Capuchins said: "What! You're coming in at this time? Don't you know that there is curfew? Some half-crazy soldier could have shot you and left you for dead on the side of the road."

So it was a realization of the violent reality there, and that was our first impression.

Q: Have you ever been threatened or felt threatened at all during your time in Nicaragua?

Bishop Zywiec: Well, one time when I was working in the jungle. When I first arrived they sent "the older missionaries to the towns, the younger ones to the jungle."

That was also at the time the Sandinistas, the organization rebelling against the government; they were hiding there [in the jungle], and I heard there were bombings over there and I was kind of afraid.

I said to myself, "My mom and dad are paying taxes to help the U.S. government, and the U.S. government is helping the Nicaraguan government, and they are dropping bombs on this area here, against the guerrillas."

Well I never saw any of these bombs, but it made me a little afraid. But God is good, and I am here right now.

Q: What was the most difficult thing that you had to overcome or adapt to in your new life in Nicaragua?

Bishop Zywiec: I arrived in 1975, and this was right after the Second Vatican Council. When I went through the seminary -- studying theology -- I felt pretty good, you know, because we had new theology, something about pastoral counseling. I felt I was up-to-date compared to these old missionaries.

But then the government army came and took some of the people prisoners and tortured them. Some "disappeared," or we found out later they were killed. Over a two-year period of time we found that there were 300 people who were missing because of the government.

What do you do in situation like that? We never even had training for that!

Q: You never dreamt to you would confront this.

Bishop Zywiec: No, we never talked about this in theology class! We talked about pastoral counseling, and youth apostolates and so forth, and this was a crisis. The only thing I was able to do is just take the information and pass it to the bishop -- Bishop Schlaefler -- and I felt very supported by him.

Q: In the Bluefields Vicariate there is what is called the "Mosquito Coast." Where did this name come from?

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How often do you attend spiritual exercises/retreats?

- Monthly
- A couple of times a year
- At least once a year
- Once every couple of years
- I have only attended a few of them throughout my life
- I've never attended one

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Bishop Zywiec: The Eastern part of Nicaragua, which is in the Bluefields' Vicariate, was never conquered by the Spanish, and so the Miskito Indians who lived there were autonomous.

And they also were able to, you might say, have an empire that went all the way from the Caribbean Coast of Panama through Costa Rica along Nicaragua into Honduras. So they were powerful back then, in the 1700s.

Q: Vicariate Apostolic of Bluefields is an area of 22,825 Square Miles. It's enormous! What does a typical pastoral visit look like for you in your travels to the villagers -- in seeking out your parishioners?

Bishop Zywiec: Usually what I tell the people is that I like four things: I like time to hear confessions. Then I celebrate Mass and then a confirmation or some other sacrament is requested, such as a baptism or a marriage.

And then I like to have a meeting with the church board: It gives me more of a chance for dialogue.

Then I say: "I'd like something to eat." Generally, you know, when the bishop comes -- since there is no electricity -- lots of times they'll kill a cow or a pig because there is no refrigeration. So there is food for everybody, and everybody eats!

Q: Vicariate Apostolic of Bluefields is almost half of all of Nicaragua. You are 25 priests. Are you not a bit overwhelmed?

Bishop Zywiec: Yes, that's a problem. We have roughly 1,000 chapels and 14 parishes. A small parish would have one priest with about 30 chapels to take care of. There is a priest from north of Milwaukee; he is in his late 70s and he visits over 100 chapels.

Every Sunday in the chapels, we'll have a celebration of the Word, so those who lead these celebrations are called "Delegates of the Word." Usually we'll have two of them in each chapel so in case one gets sick or one can't make it, we always have a back up.

Then we have a catechist for baptism, a catechist for first Communion and confession, catechist for confirmation, and catechist for marriage.

We have training courses usually once a year for these different catechists. Some parishes will have courses for musicians. And then there are movements -- we call them retreat movements -- and it's a way of helping the faith grow, you know, preparing leaders. So we depend a lot on the laity.

Q: How many missionaries are you? You mentioned that you have a number of missionaries that are getting older. Where is the new generation of priests coming from? Are there vocations coming from Nicaragua?

Bishop Zywiec: The priests that we can count on would be the priests who come from the Vicariate of Bluefields; there are missionaries and there are people who help, but our native diocesan priest are the ones we are able to count on more, and we find that a lot of our vocations come from families that are leaders in the community.

For example, where there is a married deacon, or a Delegate of the Word, there is this Christian commitment and that's fertile ground for vocations, not just to the priesthood but also to the religious life. For example, in one town of about 10,000, in the past 20 years, 15 girls have gone to the convent. I think that's a beautiful thing to see something like that.

Q: What expressions of popular faith or devotions are there in the vicariate?

Bishop Zywiec: We have lots of processions. In my experience in the United States processions are usually held inside, but in Nicaragua it's a warmer climate and the people are use to having processions outside, such as during Holy Week.

For Holy Week in some of the towns they have processions for the Way of the Cross, and for the Easter Vigil there is the blessing of the Pascal candle outside and then the procession into the church.

For our patronal feasts as well we have a procession with the statue of the patron saint going through town, singing songs, praying the rosary. This is a normal, normal part of church life. We just pray it doesn't rain too much.

Q: Other than the size of the territory, what would you say is the greatest challenge to evangelizing the Miskito people?

Bishop Zywiec: Although the territory is big, it is perhaps not so much a problem of size, but of transportation and communication. I think in that whole area, we have about 100 kilometers (62 miles) of paved road and the rest is gravel road. It rains a lot, and lots of times there are places where you get stuck.

Another thing is that of the 1,000 chapels, 100 are Miskito-speaking; the rest are Spanish-speaking. They are mainly farmers -- subsistence farmers -- involved in dairy farming or cattle farming.

Perhaps one of our main concerns is that people are not only able to receive the sacraments -- to be baptized -- but also that they learn their faith and what it means in their daily lives to live a deeper evangelization. I believe too, vocational promotion is an important thing for us so that we have available priests for the future.

And human promotion is an important thing in the form of schools, in the form of our health programs so that people not just hear the Word of God, but are able to live a human life and be able to be involved in the national life, and not be, you might say, forgotten -- to be able to participate and participate conscientiously.

* * *

This interview was conducted by Mark Riedemann for "Where God Weeps," a weekly television and radio show produced by Catholic Radio and Television Network in conjunction with the international Catholic charity Aid to the Church in Need.

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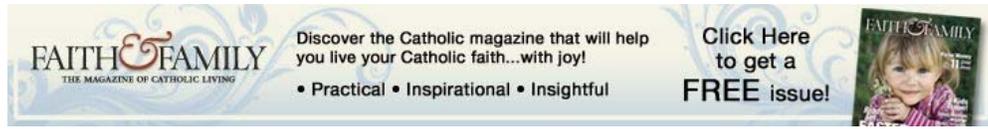
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