

by Peter Feuerherd  
photos by Dennis O'Connor

# Progress in

## A Jesuit parish in Honduras brings change to a

**P**ROGRESS comes slowly to El Progreso, Honduras, population 85,000 plus.

It is in a valley near the Chiquita banana plantations, a half-hour drive from San Pedro Sula, the country's second-largest city. El Progreso's *barrios* are full of the humble but well-kept shacks common to the country, the second poorest in the Western hemisphere.

While most Hondurans live on under \$100 a month, there are signs of prosperity. American fast-food joints adorn downtown, lending a modern flavor to a tropical town. Such places are status symbols in Honduras for those who get money from family members working abroad.

"We don't have medical services, education, classes, books," says Fr. Jack Warner, SJ, who has lived and worked in Honduras since 1979, "but we have Pizza Hut and Burger King."

Honduras is full of symbols of consumerism clashing with abject poverty. Through it all, the Jesuits who have ministered there since 1946 see God as being active in all things, particularly in the lives of the poor.

At St. Ignatius Church in the barrio of Berlin, it's near the patron's feast day, so on the bulletin board are testimonies

about the Spiritual Exercises. The Jesuits sponsor a retreat center so that the poor can find a place of quiet and solitude. Even the poor, they note, have a right to a spiritual life.

But Church here offers more than spirituality. For the devout Catholic poor of Latin America, the parish is not just for Sunday mornings. It is involved in all aspects of life.

So it is at St. Ignatius. The pastor is Fr. John Donahue, SJ, 61, a tall, gaunt figure who on this weekday morning sports sandals and a Florida Marlins baseball cap. Throughout the extensive Jesuit mission in El Progreso, a theme emerges: the Church here preaches salvation yet also works concretely to solve the seemingly intractable problems facing Hondurans.

Take immigration, for example. Every hour, 900 Hondurans leave; they are often at the mercy of the unscrupulous, who, for a fee, will sneak them over borders in the hope of jobs and wealth.

It is a sad story repeated throughout the country. Ask a group of six parish leaders Donahue has gathered, and all of them note they have relatives in the United States who, through their remittances, help support their families here. Of the 7.4 million Hondurans, one in seven resides elsewhere in

Central America, the United States, or Spain. As a result, many children in the barrio are being raised by grandparents. That, in turn, contributes to another Honduran issue: criminal gangs.

Some 24 youth have been murdered in this barrio alone in the past year. But the youth gangs, says Donahue, "have become the scapegoats for society." While they are held accountable for much of the violence, there is also widespread vigilantism and adult organized crime that is less publicized.

Unemployment and lack of education and access to clean water also affect life in Berlin. They are sources of resentment, anger, and despair the parish tries to counter. There are no alternatives to reliance on the Church, notes Donahue.

"The Church needs to do a lot because the government is inade-



Fr. John Donahue, SJ, pastor of St. Ignatius in El Progreso, Honduras, works with Caroline Castillo and other committed parishioners to meet the needs of those living in their *barrio*. "The Church needs to do a lot because the government is inadequate," says Donahue.

# El Progreso

## barrio scarred by poverty and violence

quate,” he says. In its education efforts, the parish operates a small school for special-needs children and sponsors dozens of scholarships for young people through raffles in Honduras and in parishes in the United States Donahue visits.

As in much of Latin America, a region with relatively few priests, the parish empowers lay people to preach, organize social projects, and visit the sick, among other projects.

A group of lay leaders from St. Ignatius comes with carefully prepared statements. They speak slowly in Spanish so that a reporter from the States can catch what they have to say. They are proud of their accomplishments.

Carlos Galeas, a social justice coordinator for the parish, notes that a woodcraft project started by the parish helps with unemployment, a chronic problem aggravated when Chiquita, once a strong employer in the area, sold much of its holdings after the devastation wrought by Hurricane Mitch in 1998. On those lands, independent growers now raise African palms, a far less labor-intensive crop.

Ana Pineda leads a women’s sewing group, a means to employ women considered too old for work in the massive factories in Honduras producing clothing headed to the United States and elsewhere. The work, done mostly by women, is low paying and difficult. Older women—in the youthful culture of Honduras, that can mean anyone over 30—are rarely hired for such labor.

Parishioner Rumilda Martínez says that factories often run afoul of labor law. “They have no respect for the rights of the workers,” she says, echoing much of the teaching of the Jesuits in the area, well known for their support for unions.

### On other fronts

St. Ignatius Church is but a sliver of the strong Jesuit presence in El Progreso. Another U.S. Jesuit at home in Honduras is Fr. Raymond Pease, pastor of Our Lady of Mercy Church in El Progreso. Ordained in 1968, Pease has devoted his life to work here. Besides serving as pastor, he was also dean of the Jesuit high school in town.

His parish offers an array of social services: child care,

Fr. Jack Warner, SJ, in Honduras since 1979, established a traveling theater company to promote a sense of pride among the country’s poor. “One of our main thrusts is to provide a cultural identity for people to combat the barrage of media images that come from outside,” he says.



nutrition, and a children's home. On a drive around town, he passes a Mormon church. The once overwhelmingly Catholic country is now swamped with evangelical Christian groups and Mormons, who have nine congregations in El Progreso alone. Planeloads of mission groups from the States come to convert Catholics.

Pease drolly notes that the Mormons once challenged a team of Jesuit scholastics to a game of basketball. It was decades ago, but he remembers the score like it was yesterday, a 78–43 Jesuit victory.

“The Holy Spirit was with us,” he says with a laugh. “Everything we threw up went in.” The Mormons haven't issued any basketball challenges since, but their religious presence in this historically Catholic country is still felt.



Fr. Ismael Moreno, SJ, directs a radio station with secular and religious programming. Jesuit ministries in the country range from a sociological think tank to a technical school that trains carpenters and electricians.

### On the air

It's after lunch on a sleepy tropical day in El Progreso. But there's little sleepiness in the fiery rhetoric of Fr. Ismael Moreno, SJ, a social activist, writer, and radio station director. He is one of the El Progreso Jesuits forging Catholic identity through social-justice activism.

Honduras is a nation in trouble, he notes, and he's not afraid to let the world know it. In a recent article in a social-justice newsletter, Moreno pointed out a litany of issues facing Honduras. There is brutal violence: in one region alone, more than 1,100 were murdered in the first half of the year. He says that the government is unable and, in some cases, unwilling, to stop the killings that arise from criminals and the violent, grinding poverty that wears on so many Hondurans.

“There is something very grave and profound that's occurring in this country,” he says. “In the failure of Honduras, all of us have responsibility.”

Moreno is addressing these failures in his own prophetic style. One approach is his directing a radio station operated by the Jesuits. Its target audience is young people, women, and

laborers in a country where the best medium for reaching the poor is radio. It is not an overtly religious station, at least most of the time. From its studios in the middle of town it broadcasts pop music and talk radio, but it also broadcasts pastoral reflections and discussions of contemporary issues. It works to draw audiences and advertisers as well as to provide training for young people in broadcasting.

Just a few miles away from the downtown radio station is the former country club for the old United Fruit Company. In a compound where executives and their spouses once dined, sunbathed, and partied, Fr. Jack Warner, SJ, directs the *Teatro la Fragua* [Theater of the Forge]. When United Fruit left, it donated the land to the Jesuits. Warner has transformed the old nightclub into a classic Spanish-style corral theater. The old lights were donations Warner gathered in the States from theaters that had long moved on to computerized fixtures. The group performs Passion plays and dramatic presentations of ancient Mayan myths and other aspects of Honduran culture, in its own theater and around the country.

But in a country where poverty is extreme and the needs are enormous, isn't theater a tad frivolous?

Warner, 63, gray hair falling over his shoulders, begs to differ. He says classical theater is needed in Honduras more than ever. “One of our main thrusts is to provide a cultural identity for people to combat the barrage of media images that come from outside,” he says.

The impact of those media images, he says, is that Hondurans are getting the message that their culture is substandard, particularly compared to that of *El Norte* and its goodies glorified in the media. Warner is determined, through the arts,

to counteract that notion. It's part of evangelization.

“If people are going to be good Christians, they need to know who they are. Jesus recognized that and honored the tradition of his own people. If Hondurans don't have an authentic identity as a people, they will not have an authentic Christian identity,” he says.

Forging culture, encouraging spirituality, and addressing vital social questions: these are just some of the ways the Jesuits are nurturing change in Honduras. No one claims it will happen overnight, but progress is coming to El Progreso. **C**

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