



TEOSINTE: 1988-2013 25 YEARS AS A REPATRIATED COMMUNITY

By Patricia Gabarra-Koller

This year, Teosinte celebrates their 25 year anniversary as a repatriated community. Every August the entire community has a big celebration of 'repopulation' (*re poblaci3n*) to commemorate their beginnings and to honor the elders who formed their village.

St Sebastian's El Salvador committee accompanied our sister parish in their celebration by rejoicing with them at a distance and decorating the Teosinte corner with photos of their celebration and a 25 silver anniversary banner. We are happy to further celebrate this milestone with you via this article, recapping a little of this year's celebration and the history of how the village (*cant3n*) of Teosinte was formed.

Teosinte was formed by its current village elders, in a way, while still in the UN-sponsored refugee camp of Mesa Grande, Honduras; approximately a two hour drive from the border with El Salvador. In August of 1988, as the brutal Salvadoran civil war was raging (1980-1992), and a little less than a year after the first repatriation to El Salvador, these displaced men and women made the courageous decision to begin a trip to a new place they would call home.

As the elders explained to us during our 2011 delegation, they knew of this abandoned village in the hills of Chalatenango, with a church in ruins and a few houses which, with



proper proceedings, could become their new legal home. All of them had arrived at the camp after fleeing persecution and starvation, as people were being killed if seen farming. They had suffered brutal losses of loved ones and their homes. The UN and international lay and religious organizations assisted many in reaching the camp. However, once there, they were neither free, healthy, nor safe.

Some of the group had been in the camp since 1980. With 15,000 refugees in tents, in about 3 square kilometers, conditions were complicated by food and mental crises, and by 1988 it was no longer a tenable situation. They could work for food, but could make no money to buy any other necessity. They taught themselves to make or repair whatever they needed, from

hats and clothes to shoes and hammocks; they became midwives and health practitioners. When anyone would go to the fenced edges of the camp to trade or deal with a Honduran on the other side, they risked the lives of everyone involved, and many were lost after being arrested by the Honduran soldiers guarding the movements in the camp.

As they shared with us, Monsignor Luis Santa Rosa didn't want them to starve and he helped them organize. They grouped as a Church and prayed for their own wellbeing. They knew that God would listen and reminded themselves of the verses "ask and you shall receive", "knock and the door will open". Once they left the camp, international volunteers assisted and accompanied them by foot and other means until their destination, for their protection. Persons like Alicia, Silvia, and Terencio are remembered by Teosinte's elders with sincere gratitude; without them, they say, they would have been killed on their return "home".
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Teosinte 25th Anniversary

(Continued from front)

As such, the repatriation celebration remembers and honors not only the elders who formed Teosinte, but also the international volunteers and organizations that stood by them and accompanied them along the way, one of them being the SHARE Foundation, whom St. Sebastian's has been supporting since those 'early days'.

The young adults of Teosinte and scholarship recipients play a big part in organizing the event, as well as in preserving their community's history. After all, they were either born in the camp or in Teosinte. These young men and women have the strongest sense of community I have personally ever experienced.

Saturday was a very full day. It began at 3:30am for the organizing youth, whose job was to have as much fun as possible while serenading and waking-up the community with country music and firecrackers. Mass was celebrated from 9:30 to 1:30pm by four priests, including the current and previous priests that accompanied Teosinte, and Father Rutilio Sanchez, who lived with Monseñor Romero and has been an advocate for human rights in El Salvador since before the war, and who accompanied various communities in Chalatenango during the war.



Celebrating Mass as a repatriated community.

Local youth brought up the gifts, including corn cobs. The celebration included messages of congratulations from St. Sebastian and messages from international solidarity people who have worked with community since the war and visited for the celebration. The speaker featured in the photo below is Alicia, who is one of the courageous people who accompanied the group from Mesa Grande to Teosinte, and who returns regularly



to work with the community. After the mass there was a political-cultural event featuring talks by the president of the Salvadoran Legislative Assembly, the president of the FMLN party, and the "congresswoman" of Chalatenango, a slideshow of the history and development of Teosinte (clinic, soccer field, church renovation, etc), and recognition certificates being given to those who lost loved ones during the repatriation to the conflict and to those who had been community organizers.

This was followed by plays and dances by local youth and a concert by the famous revolutionary band, the *Torogoces de Morazan*. The traditional feast included a corn roast and quesadillas, corn beverage (*atol*) and coffee.

In the evening there was a dance with an impressive sound system, which brought throngs of youth and some adults out in spite of the rain. Sunday was a low key day with soccer games.

In the photo below, current town council (*Directiva*) president, Jaime Cruz Alvarenga (centered), is accompanied by Bethany Loberg from SHARE and Alex Early from Sister Cities.



Both organizations advocate for the development and sustainability of communities such as Teosinte and support accompaniment and sistering relationships such as ours.

To read more about the Mesa Grande refugee camp and the repatriation of Salvadorans, there are various sites of interest, such as the SHARE El Salvador 2011 blog article *Mesa Grande and World Refugee Day*; Mike Lanchin's account of his wife's recollections of the camp and return to the site in 2004, in *Past vanishes in Honduras*, on BBC News online; and Linda Miller's photographic journal of the camp and repatriations in 1987 at www.lindahessmiller.com.

As we celebrate and commemorate the resiliency and faith of the Teosinte and Salvadoran people, we also remember people around the world who are displaced or affected by conflict. June 20th is the UN World Refugee Day. Why not read about it?



STEPS ALONG THE WAY ... SISTERING WITH TEOSINTE

By David B. Goehner

St. Sebastian Parish has had a sistering relationship with our brothers and sisters in Teosinte, El Salvador since 1991. A vital part of that sistering has been the connections and relationships that have been developed with the people – families, groups, individuals – that comprise the community. Those connections and relationships have largely developed as a result of the travels, to and from, between our parish community and the community of Teosinte. *(Next column)*



Friends of the Teosinte community hold up a sign greeting our St. Sebastian delegation.

Travels to Teosinte are called delegations. Including the first delegation in 1991, our parish has supported seven delegations to Teosinte. Delegations have varied in group size from two to thirteen. Anyone who has been on delegation can share the reality that each time we bring the whole of St. Sebastian, our community, even aspects of our government and way of life, to the people in Teosinte.

Travels from Teosinte are called tours. To date, there have been four tours from Teosinte. Tours have varied in group size from three to one. The essence of tours has been to bless our parish community with the experience of life, whether it be customs, culture, news, challenge, spirituality, and especially celebration ... all aspects of Teosinte. Anyone who has encountered our visitors from Teosinte has been witnessed to, blessed, likely challenged.

A tour was planned for this month. Our parish El Salvador Committee began the process of planning and implementing a tour back in late Spring of 2012. There is a great deal of planning involved in developing a tour. A short-list of tasks includes:

- Asking the people of Teosinte, particularly their community council, called the Directiva, to consider a tour,
- patiently waiting while the Directiva works with all the members of the community to finalize a slate of candidates who they believe will best represent the community, and be able to share what they learn from the tour with the rest of the community upon their return,
- completing all the initial paperwork and documentation that will be required to obtain the necessary visas to enter the United States,
- preparing the candidates for the various meetings with the U.S. Embassy as part of the visa approval process,
- developing an itinerary of activities, learning experiences, meetings, locating translators and interpreters and volunteers who will chaperone the visitors once in the U.S., preparing housing and transportation,
- securing the necessary documentation from our parish pastoral staff, community and political leaders, and other official records that will be given to the U.S. Embassy officials in El Salvador,
- praying, praying, praying for guidance and support,
- waiting for news from the final meeting between the candidates, their Salvadoran chaperones from the SHARE Foundation, and the U.S. Embassy officials.

Our parish El Salvador Committee worked with the Directiva and SHARE to bring Jaime (a university student), Marleni (a teacher), and Tino (an El Salvador/Honduras border official) on tour to the US. Following an hour wait, all three were individually interviewed by the U.S. Embassy officials. Within minutes, each visa application was denied.

One might reckon there are many factors that are involved in both the decisions to deny visas, and the

decisions at a governmental level that impact the granting or denying of visas. There is enough debate about the pros/cons of immigration and immigration legislation. Socio-economic relations between the US and Central American states, let alone El Salvador, are complicated. That there are 2 million Salvadorans illegally living in the US...who provide over 60% of the financial support for the villagers and poor people in El Salvador, exacts an impact upon the various decisions involved. *(Continued on back)*

Sistering With Teosinte

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Jaime, Marleni, and Tino are at peace about missing out on the tour. The people of Teosinte are at peace as well. They understand the complications. Actually, they were worried our parish would believe they did something wrong for the visas to be denied. They remain committed to the sistering relationship with the people of St. Sebastian Parish. There is much about which to be grateful. Certainly there is much to do to improve the socio-economic and political relations between the U.S. and El Salvador. Constant prayers from the faithful are likely the best option.

We share a common bond, and mission, with the people of Teosinte. Archbishop Oscar Romero stated it best ... offered here for you to ponder:

It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view. The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision. We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work. Nothing we do is complete, which is a way of saying that the Kingdom always lies beyond us. No statement says all that could be said. No prayer fully expresses our faith. No confession brings perfection. No pastoral visit brings wholeness. No program accomplishes the Church's mission. No set of goals and objectives includes everything. This is what we are about. We plant the seeds that one day will grow. We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise. We lay foundations that will need further development. We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities. We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. This enables us to do something, and to do it very well. It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest. We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker. We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own.

We have a tremendous and blessed opportunity to be traveling in relationship with the people of Teosinte. We keep moving forward, celebrating along the way.

Each year, St. Sebastian Parish designates money, raised from the Mission Appeal, to support the work of the SHARE Foundation. In addition to helping set up and facilitate our sistering delegations and tours, SHARE works to support Salvadorans in advocacy within local and national government (including in the U.S.), as well as two projects that impact the people of Teosinte: Youth Scholarships, and Women's Empowerment and Food Security. Your contributions to the Mission Appeal support Teosinte through the work of the SHARE Foundation.

U.S. EMBASSY REJECTS VISAS

In response to the Teosinte tour representatives being denied their visas by the U.S. Embassy to visit our parish community this Fall, the El Salvador Committee wrote this letter to members of the Teosinte community:

Dear Community of Teosinte,

Your St. Sebastian sister community is sad and disappointed that the U.S. Embassy rejected your visa applications. We appreciate all the time and effort that went into this process and your willingness to travel to be with us.

Your visit would have greatly advanced our connection and fostered our continued communication. But we are resolved to find other creative ways for this to happen. Perhaps people from St. Sebastian community will be able to travel to Teosinte more frequently. Another solution might be for us to use Skype as a way for even more people in both of our communities to come together. We will work with the SHARE foundation to find ways to let this new technology help us toward this goal.

Nothing can replace the gift of your presence here on tour but we want to find ways to overcome these barriers until a more just immigration policy is in place in the United States. "Nothing can separate us from the love of God" and YOU are the love of God for us.

Sincerely,

*St. Sebastian Community
Milwaukee, Wisconsin, USA*

SAVE THE DATE!

ANNUAL TEOSINTE
EL SALVADOR CRAFT SALE

December 8, 2013

As part of the upcoming Holiday Boutique weekend, the El Salvador committee will again be selling crafts during the Brunch and after all Masses.