

'I SEE YOU'

A Coeur d'Alene-based mission helps Honduran communities build homes, obtain water and renovate a chapel.

By Deacon Chris Stewart
for the Idaho Catholic Register

COEUR D'ALENE Thirteen year old José Melgar points to the branches high in a tree not far from his home, calling the tree: "El árbol de vida" (the tree of life).

It's that tree where he and his siblings were secured by a rope to avoid the violence of the twin hurricanes that battered his Honduran home a week apart last November.

His face and demeanor are a mix of gratitude as well as lingering trauma from the oppressive climate event that attacked this country already plagued by severe poverty, pandemic, sustained drought and political and social insecurity, all of which have taken their toll on subsistence and commercial farming.

José is the oldest of four children of a single mom who now lives in a home financed by Unión de Amor in response to the hurricanes. Unión de Amor (Union of Love) started in 2017 as a missionary effort of the St. Pius X and St. Thomas parishes and Holy Family Catholic School in Coeur d'Alene.

During 2018 and 2019, a team of missionaries from Coeur d'Alene were able to travel to Honduras to work directly with the people there, but the COVID pandemic limited our travel the last two years. However, Unión de Amor has continued to flourish, with missionaries maintaining a connection with our Honduran friends, albeit remotely, through prayer, celebration and financial support.

The hurricanes last November challenged Unión de Amor to become engaged in new ways and new places.

We have built three homes and three more are in process. We have delivered household supplies, clothing and food and water to the homeless. We helped renovate a parish that served a housing project in Barracoa. The parish renovation project was organized by the Exaltation of the Cross Parish and the Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus who are active throughout Honduras.

Here in Coeur d'Alene, we receive detailed reports on each of the homes that are part of the project, including financial details. The pastor, Father Héctor Banegas, qualifies families for homes based on their need. Families are required to help build the homes as much as possible, but professionals oversee construction and do the work that exceeds volunteers' capabilities. Our mission project manager, Diana Sánchez, conducts periodic site visits and interviews to ensure all is going well. We initially fundraised to build five homes, but six will be built due to Diana's diligence and her ability to stretch each dollar through negotiation, fundraising and volunteer labor.

Historically, our focus has been the village of Consolación. This village, plagued by past violence and substance abuse, was one of two in the region that did not have a water system serving the community.

The pandemic slowed the development of our water project but the diligence, hard work and vision of community members is keeping the project on track with outside help from the regional governing authority and World Vision Honduras. It has been an incredibly complex task pulling together the partners, securing all the financing and developing a local water board. There is also the legal process to secure water rights and manage the water system. María Oralia is our board president, which is a



Above, local children enjoy the clean water near the headwaters of a local springs. Soon a water tank will be completed to collect and store the cleaner and more accessible water for the Honduran village.



At left, Luisa Becker, a missionary from St. Pius X Parish in Coeur d'Alene pictured with three children in a family that now lives a new home thanks in part to the work of Unión de Amor, a mission project of St. Pius X Parish, St. Thomas Parish and Holy Family Catholic School, all in Coeur d'Alene. (Photos courtesy of Deacon Chris Stewart and Unión de Amor)

remarkable achievement for a woman in Honduras. It is also a truly remarkable step forward for the community.

This water project was simply impossible to execute in the past. Local leader Don Bartolo Moreno told us that he has been dreaming of this project for more than 40 years. Part of the reason for the delay came up in a conversation with the elected leader for the region during one of our partnership meetings when he said he "never even considered going to Consolación" in previous election cycles. The villagers, our brothers and sisters in Christ, were essentially invisible to the world because of their history.

What changed? Here's where we get to the defini-

tion of "mission" being an encounter of love where those involved enter into a solidarity with each other, with Christ at the center. By recognizing each other, by our encounter, we bring each other new life and hope.

There is an African Zulu greeting where one says, "I see you," and the response of the other is, "I am here." By truly seeing one another – our worth, our desire, our needs – we bring one another into existence. The people of Consolación were non-existent

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At left, Exaltation of the Cross Parish during the flooding that resulted from two hurricanes in Honduras. At right, the chapel after it was restored through the volunteer efforts of Unión de Amor. (Photos courtesy of Deacon Chris Stewart and Unión de Amor)

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because of their poverty and history of violence. When there is someone who recognizes them and encounters them, there's a shift that happens that changes the lives of those being seen and those doing the seeing. We did not go down there to save them as much as they saved us. That encounter is what makes mission complete. All the rest is just window dressing.

This is why most people who come away from a missionary venture, or any charitable event, often say that


they received more than they gave. They are articulating a sense of that "abundant life" that Jesus offers as they give their lives in love for others.

It has been that way for me. I have watched as our Honduran friends have become true heroes of their own stories – building homes, establishing a water system, battling back from hurricanes and practicing their faith. The truth is, they have also been the heroes in my story. I will be forever grateful to have been graced by their friendship and their examples of courage, resilience and joy.

Trust me when I say that Unión de

Amor changes lives. If you would like more information, feel free to call me at 208-758-1193. You can also visit our website at uniondeamor.org or receive updates by texting "Honduras" to 84756.

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