



Talk about food prices!

Conversations these days in both Venezuela and Minnesota inevitably gravitate to the coronavirus and social distancing restrictions, but what about back in “normal” times? In Minnesota the go-to topic is weather. With temps into the 90’s almost every day, people here do comment on the heat, but what really gets people talking is the price of cooking oil, sugar and rice. When was the last time you had a lively discussion over such things? Probably never, I’d guess, but this is Venezuela where people spend most of their income on food. Once they get rolling, people often become more animated, moving on to the price of eggs, milk and chicken.

Item	Ven.	MN
Cooking oil	1.23 qt.	1.66 qt.
Flour	0.59 lb.	0.40 lb.
Corn flour	0.50 lb.	1.53 lb.
Eggs	1.88 dz	1.50 dz
Spaghetti noodles	0.99 lb.	0.99 lb.
Rice	0.50 lb.	0.40 lb.
Whole Chicken	1.20 lb.	1.49 lb.
Sugar	0.45 lb	0.57 lb.
Potatoes	0.23 lb.	0.38 lb.
Onions	0.30 lb.	0.38 lb.
Tomatoes	0.30 lb.	1.49 lb.
Margarine	1.82 lb.	2.55 lb.
Mayonnaise	1.82 lb.	1.60 lb.
Ground beef	2.59 lb	5.00 lb
Block cheese	2.20 lb.	3.97 lb.
Dried red beans	1.66 lb.	1.18 lb.

I did a cost comparison this past week of the basic food items in the Venezuelan basket, converting various sized packaging to the price per pound, quart and dozen. The Venezuelan prices are what we pay buying in volume at a place similar to Sam’s Club or Costco. Most people here don’t have access to such stores, lacking a vehicle to get there and cash on hand to buy in volume, and generally pay at least 25% more at local stores. Minnesota prices are as advertised last week for online shopping at Cub with the exception of potatoes and onions which, as you know, are always cheapest at Kwik Trip. You may wonder why I didn’t include frozen pizza, ice cream, baked beans, tuna, or other items which would have been on my shopping list back in Minnesota. I haven’t seen a frozen pizza since arriving in Venezuela nine months ago, tasted ice cream just once, and have yet to eat or even see food that comes in a can. The average Venezuelan family eats little or no processed food.

Contrary to what folks in Minnesota had heard in the past, there is no food shortage here. Even neighborhood shops are well-stocked. Such was not the case here three years ago when, with skyrocketing inflation, the government set price limits on basic food items. Merchants couldn’t purchase those commodities for less than what they had to sell them, so store shelves were empty. The current issue is not availability but affordability.

The median annual household income in Minnesota in 2018 was a bit over \$70,000 of which around 12% or \$8,400 was spent on food with approximately \$4,800 being food at home and \$3,600 at restaurants. Although the typical family in our parish hasn’t eaten at a restaurant for years and has a much simpler, less expensive shopping list when going to the market, they spend nearly 100% of their income on food. How can that be?

The minimum salary here is currently around \$3 a month, obviously not enough to feed a family for a few days much less an entire month. To retain good workers, most companies give employees an additional monthly bonus of \$20 to \$30. Those with a “Carnet de la Patria” (homeland card), which the government began issuing in 2016, receive around \$3 every couple weeks deposited to their bank account and a box of basic food items distributed by the government every 2 or 3 months. The downside is that the card can be used to track votes in elections. Concerned that the card is really a political tool for buying votes, many people don’t apply for one.

More than 5 million Venezuelans have left the country in the past five years, adding another important source of support for families in the form of money sent from foreign countries. Venezuela allows transfers up to \$100 at a time through DHL, UPS, and Western Union from which a commission of around \$20 is deducted.

Unfortunately, not every family has relatives in foreign countries to support them. Not all apply for a homeland card. Many workers, public school teachers included, receive only the basic salary with no monthly bonus, and those retirees who qualify for a government pension only receive the equivalent of around \$1.50 a month.

So, next time you get to talking with your friends and neighbors, after reviewing the latest on the coronavirus and the Minnesota weather scene, consider adding the price of cooking oil, sugar and rice to your conversation and why, for many of our Venezuelan people, those prices are the major conversation starters every day.

Points to ponder

What percentage of your family income do you spend on food? What would you remove from your shopping list if you had to cut way back on food purchases? What about eating out?

The Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis has staffed and supported parishes in the diocese of Ciudad Guayana in Venezuela since 1970. These “Did you know?” papers are designed to give you a better understanding of life in Venezuela and to strengthen connections between the parishes of the Archdiocese and their archdiocesan mission during our 50th anniversary year. Please direct any comments or suggestions for future papers to Fr. Denny Dempsey at ddempsey@churchofstdominic.org or 651-368-7324.