



With All Our Hearts:
*YOUTH FROM THE DIOCESE OF
 GRAND RAPIDS ON MISSION TO
 HONDURAS*

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Sometimes the Gospel is preached more with life than with words. This is what fifteen young people from the Diocese of Great Rapids, are experiencing, who have responded to the missionary call with enthusiasm, dedication and a

deep conviction that faith is strengthened when shared. This group traveled to Honduras to collaborate with the community of La Finca del Niño, an orphanage, school and Catholic clinic in Trujillo, in the north of the country and on the shores of the Caribbean Sea. They did so not only as volunteers, but as witnesses to the Gospel and sowers of hope.

Among the participants were Zonia Martínez and Alberto Maldonado, two different stories united by the same passion: Living the Gospel “with all the heart.” Their testimonies show how such a mission transforms not only those who receive it, but deeply those who perform it.

A STORY OF FAITH AND CONVERSION

Zonia was born in Findlay, Ohio, daughter of migrant working parents and married to Sergio Martínez, a native of Durango, Mexico and with whom she had three children. Her life has passed between Arkansas, Florida and Michigan. She was raised in the Pentecostal church, where she was not baptized as a child, because in that tradition baptisms are done in adulthood. She was already married and with her son Juan when she felt the call to deepen her faith and seek full communion in the Catholic Church. “I asked what I had to do to be able to commune, and so I started my conversion. I was baptized, I did First Communion and Confirmation at St. Joseph in Wright,” she recalls. In her journey of faith, Zonia felt ever stronger the desire to serve beyond her immediate community. “As a nurse I know I help the community, but we can do more. We can go elsewhere and give from our poverty,” he says. His decision to go to Honduras was not sudden: “I told myself why I am not going to go... God gave me life after cancer, and I don't have to keep putting it off.”

YOUTH AND ROOTS

Alberto Maldonado, meanwhile, is a 22-year-old boy born in Grand Rapids to Oaxacan parents. He works full time in a medical utensils factory and has studied two years of administration. His identity is marked by the pride of his roots and his love for the Church. “I see this as a bridge to a experience that I don’t know about, as a leap to something better,” he says. For him, this mission was a seed that awaits fruit not only now, but in the future. “I want to sow something for my children, if God grants me to be a father... be an example, be a good friend, a good child.” He also hopes that the Honduran children who met the missionaries will remember that “there were young who taught them something they didn’t know, or they were just good to them.”

THE MISSION: GIVE AND RECEIVE

The community they went to is in a warm, coastal area of the Honduran Caribbean. Many of the group were never in a tropical country or in direct contact with the poverty that characterizes some rural areas of Honduras. “You can imagine what you’re going to find, but you’re not going to really understand it until later,” Zonia says. “I know what poverty is because I was born in the fields, but I still know that this experience is going to change us.” The group was organized into teams to carry out activities with niños, maintenance in school, painting, clinic work and other community tasks. “We don’t know exactly the impact it made, but we went to serve what it took: clean, cook, help with the children... The important thing is that they know they are not forgotten,” he says.

SPIRITUAL AND COMMUNITY PREPARATION

The preparation was not only logistical. All the missionaries lived a profound spiritual process. They participated in retreats organized by Father Eugenio, as well as personal moments of prayer, rosaries, confession and spiritual conversation. “I asked God to give me the right words so that they could understand the message I wanted to convey, to realize that one goes with all one’s heart,” Zonia says.

Alberto sought to connect with his faith by reading about the history of the Church, watching documentaries and preparing small reflections he shared with the children. “I went to learn from them, and they from me. I don’t know what they learned, but something had to stay.” An important part of their preparation was cultural: Contacting Honduran people to learn games, songs, typical expressions, and thus approach with more respect and empathy. This dimension of inculturation reflects the spirit of Pope Francis, who invites young people to be missionary disciples who understand the value of the other in their context.

WORDS OF POPE FRANCIS

In his Apostolic Exhortation *Christus Vivit*, Pope Francis invites young people to live the faith actively: "Young people should not be mere spectators, they should be actively involved. Youth is a stage to take on great dreams, deep relationships and missionary commitments. Don't be afraid to go out and make trouble." (CV 143)

The mission in Honduras was just that: To leave the comfort zone, to find a Cristo in the other, to build bridges where there are walls. As the Pope recalls: "Each one of you has something to contribute to the Church. Don't let others be the protagonists of change. You are God's now." (CV 178)

And Zonia reaffirms it with his words: "Although my knees hurt me, I went. Maybe other young people will see that and say, 'If she can, I too.'" The Pope also said in *Evangelii Gaudium*: "The mission in the heart of the people is not a part of my life or an ornament that I can take away. It's something I can't tear out of my being if I don't want to destroy myself." (EG 273)

A MISSION THAT IS JUST THE BEGINNING

For some, like Zonia, this experience was just the beginning. His deep yearning is someday to serve in Africa. "This is the first seed... I hope this experience will motivate more people to go elsewhere, that this will be a call to serve our brothers in need." The group was not for tourism or paternalistic charity, they went to live, learn, share and sow. They did so in community, with spirituality, with planning and with faith. "We went with all our heart," says Zonia, summarizing in that sentence all the dedication of those who respond generously to the call of Christ.

In the end, as Alberto says, this is a life-changing experience: "This is a call to be better than I am now, it's a call to conversion."