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Dear Friends,

At the end of a recent Sunday service, a catechist announced from the podium, "This coming Saturday the prayer group will be praying in the desert. All are welcome."

The desert piqued my interest. Years ago I read the book *Poustinia* written by Catherine de Hueck Doherty, a former Russian baroness and the founder of Madonna House, a Catholic apostolate of lay men, women and priests in Canada. I learned that poustinia in Russian means desert. In poustinia one prays and fasts in silence and solitude to intercede for the needs of the world.

Much like the Russian spirituality of poustinia, desert here means to go to an isolated place in creation to pray, fast, and intercede. However, here people usually go as a group.

My heart stirred. I decided to go.

A few days later, I ran into Elena, a member of the prayer group along the road outside of my house. "I would like to pray with you all in the desert on Saturday. What time do you leave and can someone pick me up?" I inquired. "I will pick you up around 7 a.m., "she said smiling. "The desert is along the road to the Playa. It's not far from here. You are right along the way." "Gracias! I will wait for you then."

The battle began Friday evening. Like a ping pong ball batted back and forth across a table, I debated whether or not to go to the desert. Back and forth it went – yes, then no, then yes again, then no. The fact was - I was busy.

Saturday morning I was convinced not to go. Surrounded by piles of papers clamoring for order, the house in disarray begging for deep cleaning and a lengthy to-do list I hadn't touched harassing for completion; I felt justified to pass the desert by. Almost.

I prayed early that morning. The Feast of St. James on July 25th was approaching and I was reflecting on his life. That morning I read in Matt. 4:21– 22 Jesus calling James and his brother John to leave what they were doing (leave their nets; they were fishermen) and follow him. They did. The reflection question posed in the commentary pierced through the web of excuses, "Are we ready to respond to the Lord's call – to do something different; to become something new?" Then I knew. I HAD to go. I looked at my watch; I had 30 minutes to get ready.

I laced up my hiking boots, put on pack, slapped on sunscreen, and plopped on hat. At 7 a.m. Diego, Elena's husband and leader of the group, with Ofelia and Sylvia, his daughters-in -law, ushered through the front gate. We greeted one another; I grabbed my walking stick, and we set out.

We hiked for about 45 minutes, first on gravel road then on dirt jungle trail. Diego led us on the trail swinging his machete with expert accuracy cutting through twisting razor sharp vines and undergrowth. Early on, he inadvertently disturbed a hive of small black wasps who chastised him by stinging the back of his neck. That was enough protest, I guess, because they left the rest of us alone. Diego rubbed the back of his neck and didn't complain of the red welts swelling while clearing the way. The trail ascended gradually. Leg muscles strained as we neared the summit. Soaked in sweat and breathing deeply we broke through to a clearing at the top of a hill surrounded by blessed trees. This was the desert.



We stood for a few minutes in silence catching our breath when the sky echoed with the clamor of a flock of parrots flying overhead. They landed unseen on the other side of us in a grove of trees. "The first choir praising," Diego said. My heart smiled.

"This is one of the most beautiful chapels I have ever seen!" I exclaimed. And it was true. The trees covered us in soft shadows of green, the pews were trunks of trees and branches. Wide long leaves were gathered and placed on the ground as a cushion for kneeling or sitting. In the center of the

space was an altar- a slab of wood on two wooden legs with a candle on top. Other members of the prayer group arrived one by one or in pairs until a dozen gathered.

We were instructed not to eat breakfast. This simple fast was part of our prayer. In addition, we sang praises joining with the birds; hymns in Spanish carried through the jungle recesses. We begged forgiveness of our sins, sins of the community, nation and world; and prayed for various needs ranging from personal healing to peace in Guatemala. Three of us read scriptures and shared our reflections.

It was the parrot flock that spoke to me and led me to the scripture in Matt. 6: 26. "Look at the birds in the sky they do not sow or reap, they gather nothing into barns, yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are not you more important than they? ... But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given you besides. Do not worry about tomorrow. Tomorrow will take care of itself..." (Matt. 6:26, 33-34).



We prayed for about 3 hours ending with a rosary. Finally, our stomachs growling but our hearts and spirits filled, we made our way down the hill. Within minutes it seemed, we arrived back at my house.

Later I realized that I almost missed my day in the desert. I almost missed the beauty, the prayer, the sense of community I felt with those present. And the message...

Do not worry. And seek first the Kingdom of God.

Prayer is an important part of the life and heart of our mission. We desire that our service flows out of our prayer. It is no surprise that engaging in spiritual practices like daily Mass, or evening services, or retreat days, or going to a park and sitting under a tree for silence in solitude is resisted with countless excuses, distractions, and demands that vie for our time and attention.

Maybe seeking first the kingdom is as simple as a cup of tea at a kitchen table or sitting by a river contemplating God. Everything else will follow.

The desert awaits.

Sincerely,



Kathy Snider

Mission Update: Board members Marlane Peterson and Laura Huber along with Diedra Lies will be visiting Ixcán mission from August 1st – the 9th. Kathy will be returning to the U.S. with them via Ciudad Mexico to visit and pray at the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Know that you and yours will be prayed for in a special way both there and in Santiago Ixcán.

Kathy is posting on her blog as internet access allows. You can find ***Reflections from the East Window*** on our website: www.ixcanministries.org.

OUR MISSION STATEMENT

Ixcán Ministries provides a prayerful, pastoral presence through lay missionaries living in solidarity with the poor of the remote Ixcán jungle of Guatemala to learn from as well as to assist both spiritually and materially the people with whom life and ministry are shared. The organization strives to be a bridge between two cultures and nations allowing for the exchange of varying gifts between the rich and poor for the ultimate purpose of empowerment and transformation of lives and society.

Ixcán Ministries is a 501(c) 3 organization. Your contributions are tax deductible. You may contact us at:

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