

Letter from Rob Currie, S.J., Arenal, Apdo 2419, Managua, Nicaragua - July 2016

“We prefer to die before giving up our land; they [the government] are trying to eliminate us . . . they’re trying to kill us off . . . but we get stronger every day.” –Francisca Ramírez, leader of indigenous, campesino communities struggling to defend their lands and culture against government plans to build a canal through Nicaragua.

“Jesus speaks for the victims, the forgotten ones, those who live and die in the margins of the text, in the footnotes, the silence, the space between letters. Be attentive. Hear the voice of the expendable.” –Dan Berrigan

Hi everybody . . . we’re breathing a little easier in Arenal these days with the regular rains that, hopefully, have brought an end to three consecutive years of drought. But we have to admit that the first six months of the year haven’t been easy: in addition to the loss of another planting season due to the drought, the assassination of a good friend of Arenal, Berta Cáceres, in Honduras, for defending her indigenous community’s land and culture against national and international mining interests, and the increasing violence here against indigenous and campesino communities struggling to defend their lands and culture against government plans to build a canal through their territory. (On a personal level, in addition to the brutal assassination of Berta in Honduras in early March, I don’t remember having lost so many good friends in such a short time as in the first months of this year: long-time friend, Joe Corr; old friend from years together in India, Bob Grib; long-time Jesuit friend, Ed Glynn; irreplaceable friend/inspiration/compañero en la lucha, Dan Berrigan; brother Jesuit and companion in countless struggles here, Fernando Cardenal.)

During these months, all of us in Arenal, in addition to trying to get through the drought and defend our community school, have spent much of our time in solidarity with our friends here in Nicaragua defending their lands and way of life in the face of the government-planned canal, and with friends in Honduras, in the wake of Berta Cáceres’ assassination, in efforts to achieve justice for the family of Berta, and in the ongoing struggle to defend the land and way of life of Berta’s community in the face of overwhelming national and international mining interests.

All of this didn’t keep us from celebrating our 20th anniversary as GRUDESA in Arenal back in February. Friends came from all over Nicaragua to share memories, music, dance, good Arenal food and drink, and, most of all, solidarity in the ongoing—and new—struggles that await us in the next 20 years! Thanks for being a BIG part of that web of solidarity—near and far—that has kept us on our feet (for the most part) during the past 20 years! (Martha Mercado, coordinator of GRUDESA, wants to share with you some additional thoughts (with translation help from Karen Rountree).

Abrazos, Rob

PS: Thanks to Elizabeth Killough and Jack Dougherty for 20 years of mail delivery!

*** Letter from Martha Mercado, coordinator of GRUDES A ***

“An **unorganized** community is a mass of putty to be played with; a community that is **organized** to defend its rights and its values will be respected.” - **Monsignor Oscar Arnulfo Romero**

Greetings from Arenal! Among so much injustice, nastiness, manipulation and the circus that we are living in Nicaragua these days, the thoughts of Monsignor Romero are alive day after day in our community, Arenal. Some months ago (February-March) children, parents, and teachers of the school Pikin Guerrero were victims of the abuse of power by the government and the Ministry of Education. Professor Maria Concepcion Pavon was illegally moved from our school to a school in Masatepe (a town seven kilometers from Arenal), without any conversation or consultation (**after 27 years of service in our school**); they forced her, threatening her with loss of work if she did not comply with their order.

Days after the move of Professor Concepcion, the authorities continued abusing their power; this time with the transfer of three more teachers from our school, automatically converting our school to a multi-grade school (one teacher teaching to two grades simultaneously). From first to sixth grade with seven teachers....we were reduced to three teachers.

The leader of our revolution (1979-1990) **Carlos Fonseca** always said: “There is no organization without action.” After receiving this final hit and hurt, not only at the school Pikin Guerrero, but also to our entire community, **parents organized** to resist the whims of the government and Ministry of Education. They presented protest letters to the authorities of the Ministry of Education at the local, regional, and national levels and they communicated with national media. At the same time, they passed through the five districts of the community repeating the simple message: “This action by the government and the Ministry of Education is an attack against the education of our children. Are we going to allow this in our community? It is time to claim and stop this deliberate action.” **The decision was taken to boycott classes at Pikin Guerrero School.**

On March 2, something unforgettable and unprecedented happened in our community. **The Minister of Education herself arrived in Arenal**, as well as the political secretaries of the local and regional government, and if that isn't enough, the local, regional, and national authorities of the Ministry of Education. (The first hour of the second day, a group of parents - overcoming the efforts of the police to prevent their exit from the community – again had gone to protest against the regional authorities. Upon arriving at the regional office, the parents realized that the regional authorities were in Arenal! Immediately they returned to Arenal.) At 9:40am the Minister of Education arrived at our school, encountering more than 100 parents, holding posters and in loud voices... demanding a quality education for their children and for the return of the teachers that had been transferred, and...**No multi-grade system!** One of the mothers expressed to the authorities present the feelings of many of us: “**Messing with our school, you are messing with all of us...all of Arenal!** I only finished second grade, I couldn't study because of the dictatorship. I am not going to allow the same to happen with my children!”

The Minister responded, expressing the “beauty” of the multi-grade system, and criticizing and insulting the teachers: “They like only what is easy...not wanting to work.” And she added: “I have been sent directly by the First Lady of the country, in order to put this situation in order”. She proceeded to throw all of her venom at the **Solidarity Group (GRUDESA)**, blaming us for everything that was happening. The parents did not stop, declaring that their children will only return to school when all of the teachers were returned to their classes in Arenal, and when each class had their own teacher. Finally the **Minister of Education had to accede**, giving orders that the teachers were to return to their classes in Arenal and that each class would have their own teacher. A triumph for all of the Arenal community...the children, the parents, all of Arenal!

But before leaving, the Minister threatened the community saying: “Do not think that you have won; here no one has bent my arm, I did it because it is an election year. We will see what happens after the elections.” One more example of the violation and abuse of power that we live day after day here, and that characterize our actual government. But the most important thing is our promise to continue organizing and resisting all the outrages from “those from above”, defending our rights, and trying to create a better community for the next generation. Thank you for joining us on our journey....!

Hugs,

Martha