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AHORA Y SIEMPRE!

A Seminarian's Travels in Orthodox Guatemala

Jesse Brandow, a newly graduated M.Div. seminarian who has studied at both St. Vladimir's Seminary and Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology, has a long-term interest in the growth of Orthodoxy among Spanish speakers in Latin America and the United States. After working with a short-term mission team at the Hogar Rafael Ayau Orthodox orphanage in Guatemala City, Jesse returned to Guatemala in the summer of 2012 to observe the growth of Orthodoxy in newly-converted Mayan communities. With native priests, Jesse visited remote Orthodox missions throughout Guatemala and southern Mexico, and accompanied the Ecumenical Patriarchate's Metropolitan Archbishop Athenagoras of Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean on his historic first visit to the country. Following is a short chronicle of Jesse's travels and observations on the quiet, yet phenomenal, growth of Orthodoxy in Guatemala and southern Mexico.

Opposite: Metropolitan Athenagoras giving out crosses to the Guatemalan Christians of Agua Alegre. Courtesy of Jesse Brandow.

Top: Rev. Fr. John and Pres. Alexandra Chakos with Jesse Brandow in Nueva Concepción. Courtesy of Jesse Brandow.

Tuesday, June 12th

Today I arrived in Guatemala City and met Fr. Andres, who has led the Mayans to Orthodoxy, and Fr. John and Pres. Alexandra, a retired Greek priest and his wife who have come to help the Orthodox community in Guatemala. I could immediately tell how heartfelt and welcoming Fr. Andres is. On our long and bumpy car ride to Nueva Concepcion, he continually asked Fr. John and me what we wanted or needed and wouldn't believe us if we said we were comfortable. "No, tell me, tell me!" He is like a loving grandfather – but one with an earthy sense of humor and a huge zest for life. As we drove past imposing volcanoes, sprawling sugar cane plantations, rubber factories, and corn fields, he would now and again break out in song and talk about how much he loves the land of Guatemala. Soon it grew dark and we arrived in Nueva Concepcion.

As soon as we opened the car doors, the humidity hit us. The tropical flowers all around underscore the change in climate from Guatemala City. The coast is hot and humid, but beautiful. The boys from the orphanage who live with Fr. Andres came out to welcome him back and to greet me. After a bite to eat, we hit the hay. Drifting to sleep, I can hear the animal sounds of a whole new environment calling out in the night.

Thursday, June 14th

Over the past two days, I've gotten to know Fr. Andres and Fr. John as we spend time around Nueva Concepcion. Apparently, the city used to be a little village but has sprung up rather quickly over the past few decades in response to an agricultural boom. Much of my time has been spent with Fr. Andres at the school where he teaches, called the "Centro Pedagogico." It is amazing to sit in his office and observe the variety of his daily tasks: sitting and joking with students, speaking by telephone with an ex-president of Guatemala, hearing the confession of a villager who walked the whole day to see him, and healing a young man injured on his farm.

The first few days have been relaxed, but we are now gearing up to meet Metropolitan Athenagoras and begin our long journey through the villages. Soon we will get a real taste of Guatemalan Orthodoxy.

Opposite: The entrance to Rev. Fr. Andres Girón's residence, formerly a Roman Catholic seminary. Courtesy of Jesse Brandow.



Friday, June 15th

His Eminence, Metropolitan Athenagoras, has just arrived in Guatemala City. Many years to His Eminence, who was accompanied by Fr. Nicholas, Chancellor of the metropolis, who works with the metropolitan in Mexico City. As they pulled up, one of Guatemala's major news stations was already waiting to interview them. Metropolitan Athenagoras spoke for ten minutes in Spanish about his visit and the Orthodox Church in Guatemala, giving coverage to Orthodoxy on a national level. Orthodoxy itself is relatively unknown and poorly understood, but many people are familiar with the work of Fr. Andres, so any news associated with him draws attention and, often, strong feeling. The phenomenon is similar to how the broader society sees the Antiochian Orthodox orphanage; while the Orthodox faith is still not fully understood, the reputation of the nuns at the orphanage, especially Mother Ines, puts a lot of weight behind the efforts of the monastery and orphanage and draws people's attention.

After the short news interview, we headed back to Nueva Concepcion, where the metropolitan was joyfully received and he warmly greeted everyone in Nueva. Soon we will hit the road as he begins his historic visit to the communities in Guatemala and Southern Mexico.

Saturday, June 16th

Today we made our first parish visit with Metropolitan Athenagoras, traveling just ten or twenty minutes to a town called Pinula, which was the very first parish that Fr. Andres led after leaving the Roman Catholic Church. In Pinula, we heard speeches from Fr. Andres and Metropolitan Athenagoras followed by a vespers service. Two things most stand out in my memory of this visit. First, Fr. Andres is a powerful speaker, and I could tell from the first moment of his Pinula speech that the Mayan communities are deeply bonded to him. He starts slowly, then begins to raise his voice as he bats at the air, points vehemently at the crowd, and shouts out moving words. There is an ebb and flow: at some points Fr. Andres shows his tender side, speaking softer words from his heart, then he raises his voice in a series of shouts that seem to come from a military man. Finally, he builds up to a crescendo at the end of his speech and often finishes by shouting, "...Ahora! Y siempre!

Opposite: Festivities at the Mayan Orthodox-sponsored school in Nueva Concepción. Courtesy of Jesse Brandow.





Y por LOS SIGLOS DE LOS SIGLOS!!!!” (...Now! and ever! and unto the ages of ages!) And the crowd responds with a shout: “AMEN!!!!!”

The second thing that struck me at Pinula, as well as in other parishes, was the mixture of Roman Catholic and Orthodox traditions. The parishes have artwork and statuary characteristic of the Roman Catholicism they practiced for centuries. Many people have rosary beads, parishes frequently use Roman Catholic hymnals, and the liturgy of St. John Chrysostom is punctuated with different fragments from the Roman Catholic mass (e.g., after Scripture readings, the reader says “The word of the Lord,” and the people respond, “Thanks be to God”). The truth is that many of the communities are still very much Roman Catholic in flavor, and others have been influenced by other religious practices as well. Yet, they have not accepted the Orthodox Church through compulsion; they eagerly embrace it and so far have taken well to the changes that are being judiciously made to bring their practices more into Orthodox tradition.

Sunday, June 17th

Today we visited a very large parish in Malaga, where Metropolitan Athenagoras ordained the parish priest, Fr. Antonio, as a deacon (I’ll explain that in just a second!). As soon as we arrived in the town and began our long “entry” walk to the parish, it started raining cats and dogs and soon we were all drenched. That’s how things are on the coast of Guatemala: the weather is unpredictable, the roads uncooperative, and the heat and humidity are unforgiving. I always remind myself of how important flexibility and patience are out here in a missionary church.

As I mentioned, the parish priest was ordained as a deacon, or as the parishioners describe it, he was “reconfirmed.” Fr. Antonio is one of the priests ordained by Fr. Andres when Fr. Andres was the acting bishop of the first “Orthodox” parishes here in Guatemala, before they came into the canonical Orthodox Church. Because of this situation, some leniency has been exercised and the ordinations are called “reconfirmations” (Metropolitan Athenagoras himself refers to them as such) and Fr. Andres is referred to as “the bishop”, although he has not yet been consecrated as a bishop by the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

Opposite: Metropolitan Athenagoras visiting the Orthodox parish in Pinula. Courtesy of Jesse Brandow.

Monday and Tuesday, June 18th-19th

During these days, the “reconfirmations” continued (Fr. Antonio was made a priest, along with others). They took place in the Antiochian Monastery of the Holy and Life-Giving Trinity on Lake Amatitlan that is run by the nuns who founded the Orthodox orphanage in Guatemala City. Father Andres and Mother Ines requested that the ordinations take place in the monastery as a symbol of Orthodox unity in Guatemala. The parishes under Fr. Andres have been accepted into the Orthodox Church under the Ecumenical Patriarch, while the nuns are under Antiochian Bishop Antonio Chedraoul of Mexico. The fact that Metropolitan Athenagoras ordained his own clergy in a church under the Patriarchate of Antioch is a symbol of the hope that Fr. Andres has for a unified church in Guatemala. I pray that the hierarchs, as well as the clergy and laity, will make that symbol of unity a reality in the coming years. May the Church know no other scandal but the scandal of the cross of Jesus Christ.

While we were at the monastery, Mother Ines gave us newcomers a tour of the grounds and of the new orphanage building that is being constructed on Lake Amatitlan. I had already seen the grounds in 2009 when I came on an OCMC mission trip, and was very glad to see the progress that has been made on the new orphanage. It will be a wonderful location for the children!



Opposite: Orthodox service in Malaga. Courtesy of Jesse Brandow.

Thursday, June 21st

In the small hours of the morning, we began our six-hour trip from Nueva Concepcion on the Pacific Coast to Agua Alegre, a small town about 6,500 feet above sea level, high up in the mountains. We climbed and climbed the entire morning in a seemingly endless ascent, and as we finally approached our destination, stopped to look out over the mountaintops at some of the tallest volcanoes in Guatemala. This country is truly amazing: although it's smaller than many U.S. states, the variety of topography, climates, and wild-life rivals most parts of our country. Within six hours we had traveled from a tropical climate with huge lizards, bananas, and sugar cane fields, to a chilly mountaintop with pine bushes and shepherders.

Agua Alegre is at the very top of the mountains that surround the large city called Huehuetenango. This city is the capital city of the *department* of Huehuetenango (a *department* is the Guatemalan equivalent of a state). Huehuetenango is located in the south-west/mid-west region of Guatemala on the border of Mexico, and this department contains the largest number of Orthodox Christians in all of Guatemala – it is, in fact, the heart of the Guatemalan Orthodox Church. The community at Agua Alegre has about eighty families, but at the gathering that day there were many more as communities from the surrounding region had sent delegations to greet the bishop. Instead of a prayer service, we had our first of many *reuniones* (meetings), which were sort of like rallies or high-energy gatherings that began with songs and cheers as the bishop arrived. Speeches from the bishop and his retinue, and from the various leaders who had come from their communities to welcome him, were followed by singing and dancing.

The people of Agua Alegre and the other communities in Huehuetenango are, for the most part, very poor and hard working. They are almost entirely from indigenous roots, many still wear the clothing that is traditional in their communities, and a large number still speak one of the twenty-one indigenous languages of Guatemala (e.g. Chuc, Popti, Mam, Quiche, etc.). Here in the villages of Guatemala, I definitely stick out like a huge, white, sore thumb! I'm often a foot taller than the people around me, and I can't tell you how many times I've hit my head on random objects. However, it's nice to be in places where gringos are even harder to find than internet ac-

Opposite: Metropolitan Athenagoras ordains priests and deacons in the Antiochian Holy Trinity Monastery on Lake Amatitlan. Courtesy of Jesse Brandow.



cess. I also feel very blessed because the people of Huehuetenango are very hospitable and open when a gringo like me does show up.

After our visit to Agua Alegre, we drove down to the *Centro Apostolico*, located on a hill overlooking the city of Huehuetenango. This center is where the catechists meet every two months for instruction in the faith. Although the Guatemalan Orthodox Church is very large, it only has eight priests to serve all the communities, so the priests depend on leaders from the communities to help in teaching the people. These catechists still have much to learn themselves, but as they continue their training, they bring that knowledge into their communities.

Friday, June 22nd

Today we traveled to Todos Santos for another *reunion*. The people met us about an hour outside of town and formed a huge parade of cars that drove in together. The leading car had a megaphone that blasted announcements throughout the mountaintops: “Bueno!!! His Eminence Metropolitan Athenagoras is making his historic visit to Todos Santos, accompanied by...” Many people didn’t fully understand who the visitors were, but they knew that the event was very special and that Metropolitan Athenagoras represents them.

The *reunion* here was very similar to the one in Agua Alegre; one aspect that was different and extremely interesting to me was the speeches given by the leaders of the communities who came to greet the archbishop. Here, especially in Todos Santos, many of the speeches were given in a mixture of Spanish and indigenous languages, switching back and forth with every other word. Really interesting!

Opposite: Construction of new orphanage near Lake Amatitlan. Courtesy of Jesse Brandow.

Saturday, June 23rd

This day we had another *reunion* in a town called Nenton, this time with even more music and dancing. During some of the praise songs, Padre Andres moved among the crowd, praying over people, embracing them, and offering intercessions for healing. His love for the people overflows.

Sunday, June 24th

Today we took an incredibly rough mountain road up to the church in Tajumucu, where we celebrated the Divine Liturgy and chrismated thirty to forty teens. Here I could see another Catholic practice that lingers in the new Orthodox communities: children are baptized as infants but don't receive Holy Communion or confirmation until a later age. Yet, at the same time, I could see in this church some of the largest improvements in iconography of any community in Guatemala. The bright and colorful iconography in the Tajumucu church is painted by Fr. Alexios, the parish priest who spent time in Greece learning about Orthodoxy and was trained as an iconographer. In different ways in different places, the Church here is actively moving toward the fullness of Orthodox faith and practice.



Opposite: Caravan of cars to an Orthodox gathering in the Guatemalan highlands. Courtesy of Jesse Brandow.

Monday, June 25th

We kicked off this new week with yet another *reunion*, this time in Aguacate, where Fr. Evangelos lives and has his home parish. Fr. Evangelos is the priest who oversees the vast majority of parishes in all of Huehuetenango as well as the parishes just over the border in Southern Mexico. He is an extremely hard-working man who travels almost daily to the different parishes throughout his region. His home parish in Aguacate is one of the largest in the Mayan church, and one of the only parishes with a complete iconostasis. The *reunion* was preceded by a short service in which Fr. Evangelos was given a blessing to hear confessions. Then commenced the meeting proper, which was very large. Once again there was plenty of music, dancing, and joy!

One of the things that stands out is the recurring theme I hear in the speeches given by the leaders of the communities: “Now we know that we are not alone! We have a bishop who has come to visit us, who stands with us, and we know that we are part of the true Church.” These leaders spoke about how much their communities have struggled, how much they have been doubted and belittled by other Christians, both Catholics and Protestants. The visit of the bishop gives them a reassurance that Orthodoxy stands with them and that they truly are part of the Apostolic Church that traces its line back to Christ.



Opposite: Church festivities at Todos Santos. Courtesy of Jesse Brandow.

Tuesday, June 27th

Yesterday we finished our last day in Guatemala, and today we crossed into Mexico to visit the communities that are just over the border. The metropolitan spent two days in Mexico and I was able to accompany him to a large and energetic meeting in a town called Tziscaco, about a mile over the border.

Early in the morning, we split up into two groups: Father Andres took Metropolitan Athenagoras through an entry with a stronger border patrol and the rest of us took a rough back-road to an entry point without any patrol. A number of us hadn't brought our papers for official entry, so this road offered us an opportunity to enter Mexico without problems. I found it rather ironic in light of the current political debates in the U.S. that we were sneaking into Mexico as illegal immigrants! True, we weren't actually immigrants, but I still couldn't help laughing when we crossed over illegally, especially when I saw the sign at the border: The United States (of Mexico).

The community in Tziscaco has about eighty families, but many more people from communities all around Tziscaco came to join the reunion that day, swelling the numbers to over a thousand. Considering that the *reunion* was held on a weekday, when the men have to work, that number was even more impressive. When the metropolitan arrived, he was greeted on the main road by throngs of people from different areas: excited community leaders holding up welcome signs and throwing fistfuls of confetti, and enthusiastic youth groups that chanted "¡Que viva el Arzobispo! ¡Que viva!" After climbing up the hill, we arrived at the meeting house and the people erupted in music and songs. Speeches followed, interspersed with more music and cheers, and the *reunion* wrapped up with the communities handing gift after gift to the metropolitan and to those who accompanied him.

A few words on the communities in Mexico: in the entire country there are about fifty-two Orthodox communities under Fr. Andres. These are concentrated almost entirely in southern Mexico, especially in the state of Chiapas where Tziscaco is located. A great number of the people in these communities originally came from Guatemala, so the communities here are a natural outgrowth of the Guatemalan Orthodox Church. Both Fr. Andres and Fr. Evangelos have told me that the parishes in southern Mexico have as much potential for growth as those in Guatemala, if not more. In a span of only five

Opposite: Courtesy of Jesse Brandow.





years, the total number of communities in southern Mexico has grown from under twenty to fifty-two, and today still more communities are seeking to enter the fold. Moreover, Mexico has some good potential candidates for ordination, which could begin to meet the desperate need for more priests to serve the expanding communities.

The communities in Mexico repeated what so many others have said: “now we know that we are not alone.” Isolation is a continuing problem and in subsequent visits to Mexico, I heard many of the Mexican catechists describe the pressure they face, particularly from the native Roman Catholic Church. Like many of the Orthodox in Guatemala, they feel under attack by both Roman Catholic and Protestant neighbors, and in two cases, the Roman Catholic Church has succeeded in shutting down Mexican churches that were under Fr. Andres. Although this is a native-led movement to Orthodoxy, Catholic clergy are upset by what they see as Orthodox evangelization in a traditionally Catholic country.

I cannot fully evaluate the situation, but I do know that the people feel attacked, isolated, and poor. They take great courage in Fr. Andres, who has sacrificed so much of his life to fight for them, and now that Metropolitan Athenagoras has come to visit them, they take hope and courage from the support of the broader Orthodox Church.

Opposite: Metropolitan Athenagoras and Rev. Fr. Andres Girón. Courtesy of Jesse Brandow.

June 28th–July 26th

After following Metropolitan Athenagoras on his visit, I spent a month accompanying Fr. Evangelos, the priest who oversees dozens of parishes in Guatemala and in Southern Mexico. As I said, Fr. Evangelos is a workhorse, tirelessly visiting as many as three parishes in one day, driving for hours on *terraceria* (terrible dirt roads), and also overseeing a huge home parish in Aguacate. In addition to Spanish he speaks two native Mayan languages fluently and is potentially a strong leader in the growing Guatemalan Church.

With Fr. Evangelos, I got a closer look at life and worship in Guatemala and Mexico. The people's lives truly revolve around their churches, often because their parish is the social hub of the entire community – there are no malls, no fancy restaurants or bars, few people have televisions, and even fewer have the internet. In short, the excesses of our “developed” country do not plague them. Of course, one cannot be romantic about their situation; life is extremely difficult for these people who are basically subsistence farmers. Their Sunday offering to Fr. Evangelos is often a stack of tortillas or a handful of eggs. To these people, the phrase “our daily bread” carries its full significance. To these families, the saying of Christ to “not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink” shows its radical nature. Despite having so little, they not only come to church services (both on Sundays and on weeknights) but also support their priests and build their own churches and schools.

The most common church services among the communities are the praise and worship services, led by bands that sing popular songs to the Holy Spirit and to Christ. Sometimes these services go on for four, five, or even six hours, beginning in the evening and going well into the night. The bands also play before and after the Divine Liturgy and, in some communities, in certain parts of the Liturgy itself. The plan is to slowly phase these instrumental bands out of Divine Liturgy.

Another common service is weddings. About every other week Fr. Evangelos marries new couples, often several couples at the same service. Most of the couples are teenagers, and they return to work just a day or two after the wedding. There also are plenty of baptisms.

Opposite: Courtesy of Jesse Brandow.



July 27th – August 9th

During the last leg of my summer travels, I spent time with another native priest, Fr. Blas. Whereas the parishes of Fr. Evangelos tend to be in high altitude areas, Fr. Blas serves parishes closer to the Pacific coast in both Guatemala and Mexico. My travels with him once again showed me the centrality of worship in the communities, their lack of resources, and the love that they have for praise and worship.

Final Reflection

Whenever someone speaks of “American Orthodoxy,” there is usually an unspoken understanding that the term refers to North American Orthodoxy: the United States, Canada, and sometimes Mexico. This way of speaking is indeed convenient, considering that the majority of Orthodox parishes in the Western Hemisphere are still located in North America. However, the explosion of Orthodoxy in Guatemala, as well as in parts of Mexico, makes it increasingly inaccurate to focus solely on North America as the western outpost of Orthodoxy.

It is true that the Orthodox Church in Latin America is still very young and new to the broader Church. It is also true that the Guatemalan communities are only just beginning to enter the depths of Orthodox worship. Yet, by God’s providence, they have been given visionary leaders like Fr. Andres who have led them to Orthodoxy. By God’s providence, they now seek to grow as Orthodox Christians and to learn from the broader Church – and by God’s providence, the broader Church will also learn from them, seeing the fervor of their faith and the beauty of their humility.

As we continue to discuss the future of “American Orthodoxy,” we must not forget that the providence of God often guides the Church in unexpected ways, and His providence is now calling our attention to Latin America. When, in 1867, St. Innocent reflected on the sale of Alaska to the United States, he said, “I see in this event one of the ways of Providence whereby Orthodoxy will penetrate the United States.” These words are often recalled in discussions of American Orthodoxy, along with the stories of the rapid conversion of native Alaskans to the Orthodox Church. Now, in our own time, over 150,000 native Guatemalans have already turned to the Ortho-

Opposite: Coming forward to receive crosses. Courtesy of Jesse Brandow.





dox Church – is this not the continuation of God’s providence in the Western Hemisphere? The Holy Spirit has opened a door for the faith to penetrate Latin America through Guatemala; will we turn a blind eye to the work of the Holy Spirit or will we cooperate with His work? Will we simply nod our heads and turn back to our own affairs, or will we recognize the providence of God and stand with the Orthodox in Latin America?

We are called to stand with the Orthodox Christians of Guatemala. We are called to gather donations of liturgical supplies and monetary support, to travel to Guatemala as missionaries or other workers (if we are able to do so), and to keep them in our prayers. Finally, we are called to once again be inspired by the richness of “American Orthodoxy.” From the small wooden churches of Alaska to the large food festivals of Pittsburgh and Chicago, from the Orthodox parishes that dot South America to the Mayan communities that live under the volcanoes of Guatemala – the beauty of God’s Church is alive and growing in the Western Hemisphere. Let us embrace the work of God’s providence, supporting the Guatemalan Orthodox Church and tending to the faith throughout all the Americas, so that the seed of American Orthodoxy will grow and blossom. ✦

For more photos and updated news about Spanish-language Orthodoxy see Jesse Brandow’s blog at www.TheOneWayToLive.com. Jesse asks for your prayers as he considers future mission-oriented work with Spanish-speakers.

Opposite: Rev. Fr. Evangelos travels long distances to reach his far-flung mountain parishes, often accompanied by extended family and friends. Courtesy of Jesse Brandow.