



Faces of the Maria Madre Godparent Program: Tony Tambasco

I started sponsoring a student in Maria Madre de los Pobres Parish in El Salvador in 2013, having been assigned a second grader by the team overseeing the godparent program. Though I can read Spanish, I cannot speak or write it, so I communicated through the Holy Trinity parishioners who were also involved in the program and were only too glad to help. The first letter I received from Anderson, my new godchild, described his family and told me that he had a twin sister. It didn't take long for me to conclude that I couldn't sponsor Anderson without also sponsoring his sister Karen, so I quickly became godfather for twins in our sister parish.

We initially communicated through notes and photos. I was always amused at how similar were the letters from both children, concluding that they had many prompts from their teacher, but I enjoyed establishing contact with them. Through photos I got to meet their grandmother, Marta, who diligently looked after them, while their mother Nelly worked almost everyday across town at a Walmart's. Annual report cards showed me their perseverance in studies, which I tried to encourage with my notes in return.

They made me Christmas cards and I sent them homemade cards to carry them through the Superman stage, their First Communion, and their birthdays. The annual visits to Maria Madre from Holy Trinity parishioners coincided well with just after the December holidays and just around the twins' August birthdays, so I could send with cards little gifts like puzzles, coloring books, and other trinkets.

Finally in August, 2017 my wife Anne and I decided it was time to meet our other family in El Salvador, so we joined the Holy Trinity delegation and traveled for a week's visit to Maria Madre Parish. Our visit overlapped with a Mass at the cathedral celebrating the 100th anniversary of the birth of Oscar Romero. Cardinals and dignitaries from all over the world joined the laity packed in the church for a wonderful liturgy honoring a special person who would soon be designated a saint. The occasion allowed us to visit his tomb in the cathedral crypt. Other sites we visited included Romero's humble residence, the hospital chapel where he was assassinated, the university where the six Jesuits and two laywomen were killed by the military, and the chapel at the site where the five nuns and a laywoman were also assassinated during the war years in El Salvador. We were in a country of saints and martyrs who died for the poor!

Back in the parish we had our chance to see our Perez family a couple of times. We visited their home, accompanied by able colleagues to translate. We brought birthday gifts for the twins and house gifts for the others, shared photos, and enjoyed our opportunity finally to get to meet everyone. On another evening we attended a prayer meeting in one sector of the parish and got to meet the twins' mother, who was at work when we visited their home. Our Holy Trinity delegation's trip coincided with the annual corn festival that Maria Madre Parish celebrates, so we had a chance to worship with our godchildren and their family at the Sunday liturgy, enjoyed the food afterward, and watched with the family as their oldest daughter/sister Alison danced in



the program organized by the school children for the festival. Finally, the delegation sponsored a field trip to a water park for all the godchildren, so Anne and I enjoyed a day of picnicking and fun with the twins, their younger sister Milagro, and their grandmother.

A second trip to El Salvador in 2019 enabled Anne and me to grow closer to the twins and their family, since now we were known to them. I even tried some Spanish, working off the Italian that I knew. I was told that I was right about half the time! We participated in a peace march that circled through all sectors of the parish and brought us past the home of our twins. This time they recognized us and came out from their house to greet us. When we visited the family later, the twins were proud to show us their poster projects for English class. Before our second trip ended, we again had a chance to enjoy an outing with all the godchildren, I arranged with the godchildren program to continue sponsoring the twins as they were soon to graduate from grade school and move on to high school, and Anne took on sponsorship of their baby sister Milagro.



We planned to return this last year to Maria Madre Parish to celebrate the twins' graduation, but the pandemic intervened. By this time, however, social media was widespread in El Salvador, so I have been able to stay in touch through text messages, especially with Anderson, who conveys messages to the rest of the family. Through internet we have celebrated the twins' birthdays, their quinceaños or fifteenth birthday (coming of age) ceremony, and other holidays. Google translation now helps for sending messages in Spanish. It appears that they are weathering the pandemic and hurricane flooding, notwithstanding that their mother has not been able to work at Walmart. The parish is helping all the families, so I have been contributing to the fund that supports Maria Madre Parish during

this troublesome year. Anne and I hope we will be able to return for another visit to our El Salvador family and to continue to support the godchildren program that has been richly rewarding for the godparents as well.
