

## **History of St. Thomas Aquinas Medical Mission to Guatemala:**

In 2003, the pastor of St. Thomas Aquinas, Fr. Dean Wilhelm (1997-2004) arranged for a group of 10 STA parishioners to participate in a medical mission to Tamahu, Guatemala. The Missionaries of Charity had established a mission there in 2001 when they reclaimed an abandoned parish, San Pablo. Fr. Dean and the director of the mission, Fr. Robert Conroy, MC, had been friends from their seminary days in Rome.

Fr. Conroy, MC, let the mission in 2004, and Fr. Belisario, Aquilar, MC, took over as director until September 2009. St. Thomas Aquinas has continued to send mission teams there annually. The size of the team has grown from the original 10 to 40 missionaries in recent years. On average, we minister to about 2500 patients during the week-long mission. Our team consists not only of local volunteers but also from around Texas (Houston, Austin, Waco, League City, San Marcos). In recent years, team members have come from Washington State; Alberta, Canada; Ohio and Oklahoma as well. The emphasis for the team is on medical personnel (doctors, dentists, nurses, physical therapists, pharmacists, etc.), but we also need linguists and a support staff of non-medical people.

The current pastor of San Pablo is Fr. Blase, MC, with his associate, Fr. Ricardo, MC. When the priests arrived there was only a very run-down church and a small rectory building. They have developed the parish into a center with meeting rooms, a soup kitchen for the poor, a primary school and a dispensary to meet the needs of the poor. The Missionaries of Charity will be leaving Tamahu within the next year and beginning a new mission in the slums of Guatemala City. With the blessing of the new priests that will take over San Pablo, we hope to continue our medical mission to Tamahu to care for the poor who count on our yearly visit.

The St. Thomas Aquinas Medical Mission is funded purely by donations from STA parish, and friends/family of the missionaries. Each missionary pays his/her own ticket/travel expenses.

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Below is an article that Meredith Olson ([olsonjm25@aol.com](mailto:olsonjm25@aol.com)) written for the State of Texas Catholic Missions Newsletter. It captures the essence of the trip:

[St. Thomas Aquinas Parish in College Station, TX has supported an annual medical mission trip to Tamahu, Guatemala for the past several years. Seminarians from St. Mary's Seminary have joined the Mission since 2005.](#)

[We chose this site four years ago because Fr. Dean, then our pastor, was a close friend of Fr. Robert Conroy, MC, who was the director of the Missionaries of Charity St. Pablo Parish Mission in Tamahu. He requested medical support for the large number of very poor Mayan peoples scattered in small villages throughout the mountainous region. The first year we sent a team of 10 personnel, and each year our number has grown. This past March, the 21 people from College Station consisted of 2 doctors, 1 PA, 1 dentist, 2 veterinarians, 5 RN's, 1 psychologist, 2 bilingual translators, and 7 support](#)

staff, who served as basic pharmacists, nursing assistants and helpers. Among the 8 seminarians, 3 were bilingual, and 1 had an EMT background.

Our parish family has always been of great support to us. While we pay our own travel, food, and lodging expenses, the parish provides us with all the medications and supplies for the trip. We receive monetary contributions for the prescription drugs, and parishioners give us donations for OTC supplies. We provide the parish with a list of supplies we need and have baskets at the back of church to collect them. The generous outpouring is remarkable, and even those in the parish who are unable to go on the mission trip feel they are a part of the effort. This past year, we even had a collection basket in the RE wing, and asked the children to bring in small toys and drawing supplies for us to take. We filled 60 trunks for our mission. The airline reduced the weight allowance from 70 to 50 lbs per bag this past year, but we had enough cash to pay the additional charge for 10 overweight trunks.

This past March, we saw 2500 patients, treating many cases of pneumonia, bronchitis, skin infections, gastritis, among others, while the dental team pulled countless decayed teeth. We were also prepared to set broken bones if necessary. There is a small clinic in Tamahu run by Sister Paty, an RN nun from Guatemala. We take with us extra supplies of powdered baby formula, antibiotics, seizure medications, inhalers, and steroids for her to dispense as needed throughout the year.

Beyond the nuts and bolts of our going and dispensing medications, the equally important issue is how our lives have been touched by this experience. We look at these beautiful Mayan faces with large black eyes, dark skin, and women and young girls with long, braided hair, wearing their centuries-old traditional dress. It is like stepping back in time to a by-gone era. We realize that we have no control over where or into what culture we are born. We, who have so much more than we need, have a huge obligation to share with those who have so much less than they need, even to lead a decent life. They are so utterly grateful to us for whatever we can do for them. Our lives are changed and enriched by our week, living in humility and simplicity among God's poorest of the poor. While on the mission, we prayed each morning just as Blessed Mother Teresa did, "Shine through me, Lord, and be in me so that every soul I come in contact with may feel your presence in my soul. Let me shine as a light to others." Within our little band of missionaries, there have been conversions of heart. Some have come back to the sacraments and others have experienced a profound sense of God's presence in their lives, which deepens their devotion to prayer. We are so grateful to our parish for the opportunity to serve our poor brothers and sisters, and allow them to minister to us. ---Meredith Olson (St. Thomas Aquinas Medical Mission Coordinator) April 2006

I think she wrote a beautiful synopsis of the trip.

Next is a description of what to expect from the trip from a practical perspective: (written before the 2008 trip)

The medical mission is a great opportunity for all of us, and many of us have been 4 or 5 times. We are primarily a Catholic group, but there is no requirement to be Catholic to go. The conditions are rather primitive, but the parish there (San Pablo Parish) takes good care of us, and ensures that we have purified bottled water, as well as food that is prepared in a safe way. We are either housed with host families in the village (electricity, running water {usually cold only!}, toilets, beds/cots), or we have some folks grouped together in the church buildings on mattresses on the floors. The church also has electricity, running water, etc. There is cell phone coverage, and it will work with some carriers/phones. The weather is very mild, and usually quite pleasant. The luggage that we check consists of two trunks per person that are filled with medical supplies. Your personal luggage (clothes, toiletries, etc.) needs to fit in a 22" carry-on bag. Small sleeping bags and pillows go in with all the medicine trunks we send as checked luggage.

We usually see between 2000-2500 patients during the course of the week. This year, we are taking a group of 40 people (our largest ever), so we may be able to see more patients. We meet at St. Thomas Church around 5 am on Saturday, then ride in vans to Houston, where we fly to Guatemala City, then ride on private buses for approx. 5 hrs to the village of Tamahu. We usually arrive at or after dark. The next day is time to get meds divided up and attend Mass. Monday through Friday we begin the day with optional adoration of the Blessed Sacrament (5:30-6:30 am), daily Mass (6:30), then breakfast at around 7 am. Clinics begin after our group breakfast (around 8-8:30). We always break for lunch, and usually finish clinics by about 5-6 pm (on Mon-Thurs). Some evenings one of the priests or seminarians give a scripture reflection. Friday morning we do a half day clinic, then pack up everything and leave the village by around 1 pm. We make the long trek back to the city and have a well-deserved hot shower at the Biltmore Hotel in Guatemala City. In the past, we have eaten as a group at a nice place, then head out to the nightlife, or back to our hotel beds. Saturday morning there is a nice breakfast provided at the hotel whenever you wake up, then about 2 hrs for shopping. Then around 11 am, we head to the airport in taxis. We fly back into Houston, then ride in vans back to College Station, arriving around 6-7 pm.

The cost per person (for 2010) is \$950, which includes everything except any spending money you wish for shopping in Tamahu and in Guatemala City the Friday before we return, plus a small cash gift that is left with the host family (around \$20-25).

You will need a current passport. Make sure your tetanus vaccine is up to date, and it is a good idea to be vaccinated against Hepatitis B and Hepatitis A, but it is not required. There is no need for antimalarial drugs in the region we visit.----Michelle Aucoin  
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