



Sister Joannes Klas (seated at center) visits with sister parish supporters at Saint Patrick Catholic Community in Hudson, Wisconsin.

Meeting Great Needs with Great Love

Sister parish bonds yield remarkable benefits

For more than 25 years, parishioners at Saint Patrick Parish in Hudson, Wisconsin, have nurtured a unique and enduring partnership with the people of the parish and village of San José El Tesoro Parish near the town of Yalpemech, Guatemala.

Known as a “sister” or “twinning” parish relationship, the bond between these communities began as an effort to provide aid to survivors of Guatemala’s three-decade civil war. Now, their collaboration has grown to include support for education, healthcare, infrastructure, and spiritual growth. For the people of both communities, this partnership represents a shared journey of faith, resilience, and collaborative change.

Sister Joannes Klas has been at the center of this twinning relationship story from its inception. Sister Jo, as she is lovingly known, spent nine years living and working in a Honduran refugee camp with about 200 Guatemalan villagers as an international observer and teacher. Sister Jo

accompanied the families when they returned to Guatemala, helping them settle on land in the north central region of Alta Verapaz. She remained there for a quarter century, helping to establish a thriving village.

“We decided to call our village San José, because we arrived in March and that is the month of the feast of St. Joseph, and El Tesoro, because the people are ‘the treasure,’” Sister Jo explained.

A Heart for Mission

The Saint Patrick connection to this tiny village 3,000 miles away came through the late Sister Bernadette Kalscheur, a former teaching colleague of Sister Jo. She knew about the villagers’ daunting challenges and recognized their great need, as well as the generosity and capacity of her fellow parishioners in Hudson. Sister Bernadette helped organize inaugural mission trips and volunteer projects. Her efforts laid the foundation for what would become a beloved tradition of regular mission trips that

bring volunteers and much-needed support to the community of San José El Tesoro.

Over time, the parish has adopted a system of organizing trips into two groups, each spending a week in Guatemala. Week one is usually a medical mission, followed by a project-focused mission in week two. A priest accompanies one of the groups. These trips allow volunteers to directly help the community and contribute to its day-to-day success.

For example, Saint Patrick parishioners were instrumental in bringing electrical service to the village. The process required careful coordination with local organizations and generous funding from the Hudson parish.

Another monumental project was the *estufas mejoradas* (“improved stoves”) building project. This was undertaken to address the health and safety needs of villagers, who had been cooking over open fires inside their homes. This exposed their families to smoke for many hours each day.

“Following the model of the Hudson Rotary Club, they built stoves for families and also taught the local people how to build them,” Sister Jo said. “The stoves use much less wood, and they keep the smoke out of the house.”

Rick Huebsch, a parishioner and longtime volunteer, said the success of this project was evident when he returned on his most recent trip earlier this year. He discovered that the villagers had built an additional 120 stoves.

“It was gratifying to see the progress made by the people of San José in both the electrical upgrade project and the stove building project,” Rick said. “They took the initiative to make significant progress on both projects.”

To address another essential need – access to clean water – each home in San José has received a cement water storage tank. Other agricultural projects funded by parishioners’ donations include raising cattle and cultivating sugarcane.

Meeting Changing Needs

Healthcare and nutrition have long been important aspects of the mission trips. Doctors travel on each trip to provide direct medical support to the community. “From the medical mission work this year, the team reflected on the need for more nutrition education, particularly to address growing issues with pre-diabetes,” Rick said.

Volunteers bring medications, vitamins, and other essential supplies with them. In Sister Jo’s case, she also has brought her own medical team!

Mission trip participants helped villagers to build stoves that make cooking healthier and more sustainable.



Father Dan Tracy's participation and sacramental care were greatly appreciated by the community.





Mission trip participants have grown lasting friendships with the people of San José El Tesoro.

“One year, two of my doctors came with us: my heart specialist and my primary care doctor,” Sister Jo recalled with a laugh. “I told the team, ‘In case something happens, don’t worry about me. I have two doctors, and a priest in case I die!’” It’s not surprising that a mission organized by School Sisters would make education a priority. Today, San José’s school has expanded to over a dozen classrooms, and Saint Patrick parishioners have helped to fund scholarships so village children can obtain vital vocational skills.

Father John Gerrits, the parish’s pastor, has been a wholehearted supporter of the Guatemalan mission, and this year, Associate Pastor Father Dan Tracy participated in his first trip.

“It was an incredible gift to serve the community of San José El Tesoro as a spiritual father,” Father Dan said. “As a priest serving a Hispanic community in Wisconsin, it was truly eye-opening to experience first-hand the great love and devotion that the Guatemalan people have for the Lord Jesus and the Catholic Church.”

“My own faith life has been immeasurably enhanced by my participation in this ministry,” said Claire Zajac, another longtime volunteer. “I am constantly reminded that our shared Catholic faith is truly universal, and that I should slow down, slim down, and live in the moment as God has planned for me.”

Maintaining Relationships

Sister Jo, now age 90, continues to make time for her friends in Hudson and Yalpemech.

“We still rely on Sister Jo and her deep connection in Guatemala to assist us, and she continues to travel with us to the village each year, thanks to the generosity of our parishioners,” Claire said. Sister Jo also receives assistance from her congregation, and the Office of Mission Advancement helps make financial arrangements, which are often difficult in Guatemala.

In San José, Sister Elena Joséfina Felipe, a Guatemalan sister who is fluent in Spanish and the local Q’che Mayan language, has been instrumental in managing the village’s daily operations. When Sister Jo returned to the United States in 2017, Sister Elena stepped up to maintain programs, oversee projects, and ensure that all the initiatives continue. Rick noted, “Sister Elena has played a vital role in sustaining the parish of San José and the sister parish relationship with Saint Patrick.”

In addition to returning to Guatemala, each year Sister Jo visits Hudson, participating in parish meetings and inviting parishioners to volunteer and donate towards the San José mission. These annual visits help bolster the parish’s support of San José’s projects.

“Our parishioners consider themselves partners with the School Sisters of St. Francis in supporting the mission at San José,” Claire emphasized. “We look forward to many more years of close collaboration.”

Read about Sister Jo’s remarkable vocation and her decades of ministry in many death-defying circumstances in an article on our community website’s Media Room: www.sssf.org.