

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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The Pope's Visit to Central America;
A Different Perspective

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Dear Peter,

Pope John Paul II's visit to Central America arouses images of huge, cheering crowds, swarming streets, and packed plazas. But for the peasants living in remote villages hundreds of miles from the capital cities, the Pope came to life through radios and televisions.

In San Juan Bosco, a dusty village hidden in the barren mountains of southwest Honduras, there is only one television. It's a small, black and white, battery-operated Sony, owned by Antonio Torres - one of the village's better-off peasant farmers. Like the other one-hundred and twenty-nine families in San Juan Bosco, the Torres family live in a white-washed adobe home, and eke out an existence from a rocky, hillside plot, where they grow corn and beans.

Last Tuesday Senor Torres issued an open invitation to the village to come and watch the Pope's visit to their nation's capital, Tegucigalpa, on T.V.. For the previous five days, most of the villagers had followed the Pope's travels on their portable radios.

Antonio's small home had been filled with peasant families since early that morning. Many of the peasants were wearing tattered clothes. Most of the little boys' trousers were too short, and at least half the children came barefoot. Entering through the kitchen door, the villagers greeted Antonio and his wife in a whisper, one of the more obvious and characteristic signs of the innate humility of the Honduran peasant. They then passed into the main room, and talked quietly amongst themselves until the telecast began.

"Isn't it beautiful?" The Pope's visit to Central America. You know it's the first visit any pope has ever made to this region," enthused Corina Ortiz, as she sat nursing her tenth child.

"Yes, but what a shame Padre Molina can't be with us now," butted in Pancha Banquedano, a small peasant woman, dressed in a red polyester shift. "And what a shame we can't afford to be there in the capital with the Holy Father."

Padre Molina is the only priest that visits San Juan Bosco. Usually he stays for four months; the other eight months of the year, the village's cement, tin-roofed church remains under lock and key. With less than two-hundred priests to attend Honduras' 3.4 million Catholics, many of the country's villages see priests only rarely. Yet,

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Honduran peasants consider themselves devout Catholics. The people of San Juan Bosco will tell you proudly that repeated visits by microphone-toting Protestant evangelists have produced not a single convert.

Although the bus ride from San Juan Bosco to the capital is only three and a half hours, few peasants could spare the money to go to see the Pope. Even in good years, they barely produce enough corn and beans to provide subsistence for their large families, most of which have at least eight children. But this year's drought virtually destroyed the villagers' crop. Seeing the Pope became an impossible dream. So they settled for the next best thing.

"And here's the 'Papamobile'! And there's the Holy Father, waving to the crowds!" shrieked the T.V. announcer, in a tone more befitting the Superbowl than a visit by God's representative on earth.

Suddenly the hum of conversation in the Torres household came to an end, and Antonio ushered dozens of children to the front of the room, the adults to the back. The home's six plastic chairs were given to women; the rest of the villagers reverently settled in on the floor.

For more than two hours, not an eye drifted away from the T.V. set. The peasants stood up, sat down and crossed themselves at the appropriate moments, murmuring prayers, as if the television screen had been transformed into an altar, as if they were physically present at the Pope's mass.

Pope John Paul II spoke emotively of the importance of the Virgin Mary as a model for all women; the problems of unemployment; poverty and political disappearances in Honduras; and, the need for peace in the region.

The crowds cheered every time the Pope paused. They waved their yellow and white flags, shouting out "Viva el Papa!". But through it all, the villagers of San Juan Bosco sat awed and solemn-faced.

For most of the broadcast, the television used a split image: the crowds covered most of the screen, and, suspended above them, in a small circle, was the Pope saying Mass. Many of the villagers think of the Pope as God on earth. The image of him hovering over the multitudes further enforced that belief.

When the broadcast ended, I asked the people in the audience what they hoped the Pope's visit to the region would bring. Repeatedly I received the same answer: "Peace".

San Juan Bosco is located just three hours' drive from the borders of both Nicaragua and El Salvador - the two countries where fighting has been fiercest in recent years. The villagers of San Juan Bosco live in fear that their neighbors' conflicts, conflicts whose political origins they don't begin to understand, will spill over the borders and cause havoc to their tranquil, if impoverished, lives.

All my best,