

A Few of the Reflections from St. Mark's 2010 Mission Trip to San Marcos  
(Be on the Lookout – all the Reflections will be printed as a series in future Postmarks)

I have to confess that I was a little apprehensive about this year's trip to Nigromante, our fifth. We were taking the largest group yet, and I was concerned that we would overwhelm and burden the parishioners of San Marcos with the feeding and housing of so many during a difficult economic time – difficult for us, even more difficult for rural Mexico. Additionally, George had received the news that his sister Eleanor was dying, and he would not be able to come and lead us in what would have been his sixth trip to the Diocese of Southeast Mexico. While we missed George's leadership and presence and were saddened by his situation, I realized my reservations were unfounded. By God's grace, we experienced another amazing visit with our friends in Nigromante. The seventeen included new travelers: Chad A., Sawyer H., Maggie H., the Rev. Elizabeth Molitors, Molly T., Hunter W., and John W.; the veterans among us were Lina B., Trey and Matthew B., Gemma M., Kim T., Anna Z., Lane, Alex, and Elliott R., and me.

The trip is never without some discomfort or concerns – there are always language and cultural barriers; it is hot; the accommodations are not what we are used to; the concept of time and scheduling is very different; the bathrooms are different; the food is different. As you will read, we created too much garbage, disabled too many toilets, and made the same dinner these past five years only to find out (after a stealthful investigation) that the people of Nigromante have been too polite all this time to tell us they really are not fond of our spaghetti.

However, while remaining mindful of the discomforts and concerns, there is so much to celebrate about our growing relationship with San Marcos. This year we painted a space in the sanctuary where the religious statues, soon to be reduced to only six, will be displayed -- away from their position at the altar. Padre Daniel's office also received a fresh coat. We bought locally filtered water from another parish in the diocese and reduced our use of plastic water bottles from previous years (we brought our own water bottles). We tried to purchase additional drinks and items from local tiendas. We participated in VBS three of the days and brought music and musicians and beautiful crafts that now decorate San Marcos. We were able to honor at least twelve scholarship recipients who received funds to help with their education through the donations we gave last year. We presented the newly ordained Daniel with a stole, a guitar, and our most recent parish picture. We honored the dead in a ceremony and processed to the cemetery. We also worked with the women in preparing food. And most importantly, we played, talked, and just sat and visited with our old and new friends from Nigromante.

Once again, you can read about the generosity and love with which the parishioners from San Marcos embraced us, the stories from our trip captured in the reflections of those who recently visited Nigromante. We will feature a few of these reflections in each of the Postmarks until they have all been included. Thank you, St. Mark's, for supporting this grace-filled relationship with San Marcos. *Kim R.*

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This was my first year going on the trip and I was really excited. When we pulled up in the van for the first time, I was nervous; everyone that had been there in the past years was so excited, smiling when they saw the kids that they had grown close to past year. I was afraid that it would be harder for me to get close to the kids because most everyone else had gotten a head start. I

was quickly proven wrong. The moment I stepped out of the van, kids that I had never seen before in my life began hugging me like I was an old friend. Of course, now I was worried about the language barrier. After an exchange of "Hola" and "Como te llamas" the conversation was pretty much over. To the kids, this did not matter at all. I soon learned that to make a friend you do not need to speak the same language or even live in the same country, because smiles and laughter are universal. *Molly T.*

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*November 1, 2009*

*Nigromante Veracruz, Playa Vicente*

*Church- San Marcos*

*For: Father George*

*Hi Father! I'm just writing this letter to ask you for your support so that we can continue studying and achieve our dreams and become who we want to be in our lives so that our parents and God will be proud of us.*

*My name is Adriana Martinez Maldonado. I am 13 years old and I, like the other children, am living an economic crisis and I ask that you award me the scholarship so that I can continue studying and achieve my dreams now that my father cannot continue working due to a back injury. With your help, I will be able to continue my studies, thanks be to you and God.*

*Well, that's all—I'm sending you my best wishes, hoping that this finds you well and that God continues to give to you and bless you.*

*Sincerely,*

*Adriana M.M.*

This is be the fifth reflection I will have written for the Mexico trip, and since I don't want to sound like a broken record, I think I'll just let this letter speak for itself. It is written specifically to Father George by Adriana, a 13-year old member of the San Marcos parish in Nigromante. Even though she goes a public school, Adriana is one of the many children (but, particularly, *girls*) in Nigromante who, without OUR economic support, would be forced to drop out, unable to afford the necessary uniforms, supplies, and books to continue her studies. How many junior high students in Glen Ellyn truly appreciate the value of an education? Because it's not something she can take for granted, at 13, Adriana already understands that, without an education, she won't be able to achieve her dreams and Adriana—along with the other children who took the time to apply for the scholarship program initiated by St. Mark's—has taken matters into their own hands. Please consider donating to St. Mark's scholarship fund for San Marcos so that children like Adriana can, in her words, make God and their parents proud.

*Alex R.*

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Nigromante is a lot different from Glen Ellyn. But you don't need me to tell you that. So what is it? The plumbing, the matriarchal society, the language? Sure, but those are easy answers. When you think about it, it's not that different really. The moment I stepped off the van, I felt at home. Not because I remembered the town, spoke fluent Spanish, or remembered every person's name from last year- those aren't really true. What made me feel at home was the mob of

children who attached themselves to our hips and arms, hugging us, grinning, and saying, "Hola!" When I replied, "Hola. Cómo estás?" (*Hello, how are you?*), they launched into rapid-fire Spanish, smiling like I was their older sister who just came home.

One afternoon I walked out the church's door and into the plaza, sunlight streaking across the sky, and a different world was in front of me. Chad and Trey were starting a band with a group of little boys, complete with water-jug drums and Padre Daniel's mandolin. Chad and a little boy were ricking out on harmonicas, while Trey and a few kids were playing the guitars. Gemma was playing catch with a line of little kids, who counted the tosses to five before letting someone else have a turn. Alex, Mrs. T., and Elizabeth were sitting on benches throughout the plaza, talking to different groups of women from the village. John and Elliott were taking turns playing soccer on the pavement (the kids play barefoot there) and being surrounded by a group of giggling, adoring, teenage girls. Sawyer was running around taking thousands- no exaggeration- of pictures. People were spread all over- drawing with chalk, on piggy back rides, playing frisbee, chasing Matthew like ducklings. I thought, *This is just too cool. This is why I came back. This is why I want to bring people with me. Because of this. And I know it will knock their socks off.* -- Lina B.

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This was my first trip to Nigromante and I was excited to see firsthand what all the old timers had been talking about. I was surprised by a number of things. The town was not nearly as remote as I had imagined. Yes you enter town on a gravel road, but it is a good size town and very well maintained. More chickens, roosters and hens than I'd seen in my entire life, but I found their company at meals to be entertaining. The people and their sincerity though is what really stood out. They were genuinely happy to see us get off the van. It was clear that there were numerous relationships that had been developed over the years, but the warm reception for all the first timers really was evident. The language barriers were not hard to overcome and even for someone with no Spanish skills, I had plenty of help, and they even pretended to understand my hand signals on a few occasions. I spent a lot of time watching the children. No matter the age, they were happy, unbelievably well-behaved and neat ( I can't imagine letting my kids when they were 4 and 5 wearing as much white as the local children did. Somehow they kept themselves clean throughout the day, even after painting with water colors for half an hour and doing other VBS projects.) I've always been impressed by their culture and their work ethic. During the entire week, no matter where we travelled, or who we met, I only saw examples that reinforced those previous beliefs. St Mark's has chosen well, selecting this particular parish, and I pray that we continue to get the support and participation from so many that will allow us to build deeper relationships and stronger ties with San Marcos and the local Nigromante families. *Hunter W.*

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The trip to Nigromante was very enjoyable. The best part was all the very friendly people that we met. It was very welcoming, and it made me feel very good about being there. Another thing that I enjoyed was seeing a different culture. It was fun to learn new things and compare them to things in our culture. The children that live there had so much energy and they were always playing games. There was never a chance to rest because at least one kid always wanted to play. The woman were very good cooks, and they worked very hard all day long to prepare meals for all of us. This trip really showed me how privileged I really am. It was a very eye-opening experience, and I wouldn't trade it for anything. *John W.*

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I think that traveling with St. Marks from Glen Ellyn all the way to Nigromante, Mexico, was really an amazing experience. We all got to know each other much more than maybe we expected and made better relationships with the people of Nigromante. I would say that my favorite part of the trip was probably doing Vacation Bible School and just playing around the church area with the children. The kids were all so friendly to everyone. The moment we stepped out of the van on the first day, they all ran to us and surrounded us with gigantic hugs. It didn't matter if we knew them or not, we were all welcome. In addition, it was incredibly interesting staying with our host families, seeing their life style and how they live off of so much less than what we live off of. The only flaw I would have to say about the trip for me was the bugs and lightening. Otherwise, I really enjoyed this experience and am quite looking forward to next year's trip to Nigromante, Mexico. *Maggie H.*

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This was my fourth trip to Nigromonte, Mexico. Each time I go there, I have a different experience. The reason I truly enjoy returning to the small village is because each year I have such a new outlook. I love watching the community, and I feel like that is one of the best parts of Nigromonte. Village life in Mexico is so different than here in Illinois. There is such a strong sense of community that is lost in America. I like that we do not try to impose our ideals on them but simply learn and attempt to contribute. I had a lot of fun furthering our relationship with the community of San Marcos. *Gemma M.*

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As it was my first year on the trip, I was really not sure what to expect or anticipate. Images and anecdotes from others formed the town in my mind. Surely, I thought, it would take time to be fully welcomed in this conjured up community I had thought about and thrown together. That thought was wrong though. Here people are very much involved in their own lives; it seems that in Nigromante there is a sense of community that I can only imagine feeling here in the US. Everyone was open, warm, and inviting, as if I had been coming there all my life and as if I did live there. Of course I don't live there and haven't been coming there all my life, but as I left the confines of the van and stepped somewhat hesitantly onto the gravel I was immediately surrounded by children that welcomed us fully. Unlike anything I had ever experienced, I was part of a community completely different from mine that literally took me in without knowing me at all. They gave up beds and room for our comfort alone. Their kindness was overwhelming and I am incredibly grateful to have experienced it. I can only hope to be blessed with the chance to go again next year. *Sawyer H.*

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The Nigromante trip allowed me to witness a foundational faith community. It was quite an honor to be a part of this relationship for the first time. Even with the limitations of verbal communication, there was a strong feel of connection that started with the location. The church being in the middle of the village allowed us to experience the community energy. Being a part of such a milieu can also stir up some uneasiness and fears. I found myself somewhat anxious about my limitations and therefore kept a safe distance for a moment or two. Eventually this was alleviated through the connection of music and the general joy of the children. The kids seemed content with just being so I gave them a harmonica.

We experienced a cycle of life intimacy as we were a part of an unexpected funeral on the first day. We went through the liturgy and walked up a hill singing songs on the way to the cemetery.

The heat gave a transcendental feeling to the ceremony. Our host family was expecting a birth any day but still wanted to engage through a meal. Life and death were all around. The rooster was the time-keeper and the sign of time passing. In Christian symbolism, the rooster is a Passion symbol. We experienced rooster's crowing in the morning and brushing up at our feet while we watched Mexico's World Cup victory. There was a rooster's foot in the food and we even sang "Little Red Rooster" the old country blues song. However, it's usually the people who make the connection. I was inspired by Eigner's patience and deacon Daniel's leadership. The senior high group and emerging adults jumped right into natural play with the children. I felt like I was a part of something special and sacred. *Chad A.*

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In trying to respond to the question, "How was Mexico" I find that only my most understanding friends have been patient enough to sit through *all* of the stories and impressions I managed to gather in the course of six short days; what a rich, wonderful experience.

So, although I have many, many stories, here is an abbreviated and distilled version of a few of the things my mind keeps coming back to...

**Refuse** (as in 'trash'): One evening in Nigromante, we were to prepare and serve a spaghetti supper to the people of San Marcos. Having stocked up on all the supplies we needed in Veracruz, we proceeded to take over the kitchen of a local woman to cook the pasta, mix the sauce, grate the cheese and slice the bread. It was meant to be a simple meal, but wow, what a production. We opened our huge containers of pasta from Costco, each sturdy cardboard box enclosing eight individually-wrapped cellophane-covered packages of penne and fusilli. For the sauce, we'd purchased large cans of tomatoes and tomato sauce, along with a case of those tiny cans of tomato paste. We couldn't find a can-opener, and so we watched as two local young people opened the cans for us, using the blade of a huge machete-like knife. For this one meal, we more than filled their trash can; it was overwhelming and shocking how much refuse we created.

**Mindfulness / Mindlessness:** This impression didn't strike me until I'd come home, that is, how mindlessly I normally move through my day. In Glen Ellyn, I don't have to think about what words to use to buy my groceries or answer the phone; in Nigromante, I had to use lots of hand-gestures and my 14 words of Spanish (or call upon a more fluent fellow-traveler) to get water from the local tienda or introduce myself to someone. All the little mundane, everyday things I do nearly unconsciously at home required a much greater level of attention in a place and a culture that differs from the one to which I'm accustomed. It was good to be reminded that my reality in Glen Ellyn is not the entire world's reality.

**Hospitality:** In the book of Deuteronomy, God reminds the Israelites that, "You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Deut 10:19). In fact, scripture is filled with advice and admonishments about offering hospitality. I suspect, though, that it's harder for some of us (I'm definitely one of these) to be on the receiving end of hospitality than it is to be the host. In Nigromante, it was an honor – and an extremely humbling experience – to be welcomed so readily into peoples' lives and into their homes, to find myself dependent and needy and not in control of my circumstances, depending instead on the generosity and grace of others.

**The Kingdom of Heaven is like:** On Tuesday evening, after sharing a meal with the people of San Marcos, I stood back for a moment and drank in the scene that was before me. The town square in front of the church was filled with people. Adults and children from St. Mark's – together with adults and children from San Marcos – kicked soccer balls, threw Frisbees, drew with chalk, sat on benches and chatted, played tag and made music with harmonicas, guitars, mandolins, water jugs and maracas. Unbidden, a line from scripture came to mind, the line that Jesus uses over and over in the gospel of Matthew to describe the way the world would be if humanity worked in accord with God's will for us: The Kingdom of Heaven is like...

On the face of it, there is so much that separates the people of San Marcos and St. Mark's: geographical distance, different languages, economics, suburban vs. rural life. But these things, which we often think of as barriers, were no match for the Kingdom of Heaven which was, that night, like a group of newfound friends eating, talking, playing and making music together.  
*Elizabeth M.*

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John 15 vs. 12 *This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.*

This was my second trip to San Marcos, and I was looking forward to seeing the people that I had met and remembered in 2007. It was a different experience; a rewarding experience, an experience filled with awe. It is remarkable to me how the communication just flows. It is all about love; it truly is. It is our love for them, their love for us, and for both communities, our love for God.

They are filled with this profound eagerness to know and to please us. Yet, it is so natural and real. The adult women were exceptionally comfortable and seemed so relaxed when we invaded their kitchen with loads of cans and preservatives! They adapted and just wanted to have fun with us. This made for lots of laughs and a very memorable episode.

Our group this year was extraordinary. Our children who represented St Mark's were once again an exceptional representation of what this trip is all about. The children of San Marcos could not get enough of them! The relationships that were formed, I am sure, will be continued and are so meaningful to both the children of St. Mark's and San Marcos. They read, they played, they created music, they created art, they sang, they danced, they laughed, they LOVED each other! Thanks, St Mark's, for the continued support of this awesome mission to continue our relationship with San Marcos in Nigromante, Mexico. George, you were missed. *Kim T.*

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I was all set to go on the Mexico Mission trip that Sunday morning. I still had memories of last year still in my head; the town, the people, the heat. Not only that, but, my favorite youth group leader aside from Jim H., Chad A., would be coming along. I would be able to talk with him about the books I am writing and the universe in which they take place in. When we landed in Oaxaca, the heat told me we were there. After me and my father caught a taste of old cartoons in Spanish at the hotel we spent the night in, we began the long trip to the village of Nigromante. One of the highlights of the road trip was me having the chance to recite my favorite speech from one of my favorite comic/TV series. Half way through, we stopped at a restaurant to have lunch and my father left the group to find a guitar so he could play music for the kids. Sawyer, Gemma

and I went with Alex, Elliott and their dad to buy a lock for the trailer we were hauling. That's when the storm hit. It was so terrible that we and the locals hid inside the store. Sawyer, Gemma and I had to run through the rain back to the rest of the group. Sadly, as we waited for the others, it soon became clear that we wouldn't be able to stay with the villagers the second day. So, we stayed in another hotel after we met the villagers again. The more we stayed in the country, the more it corresponded with my mental pictures of Thailand, Africa, South America, the Hawaiian forests, and India. As we drove to the village, I had an enraptured audience as I spoke of my novel. When we arrived in the village, all the kids were so happy to see me. They obviously remembered me from last year. The difference from this year and last is that they finally learned my name; "Mateo". The entire time I was with the kids, they wouldn't let me go for even a second. I did everything with them; I played a game that was similar to Duck-Duck-Goose, I ran around with them and played soccer with them and the padre. I even had a faux kung-fu gang fight with the older and stronger kids on the tower in the town square. I also met a cute girl named Carmen who is also an aspiring actress. Chad was able to strike up a pseudo-jug band with the kids. The family me, my father and Chad stayed with were expecting a child the night we came in or the day after that. I was also able to see the graveyard. What I noticed was that we view our graveyards as miserable places rife with owls, ravens, and bats while Mexican graveyards are chockfull of flowers and butterflies. It shows the difference between America's and Mexico's view of death. We also were able to see the World Cup in a villager's household. By the time we were leaving, I was already missing the place. What I loved most about this year's visit was the fact that we didn't just work the entire time; we mostly spent time with the whole community. All we did was be with the people. It was a bunch of fun, and it even reminded me once more of The Magnificent Seven or its predecessor, Seven Samurai. I'm thinking of inviting my best friend, David, with me next year. *Matthew B.*

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Our trip this year was, for me, the third to Nigromante. I have seen children develop over that time, and the other members of my family have seen infants grow to become six years old. We have become a small part of the lives of some of those in the church, but each visit allows us to better relate to them and share with them as we move forward. One of the relationships that is the most important to me is the furtherance of education for those who have shown the desire and hard work to move in that direction. Higher education is realistically the only way for young people there to do the things they may only have dreamed of. This goal, for most families in Nigromante, is not an option because of its expense. This year, St. Mark's has moved, through scholarships, to enable the pursuit of this goal by a select few. I would encourage members of St. Mark's to read some of the handwritten solicitations from the children, to us, detailing their aspirations and the obstacles to these aspirations that they are willing to leave home to pursue. *Lane R.*

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This was my fifth year going on the mission trip to Nigromante. Although I have been many times, I am always shocked at how the people of Nigromante go out of their way to make us as comfortable as possible. They even go as far as to give up their own rooms for us. This was the first year that our project did not consume most of our time in the village. It was nice to spend time actually getting to know the people in the town, and spending the time to make a genuine connection with the people. I always come back with a renewed appreciation for all of the blessings that we have in our daily lives and with a sense of what is really important in life. *Elliott R.*

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My second trip to Nigromante felt a little like "coming home" -- or at least returning to a place and a way of being that felt surprisingly comfortable to me. The familiar faces and warm hospitality of the people of San Marcos made it seem like we were visiting friends rather than undertaking a mission trip. Before leaving this year, Father Smith reminded us that the real value of going was in building relationships, not in completing a project or activity. Being with the children and adults of Nigromante -- singing, preparing meals, learning about one another's lives -- seemed more than enough to fill the time with meaning and purpose. And now, as I try to fit back into my day-to-day routine in the Western Suburbs, I realize that feeling of place and purpose (even for a brief time) is a gift, one that I will hold on to until I can return to Southeast Mexico. *Trey B.*

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This was my 2<sup>nd</sup> year going to Mexico. It was incredible seeing all the little kids again, and it was nice to see that a lot of them remembered you. Hopping out of the van and seeing all of their smiling faces made me know that this was going to be a great trip. This year wasn't as focused on the physical work as it had been in the past, but I felt that that was a good thing. Even with the language barrier the relationships I built and the relationships that grew from last year are very important to me. It was a more relaxed trip and I missed the physical work but I know that work and physical things will fade but the relationships are what will stay in my mind forever. I had a great time on the trip and I look forward to going in the future. *Anna Z.*