

Neerology

Theodore Niehaus
1939 - 2014



Eugene Niehaus was born on May 17, 1939 in Sauk Centre, Minnesota and was baptized in St. Paul Church that same month. His parents, Joseph Niehaus and Lucine Weiner raised a family of seven: four girls and three boys. After Eugene finished grade school in Sauk Centre, he went to St. Lawrence Seminary, Mt. Calvary, Wisconsin. By the end of his first year at Calvary, Eugene knew that he wanted to be a Capuchin. On August 31, 1957, he entered the Capuchin novitiate in Baraga, Michigan, taking the religious name, Theodore, one of twenty-six novices in his class. This class was the last to begin their college studies at St. Felix Friary, Huntington, Indiana. The next year the studies were moved to the newly built St. Mary Friary at Crown Point, Indiana. During his third year of theology at Marathon, he was ordained on September 16, 1965 and spent the next two years finishing his theology and pastoral year of practice in ministry.

Teddy, as he came to be known, was asked to prepare himself for ministry in Nicaragua. He went to study at a special language school for missionaries and international organizations: the Center for Inter-cultural Formation founded by Ivan Illich, in Cuernavaca, Mexico, where he spent five months. He practiced his Spanish with the people of the parish where he stayed, and they were so impressed with him that they wanted him to be their pastor. But Teddy told them that he already had his assignment.

He arrived in Nicaragua on December 18, 1967. Teddy started his missionary experience just when the Capuchins were gearing up to implement the pastoral practices of the Second Vatican Council. A few months before Teddy's arrival, the friars had held a "Franciscan Week" dedicated to the study of the 16 documents of the Vatican II. Several of the documents had addressed the role of the laity in the church, and it seemed that the Holy Spirit was working overtime to get the missionaries to restructure their work, especially in the rural areas, which, for the most part, they could visit only twice a year. They decided that they had to prepare the laity to become more active in their communities by training them to have Sunday services in the absence of a priest.

The first classes were given in the areas of Rama and Paiguas. The missionaries asked each rural community to select a "Delegate of the Word," as long as he was a permanent resident of their community, married, and able to read. These candidates were called together to learn more about the Bible, the church and its beliefs. Then they were given Bibles which were translated

into Latin American Spanish. Until then, the only Spanish Bible available were in Castillian Spanish and the vocabulary was hard to understand for the Nicaraguan farmers.

After a break-in period, he was assigned to work with Gregory Smutko in the parish of Rama, with its many chapels accessible by river and road. In May 1969, he moved to the neighboring parish of Muelle de los Bueyes where he barely got to know the people before he was named as associate pastor in Siuna with Leopold Gleissner in December of that same year. Leopold Gleissner had become the pastor of Siuna and La Luz –twin towns that had supplied workers for the Canadian Mining Company. Unfortunately, the mine had to shut down its operations the previous year due to a flood that destroyed the hydroelectric dam at El Salto. Without sufficient electricity to run the heavy mining machinery and power the elevators which lowered the workers to over a 1000 feet below the surface to where the gold vein had reached, the mine was abandoned.

Another loss in 1968 was the departure of the Maryknoll Sisters from the parish school which they had founded in 1944 in Siuna. Fortunately, the Capuchin Sisters of the Divine Shepherd filled the gap with some native Nicaraguan sisters so that the school could continue.

This was the situation that Teddy found when he arrived in Siuna. His first question to the pastor was: "Would it be okay if I take the outside mission trips." Leopold immediately gave the responsibility of visiting the western rural areas of Siuna as well as the communities along the Prinzapolka River all the way to the Caribbean. Within a month of his arrival he visited all of the communities of the parish outside of Siuna. Besides the usual sacraments, he also canvassed all of the communities for candidates to be Delegates of the Word.

Leopold shared his memories of Teddy's work in the Siuna parish:

When (Teddy) came to Siuna, the first thing he asked me was: would it be okay if I take the outside mission trips. I told him: "yes, of course, if that is your wish." I saw Teddy once a month, after he had made a mission trip. Teddy was always very jovial, kind, considerate and compassionate. When he came back from a trip, he always sat down to explain how the trip went and spent a day or so in community life.

Already by February 1970, the Capuchins from Rama and Paiguas were invited to give the first retreat for the fledgling candidates in the Siuna area so that they could conduct Sunday services in their communities. Soon the communities who had not chosen their candidates before did so. Another course was offered in Siuna two years later.

The sisters also got involved offering courses for health leaders and for homemakers. Eventually, the Capuchin Sisters also started training teachers so that the rural communities could have their own schools. Ronald Siu, the local agricultural agent, offered his services to train the farmers in better farming methods and introduced them to improved seeds for bigger crops. He also arranged for government contracts for the improved bean crops.

The growing sense of ministering to all the needs of a community inspired many of the people who had lived practically in isolation, deprived of the most basic elements of education, health care and basic skills. To the Somoza government, however, it was a threat. A good example was the sale of the beans that the farmers produced. When the farmers started getting bumper crops of one of the staples of the Nicaragua diet, the government agreed to pay 120 Córdobas for a hundred pound bag of beans. When the farmers hauled their product to Siuna, the buyers lowered the price to a 100 Córdobas. The farmers, agreeing among themselves, refused to sell at the lower price. The government buyers finally bought the beans at the agreed price. The united farmers won their first victory.

Soon, however, Teddy started getting reports from different families that their husbands or fathers had disappeared without a trace. The number of “desaparecidos” grew to over a hundred. Teddy flew to Managua and went to the office of the head of the Nicaraguan Army, José Somoza, to inform him what his soldiers had done to the farmers. Somoza tried to teach Teddy the dangers of communism. It seemed to the government that any efforts to build community had communist roots. Teddy returned to Siuna determined to seek another solution to this problem as the number of the “desaparecidos” grew to over 300.

In June 1976, the friars gathered for a retreat in Matagalpa, led by Reynold Rynda, a Capuchin from the States. Teddy Niehaus and David Zywiec brought to the retreat the news about the farmers who had “disappeared.” Another Capuchin who worked in the Estelí diocese, Evarist Bertrand, learned that something similar was happening in his area. Rumor was that if Evarist left the country, he would not be allowed back into Nicaragua.

By the third day of the retreat, Reynold announced that he was suspending the conferences so that the friars could deal with this very disturbing issue. So the next two days brought forth the pros and cons of making this public. All present were very aware that it might mean expulsion from the country or something worse. In spite of that, the friars were united in writing to the president, Anastasio Somoza Debayle and to the Nicaraguan Bishops Conference, regarding the crimes being committed by the army. Florian Ruskamp made over 600 copies of these two letters and distributed them to other religious communities and lay organizations all over the country. Friars were stopped on the streets of Managua and thanked for letting the Nicaraguan people know what was going on in their own country.

The superiors realized that both Teddy and David Zywiec, who had collected the data on these atrocities, were in danger of reprisals. So Teddy was assigned to take over the parish of La Cruz on the Rio Grande River, and David would work on the rivers around Bluefields.

Teddy visited Wendelin Shafer in La Cruz in February 1977 in order to get the lay of the land before Wendelin left the parish. Four months later he returned with several young men from the rural area of Nicaragua who were interested in religious life. Their plan was to live religious life in a community shaped by the *campesino* (farmer) culture. When they left on their first mission trip, they had decided that they would not ride horses or mules, but would walk from

one community to the next just like the farmers did. When the guides tried to insist that Teddy use the horse they had brought for him, he refused, much to their consternation. This would be the pattern of all Teddy's land mission trips for the next 18 years.

The first trip also made Teddy aware of some of the problems that the "holy Mission" trip occasioned. For instance, the local merchants made the mission an opportunity to show their wares, food and drink to the faithful who gathered in each community. One trip was enough to convince Teddy that something had to be done to restore order and focus on the mission. So he discussed it with the members of each community, and together they decided to "un-invite" the sellers when they were at the mission.

Another problem was the length of the mission, which lasted two days in each place. That would leave their homes and farms unprotected and the animals uncared for. As a result, the communities reduced the mission to a one-night event, starting at 6:00 PM with a penitential service, confessions and preparation for baptism and marriage. That would go on until 10:00 PM, followed by rest until 3:00 AM, when Mass and the sacraments would be celebrated. By 6:00 AM, the people could return to their farms and the missionaries could pick up their things and continue on to the next chapel. This was the pattern that Teddy followed in all his trips.

In January of the following year, Teddy invited the delegates from all the communities to gather in La Cruz. Together they organized the parish into five sectors, so that the delegates could help each other in their area. There was also a sixth sector, down the river close to the Caribbean where the Miskito Indians also had chapels.

Teddy was in communication with the other Capuchins, especially with those working in the rural communities. Soon August Seubert and other Capuchins were coming to La Cruz to give courses in scripture, church history, and other pastoral studies to the delegates.

This organization caught the attention of other neighboring communities who wanted to become active members of the parish. In 1978, at least 12 new communities requested to have the 'holy Mission.'

Meanwhile, the Somoza government realized that they had to do something to win the hearts of the farmers, especially because the reports of Sandinistas recruiting the discontents to join their forces. So, the government authorized the construction of a six classroom school in La Cruz and talked about building a hospital there also.

Two months later, the Sandinista revolutionaries invaded Managua and forced Somoza to flee the country on July 19, 1979. When the people of La Cruz heard the news, they celebrated because the "war" was finally over. In the following months, the new government sent representatives to address the needs of the rural areas: education, health care, co-ops, and politics. Teddy, along with the other missionaries, had to face a new challenge: How does one

bring the Gospel to bear on these new realities? Unfortunately, they had very little time to answer that question.

Soon the farmers brought in reports of armed groups forming in the rural areas because they were opposed to the Sandinista government. They were known as "The Contra", because they targeted all of the improvements and cooperative organizations that the new government had started.

The government tried to get the communities to form their own self-defense teams. At community at La Cruz resisted until one day they were attacked and robbed by a group of Miskito Indian Contras. Then they realized that they had been easy pickings, so they dug trenches and learned how to defend their community.

The community realized that if they wanted peace, they would have to dialog with their neighbors down river. So they asked Teddy to deliver a message to the head of the Miskito Contras, since he had a small boat and outboard motor. Teddy agreed and left to carry out this diplomatic mission. He was nearing the area when he heard a shot. He stopped the boat immediately, and obeyed the order to come to the shore where the shooter was. The man lifted his rifle and showed it to Teddy. The barrel of the gun had exploded and was totally useless. This event bolstered Teddy's faith that God was watching over him. Strengthened by this conviction he continued his programmed mission trips twice a year all throughout the Contra war.

There was another attack that occurred in La Cruz during a funeral service for a soldier who had been killed in an attack upriver. Suddenly, there was a volley of gunfire, and everybody in the church laid flat on the floor. The battle went on for three hours, but the defenders kept the Contra from entering the town, at the cost of eight deaths. That night a nurse from the hospital and Teddy washed the corpses and put fresh clothes on them for burial, since their family members were so distraught that they couldn't do it themselves. Even Teddy hesitated at first to render this service for the dead defenders, because he feared he would faint at the sight of so much blood. But he summoned his courage, and did what he had to do.

The next big challenge came in October 1988, when Hurricane Juana hit the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua with winds of 143 mph. Fortunately, Teddy had sufficient warning and was able to tie down the zinc roofs of the church and rectory with heavy ropes before the winds hit. However, the people had been evacuated to high ground because of the danger of flooding, which happened that afternoon. The Rio Grande River rose so high that it covered the town in six feet of water. A previous pastor, Martin Coohill, had the foresight to build both structures on wooden posts that kept them above the swollen river. After the storm past, Teddy helped the people to repair their roofs and to relocate to safer parts of the town.

Ever since Teddy had been assigned to La Cruz, he longed to share his life and ministry with other religious. Because the Vicariate of Bluefields, Nicaragua was half the size of the State of

Wisconsin, the Capuchins were spread out over 12 mission areas, reaching hundreds of rural communities. That, in part, was what motivated him to invite young men from the surrounding communities to share with him a Gospel life of prayer and service to the communities. His biggest disappointment was that so many of those he invited did not persevere. Even the young men who entered the training program for the Capuchins decided that it wasn't their calling. Finally, a young man from La Cruz, Flavio Murillo Gonzalez, was ordained as a diocesan priest on December 19, 2000. That gave Teddy hope, and by 2008, he commented that there were ten young men studying in St. Pius X Seminary in Bluefields, and another two at the major seminary in Managua.

In 1992, Teddy experienced another shot in the arm when Glenn Gessner came to work with him in the ever-expanding parish of La Cruz. Glenn brought with him a dedication to promoting the lay ministry and especially the Christ-centered family and one of their greatest needs: good health care. These two missionaries' work blossomed, and, after three years, they realized that the parish was attracting so many new communities that they had to establish another center at El Ayote, where Glenn went to minister to the 30 communities in that area and Teddy stayed behind to care for the remaining 25 communities.

In the meantime, roads were being opened to connect the parish with the rest of the country, thus bringing in more families. Teddy promoted the creation of a local radio station which could also link the communities with better communication of what was going on in the area and in the world. The government took another look at the Rio Grande of Matagalpa and began a feasibility study of two hydroelectric dams along the river to supply energy to the area.

In the summer of 2007, Teddy celebrated his forty years of work in Nicaragua back in St. Paul's Church in Sauk Centre, Minnesota, where he had been baptized in 1939. He preached for the occasion and revealed the three characteristics from the book: *Seeds of Contemplation*, by Thomas Merton, that inspired him in his mission work:

"See things as they are. Be free from material attachments. Be responsive to God's grace and aware of God's presence." And he added: "Those who live this way are the ones who are holding everything together and keeping the universe from falling apart. Their influence changes the world for good."

Teddy continued to work in the La Cruz area, forming the different community organizations and faithfully visiting the communities until he started having severe headaches in 2014.

The provincial nurse, Debbie Van Ermen, tells us:

After experiencing what seemed to be stroke symptoms in January 2014, doctors in Nicaragua discovered a mass on Teddy's brain. Teddy left Nicaragua to return to the United States to seek medical care on February 12, 2014. He underwent a brain biopsy which showed advanced stage glioma tumors. Surgery was not an option, so he was

treated with chemotherapy and radiation therapy to slow down the progression and decrease the size of the tumors. During treatment, he lived, for the most part, at St. Paul Villa Assisted Living. He enjoyed visits to St. Fidelis Friary as well as spending time with his family who visited every week from Minnesota. He passed on 11/19/14 at St. Paul's Nursing Home with his family at his side.

Even in his last days, Teddy was calm and appreciative of all that was done for him. Is it any wonder that the people of the La Cruz wanted to dedicate a chapel to "Padre Teodoro"!

— Niles Kauffman