



## Faces of the Maria Madre Godparent Program: Ash and Nery

Sorting through a sea of phone photos is a fine way to cure the blahs of Covid isolation. They depict our bygone liberty and the joy of friendship. Invariably, however, a single shot stops the random scanning. It could be a person, a building, or a natural setting that evokes deep feelings and reflection. It was so with me when I focused on the image of a child of about six years old, uncomfortably posing before a garden thick with tropical growth, her raven hair cut short and festooned with an array of blue ribbons.

The picture was taken four years before I came to know this little girl in her ill-fitting Dr. Seuss hoodie. As I peruse the image of her almond shaped face – the color of wheat -- and her grudging smile, I remember that it was the photo that I was shown eight years ago when I was asked to consider sponsoring her education through a program organized by Holy Trinity Catholic Church in Washington and the Catholic parish of Maria Madre de los Pobres, located in the capital city of El Salvador. It was, and still is, part of a larger program with participation by parishes in Europe and the United States. For \$300.00 annually, a student receives tuition, uniforms, and participation in a comprehensive parish formation effort for the child and his/her family.



Nery M. was originally sponsored by a caring Holy Trinity family whose circumstances left it unable to continue their association with a child that they cherished and accompanied during her first years in school. That circumstance coincided with my own desire to sponsor a child, and so, I first met this lively girl of eleven on a Sunday outing for sponsored children and their caregivers. The event was hosted by a delegation from Holy Trinity in representation of some forty-five families and individuals from the parish who were “Godparents” for Maria Madre’s youth. The picture shows the two of us mugging for the camera. I recall that she was anxious to squirm away from my embrace to join the other youngsters in the swimming pool. From that day forward, I had become a godfather, a “padrino.”

My archival images over the intervening nine years reveal her growth from a soccer loving teenager to a young woman currently in her second year of university studies. They reveal her growing confidence, asserting itself in the firm but gentle way of her winning personality. They show her strong attachment to her poverty-stricken but very supportive family, living in a house of dirt floors, set precariously on the edge of a ravine. They chronicle her devotion to her ten brothers and sisters and to her struggling parents.

The snapshots disclose the many times she and I have come together to review her academic progress, to speak of life in an atmosphere of gang violence and the reality of its dangers and limited possibilities, especially for women and girls. At one point, my late wife’s sister, Pilar, shows up in the photos, joining me in Nery’s support, so that now there is a “madrina,” with whom she can correspond and share the experiences of her maturing life.

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Throughout the sponsorship experience, I received periodic mailings from Nery, organized by a caring staff at Maria Madre that administers the program and keeps track of each student. The packages contained current pictures, hand-written messages, and school report cards. My responses to her were channeled back to El Salvador through the good offices of a very active committee of volunteers at Holy Trinity that organize the parish's participation in the program. In this way, I have been able to track her progress through primary, middle, and high school.



On several of my trips to El Salvador, Nery and I discussed the possibility of continuing with her education in college, a pipe dream for most youngsters of reduced means. Many impediments presented themselves. Her mother's health was fragile, and Nery was her caregiver and constant companion. Economic survival in La Chacra – the neighborhood of Maria Madre -- is a daily challenge. Nery's family supports itself by the sale of homemade tamales -- tasty rolls of cornmeal stuffed with pork or chicken and wrapped in banana leaves -- prepared in the hundreds and sold on the downtown streets. Twice a week, all family members participate in this cottage industry. Her hands and energy were needed in the family business.

The more basic question became, "would a college education substantially improve one's economic possibilities in a country of high unemployment and economic stagnation?" Atop all of these factors was the reality that the Godparent's Program officially ends with a student's graduation from high school. There was no modality in place for Nery to continue her studies under its auspices.

Grace is active in the ongoing relationships between students, sponsors and the Maria Madre staff. Care of the person is foremost in the consideration of any problem that arises. Bureaucracy must bend to need. After conferences with Nery's family, the selection of a university program most likely to move her into professional employment, a class schedule allowing her to help keep the tamales rolling out and arrangements allowing me to continue to channel my financial support through the Godparents Program, Nery began matriculating at La Universidad Tecnológica de El Salvador as a freshman in January of 2019.

I end this account looking at the picture of the two of us on her campus on the day she introduced me to several of her professors in the School of Business Administration. Covid-19 restrictions now require her to take her classes on-line, and they preclude my traveling to Maria Madre in the company of other godparents.

I am anxious to return to El Salvador and my camera is ready to capture new images of Nery's college life, the internships that will be part of her curriculum and the job interviews that will occur after her graduation. The rest, we leave to the guidance of the Holy Spirit and her forceful pursuit of a path that improves her economic condition, opens new possibilities for her family and contributes to the welfare of her nation.

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