

7-11-12

Dear friends: First I'll describe my adventure in the "the Orient" which is what Ecuadorians call the part of their country east of the Andes Mountains, the rainforest or jungle, with tributaries which eventually join tributaries in Brazil to form the Amazon River. On Monday I flew by Tame, our small Ecuadorian airline, to Lago Agrio, a small town in the jungle, and stayed there overnight in a hotel.

The tourist agency was supposed to take me by taxi to a bus terminal on Tuesday morning, but they forgot about me. I would have been stranded, but, by incredible luck, another agency had sent a taxi to pick up four people at the hotel, but only three were there. A man named Sali Mohammed was missing. They all agreed that this was another name for Don Kenny (!), so I left with them, first on a two-hour bus ride, where I saw this part of the country. There were oil wells, which reminded me of reading that, since oil was discovered in the rain forest, that an area the size of Rhode Island is defoliated every year for this oil, and this will have a bad consequences for the future climate of the whole planet. We got to the shore of a jungle river, where I bought sunscreen and insect repellent. Then we went by motorized canoe – a three hour trip- to a lodge in the rainforest. On the trip we saw different species of monkeys, huge termite mounds, and two sleeping baby anacondas. It all seemed very peaceful. I turned out that I was in the wrong lodge, so they drove me by boat to the correct lodge nearby. From this lodge we went piranha fishing. I never have any luck fishing because I don't react fast enough. Every else in our group was less than one-third my age, and they got a big bang out of me being with them. After dark we went by boat looking, with strong searchlights, for cayman, (sp?) a half-sized crocodile. They only come out at night. Finally we saw a spectacled caymen. Then we went for a swim. It was great. In a way, I've swum in the Amazon.

On Wednesday morning I got up early, and went to the top of a tower where, with a telescope our guide Zulema was spotting birds. In the distance I saw a kingfisher. Then we went by riverboat through the jungle, seeing huge wasps nests, a huge spider's web about a half-block long, and more monkeys. We arrived at a native village, where a woman first had a man cut yucca, and then made a yucca tortilla. Then the family's affectionate pet monkey, with a long prehensile tail, came and climbed all over us. This village had very few people. I talked to this woman, Olga, about religion, about which she knew almost nothing. She did not know what Baptism is. She said the people were either Evangelicals or Catholics, the difference being their idea of Mary. Sometimes Evangelical missionaries come there. She doesn't remember any Catholic priest ever being there.

Then we went by riverboat to another, larger, village where we met Tomas Alberto Greta, a shaman. Ever since my sabbatical at Notre Dame in 1990, I had thought of a shaman as a person with all the wisdom of nature, of all knowledge, a sage on human living, like Socrates, Buddha, Confucius, Ben Franklin, or Dr. Preston Bradley. This man came in with a body-length blue-green tunic, with a necklace of jaguar's teeth and a headdress of bird feathers, and told us his life story. He's from a family of shaman. At age of 12 he started on hallucinogen drugs, which

give him visions. He has taken them for so long that his body has gotten used to them. He has studied plant life, and believes in natural medicine. But there are only 150 people in his village. His world is very small. He gets only one or two clients a week at most. We had to pay each \$2 for this interview. People had expected him to talk about witchcraft and spells, but he said nothing about this. (Later, when I talked to Sister Rosa, who has lived in the Orient for nine years, she said there really are such shamans who believe in spells, etc. and who practice medicine with people.) Later that night he came to our lodge, expecting, I guess, money for posing for pictures. Then another shaman, dressed the same way, also came. I felt as though I was in Disney World. So, as far as this man being a source of wisdom, I thought: "You've got to be kidding."

That night we put on rainproof panchos, got our flashlights and went for a walk through the jungle, looking for spiders' webs, other insects, and grasshoppers. Then it rained fiercely, and we had to call it quits. Wow! I now know why it's called "the rainforest."

The travel agency hadn't prepared much for the last day, so we went for a boat ride down the rivers. Then we hiked through the forest. One of the guides knew a lot about the different trees, which was great for one of the group, a biology student. We came back early, and again saw the two shamans. But I had another great swim. The water was great.

Thoughts. There are many tourist agencies in Quito advertising for the rain forest. But to me much of this is misleading. I saw no bright-colored birds, jaguars, pythons, crocodiles, or giant river otters. The jungle seems sparsely populated with animal life. It's like many advertisements about Ecuador, depicting many different native tribes. Really the country is only about 6% native, and one doesn't see much of them on these tours. Anyway, I've now seen all four parts of Ecuador: the Galapagos Islands, the coast, the Andes Mountains where I live, and the rainforest.

On Friday, four of us reversed the route: first the riverboats, then the bus, to the airport in Lago Agrio. The plane trip to Quito is only 35 minutes. I wanted to be back to celebrate the Feast of St. Anthony, our patron, in Rancho Alto

I got back on time to say the Mass in the chapel San Antonio. Then we had a night-time procession through the whole barrio, carrying the statue of St. Anthony. Everybody had a candle, and very many homes had a statue or picture of Jesus or a saint on a table outside. We went from home to home. A mariachi band played between decades of the rosary. The Aro-Ecuadorian group danced. The procession lasted 2½ hours. It was the Latin American church at its most Latin American.

After the procession the group went to the Barrio center and elected this year's barrio queen, plus "Miss Simpatica" and "Miss Hospitality". In previous years the young women elected were girls I didn't know. But this year both the queen and "Miss Simpatica" were catechists and very active in the parish. "Miss Hospitality" is a girl I had in my Young Christian Students group in the school Aleman about five years ago. They all came to the First Communion Mass that Sunday.

The First Communion was great. The young people in the choir and the musicians had practiced long and hard. I give those receiving First Communion the option of receiving in the hand, and then receiving from the cup. All was upbeat. What was different this year was that the 36 receiving First Communion had brought a lot of food, wrapped it in packages, brought it up to the altar at the Offertory, and after Mass that afternoon brought it to poor people in the barrio José Peralta. They did this on their own. After the Mass a mariachi band played outside. It was a great day... This "catches up" on things till the last week in June. I'll write again shortly. Have a good summer... Fr. Don