

2019 - Issue Four

A Missionary Family

EMILIA HENNEMAN

Remember the song “Here I am, Lord. Is it I, Lord? I have heard you calling in the night. I will go, Lord, if you lead me. I will hold your people in my heart”? I remember at age nine tearing up as I sang that song at Mass with all my heart. Inside, I was praying “Yes, Lord, send me!” Even then, I had the seeds of a missionary desire in my young heart.

Five years later, my parents decided it would be good for our family to experience a different way of life before we four children became too absorbed by different activities. Shortly thereafter, we took our first trip abroad, flying to Bombay (Mumbai) and then traveling further by land to a remote village in the state of Andhra Pradesh. This is where we stayed for the next seven months, at a Catholic mission run by a priest and ten religious sisters. There was a boarding school for 73 boys on the second floor of our house. They taught us how to hand-wash our clothes at a water pump, eat rice and soup with our hands, and kill a chicken. I was devastated when it was time to leave.

Life was never the same after being exposed to the world beyond my Portland, Oregon suburb. All I wanted to do was go out into the world again, to explore God’s beautiful creation, but I had to finish high school first. The summer before senior year, my parents allowed me to return to India alone to meet Mother Teresa and work with her sisters. Then I went to college, volunteered in Belize for a year and studied theology at the John Paul II Institute in Washington, DC.

After discerning that God was not calling me to religious life—which I thought had to be the case for me to be a missionary—I met and married Nick. He shared my love of the Catholic faith, travel, and service. We were married in 2010, and by 2017 we had five children and had moved four times. Nick and I worked hard—he outside the home, I in the home—so we could afford a big comfortable house for our young family, as well as a Catholic education, martial arts and swim lessons, occasional beach weekends, home improvements, in short, all the things that meant giving a good life to our kids. On date nights, I’d sometimes share my desire of taking our children to a foreign country one day, just for a couple of weeks or a summer. It would be good for them to see poverty first-hand and do some works of mercy. Though he had never been on a mission trip, Nick shared this desire. Not now, however...some years down the road. In the meantime, we would work hard, looking forward to that trip and save money to travel more in retirement.

I did not want to become too comfortable in what I knew was, by most standards in the world, a luxurious lifestyle. In an attempt to simplify our life and prioritize family, I decided to switch to a “dumb” phone, declutter the house, and try homeschooling. We also kept our old minivan instead of upgrading as our tiny way of being in solidarity with the poor and making less waste.

In the summer of 2017, a family came to our parish to help with Vacation Bible School. I recognized them from a Catholic newspaper a year earlier as the family who were going into missions with an organization called [Family Missions Company](#) (FMC). My heart leapt—I had said a prayer that I could

meet them someday, and here they were! I invited them for dinner and asked all kinds of questions about their mission life. Although we enjoyed their company, the lifestyle didn't sound very glamorous. What struck me most was that they were an ordinary family like us. As Nick and I waved goodbye, I told him, "I thought maybe I would feel called into missions like their family, but I guess God took that desire away. I definitely don't want to live like that," and we shut the door behind us.

Six months later, however, it felt like something was missing in our lives. One night it dawned upon me to look up that same missionary family and see how they were doing. When I went to the FMC website and clicked "Meet our Missionaries," my jaw dropped; I saw many large, young Catholic missionary families. People were doing this?! I read all the family bios aloud to Nick. Then I read everyone's blogs. My questions were answered—FMC was started by a lay Catholic family. It had 300 missionaries in 10 countries preaching the Gospel and serving the poor. Becoming missionaries meant making a two-year commitment. I was ready to sell the house immediately! But what about the kids? If this was our vocation as a couple, then this was our kids' vocation too. Why *wouldn't* we do this? Nick shared his reservations—he didn't feel comfortable leaving for two years without having a job when he came back. He had a family to support. Though we had no immediate answers, we knew God did. We started praying and placed our lives in His hands.

Things started to fall into place, miraculously. First, Nick found out that he could take two back-to-back sabbatical years. Then we attended a "Come and See" weekend which confirmed everything we were hoping for. Moreover, FMC accepted our application; they thought we could do this! Our house sold in a couple of weeks. We either got rid of our things or stored them in a donated space. A week before leaving, we had some other news to share: we were expecting another baby. People asked me if I was scared to take my kids or have a baby abroad, but I was never afraid. The experiences that Genie Summers, co-founder of FMC, shared in her books about her family in missions reassured me of God's protection and shield over my family.

In September, instead of being in school, our kids were with us at "Intake," a three-month missionary formation program. After a period of study and preparation, we spent one month at a mission post in Mexico. Our family shared one bedroom, something I never would have believed possible. At the end of this trip, each missionary was handed a sealed envelope with their first year's mission post assignment. Ours was Costa Rica. The second year, we could decide to stay or go somewhere else. I used to avoid bringing all five kids to Costco, yet here we were going to take them abroad to Central America.

We went home at Christmas to fundraise and prepare for Costa Rica. There were many generous people eager to help with the mission work. They became our partners. As Mother Teresa said, "Some go by giving, others give by going." We are the part of the Body of Christ who goes to the foreign missions, and we are so grateful for the part that supports us financially and in prayer, and the part that stays home and evangelizes in our own parish.

We had a few things to do before settling into our small town of Coopevega. Our first stop was Guatemala for a month to study Spanish. The practice boosted our confidence in speaking. Then we flew to the capital San Jose and drove the five hours along winding and bumpy roads to our simple but clean, little yellow house. For the next two weeks, we unpacked and got the kids enrolled in the local public school, hired a housekeeper, and bought a car. We headed back to San Jose where little Felicity was born. My parents and sister and brother-in-law came to help for a couple of weeks. Then we headed back to Coopevega, our town near the Nicaraguan border, to finally settle in.

Our main parish has two or three priests who serve forty-two communities. Three religious sisters, the priests, our family and another missionary family are responsible for the seventeen communities in

our zone. Some of the locations where we catechize and bring Holy Communion are quite remote, accessible only by unpaved roads. The priests can only reach some chapels once every three months, and many communities don't have any qualified catechists.

Getting started was slow and steady, but we had been advised to approach missions as a marathon, not a sprint. Father introduced us at Mass, and the congregation gave us a standing ovation. We had also been advised to start a routine right away, including our most basic commitments--daily personal prayer with Scripture, family prayer, community time with the other missionary family here, and one family day a week. We didn't even look for ministries for the first couple of months. Being a missionary is not primarily about doing; it's about being. Our vocation as missionaries stems from our identity as beloved children of God, which is revealed through our relationship with the Lord. Our daily prayer sustains us; without our prayer, we cannot be true missionaries.

After four months, we went on a family retreat to discern what ministries to become involved in. We had a list of over fifty possibilities. We alternated personal prayer with family sharing to discern where the Holy Spirit was calling us. We concluded that this first year, the Holy Spirit would like us to strive to live as a holy family, then be spontaneous and willing to help people as they come along, each with a unique challenge, and finally, through friendship to journey with people in their relationship with Jesus. It was very simple.

Although we have not met personally with the bishop yet, he sent us a message: if you do nothing else but just live here, that is enough. I was confounded by that message, but it comforts me often. Sometimes it seems like we are doing so little—not building a hospital, orphanage, or a business, not running retreats or conferences. However, we are open to wherever the Holy Spirit leads us. We do things such as building houses, bringing the sick to a medical clinic, passing out food bags from our home, praying with people, encouraging them to consider marriage (which is not often considered here), teaching a baptism class, and hiring locals to plant a garden to feed the poor. Right now, we're looking at starting a sponsorship program for immigrant Nicaraguan high school students who need legal documents in order to work and receive health care. At first, our heads were spinning trying to juggle the kids, the projects, the visitors and our other responsibilities. Now, we are more used to it. Our home is in the middle of town, so it is a center of activity, not a place of rest. We were advised to take one day a week and one weekend a month away from our post in order to avoid burnout. This has helped.

On a typical day, Nick and I take turns taking time for personal prayer in the church across the street. We get the kids to school and do supplemental homeschooling. People will stop by to ask for food or rent money or help with an infirmity. We meet and talk with them on our porch, pray, and either help them on the spot or discuss and let them know later what can be done. In the afternoon, we do whatever tasks need doing that day. In the evening, we pray as a family. On Saturday, we do ministry in one of the remote communities, sometimes go to the city for errands, and attend Mass. Sunday is a day of rest.

Sometimes people line up in front of our gate waiting to talk, and one of the most difficult responsibilities of being a missionary is deciding how, who, and when to help. For example, Jose is a twenty-year old man who was going blind, and, after discerning prayerfully, we decided to pay for special lenses that were supposed to prolong his vision. He traveled to the capital to the eye clinic, but then called to explain that it was too late; because he couldn't afford it sooner, his vision impairment had advanced too much. He no longer needed us to pay for anything. We grieved with him over the phone. He's not Catholic, but we share our Christian faith. Although he won't be getting the lenses now,

this experience allowed us to journey with him. We ended up offering him, his brother, and his sister-in-law jobs in our garden.

God has been faithfully guiding our every step, but even so there are hardships. One week, all of my kids had a rash, headache, fever, vomiting, or all of the above. Then, I got my first migraine. Also, the news informed us that there were kidnappers at large. I was anxious about the kids. I also really missed having a couch, a living room, some chicken noodle soup, a house without bugs, a comfortable bed. How I was worshipping the idol of comfort and luxury! As I quickly realized that most of the world doesn't even have a house as nice as the one we have here. It seemed my whole life revolved around ensuring that neither I nor my family would suffer any discomfort when we were living in America. Blessed be God for removing us from those comforts and allowing us to live in closer solidarity with the poor. Though we are still far from living in true solidarity, the Holy Spirit is leading us step by step. I'm not sure if or when I will stop missing the comforts of home. However, what has become easier is persevering. I just envision myself following on the heels of Jesus, watching intently those heels as He leads me up and over mountains, and never being distracted or looking away.

Some days I feel like I'm not doing much—I have this vision of getting up in front of the congregation, preaching the Gospel from my heart to a church full of people and playing guitar while leading beautiful hymns. Then reality hits: I don't speak Spanish that well, and I can't play the guitar. This has been a lesson in putting what little I have at the disposal of the Holy Spirit, even my weakness.

The children enjoy the adventure of being here, the toucans in our yard, the monkeys down the road, and the challenge of learning Spanish. Some love school more than others, but overall they are happy. Some days they too are homesick for grandparents, holidays and comfort.

Life is wonderful here for Nick and me as a married couple. We are working together, sharing the roles at home and our ministries. He participates more in the parenting of the kids and also gets to lead and manage meaningful projects. We make decisions together, meeting often to brainstorm, delegate tasks and execute them. We are working as partners more than ever. Our greatest challenges here are the same as at home: the challenges of married life and parenthood. We continue to work on them both. Thanks be to God, Nick and I are in full agreement that we love this life of missions. Many couples struggle with only the husband or the wife feeling called to it, but we both feel called to be here.

In many ways, life is easier here than in the U.S. for us. Our family gets to spend all day together. The school schedule is more like part-time school, so we get to be with the kids more. We get to personally help people every day. We have a key for the church directly across the street. We live in a beautiful country where the people are extremely kind and life is much simpler. There are other American missionary families here, and we have support and continuing formation from the Family Missions Company. In fact, this is the first time in my life that I don't feel restless. I no longer need to know what we'll be doing in one, five, or ten years from now. My only goal is that we serve the Lord, anywhere that He may lead us, and He will take care of everything. As for the kids, I find consolation knowing that God called us here. They are His children first, and He will take care of them. We are here to serve, but we have already been so blessed ourselves. When God does one thing, He does a thousand!

I have an immense sense of peace and gratitude. There's no place I would rather be. Our plans are placed at God's feet. Each person in our family has the same title, down to our baby: we are all Catholic missionaries.

Emilia Henneman, along with her husband and six children, serves as a Catholic lay missionary in Costa Rica. You can learn more about the Henneman family on the [Family Missions Company website](#).

