

Wisconsin priest joins caravan to Cuba

MILWAUKEE - In his 87 years, many memories have formed in Jesuit Father Bill Brennan's mind.

An experience that he said changed his life took place in 1954 in Guatemala. While he was serving as a missionary in Honduras, his parents journeyed from Milwaukee to Honduras and he convinced them to travel to Guatemala to go sightseeing. However, the travelers didn't know that the U.S. CIA was beginning a coup against the elected government of Guatemala.

While in the airport saying goodbye to his parents, Father Brennan said he heard a message from Guatemala's president over the public-address system that the Americans were invading.

"I didn't fully comprehend what was happening," said Father Brennan from his home at San Camillo in Wauwatosa. "It was a shock; there was the president of Guatemala condemning my country."

Later, Father Brennan found out the reason for the invasion. Guatemala's president was attempting to buy back from local farmers land used to grow bananas. According to the priest, this was viewed as a communist act by the CIA.

In July, Father Brennan traveled to Cuba as part of the Pastors for Peace caravan. The trip was made as an act of civil disobedience against the U.S. economic blockade of Cuba, and to deliver humanitarian and medical supplies to the Cuban people.

Father Brennan feels strongly that Americans and Catholics should step in to help the people of Cuba.

"A blockade is an act of war," he said. "(The United States) refusing to sell medication to a poor country is hardly an act of a good neighbor."

The caravan of three buses and 140 people met in Texas. The buses carried passengers from the U.S., Canada, Germany and England into Mexico. They collected medication, wheelchairs, walkers, notebooks and bicycles along the way. The group flew from Mexico to Cuba and their supplies were shipped by boat.

While the trip was not glamorous and included many hours on an uncomfortable bus, Father Brennan said he plans to make it again next summer. "I'm going to go with the next caravan," he said. "My goal is to have an ecumenical service at the tomb of Che Guevara. We really need much more Catholic participation in this."

Pastors for Peace is made up mostly of Protestant ministers. Father Brennan is the only Catholic priest from the Milwaukee area who is involved. He is a member of the Wisconsin Coalition to Normalize Relations With Cuba, which meets at Central United Methodist Church in Milwaukee.

Father Brennan said the teachings of the Second Vatican Council inspired him to make the trip.

"In Vatican II, it said seeking justice in this world is an integral part of the Gospel," he explained. "How do you challenge the government? Say the rosary together? As a Catholic, what do you do? Jesus came to the poor; he did not have lunch with the governor."

During the 10-day trip that Father Brennan described as a "nonviolent protest," participants visited medical clinics, an adult day-care center and homes for the elderly. They also attended the graduation of the first class of American doctors trained at the Latin American School of Medicine in Havana.

"The people were thrilled we were there," Father Brennan said of the Cuban people. "They're suffering. They're grateful; they know we're violating federal laws."

Father Brennan said he feels called to be more active in justice issues. "That experience in 1954 changed my life," he said.

After working as a missionary in Belize and Honduras for 16 years, Father Brennan returned to the U.S. as a teacher at Marquette University High School and as pastor at St. Patrick Church in Milwaukee.

He said Catholics should educate themselves about this situation.

“It’s a war process,” he said. “Catholics should ask themselves why we are at war. Can we say this is a just war, that we’re fighting atheistic communism? Castro was educated by the Jesuits.

“How do you explain not selling our medical treasures?” he continued. “Why are we punishing these people? As a Catholic I have to be concerned.”