

## NEWS FROM KATHY AND PHIL IN OAXACA

### May-June, 2016

Dear Friends,

Life in an indigenous community has been an experience full of challenges, which include new ways of understanding life, and after nine years of being part of San Isidro Yucuyoco and the greater pueblo of Tilantongo, we (Kathy writing) continue to be amazed at some of the aspects of life that are so basically different from the

culture we grew up in. This year we had a chance to experience more aspects of this culture, as we were offered the opportunity to host the main meal of the first day of our village fiesta. When a family hosts the meals for the entire fiesta, they are the “mayordomos”. We were not really mayordomos, since it was only for one day, but it seems our village is really too small for a mayordomo, as there has never been one since we’ve been here.



In all the various indigenous groups across southern Mexico (17 different language groups in the state of Oaxaca), the annual fiesta is an intrinsic part of the way of life of the pueblos. People work hard and make what would be considered up north a very meager living. But the annual fiesta continues to remain an essential part of life here. Every village has a saint’s name and an indigenous name, and the fiesta is celebrated annually on the day of the patron saint. It’s the time for an all-out celebration; fun and entertainment go hand in hand with a sacred duty to give thanks, offer boundless hospitality, and to recommit ourselves to being community for another year. The rather elaborate preparations are a time when all participate in whatever ways they can, each

#### *FOOD FOR 500!*

trying to offer what they are able. There are also formalities and honors.

So on the opening evening of the fiesta —our day to host the dinner — the formal procession began, announced by initial fireworks, led by a band playing, a decorated float with little Uriel, our neighbor boy dressed up as San Isidro, the “madrinas”, who are the women and girls dressed in colorful full skirts and embroidered blouses with baskets of flowers on their heads - dancing, followed by the elected village officials, along with invited officials from other villages, and then by all the rest of the villagers, with visitors from Mexico City, (extended family members who have migrated out but always return for the fiesta weekend). Many other visitors from various villages had joined in, having walked across the hills and valleys from



miles away, knowing that all are welcome. The procession arrived at our house, led by Juvenal, one of the elders as spokesman for this event. We met them, according to plan, accompanied by our chosen “representative” who spoke for us. Juvenal greeted us formally and thanked us for receiving them and all the people; Juan, our representative, greeted them and gave them a formal welcome in our name. The first round of guests were seated at the prepared outdoor tables, while others waited their turn, as the band played on. We had lots of helpers, preparing the food - having started at 5:00 A.M., and serving. A whole crew of teenagers and young men came in the morning to help with decorating. Then all the helpers had sat down for an almuerzo (brunch). We figure we served close to 400 people during the day. When it was all over, the leftover food was given away, and amazingly, we had NO TRASH remaining — only the food scraps, which were all composted.

After the meal, the procession formed again to lead the *calenda*, a procession both solemn and joyous, which made its way up the mountain road through the village, with band playing, giant puppets dancing, fireworks shooting off, and periodic pauses for more dancing. The fireworks and dancing lasted long into the morning hours. Then preparations to serve all comers for breakfast began at 5 a.m.

When we look back on the experience of this integral part of indigenous communal life called “fiesta”, we are forced to wonder -

....at the unique confluence of the sacred and the celebratory. Before the preparation of the food began at 5 in the morning on Friday, the cooks, the *cajero* responsible for watching over all the supplies and handing them out as needed, and we, gathered around the uncooked “fixings” and asked a blessing on the food, on all who might come, and that the food might be sufficient for the unpredictable numbers of the crowd. Such ritual acts continued through the night of the fiesta, interspersed with dancing and shouts of “viva!” The following morning after breakfast was the outdoor Mass, then the basketball tournament all day, and the following evening a dance.

.... at the inverted “economic” values in the community. After the two women in charge of the cooking, from a neighboring village, had spent some 36 hours straight preparing food, cooking, washing pots, and cleaning up, they resolutely refused our efforts to pay them for the great effort and delicious food! “People would say we just did it for the money,” they insisted. In other words, we were living in a community where mutual aid and giving to one another was the predominant value. Money was not.

The other day at the conclusion of a visit here to indigenous communities where we discussed the Transpacific Partnership trade agreement, a Canadian student expressed his disillusionment. “This all makes it sound pretty hopeless,” he said with discouragement. “On the contrary,” I (Phil writing) needed to say. “What we learn here in the traditional communities of indigenous peoples is that it is not true that people are by nature egoistical, greedy, and violent. The indigenous peoples of the world are telling us of the western world that the human family long ago learned how to live in harmony with one another and with our Mother Earth, with mutual aid, communal values, love of the earth, and fiesta. So when those in charge of the western world try to defend their violence and greed by saying, “It’s just human nature”, we can now respond, “That’s a lie! For we have seen our human family living differently. We liked it. And that’s the kind of future we want for all of us.”

Next letter we’ll talk more about our projects here.

We thank you for your letters, your prayers, and your donations, which continue to help make this work possible. Our principle aim for these letters is to share our view from this little corner of the earth. If you wish to contribute to this work, you can send a much-appreciated tax-deductible donation to:

**Instituto Paz en las Americas, 2645 Mountain View Rd. Silver City, NM 88061.**

Many thanks, and we always love hearing from you.

Love and blessings,

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