

El Salvador – Medical Mission

A mission trip is not only about what is given—it is about what is revealed.

A few weeks ago, I was on a medical mission in El Salvador with a group called Helping Hands Medical Mission. While I was talking about my experience with some people, they asked me what I *do* on a mission trip, as if the answer could be measured in tasks completed or hours worked. I paused, searching for words that would not reduce something sacred into something merely functional.

“Besides being the chaplain,” I said, “nothing.”

At first, that answer seemed to confuse them. Nothing? In a place where doctors, physician assistants, nurses, and volunteers move tirelessly, where medications are counted and distributed, where lines of people stretch under the sun with quiet hope in their eyes, what does it mean to do nothing?

But “nothing,” in this case, is everything that cannot be scheduled. It is being present when a mother begins to cry—not from pain, but from the exhaustion of carrying it alone for too long. It is listening to stories that have no neat ending, stories shaped by loss, resilience, and a stubborn kind of faith. It is sitting beside someone in silence when words would only get in the way. It is being ready, at any moment, to anoint trembling hands in the middle of uncertainty, where fear and hope meet.

In those moments, you realize that a mission trip is not only about what is given—it is about what is revealed.

The people we encounter in El Salvador receive care that is tangible: medicine, treatment, relief. But what they give in return cannot be packed into suitcases or recorded in reports. They offer a glimpse into what it means to hold onto family when life presses hard against it. They show what it looks like to forgive when it would be easier not to, to remain together when everything seems to pull apart.

And the volunteers—those who arrive thinking they are coming to help—quietly begin to change. Somewhere between long days and shared meals, between laughter that needs no translation and tears that say more than words ever could, something shifts. Priorities

rearrange themselves. Broken relationships back home come to mind. The idea of family becomes less abstract and more urgent, more fragile, more worth fighting for.

What begins as service becomes an encounter.

You start to notice that the divine does not wait in grand gestures or extraordinary moments. It appears in the ordinary—in the way a hand is held, in the patience of listening, in the courage to stay when things are difficult. It is there, in small interactions that seem insignificant at first, yet somehow leave a lasting mark on the heart.

By the end of those ten days, no one leaves the same way they came. Not the patients. Not the volunteers. Not even me.

Because a mission is not a place where one group gives and another receives. It is where both discover, often unexpectedly, that they belong to one another—that they are part of a larger family, bound not by circumstance, but by something deeper, something quietly sacred.

Fr. Alex Rodriguez, sx