

FOR THE LOVE OF THE GAME: WHERE FRATERNITY AND FAITH MEET

Like all grade school students of my era, I was taught that **Christopher Columbus** discovered America. Of course, I assumed then that he touched foot on what is now American soil. I would later learn that Leif Erickson and Viking explorers were likely the first Europeans to set foot in North America proper, landing on the northern tip of Newfoundland around the year 1000 A.D. But Columbus did anchor near San Juan, Puerto Rico for two days in November 1493 A.D. on his second voyage, and when I gazed upon the tomb of **Juan Ponce de Leon**, known as the discoverer of Florida, in the **Catedral de San Juan Bautista**, suddenly the travails of the early explorers felt real. By appointment of the Spanish Crown, he was its first Governor in 1508-09. Much of Puerto Rico's rich history is in old San Juan, a few miles from our hotel.

Our "tour guide" from the parish staff was José Lara Fontáñez, who explained that the city of San Juan actually predates Madrid Spain by a few years. Traversing the streets of old San Juan is reminiscent of many old European cities. It has a completely different feel. Traveling somewhere for the first time can be a bit intimidating, especially since "Perdón, pero no hablo español!" I was impressed with seeing the massive El Morro, a six-story 16th century fortress and its sister structure, Fort San Cristobal. The morning of our Cathedral visit coincided with the arrival of a giant cruise ship in port. The narrow streets were packed by 9:00 a.m. José gave us a wonderful and informative tour. Clearly, he loves the Cathedral as much as I love ours and even gently reminded some male visitors to "please remove your caps...this is a sacred space."

The Catholic population is divided among six Catholic dioceses, San Juan being the Metropolitan archdiocese. Archbishop Roberto Nieves formerly served as an Auxiliary Bishop in Boston (as a 38-year-old!), before briefly serving as Bishop of Corpus Christi, TX prior to being named Archbishop of San Juan in 1999. We were able to collect approximately **345 pounds of medicine!** This is an amazing tribute to the generosity of the good people of the Cathedral parish. **Thanks to all of you**, I was delighted to present a **check from the Cathedral in the amount of \$25,000** (see cover photo). Ten minutes later, my phone rang—it was Premier Bank. I gave authorization for the immediate transfer of funds in the midst of the tour and we cheered when I announced it was final. What a thrill for me! We recently received a heartfelt thank you note from the rector.

With a typical high of 85 and low of 74, it is not difficult to plan for the day, unless it rains! And it did briefly, but powerfully one day. The cab driver lamented— "You see this? When it rains, the roads become a river!" And trust me, when the sun re-appears, it's like a steam room! In its infancy as a territory, Puerto Rico relied heavily on its sugar crop, but by the mid-20th century, that shifted to manufacturing and tourism. Puerto Ricans received U.S. citizenship in 1917 and Puerto Rico officially became a U.S. Commonwealth in 1952. There are signs that tourism is slowly, very slowly coming back. I suspect this is one reason why Major League Baseball was intent on keeping its commitment to this two-game series. They added LED lights to the stadium (just as we did here at the Cathedral!) and repaired the significant damage to the artificial turf in **Estadio Hiram Bithorn**, built in 1962 and named after the first Puerto Rican who played in the Majors for the Chicago Cubs in 1942.

The simple scoreboard reminded me of the old Met Stadium, built around the same time. It was "no frills" baseball, with music between innings, not blaring from speakers, but from a live band. They also strolled in the stands, with people breaking into dancing and singing right in their seats between innings. Cowbells, whistles and a cacophony of sounds seemed ever-present. There were more cheers for the Indians than the Twins, but that seemed to change on the second night, perhaps because native son Jose Berrios was pitching a gem for the Twins. It was a completely different feel in the stadium. We sat directly behind a family— Mom, Dad, their identical twin sons aged about 12 or 13 and grandpa. They were all smiles and it was quite engaging, though the "twins" sported Indians gear! Mom confirmed what I thought I understood from the vendors, as there were **no signs indicating prices** of anything. I had fresh squeezed lemonade and a hot dog, and on the second night, opted for a **piña colada**. If it had alcohol, it was the weakest drink I've ever had— but it was tasty!

Back at the hotel after the first game, our group visited with a man at the neighboring table who worked for

Major League Baseball. We began discussing the various charitable outreaches being made during the series, and the improvements that MLB made to the stadium in preparation for the series. When I noted our own outreach to the Cathedral, he was genuinely appreciative. Not five minutes later, into the restaurant walks **Rob Manfred**, the **Commissioner of Baseball**. He joined the group at that very same table, and after a few minutes, the Commissioner himself stood up and approached our table! He asked how we were enjoying our experience, and before long he invited us to a private event the next day unveiling a memorial marker in honor of **Roberto Clemente**, a national hero in Puerto Rico who tragically perished in a plane crash on New Year's Eve in 1972 while on his way to provide disaster relief to Nicaragua. The entire visit was a wonderful experience of faith, fellowship and baseball, with a few surprise extras. Thanks to all your support of this project; I'll never forget my visit.

- When **Katherine Asjes**, wife and mother of six, wrote positive comments in the “online forum,” of the journal **Catholic World Report**, she could not have imagined that her comments would be cited as a reason to deny her approval to serve on Iowa's State Board of Medicine. But they did. The article reflected traditional Catholic views of human sexuality, causing some lawmakers to question whether it was appropriate to place her on a state board that oversees health issues. She was accused of having views from the “Dark Ages.” I might add, she also held views from the early Church, the Middle Ages—in fact all the way until about 25 years ago. Go figure!
- The lemon pies could not have been more delicious or lovingly made. My parents were delighted when I brought over a pie. They assumed I would take the rest home for myself! (Shhh, I bought two!) Thanks to our volunteers, the sale was a great success!
- When I returned from Puerto Rico, I checked my mail to find a letter from the Archbishop informing me that I have been assigned another six-year term as Rector beginning July 1. I am very happy to be staying put and thank all of you for your prayerful support, as well as for putting up with my foibles and shortcomings. It is truly a blessing to serve here at the Cathedral.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,
Rector



With Twins Left Fielder and Puerto Rico native
Eddie Rosario