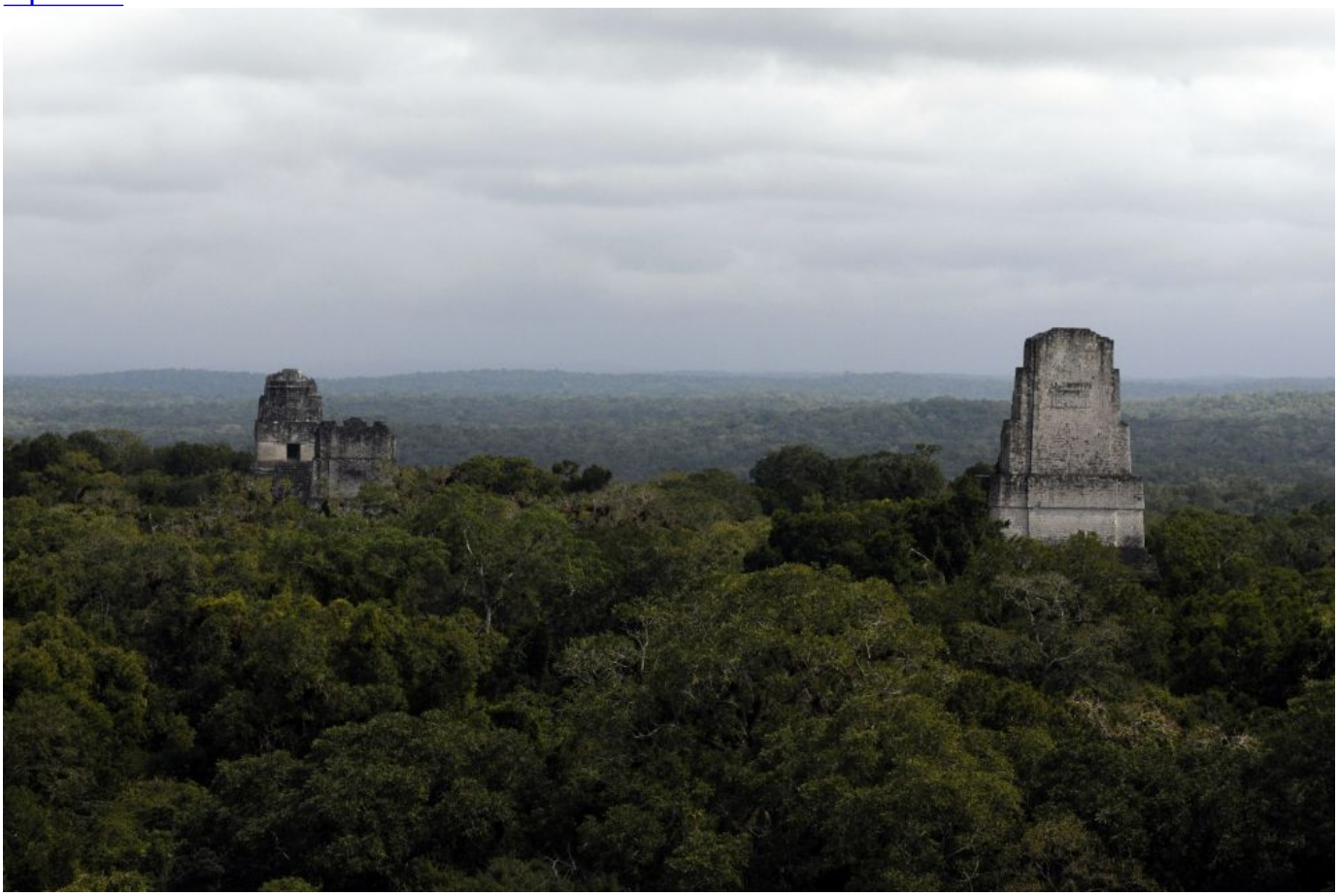
Opinion



Mayan ruins are seen in Tikal, Guatemala, in this 2011 file photo. (CNS/EPA/Sandra Sebastian)



by Mary Ann McGivern

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I'm traveling to Guatemala for nine days to meet with our sister community there, *Sagrada Familia* (Holy Family). The group I am going with is made up of five Loretto members, a high school senior and her mother. The student hopes to establish a relationship with a school where she can teach computer programing and technology over the next four years. Her mother is along for support. We Lorettos will visit the schools with them and will meet with the *Sagrada Familia* community who, like Loretto, have vowed and co-members.

It was at least 30 years ago that a couple of our sisters met the Guatemalans — and at the same time met the Daughters of the Holy Trinity in Ghana. They are both small communities, younger women than we are, but like us committed to educating themselves to better serve the world. We work together on education, rights of women, immigration, HIV/AIDS and health care, and militarization. Our relationship is not legal or canonical; it's based on friendship and shared experiences.

The barrier to working with the sisters in Ghana is distance. Two Lorettos just spent a month there; shorter trips are too expensive. The barrier to working in Guatemala is language. My Spanish is mediocre at best — and diminishes to downright poor if I don't find ways to use it in St. Louis.

The benefits are opportunities to be immersed in an entirely different culture with women whose values we share. Our work is just the same, but our worlds are different. Some years ago, I spent two months with *Sagrada Familia* and found myself immersed in Mayan prayer. On a retreat at the novitiate, I drew the blue candle and lit it with a prayer in Spanish of gratitude for the sky. That small experience changed my understanding of our relationship with the world around us.

Three years ago, two Holy Family sisters joined a dozen Lorettos to lobby Congress on health care, military spending, gun control, environmental needs and immigration. We planned for four months, prayed each week for a different issue, prepared materials for distribution. We arrived in Washington, D.C., as 40,000 children from Central America had arrived at our border. There was no other topic but immigration. We took our Guatemalan sisters everywhere. I remember a senator asking what one sister would do if her small nephew were threatened by gangs.

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She said, "Our family would meet, pool all of our money, and hire a coyote to guide the child to the United States." The senator had been viewing the use of coyotes as cruel, but his eyes were opened. We were part of the successful persuasion of Congress to maintain the requirement that children from Central and South America seeking asylum have legal representation. There are not enough lawyers, but the requirement stands.

For this upcoming trip, I'm carrying 10 pounds of half-price Christmas chocolates as a small gift, along with pencils and letters from a local school. I also have small houses with the Holy Family inside to give as gifts to the new Loretto members of our committee. These kinds of religious objects have become hard to find in Guatemalan markets, so last time I was there I bought extras. Pray for us that we give one another hope and courage to continue our work together.