

Looking for Daniel Comboni

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I have to confess that, for just a minute or two, it did occur to me that this little adventure might not have been such a good idea. I was in a strange land, and my fate was literally in the hands of a complete stranger I had only met a few hours before.

It was a fleeting worry, though, and when my taxi driver, Guillermo, comes back from the pumps at the gas station along the main Guatemala City-Mixco highway, he flashes a broad grin. The attendant at the station nods as Guillermo steps away. I know I must have visibly brightened at the prospect of some good news; yes, Lord, finally some good news.

"The Daniel Comboni School," he exclaims, thrusting his right forefinger into the air like a fencer's foil. "Now I know exactly where it is!"

"No, no, no. Not a school, La Clinica. The Daniel Comboni Clinic. Sister Sarah runs a CLINIC, not a school," I reply in my mediocre Spanish. "At the edge of Mixco." I pull out my map of Guatemala City for the third or fourth time that afternoon, indicating an area at the northern reaches of this Central American capital city.

"Mira," Guillermo says, turning his whole body around so that, despite being separated by the front seat, we are nearly nose-to-nose. "Look. Mixco is a big town, brother. A huge city. Why did you come all the way down here without knowing where you're going? Couldn't you have at least brought her phone number?"

"It's a surprise," I tell him again. "If I call, she'll know I'm coming."

At that, Guillermo harrumphs, turns his back to me, puts the dark, squat taxi into gear and merges us rapidly into traffic again. "Yeah, well, I could have called and asked for directions, like I needed some medical attention, and nobody would have known it was you," he says, giving me a squinty-eye glare in the rear-view mirror.

He has me on that one, so I just sit back and watch as we zip past the ramshackle houses perched

precipitously atop the ridge lines and above the deep gouges of the earth that always would, for me, serve as reminders of my trips to Guatemala's southern highlands.

I was making this particular sojourn as a two-day diversion from covering the 25th anniversary of the deaths of the four U.S. churchwomen in El Salvador last December for The Catholic Telegraph and Catholic News Service. The two-day lull allowed me to hop a bus in San Salvador and make the five-hour

ride to Guatemala City where I would be able to make a surprise stop to visit with my friend, S. Sarah Mulligan.

For the past several years, following my initial visit to Sarah's Daniel Comboni Clinic with a mission delegation from the Archdiocese of Cincinnati, she had always made a point of coming by my office for a surprise stop when she was in town. I thought that, this time, I'd turn the table and show up at her office for a change.



S. Sarah Mulligan

Finding the clinic would not be a problem: In my mind's eye, I could see the dusty road leading up the hillside to San Jose Parish and the nearby clinic that S. Sarah helped found more than one decade ago.

But I realized the flaw in my plan upon laying out the details to Guillermo, a veteran of 15 years on Guatemala City's streets as a taxista, when I hired him at the capital's main square.

"We'll just stop and ask somebody where the clinic is when we get up to Mixco," I assured him at the beginning of our four-hour trip. Looking back, I think he probably rolled his eyes when he heard my plan, but at the beginning, he was kind and offered neither advice nor criticism.

We'd stopped at gas stations, churches, schools and even a drug store seeking directions to the clinic. But by the time we reached the Daniel Comboni School — and truth be told, I have no idea where it was, whether in Mixco or Guatemala City or Timbuktu — Guillermo was pretty much at wits end with me.

"Dennis, I'm sorry, but I'm going to have to charge you a lot for this trip," he says, no sorrow evident at all in his voice. "I'm going to have to charge you at least \$20." I reflect on the day's adventure and realize that