

## God Ends Idol's 700-Year Reign in Almolonga, Guatemala by Carol Saia

“**The Defeat of Maximon:** Protestant Fundamentalism Alters the Culture of the Altiplano and Turns the Native Religions into Tourist Attractions”<sup>1</sup> emblazoned the June 24-30, 1994 cover story of *Cronica Semanal*, Guatemala's equivalent of *Time* or *Newsweek* magazine. This dramatic proclamation gains significance in light of Guatemala's history. Guatemala was once the center of the Mayan civilization. When the conquistadors arrived in the 16<sup>th</sup> century they found the residents had already been serving the false god Maximon for 200 to 300 years – perhaps as many as 500 years. The conquistadors negotiated with the indigenous people in Guatemala about many things, but one thing they would not give up was their allegiance to Maximon. To this day, Maximon is considered the patron saint and protector of many Guatemalan villages. The Mayans were not allowed to bring their Maximon idols into the churches, so they began to worship Maximon in the cathedrals in the guise of the Catholic Saint Simon. Sometimes Maximon figures are displayed in front of churches, or in Christian processions.

The idol representing the demon known as Maximon (pronounced “Mashimon”) is usually in the form of a 3-foot man, whose body is carved from wood and whose head is formed from clay, usually with a smoldering cigar or cigarette in his mouth. He is dressed in a black suit with a red tie and a broad-rimmed hat. Sometimes there is a hole where the mouth is so liquor can be poured into his mouth. Sometimes, in place of statues, there are ancient Mayan stone heads called “Maximon Masks.” People bring offerings to the idol and ask him for favors and protection. Except for specific ceremonies, the idol usually resides in a private home, changing to a different home each year. Maximon is associated with smoking, drinking alcohol, and immorality. The faithful bring him gifts of cigars and whiskey and kneel to kiss the idol. The priest then takes a mouthful of alcohol and spews it over the people.

In Almolonga, a village in the highlands of Guatemala in the state of Quetzaltenango, most of the Quiché Indian residents, descendants of the Mayans, had made pacts with Maximon. Some also worshipped another idol, Pascual Bailon, the Lord of death. Though the idols themselves are powerless, the spirits behind the idols held people in spiritual bondage and blinded them to the truth of the Gospel. In addition, the villagers practiced the occult and witchcraft.

Most of the men in Almolonga were alcoholics who would only work enough to buy whiskey and meet their most basic needs. Drunkenness led to violence, including much domestic abuse. The four jails were so packed with inmates that some had to be bused to a jail in a neighboring city. The beleaguered police hired civilians to help them patrol the streets at night. In the mornings the streets would be littered with men lying drunk on the streets.

Family life suffered. Pastor Mariano Riscajché recalls, “I was raised in misery. My father sometimes drank for forty to fifty consecutive days. We never had a big meal, only a little tortilla with a small glass of coffee. My parents spent what little money they had on alcohol.”

A terrible work ethic and frequent droughts reduced the truckloads of produce exported from Almolonga to only four a month.

Evangelists who came to Almolonga were chased away with sticks or rocks and churches in Almolonga were stoned. Once six men grabbed Pastor Mariano, knocked out his front teeth, and shoved a gun down his throat. As he prayed for protection, they pulled the trigger twice but nothing happened. After this event Pastor Mariano and a group of Christians began meeting frequently for lengthy evening prayer meetings. They prayed desperately for God to intervene. As they prayed, God filled them with the faith to proclaim freedom over Almolonga.

One pastor in Almolonga was beginning to learn about casting demons out of people. A woman had been beaten up by her husband, one of the most notoriously violent men in the village. The wife came to ask the pastor to pray for her husband. He replied, “Oh no, I couldn't. I would be afraid to pray for him.” She assured him that her husband was drunk and had passed out. Reassured, the pastor prayed for the unconscious man. When the man awoke from his drunken stupor he was very different. He soon gave his life to Jesus and began witnessing to his friends who also became Christians.

Many were delivered from demons associated with Maximon and Pascual Bailón. As individuals were set free, the spiritual oppression over the city lessened as well. Eventually the priests who served Maximon moved their center of operations to another town.

Pastor Joseph Mell Winger reports:

“One of those set free from demonic control was a powerful priest of Maximon named José Albino Tazei. Many people in Almolonga sought him out to heal their illnesses, foresee their future, and to bless their businesses. But one night, José, near death after a month-long drinking binge, cried out to God to save him. At 11:00 pm, José woke his family to share the glorious news of his new-found freedom in Christ. In repentance, the family burned all of their idols and witchcraft paraphernalia. The following day José went to the mountains to fast and seek the Lord.

“Witnessing this well-known slave to witchcraft come to Christ intensified the Church’s intercession for God to transform not only individuals like José, but their whole community as well.

“Before his conversion José would abandon the family for eight to ten days at a time to drink and conduct witchcraft activities for Maximon. He often left his family without any money for food. As his dedication to Maximon grew, so did his addiction to alcohol.

“José’s oldest daughter, Francisca, grimaces and lowers her voice...’Before we received Christ, we didn’t have any money, little food, or a decent house, and only clothes discarded by others,’ she continues. ‘My father started seeking God and fasting. He began a business and started working diligently. Now God has given us a house, a small store, and a calm hard-working, godly father.’

“Francisca recounts, ‘The church accepted us and didn’t leave us in the middle. They loved us and visited us, and really struggled with us as we became established in Christ.’ This care for new converts is one of the key ways God has used to maintain and deepen the effects of this revival.”

Witnessing miraculous healings encouraged the faith of young Christians. One woman, Teresa, developed gangrene after the incision from her caesarean section became infected. Her internal organs began to rot and she was in such pain that she could not walk or even talk. She died and her husband, Valeriano, asked Pastor Mariano to arrange the funeral. On the way to the house, God told him to pray for her. He and Valeriano prayed that Teresa would be miraculously healed. She rose with no pain in her body. Pastor Mariano preached the Gospel to the gathered relatives and friends and a number of them gave their lives to Jesus. Teresa now sees miraculous healings as she prays for others and her husband preaches the Gospel.

Today, 88% to 92% of the 20,000 residents of Almolonga worship Jesus. In place of 36 cantinas there are now only three. Many of the former cantinas were turned into churches. There are thirty churches (several of them with over a thousand members). Even though Almolonga has been so thoroughly Christianized there are a number of Christians who continue to fast and pray several times a week for spiritual strongholds to be broken in surrounding communities. They also share their faith with others.

Because the men no longer drink they have money to care for their families. Houses are now well-built, and the town is clean and prosperous. Women dress in brightly-colored clothing.

The men have saved up money to pay cash for Mercedes trucks to transport their vegetables for sale. Almolonga now supplies Guatemala, southern Mexico, and El Salvador with produce. Almolonga has had a thousand percent increase in agricultural productivity. Instead of four truckloads a month they now export 40 truckloads of enormous vegetables each week – carrots the size of a man’s forearm, cabbages as large as basketballs, 8-pound beets, and radishes as big as your fist. Some vegetables with a former 60-day growing cycle now mature in 25 days. Even during droughts in surrounding areas the soil in Almolonga is always moist. Underground springs have opened up to provide a constant source of moisture for their farms. God has literally “healed the land” as He promised in II Chronicles 7:14. Almolonga is now referred to as the “Valley of Miracles” and the “City of God.” One travel website reports, “Almolonga is well known in Guatemala as the ‘Garden of the Americas.’”

The work ethic has been transformed as well. Everyone works hard. Teenagers, working diligently in the fields beside their parents, are rewarded when they earn enough money to buy a truck. Visitors are struck by the joy they see evident in people’s faces as they work. Some of the farmers are now becoming

businessmen, hiring others to work in their fields and establishing farms in surrounding communities. Literacy has increased, as they need to keep records and count the profits.

In his thesis, “Stewardship and Transcendence: Two Key Biblical Principles of Economics,” Juan Callejas observes, “Family life is very solid in this town where there is a 0% divorce rate, and where women play a major role in the economic life both of the community and the family. Among single women in the community, 47% are small entrepreneurs, and they display much more independence than ladino (non-indigenous) women. In contrast with the traditional indigenous paradigm, education is acknowledged as a major factor in the positive development of the community, for it is through it that new technologies and methods of production can be taken advantage of, and this, of course, results in higher productivity and income. These characteristics are not common in most mainly indigenous communities in the rest of Guatemala...”

In *The Soul of Development: Biblical Christianity and Economic Transformation in Guatemala* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1997) Dr. Amy Sherman, through her field study of 1,000 households in Guatemala, has documented how conversion from animism to biblical Christianity has strengthened individual initiative, promoted the status of women, revitalized the family structure, and encouraged democracy.<sup>2</sup>

Pastor Joseph Mell Winger reports that Pastor Francisco Garcia acknowledges that formerly “Women were largely viewed simply as servants.” And Pastor Genero adds, “Before, the custom was that only the men would study. We believed that schools were not for women. Since the Gospel came, we teach that both sexes have the same opportunities. Today we see some women who are professionals.”

The house of prostitution has been closed in Almolonga. In 1994 the last of the four jails in Almolonga closed. Instead of guns the police now tote whistles to direct traffic. Stores which used to be filled with alcohol now are stocked with food.

Many of the stores now have biblical names – “Paradise Chicken,” “Little Jerusalem,” “The Blessing of the Lord” drug store, the “Vineyard of the Lord” beverage kiosk, “Jehovah Jireh,” “Little Israel Hardware,” the “Jordan” mineral baths. Even their trucks boast signs such as, “Little Gift from God,” “Glory to God,” and “The Lord Sees You. I Sam. 16:7.” On the way in to the town a sign proclaims “Jesus is Lord of Almolonga.”

Pastor Mariano told Joseph Mell Winger the five-fold strategy God has given El Calvario Church to sustain their revival and pass it on to the next generation:

1. Living in the fear of the Lord – always living under the direction of the Holy Spirit. Then it is easier to overthrow demonic principalities.
2. Maintaining intense prayer and fasting.
3. Building Christian schools. Revival can crumble if the children are taught by non-Christians. To avoid revival only impacting one generation we must pass our faith along to the children, and Christian education is a key step to insuring that.
4. Caring for new converts – including deliverance, discipleship, making a clear break with their past, baptism, fasting, diligent hard work, and debt reduction.
5. Establishing strong families and encouraging people to only marry believers. Formerly, parents chose the spouses for their children. Now churches encourage young people to select the person they want to marry, but to obtain their parents’ blessing and have a six to twelve-month courtship period.

Almolonga is a dramatic example of an entire community turning from darkness to light.

<sup>1</sup> English translation in *Confronting the Powers*, C. Peter Wagner (Regan Books, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> In 1996, Dr. Sherman was named by *Christianity Today* as one of the “Top 50 Evangelical Leaders Under Forty.”

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**The information in this article comes from:**

Several tapes by Pastor Harold Caballeros, pastor of El Shaddai Church in Guatemala City, Guatemala.

“Almolonga – the Miracle City” by Joseph Mell Winger in *The Renewal Journal* #16: Vision (2000:2) -

[www.pastornet.net.au/renewal/journal16/16b%20Almolonga](http://www.pastornet.net.au/renewal/journal16/16b%20Almolonga). Joseph has a doctorate in ministry from Fuller Theological

Seminary and is the former director of El Shaddai Bible Institute in Guatemala City. He is now the pastor of Boulder Street Church in Colorado Springs, CO.

“Snapshots of Glory” by George Otis, Jr. in *The Renewal Journal* #76: Vision (2001:1) -

[www.pastornet.net.au/renewal/journal17/17b%20Otis.htm](http://www.pastornet.net.au/renewal/journal17/17b%20Otis.htm).

The English translation of the thesis, “Stewardship and Transcendence: Two Key Biblical Principles of Economics” by Juan Callejas, done for the Francisco Marroquin University.