

# Grateful For What I Have Learned

Every six years our Redemptorist General Chapter chooses a special theme for the following six years. The purpose of this theme is to help us deepen our spirituality as Redemptorists as well as our apostolic zeal. A few years back, the theme was: To evangelize the poor and to be evangelized by them. This theme certainly stimulated some interesting conversations - and questions. Were not *we* the evangelizers? How could we be evangelized by the poor? What theology did they know? What could we learn from them? I do not pretend to speak for others; I can only tell of my reality.

I am now in my 28th year of priestly ministry and basically all 28 years (including 19 outside of the U.S.) have been with Latino communities. I have lived among and with some very poor people. At the same time, I could not even begin to count the many blessings I have received, not from their poverty, but from the wealth of their values. I count myself as one of the lucky folks who has certainly been evangelized by them. Perhaps a few examples would illustrate this.

A young mother in the Dominican Republic was told she could not carry her pregnancy to term. The doctors advised her to abort or risk serious consequences for her own life. She could not bring herself to have the abortion. In fact, she died giving birth to a healthy baby boy. That boy is now a priest, and I had the privilege of hearing him talk about the love of God as part of his own experience. He said that true love is never lost but continues to be shared and to grow. How well he understands his mother's sacrifice of love - and his own vocation in light of that love. The example of that poor young mother continues to evangelize through the life and ministry of her son. What did I learn? I was able to appreciate even more the tremendous value of the gift of life and the importance of sacrificial love.

Speaking of the Dominican Republic, I cannot help but see the bittersweet face of Marina. Her smile was wide and joyful, but her eyes revealed a deep suffering and pain. She lived in a poor two-room shack covered by a zinc aluminum roof. Marina's husband had abandoned her many years ago. She now lived there together with her only surviving child, a 23-year-old daughter who was dying from AIDS. Marina was up early every day to make the pudding cake she would then walk the streets of Santo Domingo to sell piece by piece so she could buy the necessary medicine for

her daughter. Some nights, from our house almost adjacent to hers, I could hear her praying and crying aloud to God for her daughter and for strength for herself. What did I learn? I learned that injustice has a human face and the importance of prayer that goes beyond our structures and memorized formulas.

And then there was Anna Mae the widow. She lived in the middle of nowhere in the hills and was raising her three grandchildren. She worked the land as well as any man and had the calloused hands to prove it. After Mass one evening in her rural community, a group of us were talking about the Virgin Mary. Anna Mae could neither read nor write but was able to inspire me with her wisdom. She said: "Mary had to suffer with Jesus and had to be there at the foot of the cross with Him. She had to do all this as His Mother if she was to walk with us, suffer with us, and be our Mother too." What did I learn? I learned a respect for honest hard work and that the grace of God is not limited to our often myopic ways of seeing things.

A date that is very clear among my many memories is Dec. 12, 2001. It was my first year back in the states, and I was working in Brooklyn, N.Y. The parish had a very large immigrant Latino population. Since it was the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe, there were folks waiting for the church doors to open at 5 a.m. and others still there when we were about to close at 10 p.m. Many came as individuals and many came as entire families. The city buses and subways all day long were full of people dressed in their traditional colors and often carrying pictures or statues of Our Lady. They wore buttons, pins and pictures of Our Lady. And there were countless little Guadalupitas and Juan Diegitos as the children dressed their respective parts complete with the details of a painted moustache for Juan Diego. I was so proud to see these good folks unashamed to innocently and genuinely profess their faith. At the same time, I felt certain sadness and could not help but ask myself: How many of us as "good American Catholics" would travel on city buses and subways in such an outward expression of our beliefs? So often we tend to see our faith as a very private matter. What did I learn? I learned that I should not be ashamed of my faith and that parents have such a great responsibility to transmit that faith to their children from early on.

Now for the first time, I find myself assigned to my home city, Baltimore. In parishes that previously opened their doors to German, Irish, and Polish immigrants, I am

continually being evangelized by new immigrants from Latin America. What do I learn? Among many things, I learn how immigration raids divide families, I share the pain of folks unable to return to bid farewell to dying parents, I see good young students who are unable to continue their studies beyond high school, I learn of folks being assaulted and robbed as victims of unreported crimes, I see people living in fear from day to day. Most importantly, I am learning that the words *to evangelize the poor and to be evangelized by them* are a challenge not just for a religious congregation or a particular group of folks. They are an integral part of our mission as followers of Jesus Christ.

I conclude with some words from last year's statement from our Bishops of the Maryland Catholic Conference (November, 2007): The history of the Church in the United States compels us to care in a unique way for the welfare of today's immigrants ...Catholic immigrants of every generation have experienced discrimination and intolerance at the hands of those who arrived before them. In the 1600s and 1700s, Maryland Catholics were denied the right to vote, hold public office and celebrate Mass in a church ... Today, like their immigrant predecessors, Latinos often are the objects of suspicion, intolerance and discrimination. Our new immigrants are encouraging us to rekindle some of the values that somehow we are not seeing quite clearly in our society any more: the gift of life itself, the importance of the family unit, public expression of an unashamed spirituality, hard work, a good education, sacrifice and a spirit of hope and compassion. Can we learn from them?

*Father Robert Wojtek is the Redemptorist pastor of the Catholic Community of St. Michael and St. Patrick in Fells Point.*