

IMMIGRATION PART III A 11/02/07

Human Faces

Margaret, Maria and I find a table in back of the kitchen tent and set about making bologna and cheese sandwiches for those who have just arrived. The mayo runs out. When the cheese also runs out we put two pieces of bread together with just a slice of bologna. It is rudimentary but it is what we can do. We distribute the sandwiches.

Our meager offerings are accepted with nods of appreciation or words of gratitude. Many of the deportees are preoccupied or exhausted.

A bus has just dropped off another group which slowly ambles to the welcome tents. My job is to pour out cups of water or cool aid as fast as possible as people enter the kitchen tent. Their faces look blank, wary, depleted and worried as they approach the tent. Many are dressed in dark blue or black clothing. I welcome them, "*Bienvenido*" or "*Buenas tardes*". They are grateful. With smiling eyes, one weary man says to me, "*Dios le bendiga.*" May God bless you. I feel blessed and humbled.

I do not see defeat, bitterness or anger, though perhaps profound discouragement. Most have paid \$1500.00-\$3000.00 for their failed attempts. Some may have sold land in order to get to a place where they had expected to find work in order to send money back to their families. Some, lacking other resources, will try to smuggle drugs across the border in lieu of a cash payment to their coyote. I am curiously moved by the absence of rancor and anger. Perhaps this is a fatalism that comes from eons of defeat and oppression. "*Es la vida*" It's life. Perhaps it's a deep faith or trust in God.

I have seen with my own eyes the grinding poverty that sends many

out of their villages and away from their families. I once visited the family of one such laborer who works at a horse farm in the Salisbury area. He has not been home for several years to visit his wife and five children, has no other companions with him here and calls his wife once a week. He is an *indigena*, a Mayan with only 3 years of primary school education. His ancestors freely roamed this vast continent thousands of years ago.

“They don't like us. They don't want us there.” One man looks me in the eyes and tells me my country does not want him. He seems hurt and puzzled. I am sorry. This is painful. Obfuscation rules. Because it has no constructive or coherent immigration policy, the United States implements forced deportation. I am grateful to be able to offer something small in the way of respect and care. I fashion a primitive cross from two discarded cuttings from the fence and place it on the food table. I mean to bring it home but leave it there.

((A little known but significant piece of American-Mexican history: following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, thousands of Mexican males streamed across the border to come to assist the United States by volunteering to serve in the armed forces. They had remembered how about 70 years earlier the United States had helped Mexico repel an invasion by the French. Of course, those who volunteered had not been involved in the famous Cinco de Maya battle in Puebla where the French advance towards Mexico City came to a halt. But they remembered their history and felt a debt of gratitude.))

Here at the Welcome Center a new bus arrives every 20-25 minutes. The pace of providing hospitality at times is hectic because of the large numbers. In the lulls we talk with the staff and others who seem to have some relationship with the effort.

Antonio is in his mid to late 30s. He comes limping in to the shelter. Like many his footwear was not up to the grueling conditions of the desert crossing. To make matters worse there were penetrating, cold rains a few days earlier. Many have horrendous blisters and calluses. Antonio has a kind face and does not seem to expect much. We talk. He has three children, ages 19, 13 and 6. He is from Chiapas in southern Mexico. Like Oaxaca next to it, Chiapas has a large indigenous, or Indian, population. The Mayan language and culture is similar to that of Northern Guatemala which Chiapas borders. The porous border with Guatemala was clearly not drawn on the basis of shared ethnic or cultural identity.

Antonio crossed the border so that he could provide for his family, something he cannot adequately do now in his own country. His boots were worn out. Margaret had set up a foot care station. She had a box of first aid supplies; cotton, ointments, soap, scissors, disinfectant, bandages etc. She had turned over a box for a foot stool. I ask Antonio if he would like her to care for his feet. He seems embarrassed at first but then relents. His feet are swollen with huge, red blisters.

This is not a ministry I am ready for, but I am deeply touched by Margaret's comfort level and the tender, healing care she provides. Sometimes she spends as much as 15 minutes on a foot. She has set aside a basin with soapy water for foot bathing for those who would receive her ministrations. Over the short time he is here, I see the drained look on Antonio's face disappear. He seems refreshed and restored by the time he leaves. I pull him aside and give him some money for his trip back. Before he leaves, one of the staff goes to the camper and finds a new pair of boots for Antonio. This pleases him immensely.

Others hobble in and take a seat. The benefits of Margaret's care are

obvious. Occasionally, she calls out for help in locating a pair of scissors or other supplies. She works without interruption from her make-shift station. She reminds me of Jesus washing the feet of the disciples, as he encourages them to follow his example of what it means to be a servant. If you love me then love each other as I have loved you.

A thin man, clearly in pain, walks in and sits down. He has fallen on a rock in the desert and injured his knee. Margaret throws me an ace bandage and tells me to wrap his knee. I do not know what I am doing but do the best I can. The whole day is like that, feeling inadequate in the face of great needs but somehow managing to make a small difference. I feel blessed to have the opportunity to meet and serve these folks in distress.

((At some point, I let it be known that I am a priest and that I have brought with me the oil for blessing and healing. No Mas Muertes is in no way an evangelical operation interested in proselytizing. So I do not want my offer to be misunderstood, but I make it. Two shy and perhaps curious men approach me; I ask them if they would like to receive the anointing. They nod yes.

“La bendición y curación de Dios omnipotente, Padre, Hijo y Espíritu Santo sean contigo y con tu familia ahora y por siempre.” “Amen.” I included their families in the blessing because their families are very important to them and many are far from home.

Soon others, men and women, line up to receive the blessing. In blessing I felt blessed. Barbara Brown Taylor, Episcopal priest and author, speaks of “the inexplicable alchemy of compassion”, noting the deep comfort that the one who gives comfort receives.))

Other Faces: One woman had been working in California for 9 years

before her deportation. Another man from Denver had been pulled over for a minor traffic violation and subsequently arrested and deported. He had lived and worked in Denver for 16 years and had established a family there.

Carlos is 19 years old, alone and broke. His unsuccessful passage from El Salvador cost him \$3000.00. I can't imagine how he put together that much money and wagered it against the risks of the trip. His loss seems enormous.

Carlos has no family or friends with him. He appears bright and certainly motivated and brave. He looks down at the earth. Like many here, he is exhausted. He is close to the age of my own boys and I contemplate how different his life circumstances are from theirs. I talk with him and ask him how he will get back to El Salvador. I feel for him. Before he leaves I discreetly give him a small gift of money for his travel expenses. He manages a smile of appreciation.

Another group arrives. A Mayan woman, the aunt of two younger women from Oaxaca, is among the newly deported. She is 52 and the desert trek has nearly done her in. She collapses in tears on a wooden bench. She is inconsolable. Her husband and a few other family members are with her. There is a concern that she might be a diabetic. The two younger women try to help her but she seems out of reach. Someone calls the Red Cross (Cruz Roja) for medical assistance. They arrive within fifteen minutes. A uniformed nurse checks her blood pressure as she sits up for the first time. Her eyes are cast down. She seems to be a little better. She sits and rests on the bench, taking small amounts of nourishment offered by others. Her face is weathered and her expression sorrowful. I talk to her to see if there is anything I can do. The ordeal she has been through has left her terrified. I tell her not to be afraid now. *No ten miedo*. One of the

younger women asks her if she wants to receive the oil of healing from me. She does not respond at first but later changes her mind. I press my thumb wet with oil on her forehead, making the sign of the cross and saying the holy words. Her ululations are ancient, deep and shake me to the bones. I would do more to console her if I could. I sit down on the bench a few spaces away. Later, when she manages to get on her feet to go, I move to her side and embrace her around the shoulders, telling her not to be afraid, that she is safe now.

When she goes to leave with her family, she unexpectedly takes my right hand and presses it briefly to her lips. Her gaze is still down. Then she leaves. It is strange to have such intense exchanges followed by leave-takings. I have little sense of what comes next for these folks.

Margaret, Maria and I move easily and quickly back across the border to the US side. I feel exhausted. I do not have words for what I have seen and felt, but I know that I feel grateful, humbled and pained. Maria feels the same way, emotionally wiped out. She decides to make trips to No Mas Muertes a regular part of her life. Margaret will continue to go 2-3 times a week.

The next morning, at the Sunday Eucharist at Desert House of Prayer, as Maria and I talk about our experiences the day before, her eyes fill up with tears. I tell her that I had also cried earlier in the day as I sat by myself and watched the sun rise over the desert, bringing a new day.