

Mi Pobre Mexico Querido

The title of this article, “My Poor Beloved Mexico” comes from the experience of explaining to Mexican people when they ask me where I am from, “Soy gringo pero de corazon Mexicano”, “I am an American but I have the heart of a Mexican.” As many of us who have ministered with and to the Mexican people, especially on *their* side of the border, I have developed a deep and abiding affection for them and for their culture. And so, when I hear about all of the agony of the current drug wars and the violence and corruption that are so much a part of it and now the unsettling news reports of this whole influenza crisis, it breaks my “Mexican heart”.

A few weeks ago I was brainstorming with Sr. Armida, the director of the Casa de los Pobres in Tijuana about raising money in order to possibly reinstate at least 1 or 2 days of the lunch meal that were suspended a few months back due to a lack of funds. She explained that one of the consequences of the violence is the fear that is keeping people from crossing the border into Mexico, including all of the groups who in past years would come to volunteer at the Casa from all parts of the United States and bring donations with them. AND when they returned to their parishes and their communities in the US, they would tell others about the Casa who would in turn become benefactors. That has just about totally stopped.

During this conversation, Sister Armida began to tell the story of one of the frequent guests at the morning meal. The other guests call him, not too kindly, “Calambres”, which means “spasms” because he shakes constantly due possibly to a neurological condition. He had come late, after the meal was finished, and he asked for something to eat. There was a supply of donated, day-old bread from which one of the women volunteers gave him a loaf. He was eating it inside of the patio area of the Casa when another younger man from the street demanded that he share it with him. “Calambres” refused and the younger man said, “You’re just lucky that you’re inside the patio because if you weren’t I’d take it from you and you’d be sorry.” The volunteer who had given “Calambres” the bread went to get one of the sisters and fearing that a violent situation was brewing, they gave bread to all of the men who were hanging out on the street in front of the Casa.” Sister Armida ended the story with the words, “Padre, we know very well that a plate of food or even a loaf of bread is an act of peace.” I added, “And it is also an act of love and hope.”

I was mulling all of this over, as I often do while I’m waiting in that infernal line to cross the border back into the US, and I realized that the sisters and the Voluntarias know that they can’t do much about the drug wars but they can still be peacemakers and a source of love and hope to the people they serve by doing what they do best: feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, healing the sick and proclaiming the Gospel. And they do it all with deep compassion and respect.

And now, my poor, beloved Mexico has a new challenge to the health and wellbeing of its already beleaguered people that is causing much suffering and pain. I received an e-mail from the Mother General of the sisters, Sister Maru, in response to one that I had sent inquiring about how they were dealing with this new crisis. She and sister Armida were on a trip to visit some of their communities in the interior of Mexico. She wrote, “Excuse the bad writing but we are in an internet café in Guadalajara. We are very concerned with what is happening and we are taking all of the necessary precautions, especially given the fact that people come to us from all parts (of Mexico). We will return to Tijuana on Friday but we will continue to be in touch. We are very worried. Would you prefer not to come for Mass on Thursday? Dr. Rodriguez (the doctor in residence for many years at the Casa) told us that the governor of Baja California has not sent out an alert and everything should continue as

normal. However we are still concerned since, as I mentioned, people come to us from all over Mexico. We just have to pray a lot!”

I received another e-mail on Wednesday, “We’re now in Tijuana. We returned Monday. There was a lot of alarming news on the radio and television and they said that it is best not to travel and to stay at home. We decided not to go to Leon, Guanajuato and to return; better to be prudent. About tomorrow, if you don’t come for Mass that is alright, we understand. The doctors are asking us not to let the people into the dining room but rather to give them their breakfast in a bag at the door. Until today of this week we were serving the food on paper dishes and we have been providing hand sanitizer for everyone to disinfect their hands before they came in for breakfast. We’re also giving out face masks to all the people.”

I wrote back that I was still planning to go the following day to celebrate Mass and asked what the doctors thought about having the people in the chapel and what they, the sisters thought. Sr. Maru wrote back, “Dr. Rodriguez recommended to us that we not allow the people to come into the dining room and that everything should be done outside (in the patio area), so that it is better not to have Mass tomorrow.”

I wrote back that it was all so sad but it seemed it was for the best. However, as I have been thinking about all of this, I keep remembering the words of Sr. Maru, “We have to pray a lot.” And what better way to pray than to celebrate the Eucharist with our people. So, I think that if things do not improve by next week, I will suggest to the sisters and the doctors that somehow we have the Mass outside in the patio so that together as a community we can pray for an end to this crisis. We will also continue to pray for an end to the violence as we do every week. Just as a plate of food or a piece of bread can be an act of peace, hope and love so is our coming together to celebrate Eucharist. In this way we will continue to proclaim the Gospel with compassion and respect.

It will also do my “Mexican heart” good!

*Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam
For the Greater Glory of God*

Fr. Gil Gentile, SJ