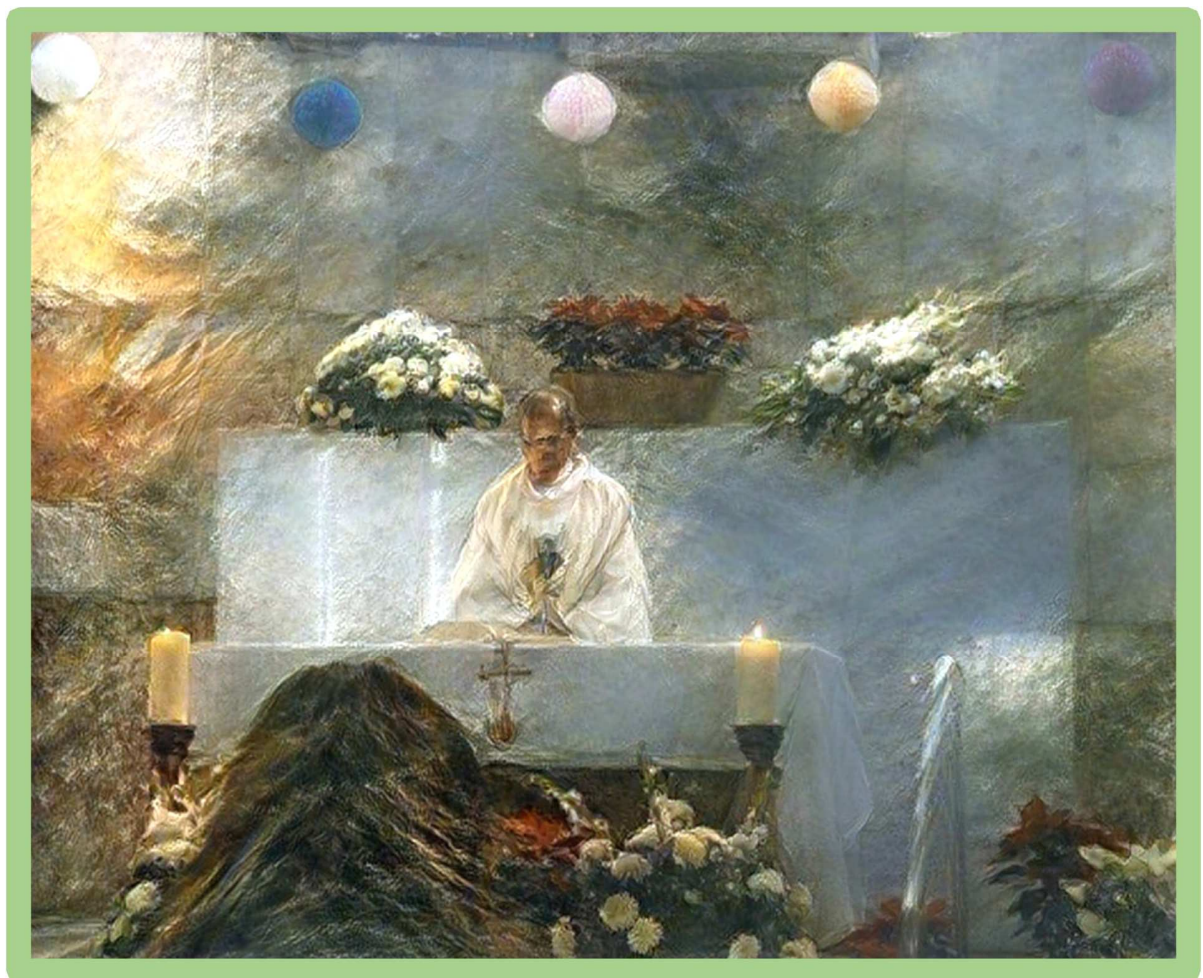


FORTY MASSES... AND OTHER MOMENTS IN MY LIFE...



Dedication

This journey of **40 Masses** would not have been possible without the light of:

- **Jesus Christ, our Lord:** Source and summit of the Eucharist, in whom every encounter has meaning.
- **My parents:** For the faith they taught me through their lives, and for the affection and love I saw and received in my home.
- **My American family:** The Amundsons, whom I love dearly and who welcomed me into their home and guided me towards knowing Christ and discovering my vocation.
- **My Congregation, the Society of Mary:** where I was given the opportunity to follow and share Christ.
- **The young people:** From Jornadas and Misiones, from Cd. Neza and New York, for the joy, sincere demands, and enthusiasm with which they pushed me to live and celebrate the faith with authenticity.
- **All those who lived some chapter of this book with me:** friends, mission companions, and collaborators who are witnesses that life, like the liturgy, is a shared service.

Thank you for being the reason and the fruit of these pages, thank you for being my reason for living, for being a priest.

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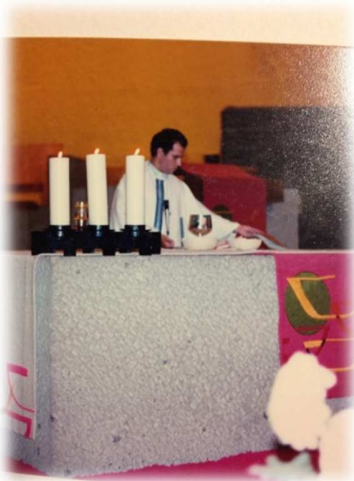
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INTRODUCTION

1989, at the *Ojo de Agua* township, State of Mexico. I'm at the convent of the Sisters of the Perpetual Adoration of the Eucharist. I accompanied one of the groups from the CPP (Polytechnic Center for Projection, our "Newman Center") on their retreat on the Eucharist. Upon entering the sacristy, I saw a sign hanging on the wall:

*"Father, we ask you to celebrate each
Mass
as if it were your first Mass,
as if it were your last Mass,
as if it were your only Mass."
John Mary Vianney
Saint Curé of Ars*



Since that day, those words have remained in my heart. I keep them in mind (almost) every time I celebrate Mass. They have helped me to become aware of the immense privilege and responsibility of standing at the altar to celebrate the Eucharist. I confess that I have not always celebrated Mass as if it were my first, last, and only Mass. I am distracted by many things: the words I will have to say, the children shouting, or the dogs coming in! But I know well that these are only excuses, that in fact I have forgotten the God who will be present in the bread and wine. Other times, however, I have been deeply touched by the grace of the moment, by the people present, by the children shouting or the dogs coming in, because all of this, everything that happens around the altar is also a presence of Christ, that those men and women, those boys and girls, that church, those fields, those

mountains, those crops growing in the fields, the rain falling and the mist surrounding us, every heart, every tear, every joy and every sorrow, also form the body of Christ. And it has been this way for 41 years...

This coming year, on April 7 2026 to be precise, I will celebrate 42 years as a priest. Forty-two years of celebrating the Eucharist, of "saying Mass," of "coming to say a little Mass." Forty-two years of putting on the vestments while thinking, "What am I going to say to them? How can I speak about Christ and not about myself? How can I find the words that each heart needs?" I realized too late in life that I cannot, that I will never find the exact "right" words and that I will always fail someone. At the same time, in a wonderful and incomprehensible way, in so many moments when I felt my weakness, even in the moments when I let my pride overcome the Gospel, there were so many moments, so many Eucharists, unforgettable, wonderful, tragic! There were moments when I was happy to be a priest and moments when I wanted to be something else, to do something more for those sick people, for those disabled

children, for those orphans or, for that widow, moments when I did not understand that God was asking me for THIS and nothing else. There were also moments when I felt that I was the luckiest man alive, blessed again and again by friends, family, and even strangers. I have had the joy, and I hope to continue to have it, of having lived, in forty-two years of priesthood, wonderful moments when I was able to try to bring Christ closer to others.

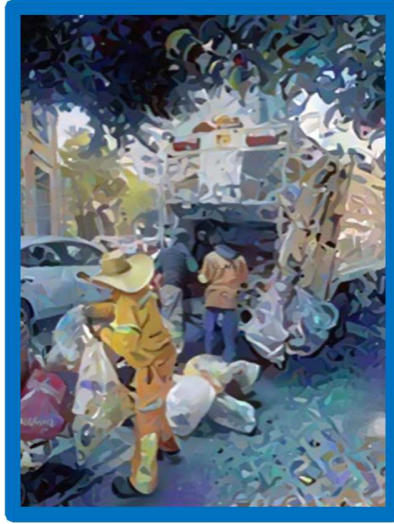
I want to share with all of you the remembrance of some of the Masses that have had the greatest impact on my life. Not all of the stories I share are strictly speaking about "Masses." Sometimes it is a washing of the feet, or a Way of the Cross during Holy Week. I have included them because they are moments when Christ has become truly and really present among us. I share them with (I hope) a grateful and humble heart. I have called this effort to share my life with you "forty Masses... and other moments in my life." I will explain why I chose this name later on.

As I proofread the texts I have written, I realize that I talk a lot about myself. Perhaps I have even let myself be overcome by my pride and solipsism (okay, selfishness!). I apologize in advance, but in a way, they have also been MY Masses, when I said the words of consecration (or was unable to say them). Forgive me for talking about myself. I know that all of you will be able to see beyond the figure of the priest to see Jesus, the Christ, the Lord, the one who loved me and gave himself for me.

FatherPancho, sm



PART ONE
THE MASSES I CARRY IN MY HEART



"God is present in the garbage."

MASS WITH GARBAGE COLLECTORS

Mexico City, December 1993.

December the 12th. Another December the 12th. So many "December the 12ths." Every year it's the same. They ask for 5, 10, 20 Masses on the same day, and they all want them at noon. Before the clowns and the meal... And yet, people ask for it: they want "su Misita", literally, their "little Mass" but that expression is full of respect and reverence... and they pay well for it!

The night before, on the 11th, two men have come to the parish and asked to speak to me:

- "Father, we want a "Misita" for tomorrow, is that possible? How much will you charge us?"
- Seriously, for tomorrow? From one day to the next? I don't think so, I'm already fully booked, it's not possible!
- It would be very early, maybe at 6 or 7 a.m., whichever you prefer!

These two men caught my attention. They were not blue-collar workers or office employees.

"Where are you from? Who sent you?"

We're from the city hall of the local borough. We've been asking the local mayor for permission for years, and he finally authorized it.

At the borough? That seems very strange to me!

- But where in the borough? In the offices? I don't think it's on the esplanade in front of city hall! (that would be a radical change in government policy!
- No, Father, look, we're from the sanitation staff, the mass would be in the garbage truck depot...



I'm stunned... The street sweepers, the "cleaners" want their mass... at 6 or 7. Should I go or not? Not a question!

- All right, gentlemen, see you there tomorrow at 6, because I have another Mass at 7.
- Shall we come and get you?
- No, don't worry, I'll get there, just give me the address.

The garbage dump is quite far away, almost outside the city. The place smells like... garbage... a deep, nauseating, penetrating smell. Piled-up, rotten garbage, mud everywhere...

They've set up a little altar with some flowers. A bulky image of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Everyone gathers around the altar, but not too closely. This is something sacred, and I, I am a poor street sweeper, I am the son, the wife of the sanitation guy, the garbage collector...

They haven't prepared anything for Mass, there's no one to read the Mass readings... I'm about to get angry when it dawns on me: No one wants to read because... they can't read...

And Christ descends to that altar... a small, clean, spotless altar, shining like a light in the midst of the garbage of this world. A small, white host that manages to illuminate, to transform, for a few moments, the garbage that surrounds it in this place, the garbage in my own heart...

No one takes communion. No one, of course, because they haven't gone to confession (are we Catholics or Jansenists?), but everyone smiles, everyone is happy: they've been waiting years for the authorities to give permission, and now the "padrecito" has come, let's hope he doesn't charge us too much, we have to give him something. After all, the Virgin Mary has come to visit us, and she brought her Son!



They pass around a basket at collection time. I 'm so embarrassed! I feel like I'm taking away what little they have! But no, it is they who give it, from the heart, they give it to God, not to accept it would be to offend them all!

"Father, can you bless the little room with the nightstand? It's right here..." I'm about to refuse. I can't stand the smell anymore. The night watchman looks at me with big, black, sleepless eyes. "Come on, Father, this way, look, let me introduce you to my wife, my children..." They all live crammed together in this garbage

dump. This is where they live, this is their room, their world, their future, I would almost say, their condemnation. I feel ashamed. I feel ashamed as I write these lines, because I don't remember their names, or their story, or anything at all. I only remember the face of a man who made his living among the garbage, of a woman who took him by the arm and introduced me to her children so that I could give them a piece of advice, a blessing, as if to protect them from a threatening future. I am ashamed that I did nothing more for them... just a "little Mass" ... Half an hour with God... And yet I want to believe that the Mass, the presence of Christ, brought them some comfort, some dignity: No matter how dirty your work is, no matter if people treat you like trash, you are a God's child, His son or daughter! And Christ came to this garbage dump to be with you. I know He does this every day, in hidden ways. that God is present under many guises: in a friend, a companion, in a shared "tamal". Today it's my turn to bring Him here!

I get in the car and go to the next Mass. I see people on the street, throwing trash away, thinking, "Someone else will pick it up." I realize that I have done this so many times, without even thinking... All I can do today is ask for forgiveness...



Our Lady of Trash

Author: P Pancho, with I.A.



"Holy Father, please celebrate Holy Mass for my little animals..."
**MASS DURING A MISSION IN THE NORTHERN SIERRA
OF PUEBLA STATE**

First mission in the "Sierra Norte de Puebla", Holy Week 1994.

Sister Diana has invited me to work with her this Holy Week in the communities of Tepezintla and Tonalixco, together with Brother R...sm, who is a deacon and will be ordained a priest this year. We set out on the long bus ride to Zacatlán, and from there it's another two hours to where Sister Diana is waiting for us. The next day, we walk three hours to reach Tepezintla. On the way, we receive our first Nahuatl lesson: *Quema*, yes! *Amo*, no!"

That same afternoon, I celebrate my first Mass in the church of Tepezintla. When I arrive at the sacristy, I see a line of about twenty people waiting for me. Apparently, word got around that the priest had arrived, and people have come to present their Mass intentions. Diana tells me that I should sit at the table and welcome each person.

I walk past them. They greet me with a slight bow and a faint smile. They look tired; they must have walked a long way (the next day, when I visit the village, I realize that most of them do not live in the village itself, but in houses scattered throughout the hills). They seem to have come directly from the fields, as some still carry their tools. I notice their worn clothes, too long or too short, the sandals that barely cover their bare feet, an almost useless defense against the cold: nothing like the jacket and boots I am wearing! I see faces burned by the weather, hands calloused and hard as metal. I see the fatigue, the weight of the day, of the life they have spent tilling the land or working in the city. And yet here they are, offering up the life they carry on their backs, a life of effort, work, and struggle, to "ask for their little Mass."

A woman approaches and takes a small plastic bag from the folds of her clothes, neatly folded and tied with a string, from which she carefully removes a folded sheet of paper and hands it to me. I take the sheet and read a text that says something like this:

"Holy Father, good afternoon, I greet you with respect and ask you to please celebrate today's Holy Mass for my animals, my chickens, my corn, my harvest, my husband who is in Mexico City working, my children who have not returned, for the eternal rest of my mother Ofelia, my sister Anastasia, for Juan, for Isidoro (and twenty other names). Thank you and God bless you."

All this is written in large round letters, like the ones we learned to draw in grade school.

The lady smiles at me and walks away, then another person comes and repeats the small, solemn, and simple ceremony of handing over their piece of paper.

When everyone has passed, Diana explains to me, I have to take all the papers and place them on the altar, and during the prayer of the faithful, I have to read all the names that have been written on those papers. No, it is not enough to mention a few, I have to read them all. That is what people expect. And they want to hear the names of their loved ones at Mass.

But that's not all. After Mass, I return to the sacristy with the papers, and once again there are people waiting to collect their pieces of paper. They wait patiently in line. I ask each one, "What are the names of your deceased loved ones?" and I look for the piece of paper in the pile.

When I hand it over (again, according to Diana's instructions), my role is to "give them good advice" and bless them with the holy water. Each person gives me a five-peso coin (the equivalent of a day's wages!), picks up their sheet, folds it carefully, and puts it back in its envelope, treating it with delicacy and infinite respect, as if it were a treasure of great value. And in fact, it is.

This begs the question: why do they keep that piece of paper so carefully? Why do they always carry it with them? Why is it so important? It took me a while to understand: many of our indigenous brothers and sisters cannot read or write. Women generally do not speak Spanish. They cannot read their paper; they do not know exactly what is written on it. You see, one day, someone helped them out. Some teacher, some person in the city, someone who could read and write, a "person of reason", as the expression goes, helped them out by writing down their intentions, the names of the people they loved and who are no longer with them. That is why, yes, it is a treasure they carry close to their hearts. Someone made them a treasure, an infinitely valuable treasure because it has the names of their loved ones. On that paper are their animals, their harvest, their pains, their absences, the emptiness that comes from the poverty that forces them to emigrate and has taken root in the depths of their being... and so many other things that they did not manage to write down.

No one knows when a priest will pass through here again. No one knows when he will be able to offer Mass again, a Mass that they may not understand very well, but a Mass where someone who "knows" speaks to God about them, someone who places those names, those animals, that harvest, that hope for a better future that will most likely never come, on the altar. But tonight, they are happy because "the little priest said my little Mass."

This ritual, which is repeated before each Mass, is in itself a Mass. It is a Mass that precedes the Mass. It is a prayer, an offering, the sacrifice of hours of walking from a neighboring (or not so neighboring) hamlet or village, the sacrifice offered for others, for those who are no longer here, but who have not completely left.

It is also, and this is no small thing, the sacrifice of a whole day's wages. That money is not free. It has not fallen from the sky. It is eight, nine, ten hours of work in the sun or rain in a mountainous and ungrateful land that does not provide enough to survive from one year to the next. And they give it to me because "I said a little Mass!"



On the last day of the mission, I am sick with a stomach ache. I can barely stand. The church is full. People are waiting in the sacristy. The handing of the pieces of paper takes almost an hour. There are more than a hundred!

The prayer of the faithful seems endless. I feel like I can't take it anymore, but people look at me with wide eyes, pleading with their gaze, attentive to hear the name, their name, their names, the name that Totatzin God has to hear! Because, if He doesn't hear them...?

The priest's voice carefully pronounces each name. I try to do it with loving care, as if they were my own loved ones. And I feel that in some way they already are...



A few hours later, the parish priest comes to say goodbye. I hand him a plastic bag with all the money from the offerings: "This is for you, Father, it's money from the parish."

"No, my brother! It's yours, you earned it, you celebrated the Masses.

"Father, I can't take this money. What would I spend it on? On clothes they don't have? On food they can't

afford? This money is sacred. It's the equivalent to months of work. How could I take it with me? It has to stay here, with you, with these people. And thank you for helping me discover this indigenous world that I was completely ignorant of for more than thirty-five years.

The truck starts up. I return to my bourgeois life, to the "people of reason," to the city folk. I return to my comfort zone, to my easy-going life. I only spent a few days in the Sierra Norte de Puebla. But I'm not taking a memory with me. I take with me a wound, a wound that I know will accompany me until the last day of my life, a wound that cannot heal, or perhaps a scar that still bleeds, that of the poverty of my brothers and sisters, the hunger and despair drowned in a little "*win*," the fermented alcohol they home-brew here in Puebla. The wound of not having been able to do more. I try to remember that I am a priest, not a social worker or union leader, that I have chosen a path, and that everyone has a role to play. My role now is to help each person discover their vocation, their responsibility. Because if we want things to change, we have to pay the price.

And despite everything, despite the pain that accompanies me, I am also accompanied by the words I was able to learn and say so many times in Nawatl: "*Totazin Tio Xihua miyac!*" God loves you very much!





Today I face life as I face the volcano

MASS AT THE PIEDRAS GRANDES REFUGE, ON THE CITLALTÉPETL VOCANO

Piedras Grandes, Puebla, December 1991

The *GAP*, Grupo Alpino Pax, of the CPP, Centro Politécnico de Proyección, is in its high mountain season. Against their better judgment, they have agreed to let me accompany them ("Father Pancho won't be able to make it!" "Well, let him wait for us at the refuge!"). But I am determined to accompany them!

Weeks of preparation, physical and mental training. Preparing the equipment, the liturgy, the trip. Finally, the long-awaited day arrives! The long trip to H..., renting the van, arriving at the Piedras Grandes refuge.

The cold is terrible. The shelter is dark, cold, unwelcoming. There is trash everywhere, remains of a campfire, some uncomfortable metal cots, furniture in pieces. Outside, night falls quickly, and the cold seems to double in intensity. A lamp tries to provide a little light, and we gather around it.

The challenge will be tomorrow: getting up super early, at 4 a.m., getting equipped, crossing the Jamapa glacier, climbing to the summit. We dream of the summit: seeing all of Mexico (well, not all of it, but almost!). But tonight, we celebrate Mass...

As best I can, I prepare a small altar: "God's working tools," the tablecloth, the corporal, my chalice, a gift from my parents for my ordination. That solid wooden table takes on a new nobility: it is prepared to receive God. Where so many men and women, professional and amateur mountaineers, have eaten before setting out on their journey to the summit, it is now God himself who gives himself to us as food. We receive Communion surrounded

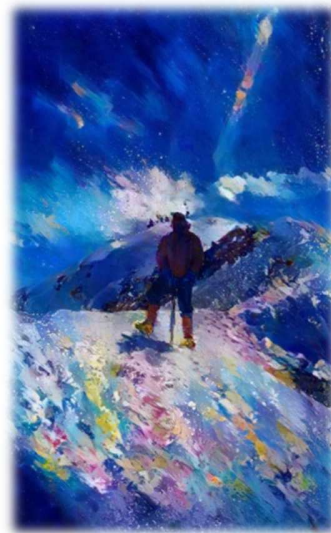


by the darkness, in a refuge that has become the most magnificent church I have ever seen, a church made of stone and tenacity. The darkness takes on a new quality: it becomes a mantle, a shield: it recognizes its Lord and shelters Him. It is filled with a profound reverence. The shadows seem to bow down. The words of consecration take on a new depth, a different density! Christ present in the Refuge, surrounded by darkness, by the hidden beauty of a

volcano rising into the night, a Mexican night, where an entire nation seems to be approaching its highest point. We gather around those two Lights: that of the kerosene lamp that illuminates our eyes, and that of Christ who gives strength to our souls. And the ancient question that dwells in every man: "What am I doing here?" "Why am I here?" "Who would think of leaving their sofa, their television, and coming to climb mountains?" tries to find, in this small halo of light, a new answer: Yes, tell me why you are here! Not "here," in this refuge, on this volcano, but here, in this life, in this world, why have you come?"

The answer, my answer, takes shape in the darkness, finding its own way: I came, not to "climb a hill" or to "conquer a volcano." I came... I came because I was created to live fully, to climb higher every day, to conquer one peak after another, and when I reach one peak, to seek and run after the next peak, because I have to climb higher and higher, I have to see beyond what my eyes can see, I have to discover what Christ saw when he went into the desert or up the mountain. I have come to discover who I really am, not in the comfort of my home or my habits, but at the limits of existence.

One day I will face Death as I face the Volcano today: sure of myself, with my strength, my experience, my thirst to go beyond what is visible with my eyes. I am also sure of the presence and support of my fellow mountaineers, of those who have accepted that we walk this stretch of our lives together, and I am also sure of the Presence of a God who accompanies me and waits for me at the same time...But before that, before climbing the last peak, today I face Life: this wonderful adventure to which I was called without deserving it, this undeserved and demanding gift that has been entrusted to me. And I am not alone...





"Who is Christ for you?"

MASS OF THE MJVC

Santiago, Nuevo León. National Assembly of the MJVC.

Hundreds of young “*Jornadistas*”, advisors, parents, “dinosaurs”! (former members who are now married and have children in the movement!) have come to this great annual meeting of the MJVC, the Catholic youth movement I work for. It is the first time I have come; I am accompanying Father Vicente Flores, a Marist like myself, who will be my lifelong friend, and many young people from the parish of Claveria. I feel a little lost among so many young people. There is a joyful and lively disorder. I’m glad I don’t have to organize anything!

Saturday afternoon Mass is for small groups. Each priest has been assigned a small flock, a group of about forty boys and girls.



At the last minute, a young priest approaches me, a little confused, having arrived late and not quite sure what to do: “Father, can I concelebrate with you?” “Of course, welcome.” I like him, he works with young people! But I feel he is somewhat... fragile...

During the homily, I invite everyone to answer the question: “Who is Christ for you?” But don’t try to impress anyone, guys! The only one listening to your answer this afternoon... is Christ himself! So don’t try to show off. Just speak from the heart because here, in this assembly, there are some of us who doubt, who are afraid, who feel lonely, who don’t know if they believe, and your testimony can save a soul!”

Of course, no one dares to speak up. I stare at them, I challenge them with my gaze, even with words: “Or is all this just a game? Is *Jornadas* just about having a good time, finding a girlfriend, hiding your fears? Why are you here? What meaning do you give to your life? Seriously? Is Christ your ‘friend,’ your companion, your God? or what?”

A young man stands up, almost in front, and stares at me: “No, Father, for me Christ is more than a friend, Christ is God, he is my God! He is not a ‘friend,’ he is my Savior, and I am here because He has saved me.”

Another young man stands up: "I have so many doubts, I am in so much pain, my mother died recently, but I feel that Jesus is with me..."

Two or three more testimonies... the young people listen, they feel supported, challenged.

Suddenly, without warning, I turn to the other priest, sitting a little behind me, as if hidden, and ask him point-blank: "And for you, Father, who is Christ?"

He wasn't expecting it! He was daydreaming, and suddenly, a bucket of cold water!

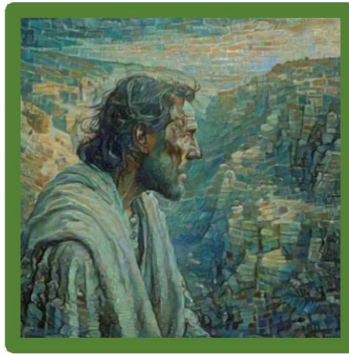
"You're a priest, aren't you? Are you a father? You've left your home, given up having a wife, starting a family... For what? Why or for whom? For you, Father, who is Christ? You're supposed to have given your life to Him, aren't you? He is everything to you! Really? Do you never doubt? Do you never get tired? Do you never settle into your role of authority (of a bureaucrat, Pope Francis would say years later), of being better than the rest, you know things and they don't, you've studied Greek and Latin, hermeneutics and apologetics, you are "well-read and well-written"! But the question is the same for everyone, for you and for me!"



I don't remember exactly what he answered... I remember his surprise, his confusion. For a moment, he seemed to be searching for an appropriate and edifying answer, something taken from the Baltimore Catechism or some book for young people. I don't remember. But the question remains.

I walk toward the altar for the offertory. But I feel the eyes of hundreds of young men and women fixed on me. I haven't answered the question. They seem to demand an answer from me. I look slowly into their eyes, trying to address each one of them: "I know I haven't answered the question I asked you. That question is also asked of me. I would like to answer it... with my life. With words, yes, when necessary, but not only with words. I want you to see Christ when you look at me. I want you to see the answer in what I do, not in what I say. And my first answer is precisely this Mass. Because I would like to give so much to each and every one of you: to give you strength, trust, love... Like the young boy in the Gospel, who had only two fishes and five loaves, I have only a little bread and a little wine... and my life. It is not much, but I give it to you with all my love... and my fragility."





Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert... (Mt. 4:1)

MASS IN THE NEGUEV DESERT

Neguev Desert, Holy Land, August 2016

- "We want to invite you to the Holy Land."

I can't believe it. Having just arrived at the Foyers de Charité, a lay association that originated in France, I am still a stranger to them, the newest of the priests who want to work in this ministry. And yet, already in this first year, they are inviting me to accompany the group going on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. It will be a wonderful adventure, walking with Jesus in the land where He was born, lived, died... and rose again.

It is a journey to the heart of the Gospel. In fact, the Holy Land is often referred to as "the fifth gospel," that is, a narrative written in the fields and roads that Jesus knew and that even today, like the stones of old, continue to cry out to us that Jesus came to us out of love.

Today we have arrived in the desert, the desert where Jesus was tempted by the devil. The place is spectacular: seemingly empty, the desert has a life of its own. It vibrates with its own energy. We poor human beings feel helpless and at the same time surrounded by mysterious forces that surpass us. It is not just a matter of becoming aware of one's own fragility. It is also about facing something transcendent, something greater than oneself, something or Someone that calls you to surpass yourself, to be better, but not without first facing yourself, seeing in your heart the emptiness left by that search for pleasure, power, and prestige. In the desert, you face yourself in order to face God. You cannot do one without the other.



That, incidentally, is the drama of agnosticism: it does not want to know. It does not ask the question. It does not face head-on the drama of human existence, the problem of evil. In the desert there are no agnostics. There may be atheists, but no agnostics. You cannot flee from the desert, nor from yourself, nor from God.



It is my turn to preside at the Eucharist. I experience it as an honor, a gift, but also as a call. We are only a small group of pilgrims gathered around a makeshift altar, with the five priests who celebrate with us in this spectacular place. But instead of losing ourselves in the immensity of the desert, of feeling the heat or thirst, in a wonderful way, the desert itself seems to embrace us, surrounding us with a tenderness that is strong, arid,

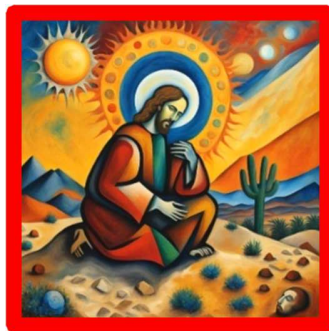
demanding.

In this place, more than anywhere else, it is impossible to invoke the name of God gratuitously. It is not just a matter of "saying Mass." One requirement on this day is clear: like Jesus, I have to face my own demons, I have to defeat them, overcome them. I have to be better than myself.

We are afraid of the words "demand," "duty," and "commitment." We want to be "free," without knowing what that word means, without realizing that true freedom is born of Love; and love of commitment; of duty, because love has its demands, and that human beings are free only to the extent that they give themselves to others.

The Mass is ended. I carefully fold my alb and stole. I feel as if I am also carrying in my suitcase, and in my heart, a piece of this desert, of this silence... I feel not so much free as liberated. That is to say, my freedom is not complete, perhaps it never will be, but in this desert where Jesus fought and won, on this day, in this Mass, the battle, the demand, the commitment are repeated. Now they are my battle, my demand, my commitment.

I am thirsty, thirsty to return to the desert, to meet God again, to meet Jesus again. I know it will be a struggle, a constant search. I don't know if I will always succeed. But something tells me that it will be precisely this search that will give meaning to my life...





"In the Church of God, there is a place for you."

MASS AT THE MONASTERY OF "NOTRE DAME D'ESPOIR"

Monastery of "Notre Dame d'Espérance," Évian, France, 2017

I have embarked on a two-month journey through southern France and northern Italy. I am heading to Rome to assist as an interpreter during the General Chapter. I look for monasteries or other communities where I can stay for a few days, and I find the website of the Benedictine community of "Our Lady of Hope" (<https://www.notredamedesperance.com>) in Evian, France, on the shores of Lake Geneva. The monks have agreed to welcome me and even offer to pick me up at the train station.

On the platform, I meet a young monk, very tall, with a broad smile, but I can't help noticing something strange, something like shyness or withdrawal. His body is too big for him. He moves and expresses himself like a teenager who is still a little unsure of himself.

On the way to the monastery, I explain that I am going to Rome for a general chapter, and I thank him for his hospitality. I see a look of surprise on his face, as if he were surprised by my presence, as if they did not have many guests.

- You don't really know our Order, do you, Father?
- No, in fact, I don't know anything.
- Perhaps it would be best if I explained our charism to you. You see, we are a Benedictine congregation that welcomes vocations... let's say "fragile" ones, men who want to devote themselves to religious life but who suffer from physical or psychological difficulties and have therefore not been accepted in other monasteries. I don't know if you will feel comfortable among us.
- Look, I came here for a reason, and I appreciate your hospitality. I'm sure it will be a great experience.



Indeed, they are "fragile" people. French is a very correct language, with many euphemisms. In fact, they are ill, both physically and psychologically. Unlike us "healthy" people (who need the Doctor with a capital "D"), they know they are ill and they accept it. Some suffer from psychological disorders, and they say so openly. They do not hide their reality. They know they are ill, fragile, but they also know that Christ accepts them as they are, and they want to follow Him in religious life. They themselves express it in a wonderful way: "

Our daily life is a testimony to a wild hope: the God of Jesus Christ loves us as we are, not in spite of our wounds, but with them! Our poverty is a privileged space for realizing the very heart of the monastic life project: the conversion of life, in mutual obedience. We depend on each other, and the strongest often receive more from the weakest... our monasteries are places of life where human frailty is gradually transfigured by divine strength: day after day, all together, we grow in humanity and, therefore, in God. The encounter with our brothers and sisters, with others, strips us bare, unifies us, and leads us to the Encounter with the Other."

I admit it with shame: the first contact is a real shock; my first reaction is fear ("what am I doing here?"). I find myself before a group of wounded, fragile men, but inhabited by that wisdom of the sinner who knows he is forgiven and loved, even though his body and mind are not completely healed. The prior recognizes my fear, perhaps he has seen it before, and approaches me: "Welcome, Father!"



Because I am a priest, they accept me into their community, and I celebrate the Liturgy of the Hours and Holy Mass with them. I can barely hold back my tears as I share in the prayers of these men who speak too loudly or too softly, who sing out of tune, who distrust while trusting, who know that life has treated them badly and others have treated them worse, but that Christ has welcomed them, and so has the Church.

The food is very simple, the cups are plastic cups, the metal plates look like dog bowls! The atmosphere is simple, cheerful, but they know their limits: they know that some of them can get angry or upset easily. But that doesn't stop them from joking and treating each other with affection, even love.

Praying with them is a moving experience, because I... I have everything: health, education, friends, loved ones, family, work, travel! Following Christ is easy when you have everything! Would I be able to follow him if I were terminally ill? These ten or eleven men have only their illness... And their love for Christ. And now they have each other, they have formed a welcoming community, and they are happy about my visit.

They all ask to go to confession! They are grateful for this encounter with a brother who comes from outside, who listens to them, who for a few moments takes upon himself the weight of their loneliness, their illness even.

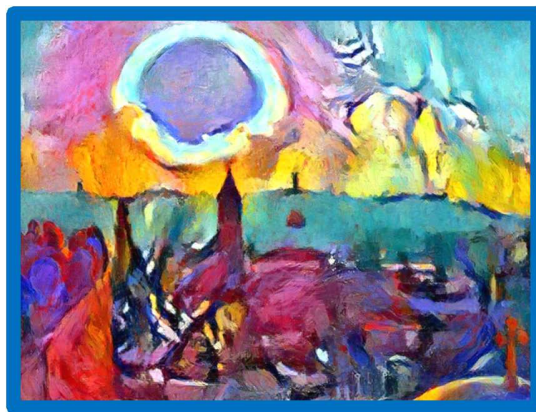
I ask to speak to Father Prior. I share with him my surprise at this very special charism: "That's right, Father," he replies. "We are the "members of Christ who are ill,' we are the sick that no one wants to see, we are worse than lepers, we are 'dangerous,' we make people feel sorry for us. And yet here we live under the gaze of God, in this beautiful place, and as St. Paul says, 'we carry each other's burdens.'"

Father Prior asks me to preside over Mass on Sunday, the day of my departure. I apologize, I don't dare accept, because I know I won't be able to, the emotion is too great. But I agree to say a few words to the community.



A few people arrive, only a handful of parishioners, most of them alone, most of them women. You can immediately sense that they have found something special here, something that responds to their own loneliness and sorrows. And suddenly I understand, and I tell them: "It doesn't matter who you are, rich or poor, sick or healthy, with family or alone, there is a place for you here, in God's church there will always be a place for you, a place that God has chosen for you. You and I have to accept it, conquer it ("the kingdom of heaven is taken by force"), but that place is yours! It belongs to no one else! And if you don't come, if you don't take your place, the Church is incomplete, the Church is not fully the Church if you are missing!"

Eight years have gone by, and I have not returned. But the monks of Our Lady of Hope occupy their place in the Church (they have ten communities in France) and in my own heart, in my religious life.





The message arrived... centuries later...

MASS IN THE NEOLITHIC AREA OF CAPO DI PONTE

Capo di Ponte, Lombardy, Italy, August 2021

I am in northern Italy, in the region of Lombardy, where the great lakes of Italy are located. I have come to celebrate the Eucharist in a very special place, which I have wanted to visit for a long time, and I can finally fulfill this long-held dream. I have arrived at the Neolithic site of Capo di Ponte.

This was (and still is, at least for me) a sacred place. For millennia, between 8000 and 2000 BC, men and women from all over Europe came here in search of the Divine, and they expressed that search, that encounter through their art, their engravings on stone. On the side of the mountain, large expanses of stone appear at ground level, which were used as large canvases, vast irregular surfaces of a special gray color, marked with a certain serenity born of their eternity, calm, firm, "looking" at the sky, as if waiting for some message.



The message arrived... centuries later. Little by little, the stones were covered with signs, drawings, hieroglyphics: some children next to me have fun identifying the rabbits, wild boars, and deer that seem to run across the stone surface. Other abstract symbols seem to want to express something unknown yet present.

For thousands of years, men and women from all over Europe have come here. The last ice age sculpted the landscape. Vast tectonic movements shaped the high peaks that seem to reach the sky. My gaze, like that of so many other pilgrims, turns upward: the summer sun seems to look down on us, wanting to protect us. The mysterious signs seem to speak to the clouds... or to those who inhabit them.

I move slowly, silently, almost in worship, meditating as I walk in the footsteps of my ancestors who came here... seeking a trace of the divine, seeking God.

Because this is a place that speaks of God: or perhaps of gods, spirits, magic, or superstitions, depending on how you look at it, but above all, it speaks of Something, of Someone, of *Someone Else*. There is Something here, there is Someone who surpasses us, and this is how those who, in these hieroglyphics, have expressed their desire to know, to contact, to serve, to

love the One who surpasses them and, at the same time, gives meaning to their lives and protects them, felt it.

For centuries, to our shame, we have despised them: "pagans," "infidels," "idolaters," "savages," barely capable of sitting around a campfire and gazing in awe at the heavens, "worshipping" the sun and the stars... "poor fools!" On the road to "civilization," we forgot that they are our brothers and sisters, capable of working, loving, giving their lives for others, open to transcendence, and yes, loved by God too. Christ died on the cross for them as well...

I have brought bread and wine to celebrate Mass. I want to do it in this sacred place. Because they, my ancestors, my brothers and sisters, prayed here, offered their own sacrifices here, seeking to understand who this god or gods were who had made all this, this transcendent reality that could give meaning to their lives, with their joys, their sorrows, their pains, their yearnings, with that cycle of life that is reborn every year, in every baby that grows and turns into every elderly person who leaves us...



There are too many people, too many tourists, I can't find a suitable place or table. Suddenly, on the other side of a small stream, on a hillside, I see a small church, almost a hermitage. Its small bell tower looks like a sentinel guarding the entrance to the sacred mountain. I cross the small river and climb the hillside. The church is closed, but there is a wooden table to one side. Before my eyes lies this entire sacred area. The hillside covered by the forest seems to come to life: it becomes a mountain of fire! Those flames that I see with the eyes of Faith are surely the prayers of so many thousands who already knew God... without knowing Him.

In the shadow of the small chapel, with bread and wine, alone, but not really alone, I ask Jesus to come. To come down to this mountain, as He did here, so many years ago, under another name, with another face. But who can doubt, who can think that God has not heard, welcomed, answered the prayers of these men and women from another time, who sought God, perhaps without knowing it?

With the Bread and Wine, already consecrated, I feel solidarity with so many others who walked this same beautiful world, and I pray for them, the "primitive" men and women, "cave dwellers." For them, I offer the Eucharistic Sacrifice of a God of Love who also loved them.

Later, I visit the National Museum of Prehistory in *the Camonica Valley* and some churches: the "Pieve di San Siro" and the Monastery of San Salvatore. These are all places where Christ has manifested himself. But Capo di Ponte will always be special for me. It is a bridge across time,,,





For a few brief moments, I share those lives...

MASS IN SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA

Compostela, Spain, Easter Monday, April 1st, 2024.

Fathers Ramón and Valentín, my Spanish confreres, have invited me to Santiago de Compostela. I never thought I would be able to make this trip before leaving Europe! But thanks to God and my brothers, it has come to pass, and right now I am celebrating Mass in the great cathedral of Santiago de Compostela, a few steps from the tomb of the apostle James, and before hundreds of pilgrims who have come here. Why? For tourism? For sport? For devotion? It is not my place to comment on that. It is my job to celebrate Mass for them, to pray with them and for them, to pray with the millions who have come over the centuries to draw closer to God through penance, effort, and leaving behind the things of this world that hold us back and prevent us from seeing the Light.



At the time of Communion, the celebrant asks me to distribute it to the pilgrims on the left-hand side. I experience this as an immense privilege: to distribute the Bread of Life, to give Christ to others, to sow once again this seed of eternal life, this time throughout the world, for pilgrims have come from Costa Rica, Korea, Argentina, Ukraine... The list is endless!

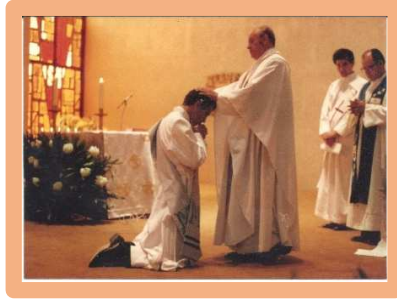
Each person approaches slowly, some smile at me, and extend their hands to receive the body of Christ. I lift each host and say, "The body of Christ," looking at each person's face, trying to guess where they come from, but above all trying to see what they have experienced, what they carry in their hearts, what wounds, what blows they have received... I look into their eyes for a trace of their joys, their loved ones they carry in their souls, those who are still here and those who have already left. Each pilgrim comes with his own story, past and future, and in this cathedral, they present themselves to God at the moment of receiving Him.

As I place the Host in their hands, I feel like saying to them: "I trust you! At this moment, I give you to Christ! He also trusts you; He delivers Himself into your hands, renewing that act of love that led him to the Cross two thousand years ago.



My gaze rests on those hands: the hands of an older man, a father, calloused hands, working hands, more accustomed to the hoe and the shovel than to books... The hands of a grandmother, of an elderly woman who walks with difficulty, hands that have cooked, knitted, washed, healed, caressed, hands that have helped to give birth and to die in peace, hands which now are given their Savior ... Other hands, young hands, open to life, waiting to build their future, and which come to give their future to God... And I, a servant, a priest of God, for a few brief moments, in this all too short encounter, share those lives, those desires, that future that only God knows... A few brief moments in which, in silence, with a glance and a smile, I try to say to them: "All is well! Go with God!"





There are no words...

MASS OF MY PRIESTLY ORDINATION

French Parish, Mexico City, April 7, 1984

How can I describe this Mass? I don't think I can find the words... It had been eleven years since I told my parents, "I want to be a priest!" Eleven years of dedication, studies, travels, work, challenges... Eleven years that today bring to an end a long but fantastic process!

I don't want to recount the details. They are valuable, but there are too many. Almost forty years later, when I look at the photos, so many memories fill my heart.

The boys are there: the students from the Franco-English School, with whom I went on so many camp-outs and retreats. They will be the altar boys. Serious, solemn, but with smiles on their face, eager to laugh and celebrate with me: "Way to go, Panchua, your day has come!" Ours, boys, it's also yours. Mauricio. takes the enormous processional cross we brought from Claveria.

The *paroisse* is packed to overflowing! I can't believe it! Who are all these people? And I scan all the pews with my eyes (and my heart): Look, there's X, and also Z! And suddenly, it dawns on me: I know them all! It's an incredible feeling of communion, of closeness, it's an embrace of a thousand people who welcome me and carry me to the altar

The singing of the litanies begins. Fathers H. and J. sing them like never before. The music envelops me, protects me, gives me a special grace: the Saints of God welcome me.



Monsignor José Pablo Robalo, SM, approaches slowly. You can feel his pastoral affection. It is not just another moment, another ordination. I feel his hands on my head; I feel the love and protection of the whole Church.

My parents' approach: it is their immense privilege to help me put on my chasuble and stole, a gift from my aunt Emma, my godmother. With gestures that are a little shy, uncertain, but full of love, they cover me with the symbol of the priestly ministry in the liturgy. I hug them both, right there, in front of everyone. There are no words...

On the altar, they have placed the silver chalice that my parents gave me, next to the one made of clay that my sister Gina made for me. I feel surrounded by affection... and responsibility. Together with the Bishop and my fellow priests, I say the words of consecration for the first time: "This is my Body... This is the chalice of my Blood..." There are no more words...

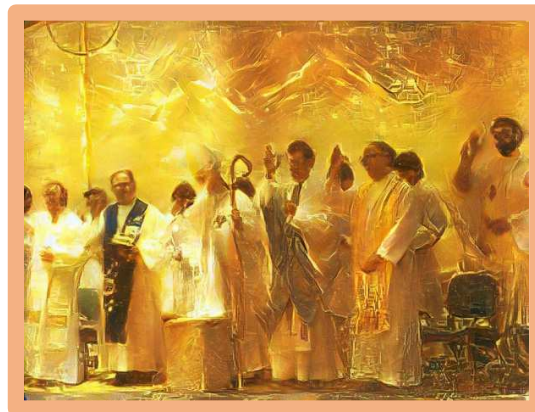
At the end of Mass, I also give the final blessing for the first time: a gesture of love from Christ to his people: "The blessing of Almighty God..."



While everyone leaves in procession, I remain before the altar to impart the personal blessings that each person wishes to receive from the newly-ordained priest. So many familiar faces, so many loved ones approach me, take my hands and kiss them, and kneel before Christ the Priest, Christ present once again, and I wait, before a Christ who has a familiar face, that of a friend, a Christ of camps and retreats, of missions and classes, a Christ who wants to be more present.

Omar and Rita Amundson, my "parents" from the United States, with whom I lived for a year in Minnesota in 1972, approach. They too, who are Protestants, ask for a blessing.

Today, April 7, 1984, marks the beginning of the most wonderful adventure of my life. The word "adventure" may seem strange in this context. I use it because following Christ means finding yourself in totally unexpected, unheard-of, wonderful situations! It means moving forward without knowing exactly where you are going! It means to trust, to take risks, to move forward without knowing exactly what awaits us, it is only knowing WHO awaits us! It is starting over every day, every hour, every encounter... it is seeking, and at the same time disappearing... It is guiding without being seen, it is speaking without speaking, it is loving with another heart... There are no words...





"Mon père..."

MY FIRST MASS

French Parish of Polanco, April 8, 1984.

The day after my ordination, I celebrated my first Mass. I asked to celebrate it in the parish where I grew up, the French Parish of Polanco. From its origins in the city center, in the girls' school founded by Friar Pedro de Gante in 1548, to the construction of the new church in Polanco, it has sheltered hundreds of families of French origin, including the Chauvet's.

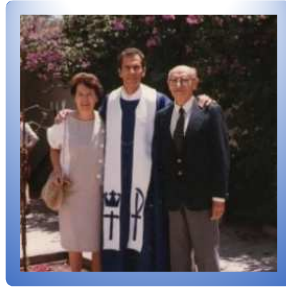
Accompanied by my friend Enrique from Nicaragua (who was recently imprisoned by the Sandinista regime and finally released), I say for the first time, as the main celebrant, the words of consecration: "This is MY body... MY blood..." The words reach the depths of my soul: "It is not I; it is Christ who lives in me." I feel immensely alone, alone but not lonely before Christ, who looks at me with love: "come and follow me."



At the end of Mass, I address the assembly once again: "Please pray for me. Because if for all of you it is an act of faith to believe that the words of consecration transform the bread and wine, if you who hear these words believe and trust in Christ, how much more do these same words demand of me an enormous act of faith, because it is I, and no one else, who says them... I must believe, despite knowing my weaknesses, my faults, my temptations... please pray for me." It is a battle in my heart between joy and emotion, trust and fear...

And something happens that I never would have expected: people applaud... I don't know how to react, I start to cry.

A woman approaches me as I leave the sacristy, and for the first time I hear in French, addressed to me, those words that have marked my life with the presence of so many holy and exemplary men: "*mon père...*"





Who died? - We don't know...

MASS FOR A STRANGER

The late, unexpected phone call, quite some time after dinner: "Father Pancho, how are you? Sorry to bother you so late, but... can you come to the funeral home? For a funeral Mass?" D.'s friendly voice sounds calm, unhurried, a little sad, but a call like this always portends tragedy, loss. "I can be there in an hour, okay? Forgive me for asking, but who passed away?"

"I'll tell you when you get here. Come when you can. We'll be waiting for you."

It's nighttime when I arrive. Very late at night. There are very few people in this small funeral home in the State of Mexico. I look for my friends' names on the board at the entrance, but I can't find them. So it's not a family member. Suddenly I see D., calm, with a friendly smile, as always: "Come, it's this way."

- "My condolences, who passed away?"
- "We don't know."
- "Wait, what? You don't know?"
- "That's right."



I don't understand a word. We arrive at the parlor, where M, D.'s wife, and his brother H. are waiting for me. No one else. I find myself in front of a simple, humble, pinewood coffin (like that of John Paul II, years later), the cheapest one, the one for the poor, a coffin that seems to apologize, that seems to say, "sorry to bother you."

A brief but affectionate greeting to the whole family. But I still don't understand: "Excuse me, but who...?"

D. smiles modestly, as if not wanting to say too much: "As I told you, we don't know. We don't know who he was or where he came from. We called him Uncle Alberto, like the one in the song."

And D. tells me the story of Uncle Alberto. One day, he arrived at their house, back when they lived in a smaller town, upstate, he was dressed in rags, lost: "I'm looking for my family, I don't know where they are, I don't know where they live."

"But where are you from, sir?"

"I don't know, I took a bus, I got lost at the terminal, they dropped me off here, they told me I didn't have a ticket, I don't understand..."

We spent a few days trying to help him locate his family, we went to the mayor's office, to social services. No one could do anything. He's not sick, he's not crazy, he's not malnourished, we can't help him. It seems he has forgotten everything.

"It's okay, don't worry, we'll take care of it."



And Uncle Alberto stayed. He lived with us for fifteen years. We tried everything. We searched high and low. Newspapers, posters, notices... and nothing. We gave him his own room. He ate with us. When we moved to Mexico City, he came with us. Sometimes he would go out to look for his family and come back at night.

He passed away last night. We never knew his name or where he came from, but he became a loved one, a member of our family.

We gather round that humble and silent coffin. Yes, silent, because it told us nothing about its occupant, silent like "Uncle Alberto" who found his final resting place in it, silent like the Holy Shroud of Turin, which I saw years later, silent because it says nothing with words, but screams with the traces of suffering of that man who was scorned and crucified... Around the coffin, a family, also strangers, unrelated to that man they had wanted to accompany, pray for, ask for a Mass, enveloped that stranger who was no longer a stranger thanks to the affection with which they surrounded him.

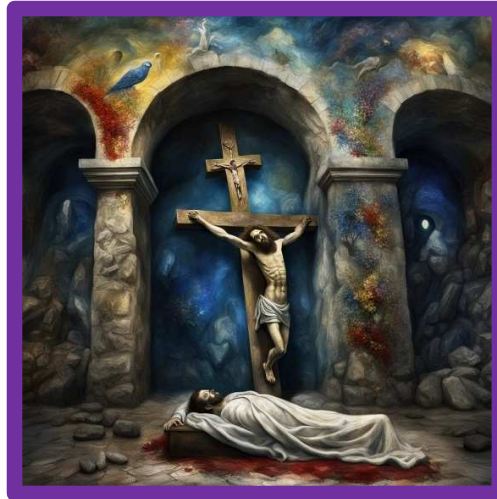
His family never knew about him. They will probably never know anything about him. "They lost him," like so many "desaparecidos" men and women, young and old who vanish into thin air for so many reasons: they want nothing to do with their families, day laborers, *Jacinto Cenobios* (from the name of a song) who disappear "in the hell of the city." I think of the children, the parents who never returned, the "*levantados*", kidnapped by the drug cartels, the disappeared, those buried hastily in some mass grave because no one claims them, or in the clandestine mass graves of drug trafficking... I also pray for them, for those who are not here, but who in some ways have never left... and will never return.

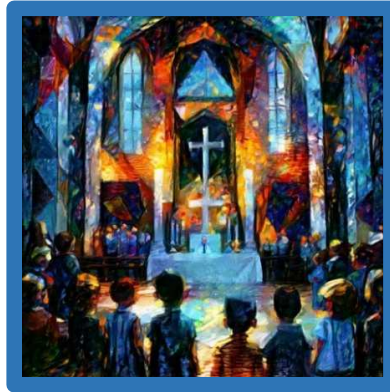


The mass was brief, with no hymns, no "memento mori", without the ability to evoke memories of childhood or youth, loves or mourning, without a real name, just "Alberto," the traveling companion, unfortunate, abandoned, but who found a home in a family of strangers, a warm and welcoming home.

I say goodbye to my friends: "Thank you, Pancho!"

No, guys, thank you for doing what few would have dared to do, for giving reality and life to the works of mercy that Christ left us: "I was hungry, and you gave me to eat, I was sick..." the works of mercy of Christ to which the Church has added one more: giving Christian burial.





"And the fathers?, well, no, not a single one came."

MASS AT THE SPECIAL EDUCATION SCHOOL IN EL POCITO

- "Listen, Father, there's a lady outside who wants a First Communion Mass for her children."

It's always the same! Everyone wants their "special Mass" because their little boy or girl is so special and doesn't have to mix with the "riffraff" of the parish ("I want my Mass, that's why I pay! Tell me how much it's going to cost me!"), and you have to be as tactful as possible to explain to them that the Church no longer wants these private Masses that create divisions in the Church, if I can find the right words. "Tell her to come in, please."

And in a minute... everything changes. My superiority, my training, my "I know more than this unpleasant lady" they all go out the window! I realize that I judge and misjudge people. At the same time that our Lord is teaching me a lesson, I am about to experience one of the most fabulous adventures of my life.



- "Oh, Father, how nice of you to welcome me! (Yes, of course, that's how "nice" I am!). You see, I've been to all the parishes in the area and no priest wants to hear my children's confessions!"

Wait, what?

- "Well, Father, let me explain. I'm the principal of a special education school (and just saying that makes my throat tighten), and this year the mothers have asked that their children receive their first communion. No matter how hard I look, everyone tells me: Those children don't need to go to confession, they have no sin, they can receive their first communion just like that."

- How many children are there?

- About twenty.

I feel a knot in my stomach. How easy it would be for me to say the same thing, that they don't need to go to confession. But something tells me that every child deserves, in the words of John Paul II, an encounter with open eyes and a beating heart with the risen Christ. Above all, I feel that, as a priest, I can give back some dignity and joy to these children who may have been rejected since birth.



- "No problem, ma'am, just tell me when you want me to come to your school."

- Well, Father, confessions and Mass would be at the Pocito church of the Basilica of Guadalupe. If you could also celebrate Mass for us, it would be a joy."

On the Friday afternoon before Mass, in the Pocito itself, the children come one by one: distracted, restless, not quite sure what is happening, they look at me with a slight sense of dread! Each one of them is wonderful! They kneel before me with their "sins"(?) I would rather say, with their shortcomings, their difficulties, with the bullying they have suffered, with the rejection that accompanies them every day. Also with their innocence, their confusion, their fragility... With their Down Syndrome, their epilepsy, their lack of oxygen at birth... And it is my immense privilege to be there with them, to hug them, to bless them. I want to give each one of them a special, personal blessing... (For everything else, there's MasterCard!)

Some of the mothers also approach me: "I can't go to confession, I'm separated, I live in sin, my husband left me when the child was born, when he saw what he was like..." I search the heart of Christ for the words of encouragement and comfort that I lack.



Saturday Mass arrives. The Pocito church shines with a special light. All the children are there, dressed in white, already seated in the front pews, radiant, impatient, nervous surely, chatting, very excited. Some are still arriving. My new friend the principal walks up to me:

- "Well, Father, let me explain: the boys and girls are all here, ready, very happy. Not one is missing. The teachers? Some did come, but not all of them. In fact, there are very few. Saturday is their day off, and they didn't want to waste it on this. They do

plenty enough taking care of the children all week long. Their job is not easy. The mothers are all here, absolutely all of them."

None of them could miss it. They are so proud, they look at their children with a look of affection, love, pride. Today their child receives Christ in the Sacrament for the first time, how can they not thank heaven for such a special grace?

- "And the fathers, well, no, not one of them has come."

There is no father in these families. Not a single one. When they saw the child, a fragile, sick baby, in need of love and support more than anyone else, they ran away. All these strong, brave men ran away. I try not to think about them.

It is a noisy, disorderly, beautiful Mass! There is no choir or organist because there is no money. The children get up and walk around for any reason; they don't understand anything about liturgy, announcements, rubrics, or good manners! But of course, it doesn't matter! They are in the house of God, in the house of Jesus and Mary. Today they are the guests of honor, and little by little they will understand that this is also their home.

The mothers worry: "Sit down, don't make noise, children, the priest will get angry!"

Get angry? How could I get angry with these beautiful creatures? And yet, yes, it is difficult to look at them with love; it is easy to feel pity, but that is not why they have come. They have come with their mothers to ask God for strength, patience, and a happy life for their children.

I try to find words to talk to these mothers. But I feel I don't have much to say to them. Tell them I admire them, tell them I wish them well, tell them their sons and daughters will be fine. They know well that time will pass, that the day will come when they will no longer be here: What will become of that child that no one wants?

It is at times like these that I wish I were more than just a priest. I wish I were a doctor to heal them. And I wish I were a psychologist to accompany them. I wish I were a clown to make them laugh. I wish I were a father so that at least one of them could feel the love and strength of a father's arms.



But I am just a priest, and I can only tell them that, through all these years of suffering, in a way that is both mysterious and wonderful, Our Lord God is with them, is one of them, and that every bit of love, every bit of patience, every tear, every pain is a seed of Grace that they sow today in the hearts of their children, and that today, on this day of their First Communion, it is they, the mothers, who sow Christ himself in the souls of their children. And that Our Lord will make each of these seeds bear the fruit of Eternal Life.

I say goodbye to each of the children, to each of the mothers, to each teacher, to the principal who has organized all this. I want to give each of these people all the love of God. I search for it in the depths of my own heart. I can't give them more, I can't give them less.

This was many years ago. I lost track of them because life takes us down different paths. As I write these lines, I want to remember every face, every smile... But I can't. Time has passed, and my memories are vague. What has become of them? I feel ashamed, I feel that I have failed them. I can only ask the Lord Jesus to hold them, each and every one of them, in the palm of His hands.





A love with the face of a Mother

2009: MASS AT THE GROTTTO OF LOURDES

I have come to attend a course at the Foyer de Charité in Chateaufeuf, France, where Marthe Robin lived for so many years on the Eucharist alone. The Foyers de Charité are a wonderful work of lay people who live fully dedicated to the service of evangelization. To my surprise, they ask me to accompany a small group to Lourdes! A dream come true!

The drive from Chateaufeuf was long, taking a whole day. The van (like me) is getting on in years! We drove non-stop through the south of France, and finally, at sunset, the Pyrenees mountains appeared in the distance, which I was seeing for the first time. We were almost there!

As soon as we arrive, we head to the pilgrim reception center: we have to reserve a place for Mass at the Grotto! The only time available is tomorrow at 7:15 a.m. There will be no time to rest. We arrive half an hour early. A German priest, accompanied by a small group of pilgrims, is ahead of us.

I approach the altar. I am in the same place where Mary appeared to Bernadette Soubirous. In the early morning light, something is born in my heart: a feeling of peace, of trust. The grotto envelops me like a mantle... a mantle made of stone, solid, reliable, without hiding me from the world, on the contrary.

I become aware of the immense privilege I am enjoying: I am in a blessed, sacred place, and in an instant so many names, so many loved ones, arise from my soul and I place them on the altar: my parents, family, friends, the "Lourdes" I know, the pilgrims who accompany me... I am here for them.

I slowly pronounce the words of the Eucharistic consecration prayer, aware that I will not be able to say them again here. It is a unique moment... that still continues...

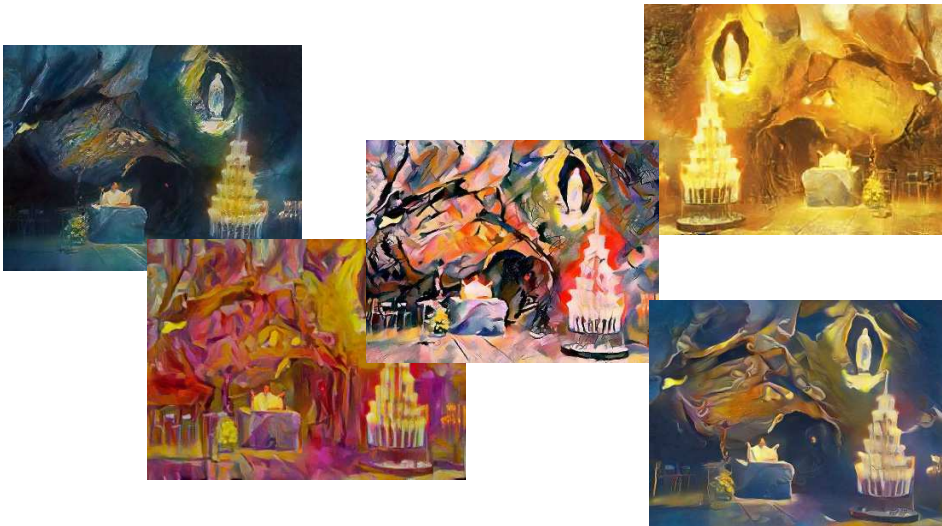


I have finished Mass. Another group of faithful approaches the altar with their priest. They come from Indonesia. We greet each other with that gesture of joining our hands and bowing slightly. Later others will come. They will continue to come, by the thousands, by the millions: in groups, in families, by themselves. They want to touch heaven. They want to see Mary, and through her, God. Or perhaps they are only seeking some comfort, some

rest, a blessing, a smile from God. Today it is my turn to give that blessing, to be that smile. How many have come, apparently alone, but with their hearts full of their loved ones, who suffer, cry, doubt, believe... How many would like to come, but never will be able to. I make them present in my prayer. How many will never come because they do not believe, do not seek, do not find. They too have a place in Mary's heart, and there I place them.

Tonight, I look again at the picture a friend took of me. I try to see beyond the simple image. It is a picture of Heaven. With an AI software program, I transform it, I explore it: I look for the trace of God. In the various variations I create, the Mystery emerges again and again: Bread and Wine... an altar... a sinner... And Christ becomes present!

Lourdes is above all a place of healing: both body and soul find here the compassionate love of God, love with the face of a Woman, a Mother, a Daughter. *Our Lady of Lourdes, pray for us!*





Shrine and volcano, chalice and paten unite Heaven and Earth

MASS AT THE PYRAMID OF CHOLULA

On vacation with Pedro Herrasti throughout Mexico! On our way back to Mexico City we are welcomed by the D. family in Cholula, a neighboring town. They have made the necessary arrangements so that we can celebrate Mass in the Shrine of Our Lady at the top of the pyramid of Cholula, the largest in the world (by volume)!

From the altar, I see the Popocatepetl volcano in all its splendor, framed by the church door. Its presence is overwhelming. The volcano itself seems to be attending Mass! Nature, the world, all of creation participates in this liturgy.



I still carry that image in my heart: I feel that the Church receives the created world and offers it back to God in the Eucharist. Shrine and volcano, chalice and paten unite Heaven and Earth to make Christ present in a world thirsting for Him, often without knowing it.





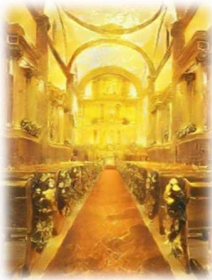
"Tu es un grand garçon, maintenant!"

1963: MY FIRST COMMUNION AT THE FRENCH PARISH

My memories of my First Communion are vague, like images floating in the air. Sixty-two years later, it all seems like a dream. I move among fading figures, among loved ones who come and go, who are gone, among feelings of joy and nostalgia.

It is nevertheless a moment that marked my life, and as I write these lines today, the images become clearer, take shape. I remember the previous Thursday night, going to the church for my first confession: A dark church, a long waiting in line, feelings of guilt and fear, not knowing what to say, inventing sins, a cold and austere priest, immobile, inhuman, speaking in an unintelligible language, complete terror!

I remember we went downtown to buy the little alb, the wooden cross. My mom takes hours to choose; she wants the best! My dad waits, calm and proud, fulfilling his mission...

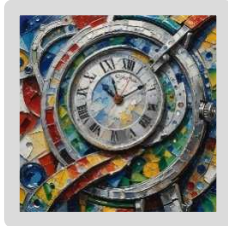


I remember the hurried car ride ("We're going to be late!") to the church of Notre Dame de Lourdes (a former girls' school, now... a bankers' club!) in the city center. I remember the church full, the whole family, my catechism classmates, my friends, Piero, Marc, already there... They are friends for life!

I kneel and rest my hands on the rail. The priest approaches step by step. "Corpus Christi." I remember the fragile white form of the host touching my lips, sticking to my tongue! I don't dare chew it, I feel weak, and of course, I faint after receiving communion! (This would happen several times during Mass, especially at my confirmation).

In the church, I recognize my catechist, Mme. R, all smiles, happy, proud of her little ones! But above all, I recognize my scout leader, my *cheftaine* Touti! How we loved her! Every Saturday she took care of us, the whole little "pack" of cub scouts; we ran towards her shouting "*cheftaine, cheftaine, cheftaine!*", and we made our promise, words that I still carry in my heart: "*Akela nous ferons de notre mieux, de notre mieux! notre mieux!*" (Akela we will do our best, our best! our best!) These are words that still give me strength today, because they are my Scout promise!

Another image: Father Pierre Bernault de Salaignac, tall, thin, pale as a ghost, a mystical presence amid the noise and disorder (years later, I would visit his grave in Toulon, France, and thank him for his dedication and love for us. If I am a Marist father today, it is largely thanks to him). He says goodbye to each of us: "*Au revoir, François.*" Wow! He remembers my name!



The return home, lunch at Granny's, the cake, the official photo, and the traditional gift: a huge, beautiful silver wristwatch,, "*tu es un grand garçon, maintenant!*" ("You're a big boy now!"), but the watch is too big for my small wrist. Some links have to be removed from the wristband. But I have a watch, I can enjoy my independence: I can tell the time without having to ask anyone!

2025: I no longer have the watch... My parents are gone... I look for some memory of that day: only a couple of photos, but more important than the absence or the past is Life, a vocation, the promise that child made and that the adult I have become is still trying to keep today...



The story that follows is hard to tell, and many of you will surely disagree with what I write. I just want to share it with you as I experienced it. It wasn't easy. As I wrote these lines, I tried to reevaluate my feelings. I am still hurt. I have decided to write this and other similar stories because they are part and parcel of my life, with its ups and downs, with moments of grace and moments of sin, of doubt, and because I want the Kingdom of God to be built here on earth, with everyone's help. Only when we face things honestly can we move forward. I apologize if I am sharing an episode that is imperfect, but I feel it is necessary to do so.



Come on, let's clean this up."

THE FOUNDER'S TOMB IN LA NEYLIÈRE, FRANCE

France, December 1993. I am in the region of the "Monts du Lyonnais," near the city of Lyon. I am visiting for the first time the house where Father Jean-Claude Colin, the founder of the Society of Mary, the Marist Fathers, my congregation, lived and died.

I have seen this place many times in photos, on postcards, in the books on Marist spirituality that I studied in my novitiate. I have seen old photos of Father Colin, an elderly man, smiling, with a clear and strong gaze. Today I finally find myself before him, before my founder, the man on whom I learned to "have faith," as my novice master, Don Martin Perez, used to say. Because having faith in God also means having faith that God speaks to men, chooses them, calls them.

I am filled with emotion as I look at the final resting place of this great man, with his faults, his profound humanity, but also his qualities as a leader and, above all, a man of God, who lived only for God and Mary.

Today I celebrate Mass before my Founder and spend a few moments alone with my Father: I ask him for faith, strength, fidelity...



I return to La Neylière in 2015: the chapel is being remodeled: there is dust, construction material, beams, cement everywhere. The candle of the Blessed Sacrament is still lit. I look for Father Colin's tomb. I know exactly where it is, but I can't see it. Finally, I see it and I can't believe my eyes: it has disappeared under the rubble. Dust covers everything. The workers walk over the tomb, stepping on it as if it were nothing, not even knowing it is there. There is no sign, no rope, nothing to restrict access. I suppose it is not important; it is just a tomb...

The lay people accompanying me watch the whole scene with incredulous eyes. The emotion, the tears, the mixed feelings, the scandal itself prevent them from speaking: How is

it possible that there is so little respect, so little devotion? I feel that a Holy Place has been desecrated, humiliated...

When I talk about this with one of the priests in charge of the chapel, his lips form a smile that seems to me a little condescending. His eyes seem to say: Do you really think all that matters? His answer surprises me and I don't know how to react: "Well, in cathedrals, the tombs of bishops and priests are right at the entrance or in the atrium, so that people can walk over them. It is a sign of humility and service."

I don't know how to respond. I don't think it's the same thing: I understand perfectly well that a priest might choose out of humility to have his tomb hidden, or to have it stepped on. But that the spiritual children, the successors of this founder, should despise his resting place in such a way... I disagree; I have no words. I prefer to walk away before anger makes me say too much. My very personal analysis is that this is the fruit, the consequence of an attitude that could be called anti-clerical, but which is actually anti-ecclesial, even on the part of members of the clergy for whom heaven, holiness, the life of grace (and, incidentally, the cause of canonization of the founder) are of no great importance. I know this because I have been told so. What is important today is the environment, interreligious dialogue, ecumenism, justice. They are all important, yes, and so is Heaven, and Grace and the Sacraments, and eternal life. I do not understand this dichotomy.

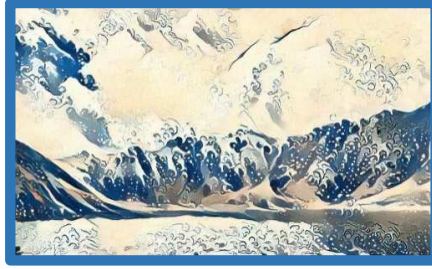


The laypeople turn to me with pleading eyes. They don't understand. I want to console them, but I too am hurt. At the same time, I become aware of my own faults, of the times I have prayed with little confidence, celebrated with little devotion, preached more myself than Christ. It would be too easy to point out the "faults" of others without seeing my own. Christ's words

take on a new meaning: "Do not judge, lest ye be judged." Only God can know the heart of each person.

I take both lay people in my arms and say to them with emotion: "This is our family, guys! This is where we have to live! So... let's get to work! Come on, let's clean this up."





"We're sorry, Father Pancho, it was more important to protect the Lord!"

OCTOBER 1984: MASS IN THE CRATER OF THE NEVADO DE TOLUCA

I had just joined the CPP (Polytechnic Center for Projection, THE EQUIVALENT OF A Newman Center) a few months after my ordination. The CPP is full of dynamic, dedicated young people who are committed Catholics and want to live their faith and deepen their search for God. The Pax Alpine Group plays a special role in this center, as it leads young people to discover God in nature and fellowship.



I arrived just as the mid-mountain season was beginning, and I was invited to accompany them on an excursion to the Nevado de Toluca, an extinct volcano close to Mexico City. We left Mexico City very early in several cars, and by mid-morning we arrived at the parking lot at the foot of the volcano. The crater appears before the eyes of this young priest like an immense cathedral, an open-air sanctuary, a temple with the sky as its roof! We began the hike, as we were going to walk around the entire rim of the crater, so let's

go!

Halfway there, we chose a place to stop to celebrate Mass and rest. There is no altar here, of course, but that's no problem: the boys have made an altar with their backpacks! They placed a pile of them and a small board, on which I placed the chalice and paten from my ordination. I am reminded of the image of another young priest many years before, Fr. Karol Wotyła, celebrating Mass on a canoe with his young hikers! I always wanted to be like him... John Paul II, now a saint, will mark my entire priestly life in a wonderful way!





I feel a boundless emotion as I celebrate Holy Mass in this way, in the open air. In a way, many superfluous things have disappeared: the altarpieces, the pews, the lights. We are a small church within an immense open-air cathedral!

But the weather changes quickly, and dark clouds approach, covering the entire sky in a matter of minutes. I feel the cold wind that seems to say to me, "Hurry up!" Just as I finish the consecration, a hailstorm breaks out unexpectedly over us. The boys rush to cover the Body and Blood of Christ with a raincoat, leaving me soaking wet, with hailstones hitting me from all sides.

"Sorry, Father Pancho, it was more important to protect the Lord!" We all laugh. In a few minutes, the sun comes out again and warms us up! We are wet but happy! It's as if an angel had played a practical joke on us!

No! It is more as if nature itself is celebrating the Lord's Eucharist with us: the volcano, the sky, the hail, the sun, all gathered around the altar where these young people celebrate their faith and seek to climb one more peak on their way to heaven.

We begin our journey back home... Not everyone walks at the same pace... Some are slower, more tired, less strong. Perhaps they are carrying a heavy burden, which I am unaware of. Some come up to talk to me. Many seek the company of the girls who have come. With each step, the future of these young people is being forged. Years later, I will bless their marriages and baptize their children. With others, I will have the painful duty of attending their funerals. But that will be later. Now it is time to forge these souls, to share adventures, values, prayers, joys, and sorrows with all of them. I pray for each one of them, that they may find their own path, that they may find happiness in this life... and above all in the next.





Next year, you will be our captain!

2001: MASS WITH THE FOLK DANCERS IN THE OBRERO POPULAR PARISH

This is my first year at the church of Our Lady Saint Mary of Guadalupe Queen of Workers, in the Obrero Popular neighborhood of Mexico City. The circumstances of my arrival are a bit strange, but here I am, ready to help Father C., a Marist like me.

December the 12th, the solemnity of Our Lady of Guadalupe, the great patronal feast of the parish, is approaching, and Father C assigns to me a few of the Masses for that day. There are about five Masses, plus those celebrated in the neighborhoods. I have been assigned the 12 o'clock Mass.

I arrive running from another Mass and what a surprise I get when I reach the church! I find a group of "concheros", folk dancers in the street right in front of the church, with their loud music and pre-Hispanic costumes. They have taken over the entire street in front of the church and are dancing joyfully. I come up to greet them, and am surprised to recognize Doña H., a lady from the neighborhood, among the dancers: "What are you doing here? How nice to see you!"

"Well, you see, Father, here we are, honoring our ancestors and our Mother in Heaven."

"Well, come on, let's all go to Mass!"

Doña H. looks at me, surprised and annoyed at the same time.

"No, Father, we can't. First, because our role is to dance here, and second, because the other priest doesn't like us being here. He says it's not Christian!"

I stop to think for a moment, and indeed I remember that, in pre-Hispanic tradition, the dancers remain before the pyramid, like the people themselves. Only the priests climbed the pyramid. Today we would say that they do not enter the temple; their role is to dance, to dance in the courtyard, while the priests "climb the pyramid" (enter the church) and celebrate the rite.



"Let's see," I say, "let's do this: You are going to accompany me in procession to begin the Mass. I will come here for you, and we will all enter together. Then you will leave and continue dancing, and you will re-enter the church for the offertory. You will bring me the offerings. You go out again and at the end of Mass, you come to get me and we leave the temple in procession. How+ s that?" They love the idea.

They look at me with wide, amazed eyes and huge smiles. We're going to surprise everyone!

Indeed, the entrance procession is wonderful: the entire group of dancers enters in front of me, with their amazing music. People are surprised, but when I explain everything to them, they accept it with pleasure. You can immediately feel the change: the church no longer smells of incense but of *copal*, the music fills the whole church without being deafening, and I enjoy this liturgy that reminds me of the missions in the Sierra Norte de Puebla. The group enters again for the offertory, bringing the bread and wine, and at the end of the Mass, before the final blessing, they enter again to accompany me in the exit procession. I explain to the entire assembly that, because today is such a special day, I am going to give the blessing in the same language that the Blessed Virgin spoke when she appeared to Juan Diego: in Nahuatl.

The blessing of Almighty God...

Itlateochiwalis Teotl Ipalnemokuani, Totahzin, ikonetzin + iwan Teoihiotzin, Anmopa mawalmuika.

The people are amazed, but happy; some don't know what to think. They are experiencing something new. It is like a window to the past, a discovery of their roots. They know that they belong in some way to an ancient culture that the Blessed Virgin herself visited and adopted as her own in Juan Diego's cloak, and that unfortunately we have not valued enough. The dancers say goodbye gratefully. Today something was born, in their hearts and in mine. I remember the only phrase I know in Nahuatl: "*miyac pakillis in no yolotl*, much joy in my heart." We have come closer; we have found each other. However, I have the feeling that something is missing, there is a kind of suspicion, of doubt, especially on the part of the men, as if one more step needs to be taken.

A year later...

I ask the Father C. to let me celebrate the twelve o'clock mass again. I know the dancers will be there, and indeed they are. We greet each other warmly,



"How about we do it like last year?"

"Of course, Tata, let's dance in honor of Our Lady, Our Mother!"

The Mass is once again an event filled with dancing, pre-Hispanic music, conch shells, drums, and the smell of *copal*. There is something in the air that moves us all.

I admit with regret that it took me more than 38 years to discover the indigenous world in my own country. Locked in my bubble in the Polanco neighborhood of Mexico City, I confess that I did not know my indigenous brothers and sisters. I looked at them with fear

because I did not understand them and because I felt ashamed of having everything when they had nothing, or at least that is what I thought.

We leave the temple again in procession, and when I try to say goodbye, the dancers surround me. And that's when something wonderful happens. Doña H. tells me with great emotion:

"Father, we have something special for you. Go change quickly and come back here, hurry!" I quickly went to the sacristy, returned a few minutes later, and once again found myself surrounded by the dancers.

One of the "nanas," one of the elderly women, approaches me and asks me to kneel down. And I feel in my heart that something very special is about to happen. The "nana" performs an "encounter" with me, that brief ceremony of welcome and acceptance, with copal and gestures of blessing.

A couple of young people approach me, help me to my feet, put a ribbon around my head, and some bells in my hand: "Come on, little, now it's your turn!"

And we danced, in front of the church, in front of all the people who watch in amazement as the father joins the dancers.

After an hour, I am exhausted! I ask to be excused! Everyone laughs, but I feel surrounded by their affection:

"Let me tell you, Father, something that hurts us is that people have ignored us; they say we are not dancers, that we are not *concheros*, we are not even indigenous! We are from this neighborhood, Father, it's true, none of us speak Nahuatl, but we are Mexicans, and proudly so, proud of our homeland, our culture, of this Earth that is our Mother, and that we have covered with asphalt and cement, so as not to feel it anymore, so as not to love it anymore! Father, now you are one of us, we have just appointed you lieutenant of our group! Next year, you will be captain!"

But "next year" never came...

- . I was transferred to another parish. I never saw them again, and I feel once more that I have failed them. I am left with the hope that something changed in them that day, just as something changed in me. I can only hope that Totatzin God and Mary of Guadalupe saw everything. "*Totazin tio Xihua...*"





"Scouts, toujours prêts!"

1963: MASS WITH THE CUB SCOUTS IN THE « DESIERTO DE LOS LEONES »

The *Scouts de France* movement was very important in the French parish in Mexico. At that time, the parish was still located in the former girls' school downtown, and three or four times a year there was an outing. On this occasion, they took us to the *Desierto de los Leones*, literally, “desert of the lions”! the name alone was impressive! (the name comes from the Carmelite convent built in this “desert”, a forest far away from Mexico City, inhabited by wild animals!)

Leaving the city behind, we all entered that dense forest together, with trees that looked like giants. And in a clearing, the adults had prepared everything for Mass, because on this occasion some of us cub scouts were going to make our Scout promise, wow!



"I promise to be a scout all my life." How many thousands, perhaps millions, of boys and girls have been marked for life by those words: "I promise to be a scout all my life." Giving my word before the cheftaine Touti, Father Bernault, my parents, with my friends, all together, all proud to wear the uniform with the neckerchief, the cry of my cheftaine: "*meute, meute, meute,*" to which we responded by shouting: "*cheftaine, cheftaine, cheftaine!*" and the Scout song: "*Akela, nous ferons de notre mieux, de notre mieux, mieux, mieux, notre mieux, mieux, mieux!*" Akela, we will do our best, our best, our best, our best, our best, our best! And then came the solemn moment of the promise: one knee on the ground, the Scout salute, my parents, my *cheftaine* looking on with pride.

Years later...

In 2008, with other fellow Scouts, I renewed my Scout promise... in Jerusalem, on the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Scout movement by Baden-Powell. "*Scouts toujours prêts!*"



Several years later...

Father Louis-Pascal P., of the Brothers of St. John, who are responsible for the French Parish in Mexico City that we Marists had to leave due to lack of personnel, visits me in Paris. Like

myself, Louis-Pascal is a vocation that came out of the Parish. He is also the eldest son of Touti, my cheftaine... I greet him and embrace him with the same affection I received so many years ago from Touti, my troop leader, my *cheftaine*! There are some things you never forget...

Scouts, always ready!



I am aware that in the story that follows, I come across, shall we say, "in a good light." There is undoubtedly a touch of vanity. I beg your indulgence and your forgiveness. I hesitated a lot before writing it. But I want to share it as it happened, because ultimately Christ is present in the life of each one of us, and to recognize His works is to give glory to Him. So... Glory to God!



"If this is what priests are like, I want to be a priest too!"

2006: MASS AT THE ORPHANAGE "OUR LITTLE BROTHERS" IN CUERNAVACA.

- Father, can you come hear confessions?

The call comes from the orphanage "Our Little Brothers," founded by Father Wasson (for fun they called him in Spanish Father "Guasón", the Joker!) in 1960.

It is a work that has touched thousands of lives, and it is a privilege for me to be able to help, even if only for a few hours.

When I arrive, the receptionist explains that a young priest is giving a talk, and that confessions will begin when he finishes.

- Yes, no problem, I can wait a little while. In fact, I'm going to listen to the priest's talk to find out how the retreat is going and what mood the young people are in.

I enter a large room filled with young people, perhaps 80 of them, and sit at the back of the room. A young, very dynamic priest is giving a talk on grace. At first, I don't pay much attention, but suddenly his words hit me like a blow: "Yes, my friends, Grace is participation in Divine Life! God wants to live in you, within you and transform you completely, to make you a saint! Holiness must be your ideal; it is the only worthy and inexhaustible ideal that will give full meaning to your life!"

Wow, these words are so familiar! I have told them hundreds of times at the youth retreats called Journeys of Christian Life! This priest must have gone to such a retreat! Who is this guy?

Suddenly, the priest interrupts his talk. He looks at me intently, surprised. He approaches me: "Chauvet, is that you?"

I am stunned. I should clarify that in Mexico, almost no one calls me "Chauvet" (my last name). Everyone calls me Pancho or Father Pancho. The only exception were the guys from the Cuernavaca "Maranatha" Jornadas group, which I started in 1993. For some reason, they called me by my last name.



- "Chauvet, it's you! I can't believe it!"

Neither can I!

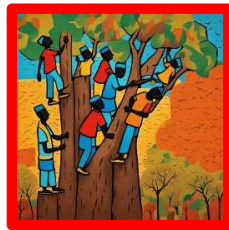
- "Don't you recognize me?"

I blush: "Actually..."

- "I'm Victor, from the Maranatha retreat group! I went on a retreat with you 20 years ago! Guys, listen, I want to introduce you to someone. Meet Father Chauvet. I think everyone calls him Father Pancho now. And I have to tell you a story: Twenty years ago, guys, I was where you are now. I had been invited to a retreat called a Jornada, and like many of you today, I was bored to death! I didn't understand much. with the same "what am I doing here" look on my face that many of you have right now! And I remember that Pancho came in to give us a talk that I will never forget, because he gave it with so much love and joy and enthusiasm that when he finished, I thought to myself: if this is what priests are like, I want to be a priest too. Guys, that was 20 years ago. I've been a priest for eight years now, I spent four years doing missionary work in Africa, and of course I owe it all to God, but also to a priest who knew how to be enthusiastic about the person and the message and the grace of Christ.

Wow! I don't know what to think, what to say, what to do, I'm overcome with emotion, and I try not to cry. I know this story may sound very vain, but I dare think that Christ wanted to give me a hug, encourage me, make me see that, although I have made many mistakes, sometimes I also got it right, that often preaching the Gospel is like sowing seeds and praying that they fall on good soil and bear much fruit. But that part does not depend on me, it depends solely on God and on generous hearts like Victor's.

Victor and I are concelebrating Mass this afternoon. I ask him to preside. It is my turn to see Christ before the altar...





We must learn to live from exemplary people, and also learn to die in order to reach God.

JANUARY 2013: MASS FOR THE RITE OF COMMITTAL OF MY MOTHER'S ASHES

Today is December 29, 2012. My mother passed away this afternoon. She died as she had wished, passing away slowly, looking at the sea from the balcony of her room, surrounded by the love of her daughter, grandchildren, and great-grandchild. I found out from a text message my sister Gina sent me, which I read in the early hours of the next day when I went down to the garden.

I am not by her side. I am eight thousand kilometers away. I came to Paris to work at the provincial chapter of the Marist Fathers of Europe. I am deeply saddened by the distance, by not having been there, by the words I did not say to her and the hugs I did not give her. It suddenly dawns on me; I suddenly realize that I will never see her again. At the same time, I feel full of gratitude, joy, and thankfulness for the mother God gave me, for everything she did for her children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, for my father, for all her loved ones.

In the garden, I meet Father Hubert, Provincial of Europe, who knew my mother years ago and always asks me about her: "Francisco, hello, good morning! How is your mother there in Mexico?" "She's very well, she just went to heaven."

Hubert looks at me with brotherly affection: "Do you want to go back to Mexico? Do you want to be with your family?"

I think about it for a moment: Thank God I had time to say goodbye to her, to have lunch together, to talk, to remember and laugh all afternoon, to tell her or better yet to make her feel how much I love her.



"Thank you, Hubert, but I am here with my family as a priest. I have work to do here." I knew well when I accepted the priesthood that I would miss out on many moments like this. But my family is fine, the time will come to be with them.

January 2013, I have arrived in Cuernavaca for the Rite of Committal to place my mother's ashes in the crypt of the cathedral of Cuernavaca.

Today, May 11th, 2024, I am trying to put into writing what I experienced that day. I do so knowing that I am leaving out many details: the faces of friends, words of comfort and hope. Even today, I feel overwhelmed with emotion. I am also doing it because many of you have gone through the same experience, many of you perhaps did not find a priest to celebrate Mass. The words of an elderly priest come to mind: "Celebrate every funeral as if it were that of your father or mother." Well, now it is my turn...

So many friends and acquaintances have come. My dear friend Alicia, she's like a daughter to me, has brought a beautiful portrait of my mother, a wonderful gesture! I feel enveloped by your affection, and I need it! Hug after hug. Many realize that now I am the one who needs those hugs. It will not be easy to celebrate this Mass...

Many people have come from Mexico City. Among the many faces, I see Piero, my friend since childhood, and his wife Yuye. Their presence is another wonderful gift. Eduardo Alarcón takes out his guitar and sings like never before. I feel the love and support of so many, so many people who are so present in my life on this day.

Later, Eduardo will write a few words: "*The atmosphere in the chapel, filled with family and friends, all brothers and sisters in Christ, singing in the hope of knowing that we will meet again, WAS NOT A FAREWELL, IT WAS A SEE YOU LATER, in the words of Francis. God bless the Chauvet Contreras family and bless us all... Amen.*"

Another friend, Genoveva, also wrote to me:

Dear Father Pancho, it was a very beautiful, very emotional Mass, from a priest son for his mother. It was a very special moment, from the heart, because the entire congregation felt united in Christ, accompanying you and your family, and it was a lesson in life, because the reality is that we are all going to die someday and we must learn to live from exemplary people, and also learn to die in order to reach God, and learn to live without those who have gone before us!!!

At the end of the Mass, we take my mother's ashes to the niche where my father rests:

Together again!

I have returned to the church a couple of times... It is not easy now that I no longer live in Cuernavaca, now that I am eight thousand kilometers away again, now that I pass by the garden where I received the news every day. But there is no need to return. As Genoveva said, I have learned to live from exemplary people, I have also had to learn to live without those who left before us, but I will never be able to live without loved ones, without friends nearby, without that beauty that unites us to Christ even beyond physical death.





A sick person's bed is an altar.

1989: MASS FOR MY AUNT YAYA AT HER HOME

My aunt Martha, “Yaya” is dying. Everyone knows it, but no one says it. Martha Chauvet, widow of Llamosa, my father's sister, a widow since forever, or almost, since I can remember. Her strong presence has been a part of my childhood and youth. She lives in Cuernavaca with her sister Emma (“Mita”). I often go to Cuernavaca on Mondays with them. That day, Mita approaches me: “We want to ask you a favor, I don't know if it's possible... You know that Yaya can't go out, and she would so much like to attend Mass. Do you think it's possible?” As a young priest, I am still very attached to the rules: “Let me see, we would have to ask permission...” I told my superior: “Let's see, my friend, what is the highest law in the Church? Charity, right? Besides, once a year you can do whatever you want!” I'm not sure if that last part is in Canon Law, but anyway, I have permission!

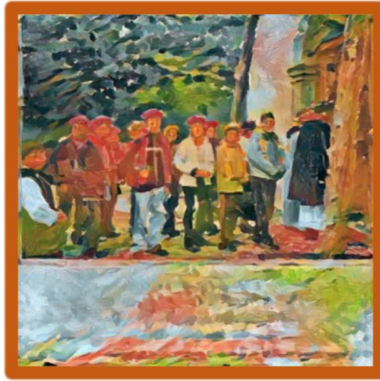


I arrive the following Monday with everything I need. We set up a small altar at the foot of the bed. My aunt's bed is itself an altar, with an offering of 85 years of faith and fidelity. For this Mass, I have brought the chasuble that the two Chauvet Villalba sisters gave me for my ordination.

In her youth, she went with her sisters, Emma and Valentina, to protest in the Zócalo against the religious persecution of the Calles government. The army attacked with tear gas. They sat, motionless, resisting with the only weapon Christians have: love.

Yaya is dying, but she is so alive! This is not even remotely a funeral Mass: it is a Mass that celebrates life, the life of a strong and faithful woman. We look at each other at the end of the Mass. She seems to know that this is the last Mass she will ever attend. It is in some way a farewell, the end of a whole life. It is also a moment of transition, between her faith and mine, between her devotion to Christ in the Eucharist and mine. We are links in a long chain that spans the centuries. Yaya has died. She lived her Easter in peace, in trust, in love.





"Father, Father... Sit down, Father!"

MISSION MASS IN THE SIERRA NORTE OF PUEBLA: THE BLESSING OF THE PULQUE

Once again, I am on a youth mission in the Sierra Norte of Puebla. With a group of young people from our parish in Ticomán, I have returned to Tepezintla, where we will be for the whole of Holy Week. Despite the constant rain and cold, people come to Mass, happy to have a priest and some young people with them during this week.

It's cold. The rainy season has arrived early this year, and when we go out to visit, we come back soaked! The young people are brave and come to Mass despite their fatigue. At this evening Mass, I watch with surprise as the fog creeps in through the broken windows, and soon the whole church is submerged in semi-darkness and bone-chilling cold. But a surprise awaits me, all of us!



Halfway through my homily, Mr. H., one of the “mayordomos” people in charge of the church, walks to the center of the church and, raising his hand in a gesture that invites me to stop, says to me, "Father, Father... Sit down, Father!" At this point in the game, I have learned to love and respect them, to respect their way of being, which can sometimes seem abrupt. So I sit down and wait.

H. climbs up to the seat, approaches me, and says in a low voice, "Father, today is the day of the blessing of the *pulque*. With your permission, we are going to do it now. Wait for me here, and I will let you know." Okay, I think... For those of you unfamiliar with Mexican culture, the *Pulque* is an alcoholic drink made from the large cacti called *aguey*. They say it's a meal in itself! I tried it once and, it did not end well!

Immediately afterwards, some young people bring in three wooden barrels. They place them in the center of the church. Men and women are standing (there are no pews in the church; people follow the entire Mass standing up), men on one side and women on the other, as they should ("we must not tempt our *compadre*," a lady once explained to me).

H. approaches the barrels, and from there, from the center of the church, addresses the entire congregation. He speaks to them in a rapid and, I would say, cheerful Nahuatl. Of course, I don't understand a word, but I like to imagine that, as the village elder, he is instructing, warning, scolding, and encouraging them! In short, everything I should be doing.

I realize that many times people don't understand what I say simply because they don't speak Spanish, and also because I'm not always sure how to find the right words, images, or tone.

It seems to me that he is doing quite well!

When he finishes speaking, a "nana" (old woman) approaches with the *copal* (a sort of incense) and blesses the barrels by blowing the smoke over them. Finally, H. opens one of the barrels and fills a glass with pulque by dipping it into the barrel. He turns to me and says with a huge smile, "Padrecito, padrecito, *salud!*" and drinks heartily.

The young people take the barrels away again (people will drink outside once the Mass is over). H. approaches me again and says with his huge smile, "Now, Father, you can continue with Holy Mass!"

For a few moments, I don't know how to react. Should I be angry, upset because they interrupted Mass? Should I be scandalized because they brought three barrels of alcohol into the church? Or should I try to understand that in these villages there is simply no water? There is no water to bathe in, no water to drink (water can even be harmful to their health), and pulque is a perfectly acceptable drink.



Suddenly I understand that somehow, they have accepted me and the young missionaries into their community. We don't just celebrate Mass with them: we also celebrate their ceremonies, their liturgy, their way of communicating and thanking Totatzin God for everything He gives them, even the little he gives them, corn that is not enough, beans that do not nourish, pulque that serves more to deceive hunger than to quench thirst.

I take a few moments before continuing with the Mass. I look at my Nahuatl brothers and sisters who have been standing for an hour without complaining. It pains me to think that I am not really doing anything to improve their standard of living. But this afternoon, my role is perhaps simply to bless them, them and their pulque! Their corn, their beans, their little animals, their small houses made of a few wooden sticks.

I understand that blessing the *pulque* is not blessing alcohol or drunkenness. It is blessing, that is, asking God to be present and to look with love upon his people; it is blessing a whole way of life marked by centuries of poverty that has prevented so many of our brothers and sisters from living as children of God. Blessing is perhaps not immediately changing the quality of life, but doing so by helping to change hearts.

Part Two:

As I write this, I realize that I had never really learned more about the blessing of the pulque. I found a couple of interesting pages on the Internet. I hope this helps us all to better understand our indigenous brothers and sisters.

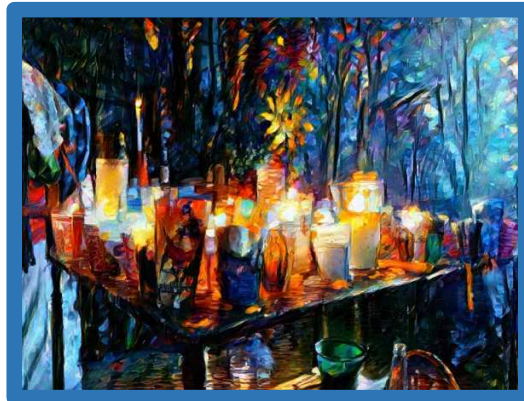
Two blessings of pulque by priests:

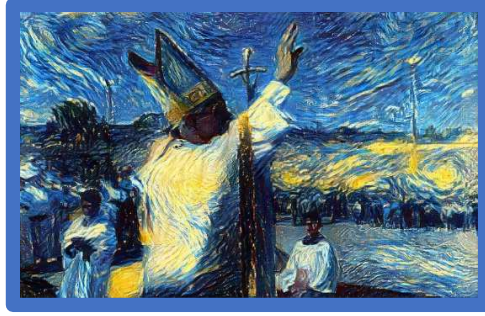
<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=512960170302742>

<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1843978362340854>

A little history

<https://lechecontuna.com/2022/05/23/uvi-ido-la-experiencia-del-pulque-en-la-mixteca/>





"It's okay, Father, it's okay to cry! We're in the same boat!"

MASS FOR THE ETERNAL REST OF JOHN PAUL II, COLONIA OBRERO POPULAR

The news spreads quickly, on the radio, on television, everywhere: He's dead! The Pope is dead!. John Paul II, the Mexican Pope, *Juan de Dios*, has gone to the Father's house, he has left us!

I am alone in the parish on this April 3, 2005. The parish priest is not here. I don't know what to do. John Paul II is the Pope of my entire priestly life; I have never known another Pope. I was a seminarian when he came to Mexico for the first time in 1979, and I had the honor of being an altar boy/bodyguard at that magnificent Mass in La Villa (I'll tell you about that "altar boy/bodyguard" thing later). In all my Masses, I have prayed for him: "...and with our Pope John Paul II, our bishop..." I feel like I have been orphaned, a feeling that millions of people will share.

The only thing I can think of is... to celebrate Mass. We ring the bells, and little by little people arrive. Not many, but they come, some wondering ("What could have happened?"), others are already aware. I approach the altar with a lump in my throat, I try to explain, but my emotions get the better of me.

"You will forgive me, but I don't think I can celebrate this Mass without crying."

"It's okay, Father, it's okay to cry! We're in the same boat!"

I don't remember anything else... I know I cried, I know I struggled to finish the Mass, I know hundreds of memories passed through my mind and heart: his first Mass in the Villa; the meeting with the seminarians in Guadalajara; years later, the visit to Castel Gandolfo with my mother; the meeting in San Juan de los Lagos; the Mass in St. Peter's in Rome. In total, I saw him in person nine times! And thousands of images of John Paul II, the pilgrim Pope, bringing the Gospel to all corners of the world.



John Paul II, the Pope Shepherd of the whole world, has died. Today everything changes. I also feel that, in some way, now it is my turn, our turn. John Paul II showed us the way forward, accompanying us step by step. As Catholics of the Third Millennium, we too must be faithful until death and evangelize with courage.

June 1, 2024: As I write these lines, hundreds of images come to my mind and heart: His appearance on the balcony of St. Peter's on the day of his election; the Mass in the Basilica, when we altar boys had to protect him from the people who were rushing forward to touch

him; shaking his hand and receiving a rosary from him; his numerous trips; the criticism that rained down on him, especially in Europe; his last visit to Mexico in 2002, when he said goodbye to a tearful crowd.

St. John Paul was canonized on April 27, 2014, in Vatican City by Pope Francis. While his remains rest in the Vatican crypt, his memory rests in the hearts of millions of people, believers and non-believers alike.





You are my reason for being a priest

WEDDING OF SOFIA BEATRIZ AND JUAN PABLO

Basilica of Guadalupe, June 8, 1991

I met them during my first year at the CPP in 1984. Typical polytechnic students (as far as I can see): open, frank, friendly, helpful, Sofia and Juan Pablo won my friendship. Sofia studied tourism and Juan Pablo studied engineering. They wanted to study, they wanted to better themselves, they didn't skip classes to go to parties, they were loyal to their group and their community at the CPP.

Years later...

"Father, we want to get married..."

(I already knew!)

- What? With whose permission? No one marries my daughter without asking my permission!"

Everyone bursts out laughing.

-Look, Juan Pablo, I know you, you're a good guy, but... do you really think you deserve a gem like this girl?

"Well, no, Father, not really, but she's so stubborn!"

More laughter! You're going to be very happy!

"And we want you to marry us..."

Oh, wow! Maybe I should have expected it. However, it comes as a pleasant surprise.

-It will be an honor, guys! Where and when?

- It's still a ways off, in six months... at the Basilica of Guadalupe!

Wow! I didn't see that one coming!

-We want to ask for the Virgin's blessing. What better way than to unite our lives at her feet?



The wedding day arrives...

I feel overwhelmed by the place, by its size, its history, its significance. It is a sacred place, inhabited by a presence... I have been here so many times, but never to celebrate Mass (well, not alone)! And today I am at the main altar!

The Basilica seems immense to me, open to the world that the Virgin Mary wants to cover with her mantle. I feel unworthy, and at the same time happy to be here!

The distance between the altar and the bride and groom feels infinite. I feel that they are at an enormous distance. I would like to have them close to the altar, close to my heart as a friend and a priest: "Why are they so far away?" But they are not far away: they are here, at the foot of the altar, happy, excited, two faces radiant for having found love, love blessed today by Love...

Thirty-three years have passed... And they are still married...

I have asked them to share the feelings of their hearts:

33 years of marriage, but how? It seems like yesterday when we began this adventure. With the blessing of God and our dear father and friend Pancho, we began a new life, full of hopes, love, and joy, and we continue that way to this day, of course with ups and downs, joys and sorrows, illnesses, worries, changes, adaptations, and problems. At first, we both worked, but when the children started arriving, I dedicated myself to the most demanding but beautiful and rewarding task of being a mother and housewife. Life went on, the children grew up, and thank God, everything was fine. However, an unexpected event came into our lives: Juan lost his job when Luz y Fuerza del Centro disappeared. It was a very difficult time for us because Juan couldn't find work. We ventured into starting a business with the help of my uncle Arturo. It was undoubtedly a very difficult time, but God was always with us. We have so much to thank God for, as we have a wonderful family with our three sons, Daniel, Fernando, and Alejandro, and two beautiful grandchildren. Our family became even closer with the arrival of the latter. Our marriage has grown; we have more experience, more strength, more love, more unity, and more trust. Without a doubt, life is the best school. We ask God to continue strengthening our love in this task of guiding our family with values and to increase our faith so that we may continue to grow spiritually. Thank you, Pancho, for always being present in our lives! And pray hard for us.

With their children and grandchildren, their problems and difficulties, but here they are, faithful, strong, happy... and we continue to be friends... No, they are not friends, they are my family, they are my reason for being a priest, they (and you who read these lines) are my reason for living... They are also a treasure of the Church, of the Kingdom of God, because their faithfulness and constancy are proof that God keeps his promises, that God does not fail us!





My nephews and nieces never come, my sister doesn't bring them...

JUNE 2024: MASS AT THE PSYCHIATRIC HOSPITAL IN S..., PARIS, FRANCE

The phone rings on Saturday afternoon. The familiar, pleasant voice of my friend Marie-Béatrice fills my ears with her laughter and good humor, and like any good friend, she reminds me of my promises!

"Do you remember that you promised to accompany me to Father Jacques' Mass at the hospital? Haven't you forgotten? What are you doing tomorrow?"

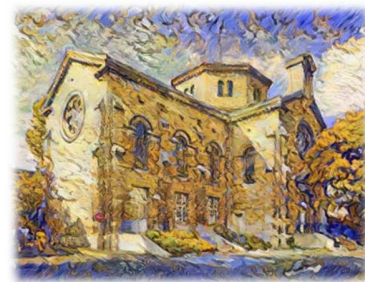
Of course I remember my promises, even when I try to forget them! Marie-Béatrice introduced me to Father Jacques a few weeks ago and told me proudly, "Jacques is the chaplain at S... Hospital. Isn't that wonderful? We should go with him one Sunday!"

"Yes, yes, of course! Nothing would make me happier than to accompany Father to celebrate Mass"... In a psychiatric hospital...

But this time I can't get out of it. I roll all my fears and prejudices into a little ball and swallow them:

"See you tomorrow at 10."

The hospital itself is huge, occupying several blocks in the heart of Paris. It was built in the mid-17th century, under the impetus of Anne of Austria, mother of Louis XIV, at a time when Paris was much smaller. We cross the large gardens and arrive at the chapel, a small neo-Gothic church with its doors open. A sign at the entrance indicates the hours assigned to different religions: Friday is for Muslims, Saturday is for a rabbi,



Protestants and Catholics share Sundays and other weekdays. This morning it's our turn. Father Jacques greets me warmly, because we already know each other, and he is pleased to have "backup" for this very special Mass. Jacques is now 84 years old and has been in this ministry for more than 10 years. The chapel is small, and it soon fills up with about 30 people.



Fr. Jacques begins by asking for volunteers to read the readings and lead the hymns. His warm, strong voice seems to touch the hearts of those in attendance. Their faces, however, are clouded with sadness, or perhaps exhaustion. Their eyes are restless, and the few who sing do so almost in a whisper. An elderly woman raises her voice from the back of the room: "I would like to ask for a prayer for my father who died 45 years ago. His name is Albert." Something tells me that the memory of this loved one is the only memory she has left.

Jaime introduces me as "the priest who comes from Mexico," and instantly everyone smiles at me! There is no doubt that for them, having another priest present is a novelty, almost a gift, and what's more, he comes from so far away!

After the Gospel, Father Jacques begins a dialogue with the attendees, sharing the text we have just heard, and in a few minutes, I feel my heart breaking. A large, strong man begins to speak. He talks too much. He monopolizes the microphone. Jaime speaks to him tenderly, welcoming him in his suffering, above all making him understand that he is listening to him and that he understands well that his situation is not easy.

A woman in her forties, sitting at the back, raises her hand timidly: "I've been here for six years, and I've tried to talk to my family, but when they come, I realize that there is a certain shyness, a distance, they don't really want to talk to me, I feel that they are afraid of me. My nephews never come, my sister doesn't bring them, I don't know what's going on..."

Something tells me that she does know, just as I know, just as we all know: a crazy aunt, locked up in an asylum, is a source of shame, even fear ("she could scare or even hurt the children"). Her words hit me like a dagger: I realize that I have been afraid, I myself have not known what to say, I have not found the words, I have preferred to remain silent...

Another woman speaks up: "Father, what about when you no longer have the strength? When there is no reason to get up, to face the day? What can I do when I feel I can't go on?"

This time I take the bull by the horns: "What you have to do, ma'am, is ask for help, recognize that you can't do everything and have the humility to say 'I need you'... And it's also having the humility to tell those loved ones who are afraid that you love them, that you understand their fears, that you are also afraid and that you also need their love."

Because, sick or not, locked up or not, or rather, locked up in a psychiatric hospital or in an empty apartment or in a toxic marriage, in all these cases we need someone to love us and someone to talk to us.

I feel a spirit of peace gradually filling the chapel. Something, however small, has changed: we have spoken to each other, we have listened to each other. People smile at the sign of peace. I feel hope reborn in me.



At the end of Mass, some people come up to say goodbye, chat for a while, and thank us for our Mass.

Marie-Béatrice, Jacques, and I go to grab a bite at a nearby *brasserie*. We share and give thanks for the moments we have just experienced. And foolishly, I say, "Life is beautiful!" "No, Father, life is not beautiful," Jacques tells me. He does not say it with bitterness or sadness; it is simply a statement of fact. And once again, sadness overwhelms me. Yes, of course, life is beautiful when you have everything, when you have friends, a home, food on the table, a roof over your head, a job, a mission. Life is much less beautiful when you spend 30 years in a psychiatric hospital, where no one comes to see you. Life is not beautiful when you know that there is no treatment, no medication that can help you. Life is not beautiful when you have been a priest for fifty years and everything seems to have been useless. I am not trying to answer... I will answer tonight when I write these lines. I will answer tomorrow when I visit a sick person, feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, or give a Christian burial to the deceased and comfort their loved ones. And life will be beautiful, yes, it will be beautiful to the extent that I embellish it with my prayer and my work, when I can show the way to Heaven, a path that I myself try to follow... Life will be beautiful when I can talk to you who are reading these lines today and I can tell you in person that Christ loves you. When do you have time? Where and when can we meet?





Here is something that is true
THE MASSES AT SAN AGUSTÍN

1962. I am six years old. My world is small and vast at the same time: the apartment where we live on Musset Street, in the Polanco neighborhood, before it became an office district; the French-Mexican Lycée; the park with an "island" near the Periférico; and, one block from home, the church of San Agustín, a huge gray building, a sleeping dinosaur, cold and solemn. Every Sunday we go to mass as a family. An immense, gray church made of black stone, with spikes along the heavy granite stairs and secular solemnity.



It is a church for the rich, no! For "good people," educated, law-abiding. Years later, my liberation theology professors will teach me in my theology classes that they are "obscurantists," of "Christianity," that they are not the true "People of God," that they are not true Catholics, that the people must be freed from the oppression of the bourgeoisie... But right now I am just eight years old. I don't know about those things. I only see the faces, the figures of my loved ones.

Familiar figures that I would never see again: my parents, my teenage siblings who go reluctantly! Memé, my maternal grandmother (Germaine Crest+), Doña Julia or "Mamande," sometimes my cousins, my uncles and aunts, usually at funerals.



Few people at Mass: small groups, families... A solemn father, in a suit and tie. The elegant mother, children looking bored... Songs in Latin, hurried voices that I hear without understanding. I forgot my missal! How awful, they're sure to scold me! But nothing happens. Mass is about to end. I am drawn to the air of certainty, of solidity! This building, this church is solid, immovable, perennial. There is something here that is *true*. Here, time does not pass. There is something here that gives me security. But that Something, that

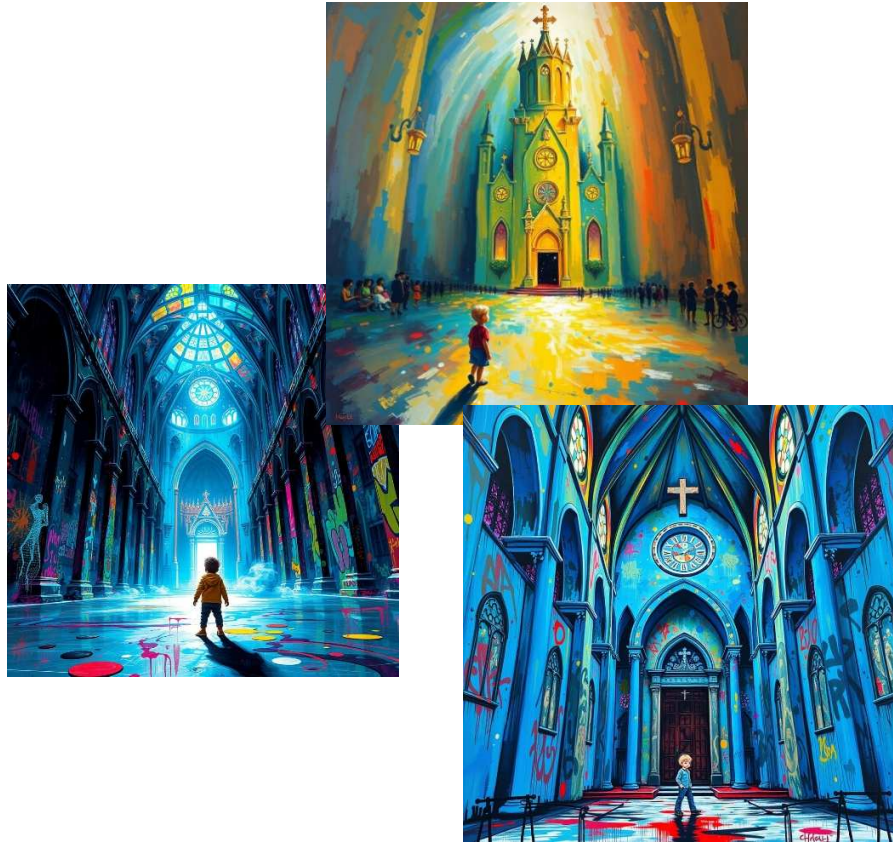
Someone, still has no face. I am eight years old...

Songs in Latin, incense, elegant people, no noise, no children, no running here.

After Mass, it's time to run in the park, eat pork rinds or ice cream, be careful when crossing the street!

The prayer book, with photos of the priest, always with his back to the congregation. An air of solemnity, of seriousness rather, and yet, one already feels a sense of peace: there is a

reason, a reason to come to Mass. A meaning can be glimpsed, beyond the visible. Someday I will understand. I am only eight years old.





For the soul of Don Mauricio...

MASS IN THE CHURCH OF LA CANDELARIA IN TLACOTALPAN, VER.

In theory, it was a vacation trip. In reality, for me, it was a pilgrimage. The four Marists of the CPP community had decided to spend our end-of-year vacation together, so we climbed into the van and set off on a beautiful trip that would take us to Veracruz, Alvarado, Oaxaca, Huatulco, Acapulco, and back to Mexico City.

But the most important stop for me was... Tlacotalpan, Veracruz.

They say it is the most beautiful town in Mexico, and I don't doubt it. It has beautiful squares, a kiosk, streets with porticos. But my gaze goes beyond the arches and houses. My gaze goes back to the 19th century, to the year 1849, when, by chance, a young Polish man named Mauricio Scheleske arrived here. He had participated in his country's independence revolution and had been exiled to Mexico. He came from a country that, incidentally, did not really exist. Poland had been divided between Prussia, Austria, and Russia (yes, this is not the first time this has happened to Ukraine). Mauricio Scheleske is my great-great-grandfather.



I stop in front of the Church of La Candelaria. Its tall, noble, and serene figure rises against the blue sky. Its deep white façade and towers are already a Presence, a voice that speaks without words of an ideal: Purity, or better still, freedom! Freedom of body and spirit. To be free from burdens, reproaches, sins: the light that emanates from this façade reminds us that we are the light of the world (Mt. 5:14).

I look around... and with my heart... the old temple. There are few people. I let myself be enveloped by the solemnity of the moment: one day in 1849, Mauricio Scheleske entered through this door and was baptized (he was Jewish) before this altar before marrying Pilar Aguirre, a native of Tlacotalpan, Veracruz. The roots of the Chauvet Contreras family are buried in the floor of this church.

The parish priest has agreed to let me celebrate the 7 a.m. Mass. The church is almost full. I introduce myself to the people as a descendant of "Don Mauricio." I see smiles on their faces. There are those who have kept the memory alive, who know the tomb of that man who came from afar.



During the consecration of the bread and wine, I think of my ancestors, the Scheleskes, the Aguirres, the Contreras (my second surname), who entered this church countless times: Here they prayed, sang, cried... their blood runs through my veins, their prayers run through my lips, I carry them within me, I present them to Jesus: this is my family, my loved ones, I am in them and they are in me. "Remember our brothers and sisters who have fallen asleep in the hope of resurrection, and all those who have died in your mercy; welcome them into the light of your presence": I pray for those who have died, for those who still live, for all of us who share this same story, born in the life of a young man who left his country to come to Mexico.

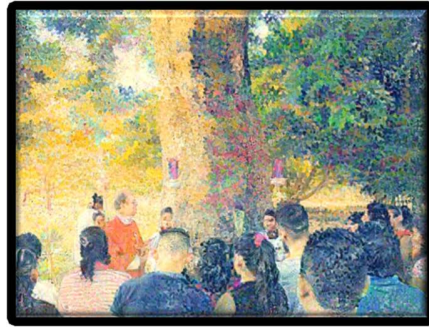
Later that day, I visit the cemetery and find Don Mauricio's grave. It was a gift from another exile in Tlacotalpan, who was a good friend of Don Mauricio and helped him carry out his next coup d'état: Don Porfirio Díaz, president of Mexico from 1876 to 1880 and from 1884 to 1911. The tomb is a little neglected, and I stop to remove the dust and weeds. It is a filial duty that I seek to fulfill, to honor the memory of my entire family.



Others will come to discover Tlacotalpan. They will celebrate the Pamplona festival in the streets of the town, try *chilpachole* and seafood, stroll through the quiet streets, and admire the beauty of the portals. Others will come to Tlacotalpan, attracted by its beauty and joy. I, on the other hand, have come home. Here, where my roots are sunk deep into the earth and time, I find the meaning of my own history.

Here, where my maternal grandfather, Diódoro Contreras, left many years ago for France, where he met my grandmother, Germaine Crest, to write his own story. And I thank God, because now I too can write my story, because I too can be part of something that transcends me.





A house divided against itself; we have met the enemy...
MASS AND MISSION IN PAREDÓN, CHIAPAS

This year I have decided to spend Holy Week in the community of Paredón, Chiapas, where the Missionary Sisters of the Holy Spirit work, a congregation founded by the Venerable Father Félix Rougier, a former Marist Missionary. I met them when I worked in the Sierra Norte de Puebla.

These will be fabulous days for me, with very warm, very friendly people who are above all very committed to their Church and to evangelization.

At first, they look at me with a little suspicion: Who is this guy, and what is he doing here? Doesn't he have his own parish? Well, no, I don't "have" one, in the sense of being incorporated into the work of the parish where I live. I want to see it as an opportunity to serve others, on the "peripheries," before it became a fashionable expression rather than a commitment.

I introduce myself as a missionary priest, but I feel a certain emptiness when I think that I haven't been able to develop a pastoral plan with my confreres in Mexico City. But I'm here now, so let's get to work! While I am grateful for this opportunity in my priestly life to live a few days as a missionary, that emptiness remains with me throughout these days. Where have I failed? Why can't I really work as part of a team? I feel a wound, even a sin on my part: I am not all that I think I am...



I discover another aspect of Mexico. The southern coastal region, the tropical Mexico, a region that became enormously wealthy from shrimp, but poor management destroyed its natural wealth. There are huge, luxurious houses, but they are empty. Everything was lost... A tragedy marks this Holy Week: some young people went out fishing and have not returned. They were surprised by an unexpected storm... or perhaps they did not listen to their elders who warned them of the danger. The tension and sadness are palpable.

The priest asks me to work in several chapels, so I have the opportunity to meet many people. It is clear that there is a pastoral plan. Missionaries, altar boys, catechists: several hundred committed Catholics respond "send me" to the parish priest's call. How wonderful!

In a short time, I discover the deep wounds of the community, caused by the presence of so many sects, independent churches, with self-appointed pastors. Divisions even within

families, where some members have switched churches and look at each other with suspicion, if not hatred.



However, I am most impressed by the joy, faith, and generosity of all these people. They welcome me with great affection: "A new father has come to visit us!" The altar boys especially surround me with their smiles and their eagerness to learn. I finish each Mass tired, but also full of energy, full of spiritual energy, full of the desire to renew my priesthood by serving these people.

The Easter Vigil is impressive: the parish priest has gathered all the communities in the city of Paredón, wanting to show everyone the vitality and strength of the Catholic community. He is still a young priest, but his health is not good. The people love him very much and surround him with care.

More than anything else, more than in many other places, I feel at home: this is my family, my Catholic Church, my brothers and sisters, my father and mother.



But this time, as I return home, I am sad: it is a divided people, at odds with itself, with deep wounds caused by religion. I know that the divisions will continue, that there will be more wounded, divided families... I feel powerless, helpless... "When will you have mercy on your people, Lord?"





You don't get it, do you?

MISSION MASS IN THE SIERRA NORTE OF PUEBLA: THE MARRIAGE OF STEWARDS

That first Holy Week of missions in the Sierra Norte de Puebla in 1993 was marked by so many events that left their mark on my life.

It was Wednesday afternoon during Holy Week. A somewhat quiet moment of rest, waiting for the avalanche that would begin with the Holy Thursday ceremony. But for now we are resting for a while, or at least that's what I thought.

Sister Diana approached me somewhat shyly. "Excuse me, Father, there are some people who want to talk to you. I think it's about a Mass."

The young and enthusiastic priest that I am (or was), quickly gets up and goes to talk to these people. It is a small group that has come from the village of..., they have already walked for over an hour and a half to come and find me.

- "Father, we wanted to see if you could celebrate Mass for us..."
- Of course, when would you like it?
- Right now, Father, the people are already waiting!

Oh dear, I think to myself, let's go!

- Is it very far?
- No, Father, it's close by, we'll accompany you."



Yes, really "close by", just 90 minutes 'walk! The hour-and-a-half walk isn't hard for me, and Sister Diana is with us too. I think about the people who are already waiting, and we walk quickly. Finally, we arrive at a small, humble chapel in the middle of a hamlet. The chapel is already full. It is really small, perhaps the smallest in the entire parish. It has no sacristy, so I put on my vestments at the entrance.



About 50 people fill the entire chapel. It is difficult for me to reach the altar. The walls are covered with flowers and images of saints, offerings and incense are everywhere, and I feel completely immersed in a magical world, a world of faith, of pain, of hope, a world of poverty too, both material and spiritual, a world that I still do not know...

As I walk through the chapel, I think about the homily I am going to give them. After all, I am young, I am intelligent, I am "well-read and well-written," and I have come from the big city to preach the gospel to you! Wow, how lucky these people are that I

have come here! I have so many things to tell you, to teach you! I want to do it well; I want to impress you! (Yes, I know what you're thinking, dear reader!)
The surprise that awaits me...



I finally reach the altar, a simple table covered with a tablecloth, and as I look up at the people, what a surprise to see that, right in front of me, less than half a meter away, blocking my entire view, a married couple, a man and a woman, are holding a small statue of a saint, and they look at me with deep, dark eyes, full of fear mixed with hope, almost not daring to look at me, let alone smile or say anything.

Sister Diana has stayed in the back, and I am there alone, looking at this couple and all the people gathered. I don't know what to do because their presence bothers me, it prevents me from seeing the others. I don't understand why they are standing there with the image of a saint? What is wrong with them? Who would think of such a thing?!



I can only manage a few words of thanks, and I invite them to sit with the others. They both smile at me... and don't move! I insist politely, but nothing happens, and I realize they're not going to move, so I begin the Mass, a little annoyed. I don't get to say all the wonderful things I had planned to say, and of course, no one receives Communion! They just listen silently to the Mass, which I finish in a hurry.

After Mass, we share some bread and coffee with the people, but I am in a hurry to get back. It is a long walk, I have another Mass, and I was unable to say anything I had prepared. I feel a little frustrated: I had so many things to say! I feel like I have wasted an opportunity.

On the way back, Diana approaches me:

- "Is something wrong, Father? Are you upset about something?"
- Well, actually, yes, I tell her, I wanted to give an excellent sermon, which I had already prepared, but I couldn't say anything. I feel like we've wasted our time...
- " You don't get it, do you?" Diana says with a smile.

I don't get... what? I don't understand.

Diana smiles at me patiently, like a mother who has to explain something to her child.

"Look, Father, here's what happened: That couple in front of you, you know their names, right?"

Oops! I have no idea what their names are.

"The truth is..."

- It's okay, don't worry. Here's what's happening: They are Roberto and Eustolia. Nobody knows them. Nobody pays any attention to them. They are just two peasants, two farmers who work the land, they don't count for anything, they are nobody, not even in their community. Their life is a normal, ordinary life that nobody cares about.



Except today. Today they are THE "mayordomos", the stewards of the celebration. They have accepted the responsibility of organizing the Mass and finding a priest. Today they have become DON Roberto and DOÑA Eustolia. Today they have taken on a special role in the service of their community. And they managed to get a priest to come from Mexico City! Today, everyone greets them and thanks them. I know you didn't realize it, but the fact that

you came, that you responded to their invitation, is much more important than any homily or teaching you could give them.

I feel like crying. I'm so ashamed. All this time, all these days of mission, I've been thinking that I'm the important one, what I tell them, what I teach them, because I've come to teach and they're here to learn.

I don't even know where to hide. I stop to look around and I think that for the first time I see the people who accompany me. I see their faces, their tired bodies, poorly dressed, but who do not hesitate to walk three hours to bring the priest.

I turn to look at the village and the chapel that have been left behind. I see them for the first time. Yes, that humble chapel is the place where Christ Our Lord restored some of their dignity to Roberto, Eustolia, and that entire community. And He does so every day, in every church, chapel, and temple. I want to think that this is the whole meaning of Baptism.

Entering the Church of God, not as an anonymous and useless being, but as a son, as a daughter of God, called by name, called to occupy a place of honor, a position, a responsibility, called to serve and praise God.

I have so much to learn...





"Now you can come, right, Father?"

MASS AND VISIT TO THE SICK IN SAN JOSÉ DE TICOMAN

This is the story of a Mass and a visit to a sick person that I made more than 40 years ago. Despite the time that has passed, I remember it as if it were yesterday. In some way, it is an event that still lives within me, that occupies a large space in my heart, a moment when I experienced the tragic fragility of human beings and my own powerlessness.

September 1984. I had just been appointed Vicar at the Polytechnic Center. Fr. Herrasti and I shared a small apartment in the Juan de Dios Batis unit, in the Lindavista neighborhood. Pedro insists that we each celebrate our daily Mass, and so he makes arrangements with the parish priest of Ticomán for us to look after the small chapel of San José de Ticomán with daily Mass at 7 a.m. We take turns each week, Mass in the morning at San José and Mass in the afternoon at the CPP.

It is a tiny chapel, next to a warehouse for building materials, right at the entrance to a small, slum area with only one street. As a young bourgeois from Polanco, I am about to discover another world.

Few people come to Mass. It is an extremely poor neighborhood, with no drainage, no electricity except for the hundreds of cables hanging from a pole, no running water, a chaos of filth and poverty where the poorest people I have ever met live in terrible conditions. But I don't know that yet. And it will be several weeks before I realize that the few people who come to Mass live in subhuman conditions. But everything is about to change.

That day, an elderly woman approaches me. She speaks to me timidly, fearfully: "Father, if it's not too much trouble, I don't know if you could come and see my husband, who is sick, he's very sick, we live here in the alley."

As a young priest fresh out of seminary, I immediately think of bringing him communion, the anointing of the sick. But there is nothing in the chapel.

"Don't worry, Father, it's just to confess him, to talk to him."

"Of course, ma'am, let's go! You are Doña Catalina, right? Tell me where he is."

It is a cold winter morning, and we enter a world of misery. It is not far to walk, just a long street with small concrete and cardboard houses on either side. We arrive at a house that is practically in ruins, and the lady takes me to a room where her husband lies dying. I feel nauseous, I can barely stand the smell: filth, alcohol, poverty, neglect, and pain.





"**Viejo**" dear, look, the priest is here, you can talk to him now."

"What's your husband's name, ma'am?"

"Ambrosio, Father."

"Don Ambrosio, good morning, I'm Father Francisco. I've come to say hello and talk with you."

He doesn't answer me.

- Don Ambrosio, how are you? Look, I've come to talk, to see how you are.

A grunt, a gesture, Mr. Ambrosio seems to wake up from a daze. The smell of alcohol is unbearable. It takes me a while to understand, a while to accept that he's not sick, he's hopelessly drunk.

"Yes, Father, yes..."

- Don Ambrosio, how are you feeling? Do you want to talk? Do you want to confess?

I don't know what to say to him, I feel out of place, helpless. What do I do? Do I scold him? Do I comfort him?

- Yes, Father, look, Father, I... Look... I...

I can only think about confession, about the need for forgiveness, for the Grace, for the healing that Don Ambrosio needs. But I know where he is, increasingly lost in his nightmare of alcohol and poverty. He responds only with grunts.

- But look, Don Ambrosio, I can confess you. If you repent of everything, tomorrow I will bring our Lord to you. Tomorrow Jesus will come to visit you...

"Yes, Father. Yes. Yes, I repent..."

He doesn't finish his sentence. He is back in his lethargy, in his coma. With broken words, I give him the absolution: "May Almighty God, who in His Mercy has reconciled the world to Himself through the death and resurrection of His Son...."

But no one hears those words. Not even his wife, crying in a corner. I say goodbye without saying goodbye.

"I'll come back tomorrow, ma'am. Tomorrow, I'll bring them communion if you want."

"Yes, Father, thank you. I'll see you at Mass and bring it."

But it won't be necessary. It's too late. When I arrive at the church the next morning, the first thing I see is the husband's coffin, surrounded by four candles, in the middle of the chapel. His wife is there, inconsolable. I give her a hug. I celebrate Mass, searching my theological knowledge for words to comfort her. But this is my very first funeral Mass, and I don't want to just repeat kind but empty words. Some neighbors take him to the cemetery of Our Lady of the Assumption a few miles away.

Next morning Doña Catalina's back at the church: "Father, I wanted to see if you could come and bless the house." From the tone of her voice, I can tell that this is not just any request. I feel the urgency, the importance of what she is asking.

"Of course, Doña Catalina. Shall we go as soon as Mass is over?"

We returned to the same room, where the empty bed took up all the space. I took a few moments to look around the place where Don Ambrosio had died.



- Listen, Doña Catalina, why hadn't you had the house blessed? You've been living here for a long time, haven't you?

- Well, Father, I did ask the previous priest, but he said that as long as my husband was still a drunkard, he wasn't going to come. But now my husband is gone, so... now you can come, right, Father? You can bless the house, right, Father? There's no problem now?

That's right, there's no problem anymore...

I notice a portrait of two young people on the wall.

- Are they your children? Tell them to come, so that the whole family can be here, to bless them too.

Doña Catalina bursts into tears.

"No, Father, my children died a long time ago."

"Oh, my! I'm so sorry. How did they die?"

- Just like their father, their dear old man, the three of them would go out drinking together, and one day my children didn't come home...



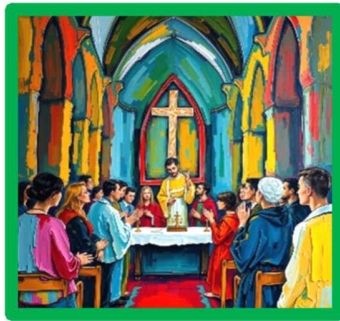
And Doña Catalina cries. She cries for her alcoholic children, and she cries for her drunk husband, she cries for the children and the man she loved.

Because if one thing is clear to me today, it is that this woman loved her husband. Perhaps she loved him too much. I, on the other hand, feel resentment towards him, because I feel that he killed his children...

And I leave there furious, angry. Angry at him, for being a drunk, for being irresponsible, for being poor? Angry at her, at Doña Catalina, because all I see in her is a weak, downtrodden woman... Angry at the children, at society, which tolerates this kind of situation in its very heart. And angry at myself. Because all I have managed to do in these hours is to judge everyone, to reproach them for their faults, their weakness, their poverty. I only know how to find those guilty of the worst sins, of the worst selfishness, and not my own faults. There's something in the Gospel about that...

It will take me a long time, years perhaps, to understand that the role of a priest is not to judge others in order to forgive them in a more or less correct confession, but rather to love them, to forgive them unconditionally, and, like Jesus, to alleviate the sorrows and pains of those around me. Perhaps instead of criticizing and judging, I have something to learn from my poorest brothers and sisters. Even today, I sometimes wonder if I have managed to understand this...





The silence that sings...

MASS FOR THE DEAF IN PARIS

This is my last year in Paris, the City of Light, a city of light and shadows, of music and echoes, of beauty and art, a multifaceted and (de)humanized city. I have embarked on a personal pilgrimage, this Sunday morning, in search of communities and liturgies that would speak to me in a new way about God and man. Throughout this year, I was able to attend Mass at the Catholic Church of Armenia, at the Maronite Church of Our Lady of Lebanon, at Our Lady of the Workers, built by and for the workers who built the Eiffel Tower, and many more...

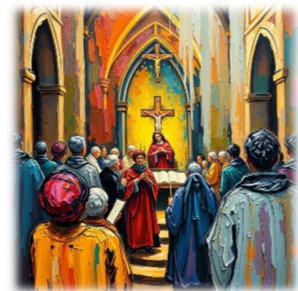
This Sunday, I have arrived at the Church of Saint Eustache, as I had heard that there was a Mass for the deaf and dumb. Curiosity, yes, I won't deny, but also the desire to meet and pray with people wounded by life prompted me to go to that Mass. No, it's more like a challenge I want to face: go pray with those who suffer.... On the surface, everything was like other Masses: people at the entrance, greeting each other, looking for a place, the choir entering through the sacristy and settling in front. Everyone stands for the entrance hymn and the entrance of the celebrant.

Next to the priest, a woman stands up and interprets the celebrant's words in sign language. She does so with strength and joy, and my gaze is drawn more to her than to the celebrant. Suddenly, I realize that there are two choirs! For the Gloria, a second choir has stood up, and the image I see is still etched in my soul.

This choir began to "sing." Not with voices, but with their hands. Their arms rise, their hands move in a beautiful and moving dance, a language of gestures, a silent hymn that expressed joy and devotion with an intensity I had never seen before, a song that is heard with the ears of the heart.

I am captivated by those hands moving in the air as if weaving a beautiful tapestry made of prayer. Their fingers play with an invisible skein, drawing in space the sacred dance of the angels, and although I could not see their faces, I could guess the joy that shone in their eyes, a joy born of the certainty of being heard by a Father who does not need sounds to understand the language of the human heart.

Their joy was contagious, a celebration of life, despite enormous difficulties, a life full of faith and hope despite everything.



The priest, a humble apprentice of this other language, officiates with special reverence, with patience, perhaps aware of being closer to the mystery in this ritual where words give way to gestures.

I approach the choir at the sign of peace. I want to touch those hands. I want to see those faces. But I can't. They are too far away and the Mass continues. Their faith that made me question the superficiality of my own liturgies. Is this not the true language of faith? Does God not speak in the silence of the heart, in that intimate space where words prove insufficient? Finally, what is prayer? What does it mean to talk to God and love Him?



I wondered if I, in their place, if I were deaf or dumb or both, would I be able to sing to the Lord with such joy and devotion? The question left me with a huge void, a doubt about the authenticity of my own prayers. As I left the church with my soul shaken, as if those singing hands had touched my heart, a thousand questions flooded my mind:

What if I were deaf? Or blind? What if I were deaf and dumb? Would I give thanks to God? Would I come to Mass to sing to Him? Would I be a

priest? I complain about every difficulty, every problem. And they sing to God!

I wonder (I know, all comparisons are odious) if my Masses, my liturgies, even my prayers, my whole life, were really acceptable to God. Was my prayer a proper "silence," silence heard by God? Were my prayers not rather meaningless, empty words, repeated over and over again without really thinking, without really praying?

Wasn't that singing in that church, that singing with their hands and hearts by those souls wounded by life, the most beautiful of prayers?

That Sunday in Paris, I learned that something in me had to change, that faith does not need words to express itself as much as it needs actions, hands that are at the service of others, that love for God is manifested in a thousand languages throughout the world, but that silence is often the deepest and most effective of prayers.



Part Two

In 2004, a meeting of the Catholic Pastoral Care for the Deaf and Mute was held in Mexico. A Jesuit priest came to give his testimony. He was accompanied by his sign language interpreter, a young man who translated his gestures into Spanish. He told us how he had to fight against everything and everyone. They did not want to ordain him. "But how will he say the words of the Mass?" His struggle has been titanic.

There are others like him: Father Joseph Thermadom, of the Congregation of the Holy Cross, is the first deaf priest ordained in India; Father Benedict Park Min-Seo, the first deaf priest in Asia, ordained in South Korea in 2007; Father Cyril Axelrod, a Redemptorist priest who was born deaf and lost his sight due to Usher syndrome. And the list goes on... Let us pray with them and for them.





Hey, Father, do they have to wear white?

FIRST COMMUNION MASS IN THE FELIPE ÁNGELES NEIGHBORHOOD

Ticomán, 1993. I had just been appointed vicar of the parish of La Asunción de Ticomán, a huge slum area town with over 80,000 inhabitants in Mexico City: two main churches, seven chapels, an endless number of Masses, weddings, *quinceañeras*. The four priests present can barely keep up. It is intense, demanding work, but at the same time full of joy and very emotional moments.

A lady has come to ask for a priest to visit a sick person. A seminarian and I accompany her, and we arrive at an entrance that at first, I think is that of a house. To my surprise, I see that there is a whole small neighborhood behind that door! A kind of huge courtyard, full of mud, garbage, dog excrement, and about 20 or 30 rooms made of cardboard and wood, half collapsed, where these poor people are crowded together in subhuman conditions.

After visiting and anointing the sick, because there are several of them, I start talking to the women who are there: "Well, we live here, Father, we pay rent to the managers, look, they're those young people over there."

Three young men approach me, dirty and aggressive, surrounding me so I can't leave. "Well, we're in charge here, we're students at the local university," as if to say, "we're in charge here, so don't bother us, Father."



"Well, that's great. It's good that you can do something for your brothers and sisters, and I see there are a lot of children around here, aren't there? We have to start thinking about preparing them for their first communion.

"Well, we'll see, Father, but I don't think people will want that. Come back next week and we'll talk about it."

"If those are polytechnic students, then I'm a Chinese astronaut," says Ricardo, the seminarian. This is very strange. I don't like it at all.

"You're right, it's clear that these people are being exploited. Let's go in there with God leading the way."

I return a week later. The three "students" are waiting for me with their arms crossed. Behind them, several women are milling about.

"Well, we've already discussed it, Father, and the answer is no. We're not interested in the children taking their first communion." All the ladies seem to agree.

- Very well, I reply, thank you very much and goodbye.

And I turn around and walk away, without arguing or discussing it. It wasn't the reaction they expected. Fortunately, I've learned to walk slowly, and that gives the ladies time to react.

"Wait, Father, don't go, we want to."

I stop and turn around.

"Go ahead, ma'am, tell me what's on your mind."

"Yes, Father, they don't want anyone to come, but we want the children to have their first communion. So, what can we do?"

And that was their first act of rebellion, of independence, of affirmation: "We want it." Three words that touch my heart, full of meaning, of self-affirmation, of will, of doing something for their children. Three words that are worth all the manifestos (communist or otherwise), all the speeches, all the political platforms: "We want it."

We quickly reach an agreement. Catechists will come on Saturday. The preparation takes several months. I go when I can to make sure there are no problems. I also meet with the parents. Little by little, the project takes shape.

"Well, Father, you tell us what date we should set for the Mass..."

We set a date.

- Listen, Father, do they need to wear white?

- No, ma'am, it's not necessary. Please don't spend too much on clothes for the children, it's not necessary!

Silence. Sad looks.

- All right, Father.

I realize a bit too late that I've "messed up." And I will mess up many times throughout my priestly life. Telling people, especially those poorer than me, not to spend their money, not to make their own decisions, like I know better than they do, yeah, right! I don't realize that with my attitude I am humiliating them, denying them the power to decide and govern their own lives. I begin to realize that I see them as "poor" and not as people. I must change my perspective. I must learn to see people for who they are and not just their socioeconomic status.



We agree that the mass will be held right there, in the Felipe Ángeles neighborhood, so that everyone can attend. When I arrive, everything is ready. They have swept and cleaned the courtyard and set up a small altar in the center. And the children welcome me. My children—dressed like angels, in white, beautiful, with faces that reflect joy, anxiety, shyness, but aware that they are experiencing an important moment, one that they will perhaps remember for the rest of their lives. And they receive communion like children, born and raised in a slum, in a forgotten part of town, with their clean shoes sinking into the mud and filth that surrounds them every day. The mothers do not receive communion. They are not married by the church, they have not gone to confession, they know they cannot, that the rules do not allow it, that on this day they cannot share the Bread of Life with their children...



I cry with them with hidden tears.

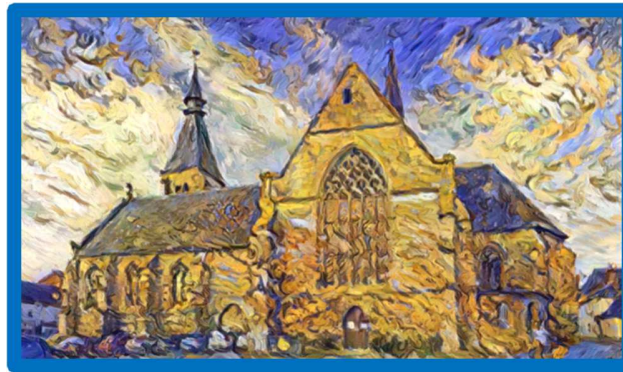
There are few fathers. They don't dare to approach. At the sign of peace, I approach and greet each of them, after hugging their children.

And of course, there is *molito*, rice, beans, there is a festive atmosphere that seems to take away the sadness of everyday life. For a few hours we have all been in heaven.

I have to leave quickly because I have another Mass. And so, it will be for four years. Running from one chapel to another. Trying to serve the tens of thousands of inhabitants of one of the most terrifying slum areas in Mexico. Without enough time, without enough strength...

Thirty-five years have passed... What remains of all this? What became of those children, their mothers, the "students"? Our lives intersect and then separate. I still carry in my soul (and in my prayers) the traces that all these people left behind. They will remain there for a long time, with doubt. Could I have done more? Because... What did I really do? I didn't sweep the courtyard, I didn't set up the altar, I didn't improve their living conditions, I didn't offer them work, health services, or vocational training. I didn't give them psychological help. The only thing I achieved was that, on that day, Christ came down and, why not, transformed some hearts. Including mine. The task continues. There are tasks that are mine and there are tasks that belong to others, to the laity. It will always be necessary for Christ to continue coming down to the slums and impoverished neighborhoods of our cities and our countryside.





"For the Chauvet family..."

MASS IN THE VILLAGE OF MY GREAT-GRANDFATHER: ETREPAGNY, FRANCE

Etrépagny, Normandy, France, February 2000

I am back in my parents' homeland. This time I came to work in the Channel Islands and am spending a few days in Paris. But on this occasion, I have decided to make a very special pilgrimage.

Etrépagny: How many times have I heard the name of this small village in Normandy, the ancestral land, the place of origin of the Chauvet family. On many occasions, my father and my uncles talked about the village where my great-grandfather, Maxime Chauvet, a soldier in Napoleon III's troops, a *Zouave* to be more precise, left one day and arrived in Mexico with Maximilian's troops. Apparently, he met a pretty brunette and decided to stay in Mexico, thus founding the Chauvet family. Later, he would return to France to fight in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, only to finally return to Mexico and die here. Years later, my grandfather volunteered to fight in World War I. And years later, my father and my uncles traveled to Europe in 1940 to fight against Hitler's Nazi army.



I remember that the family always spoke with a kind of respect, affection, and longing for a small town that no one really knew, the town of Etrépagny, where our family once had deep roots in the rich Norman soil. And I remember that, listening to these family stories, I promised myself that one day I would return to the ancestral town.

I have finally done so. In this last year of the millennium, I finally have the time to go and discover the land of my ancestors. After an hour's train ride, I take a taxi in the village of... And finally, I arrive at this sacred place. I have a very clear goal in mind: to celebrate Mass in the village church, to celebrate it for all my ancestors who were baptized in this church, who were married here, who attended Mass here many times, who went to confession here, who attended funerals here... I will never know what thoughts were in their hearts, I don't

know if they were good Catholics, or if they were just going through the motions, I can imagine that like so many people I know, they loved, they suffered, they lost loved ones, they saw others arrive, they worked this generous land under the gaze of God. I don't know, and it's not my place to know. It is now my turn to celebrate the Eucharist, that is, to give thanks for them, for my family, for my ancestors, whose blood runs through my veins and whose surname I bear with pride. I am treading on sacred ground.

I arrive at the church just as the door of the parish house opens. A friendly priest with a pleasant smile looks at me strangely:

"Good morning, can I help you with anything?"

"Yes, Father, I came to see you."

"What can I do for you?"

"Well, Father, this may seem strange to you, but I'm here on a pilgrimage!"

His face lights up when I explain who I am, where I come from, and why I have come: "This gesture is very important to me. I don't have much time, but I do want to pray for my whole family."

He smiles at me very kindly, but explains that there is a problem: "I'm just leaving, I'll be away for a couple of days, so... Here, takes the key (!), please lock up when you're done, and I wish you all the best!"

I can't believe it! He leaves me the keys with complete trust and leaves!



I am alone in the church, before the altar... There is no one else, just Christ and me... And my family... My great-great-grandparents, my great-granduncles and -aunts, distant relatives and close relatives alike (later I learn that there are no Chauvets left in the village, well, perhaps in the cemetery).

And I celebrate Mass: for them, my parents, my uncles, my cousins, all those who, one day, came to this altar, to this church, to draw closer to God, to receive His Grace. Today it is my turn, a distant Chauvet born thousands of miles away, who has his own homeland, but who with a grateful heart prays to God for all the Chauvets, living and deceased.

A few days later, I take the plane back to Mexico. I return to my family, to my homeland, to my parish, but I do not say goodbye to my family in France. See you up there!





"You shouldn't be here..."

LE SANBUY, FRANCE, PALM SUNDAY 2015.

I am in France doing my "second novitiate" or "Colinian renewal" as they call it now, a period of rest, study, and renewal in Marist religious life.

Strangely, nothing special has been planned for Holy Week, so, with my Italian colleague and friend, Father Emanuele di Mare, we decide to go to the south of France to visit some friends of mine, Alex and Natasha, whom I met in Mexico.

A couple of hours' drive takes us to Le Sanbuy, the small provincial town where they live. I know they don't go to Mass very often, but I have asked them to put me in touch with the local priest so that I can accompany him during Palm Sunday Mass. So, the next day, Emanuele and I find ourselves in front of the small village church and introduce ourselves to the priest.



Shortly afterwards, we go to the place where the procession of this unforgettable Palm Sunday begins. In a small clearing in the forest, surrounded by a wonderful landscape, filled with the light of Provence and the pine forest, but above all surrounded by the people who have come, simple people, farmers, workers, dressed in their Sunday best, you can see in their faces that they are happy to be together on this Sunday.

However, they look at us with a little surprise, so I decide to introduce myself: "Good morning, everyone, dear brothers and sisters, happy Palm Sunday! First of all, allow me to introduce myself. I am Father Francisco, I come from Mexico, and I am here with my brother priest, Father Emanuele, who is Italian. Some friends have invited us here, and we are very happy to be with you!"

The people smile kindly; they are happy to have visitors, to see new faces...

As in many other places and occasions, the liturgy presents some challenges! The choir is late, they can't find the song sheets ("Don't worry, ma'am, that Sunday in Jerusalem, they

didn't have song sheets either!"), people arrive little by little, there is a cheerful and relaxed disorder, there is a festive atmosphere at the beginning of Holy Week!

And suddenly something happens that shakes me to my core and has remained in my heart ever since. An elderly gentleman, his face and hands weathered by the sun and work, approaches me kindly and, with an expression of sadness and surprise, says to me:



"You shouldn't be here!"

Oh dear! I didn't expect that! I don't understand what he means at all.

But there is no aggression or ill will in his voice. I hear in his words the echo of a deep humility:

"You shouldn't be here! You've come from far away, from beyond the ocean. You should be back in the big city, with the bishop, with the important people! Why have you come to this remote little town?"

My heart is breaking! I feel that everything is wrong, that I am trapped in an unfair, classist worldview, where social class matters more than a person's character. What have they taught this man? What religion has he lived? Who told him that he is not important? Who told him that his beautiful little town is less valuable than a big city? The image of Nazareth comes to my heart.

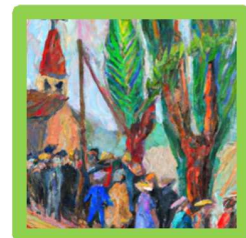
It takes me a while to find the words to tell him that no, things are not like that, God has not separated us into social classes or socioeconomic levels!

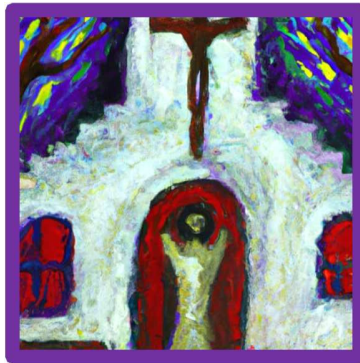


"Mon cher monsieur... My dear sir, Father Emanuele and I have come because we want to be with you. We wanted to come to the most beautiful place in France to celebrate with you the Passion, Death, and Resurrection of Our Lord. We are exactly where we should be, with you, your family, and all these Catholic people who are the church I love and wish to serve. We are very happy to be here. This is our place. Thank you for welcoming us!"

His gaze and his handshake say it all. I would have liked to give him a Mexican *abrazo* or hug, but I know that is not done here. We look at each other with a smile, like accomplices, like brothers. Beyond language or borders, today we gather as Catholics, as children of God, as disciples of Christ who want to walk with Him to get to where He is.

This Mass was not recorded on video, there are not even any photos, it was not shown on television or recorded in the annals of the diocese. It was only recorded forever in my memory...





Easter Sunday on Monday

TEPETZINTLA, PUEBLA, HOLY WEEK 1993

Today is Easter Sunday. Today e. this wonderful adventure that Deacon Rubén and I have experienced in the company of Sister Diana, together with all our indigenous brothers and sisters from the Sierra Norte de Puebla comes to an end. I am now 37 years old, I have lived almost my entire life in Mexico, and it is only now that I discover with new eyes the wonderful indigenous world that is the very soul of our Mexico.



So many things have changed! I have discovered a world from which I have so much to learn. On this Easter Sunday morning, when I think everything is over, Christ has another surprise in store for me.

We are taking a moment of rest before the 12 o'clock Mass, the great Mass of the Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Last night's Easter Vigil was wonderful, and we are all a bit tired, but also full of joy and enthusiasm for what we have experienced. I am already beginning to prepare my return to Mexico City, perhaps leaving behind this world that has stolen my heart, although I remain hopeful that I will be able to return. And it was in this moment of tranquility and rest that the *mayordomos* (they're the men in charge of the church) arrived.

"Father, there are some people outside who want to talk to you."

I go out into the courtyard and find a group of people I don't know. They introduce themselves politely.

"Look, Father, we heard you were here, and we've come with an inconvenient request, to see if it's possible..."

I'm already doing the math: Mass ends at 2, we have to leave for Mexico City, I don't really know...

"We were wondering if it would be possible for you to celebrate a little Mass for us on the Sunday of our Lord's Resurrection."



Oh dear! I'm trying to find a way to tell them I can't without offending them, without refusing.

- A Sunday Mass? Where are you from?

- We're from Omitlán, it's not very far, Father, we'll accompany you, you see, it's Easter Sunday and people are ready.

I go back to my mental calculations: There's simply no time. Rubén and I won't be able to find transportation back to the city.

- Look, I'd love to, but it's late and I have Mass at 12. I don't think I'll have time today.

"No, Father, it wouldn't be for today, it would be an Easter Sunday Mass, but we'll come for you early tomorrow morning."

I don't understand! Today is Sunday, Easter Sunday, and they want a Mass! Thank God, I've been learning little by little, and I decide to consult Diana before giving an answer.



"Well, Father, here's the thing: In that community, they don't celebrate the Lord's Resurrection on Sunday, but on Monday! Apparently, it's always been that way. They really want a Mass early tomorrow morning! What's happening is..."

But I don't let her finish. I turn to Ruben, who nods his head: No problem with me, we'll stay until tomorrow!

I am delighted to stay one more day! So, I quickly go out and tell them that I will be very happy to celebrate Mass for them tomorrow. We agree that they will come for me early.

Next, we all leave very happy, but I do feel a certain uneasiness: Why don't they celebrate the Resurrection Mass on Sunday? Aren't they Catholics? Is there some semi-pagan tradition behind all this? Or what strange motivation could they have for not going to Mass on Sunday? Canon law would not agree! (I only say this to show you how silly I was at that time! I hope I have learned something since then!)

People are waiting for us at the church entrance in a joyful atmosphere: Father has arrived! We get ready to celebrate, although I feel a little uncomfortable celebrating Sunday Mass on Monday.

Then something extraordinary happens: I am a witness to the Resurrection!

A small coffin, like a child's, covered with a black cloth and also surrounded by flowers, has been placed in the middle of the church, and people gather around it. The *mayordomos*

approach with their wives and remove the mourning cloths, replacing them with white and h-colored fabrics. The musicians play joyfully, and the prosecutor approaches the coffin, opens it, and carefully inserts two wooden rods into it. And that is when Christ rises!



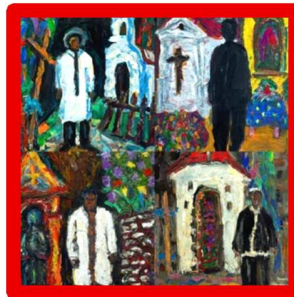
With these two sticks, the prosecutor lifts a small statue of our Lord, the Risen Christ, dressed in blue and white, who literally rises from the coffin, practically by himself, resurrecting...

Resurrecting in the heart of the Sierra Norte de Puebla, illuminating all the people who have come today, filling the hearts of those of us who celebrate Christ risen from the dead with joy and music! As I write these lines, I have before my eyes the image of Christ rising, victorious over death!

Yes, Christ rose from the dead... But this people haven't yet, certainly not from poverty, or rather from a certain type of poverty... I know that they are rich in many aspects of their lives: I have truly been able to see how wonderful it is to live in a community where people help each other, that respect the earth and nature, a community that lives and recreates itself with the resources at its disposal... However, they also suffer the consequences of a certain type of poverty that prevents them from having access to education, health services, civil protection... and even to the Church.

Sister Diana patiently explains to me: That's right, they don't celebrate Easter Sunday on Sunday. They celebrate it on Monday for a very simple reason: because there aren't enough priests to serve all the communities, and because their community is poorer and more remote than the other communities, which are parishes, which have Mass once or twice a month, which are served by the local priest. They, the people of the community of Omitlán and many others in the same situation, are poor among the poor. The priest goes two, maybe three times a year. He can't keep up. He can't manage to visit the sick, to bury the dead, to baptize the children who are born sick and die without the sacraments. Because they are poor, there is never a priest to celebrate Easter on Sunday. Because they are poor, the priest comes on Monday, sometimes... And so the tradition was created: here, Father, we celebrate Easter Sunday on Monday. They are poor... even in the things of God...

Later I find out: in Omitlán they celebrate it on Tuesday... in Xochistlasco on Wednesday... and so on throughout Holy Week. And so they keep the Faith!





"Didn't they pay you for the Mass, Father?"

MASS FOR THE DECEASED

- You're in charge of the eleven o'clock Mass.
- Yes, Father.

It was a Saturday like so many others in the parish of Ticomán, a huge urban parish in a *ciudad Perdida*, a slum area that would soon reach 100,000 inhabitants. Like every Saturday, there were many ceremonies, Masses, *Quinceañeras*, *tres años*, end-of-year celebrations for middle school, high school, elementary school, and kindergarten! Everyone wants their own Mass, just for them. I don't want my deceased loved ones to be lumped together with the others. It's a Mass just for my Granma alone! So let's go! I haven't been in the parish long, and I don't dare suggest changes yet. First, let's see and learn and try to serve the People of God!

I arrive at the Church of the Assumption and put on my chasuble and stole. Outside, a cold winter wind blows through the old church doors. Inside, the air is heavy, with a strong smell of wax and dampness.



The clock on the wall in the sacristy strikes eleven o'clock. I look out and see that there is no one there. The church is empty. How strange, it's already the hour! I decide to wait a little while. So, I wait. And wait. Ten minutes pass, then twenty, then half an hour. I don't know what to do: Was there a mistake? I check the book: no, the mass is listed; "for the eternal rest of..."

The family didn't show up.

I call the number they had given me.

"Hello, Mr. Pérez? This is Father Francisco. Mass is about to begin, but no one has arrived."

There is a moment of silence on the other end of the line, interrupted only by the metallic echo of a welding shop.



"What's the problem, Father?" said a man's voice with a tone of impatience.

"But... your relative's Mass? Aren't they coming to Mass?"

"Go to the Mass? I mean, why, Father? Do you need help? Isn't the sacristan here?"

- Yes, he is, everything is ready, but you are missing, the family is missing, the ones who requested the Mass!
- Didn't they pay you for the little mass, Father?
- Yes, it's been paid for, but that's not the problem. The thing is...
- Let's see, Father, let's get this straight: You were paid for the Mass, weren't you?
- Well, yes...
- And you're going to celebrate it, aren't you?
- Well, yes, but...
- Then everything is fine, what more do you want? Celebrate the mass, Father, pray for our deceased, and thank you very much!

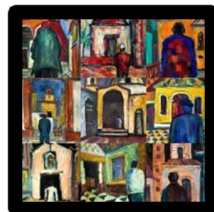
The call is cut off.

I stand there, still holding the phone. I look at the empty church. My God, I think, what am I doing? What religion am I teaching? This looks like a supermarket, or a pharmacy, or a bank!

Because people believe in God, they have faith, but it's a faith that asks for a Mass, a *little Mass*, but doesn't need to attend. A faith that gave more importance to the ritual than to the Presence, to prayers than to people, to the priest than to the people.



I am left alone in the vastness of the empty church. The sacristan decides to leave quietly. I have never felt so alone. I will say Mass, I will collect my stipend ("May God multiply it a thousand-fold, Father"). I begin Mass, trying to feel the presence of God in an empty church, in a church where voices should resound, the prayers of the whole Church, not only of the priest, but of the People of God. But there is no such thing. There is only a "church" (it would be more accurate to say a temple), a building made of dead stones, not living ones where a ritual was performed, a Mass was "said," an empty church. A silent church, with a silence that did not come from the presence of God, like so many other moments of silence. A silence that came from absence, from emptiness, from the absence of the Catholics who "had paid for Mass," and that was plenty enough....





"I just came to give thanks"

THE *QUINCEAÑERA*

- It's your turn for the three o'clock Mass...
- Yes, Father...
- Don't make that face, it's a *quinceañera*, I know you like those Masses!
- Very funny...

Another Saturday afternoon in Ticomán... I've been here for a couple of years now, and I still can't get used to the pace of work: Masses in La Purísima, La Asunción, San José, in homes, in factories, on the hill... Masses everywhere ("well, what do you think we live on?"), there's no time for anything else...

Quinceañera masses are a coming-of-age celebration for girls who turn 15, something like the sweet sixteen in the US. They are always noisy and colorful events, full of floral arrangements, photographers, *mariachi* music, and the usual procession of chamberlains dressed in pink or mauve and bridesmaids fighting for the best pose. In general, there's everything but devotion or religious sentiment. Obviously, no one takes communion "because we haven't gone to confession..." nor do we plan to...



I have already officiated dozens of these Masses. I know the routine: the show, the endless photos, the lack of attention to the Gospel. I try to give it a Christian, evangelizing twist, but I know that no one is really listening to me; they are already thinking about the party, the girls, the alcohol... I know I sound very negative, that I am judging them without knowing them, and it's true: I immediately regret those feelings. I try to look at their faces, to greet and congratulate their parents, to learn the names and dreams of each young man boy and woman... But it's not easy; this takes years of work, of evangelization, not just *little Masses*...

I arrive at La Asunción de Ticomán for another Mass, another *quinceañera*... I expect to see the same thing as always, but God has a surprise for me. I immediately notice that something is different. There is no one outside the church! Inside, there is total silence. The church is practically empty. There is no music, no choir, no attendants, no photographers, practically no one. Only one young girl.

Just one girl, the *quinceañera*, Sofia. She is wearing her everyday clothes. Next to her is a younger girl, her little sister, and also her mother, a woman who looks at me with some sadness...

There are no escorts, no music, no guests.

I approach her with a smile: "Hello Sofia, nice to meet you, congratulations!"

- Thank you, Father, nice to meet you!
- "And the others?" I ask gently, "Haven't your friends and guests arrived?"
- No, Father, there's no one else.



I don't know what to think... This is supposed to be her coming of age, her debut into society as it were, and it's usually quite a show, an occasion to show off!

No, Father, I'm not going to have a party, I just came to give thanks to God...

Wow! I stand still, struck by the simplicity, the transparency, the warmth, the smile on the face of this girl and the few loved ones who accompany her today: "I'm just here to give thanks to God..." I'm not here to show off, to shine in society...

I'm just here to give thanks to God... Thirty years later, I still remember her: a simple and humble Mass, no pomp, no show, no distractions. Just pure and simple faith and gratitude.

At the moment of the homily, I don't know what to say: I forget the prepared and memorized sermons I use at every quinceañera. I look Sofia in the eyes: "My dear, I don't know what to say, only that I also want to give thanks at this Mass. And to tell you that God loves these Masses. Because today there has been nothing to distract from prayer. And prayer is the only thing that truly matters on a day like this. Today you are not the queen of a party. Today you are the protagonist of a miracle, because your faith has filled this empty place."



Sofia looks at me and smiles. She has such a transparent, sincere smile! A smile that needs no makeup or a fancy dress. A smile of a grateful girl, grateful to God, grateful before God. We say goodbye simply, affectionately. I watch her leave in her simple, everyday clothes, heading for a simple, everyday life, but a life that, I am sure, will be extraordinary... because she knows how to be grateful...

I return to the sacristy, where so many times I have found myself alone, surrounded by silence, by worries, by "What time is the next Mass?" I remain alone in the empty sacristy, but this time, the silence is not one of loneliness, it is a silence of peace, a silence of Grace.





AND SO MANY MORE MASSES...

There have been hundreds, thousands of Masses celebrated all over the world... In Mexico City, in the Holy Land, in Rome, in Paris, in Madrid, in small villages in the Sierra and in large cathedrals, on the beaches of the Pacific and on the slopes of the Citlaltépetl...

I don't remember them all... I couldn't keep a complete record of each one. My heart sometimes forgets how much it has experienced. Many Masses, laden with deep meaning, remain unrecorded. Nor have I written about all the Masses that have had a profound meaning for me. There are so many occasions I remember, some with joy, others with sadness, Masses where I met so many people, so much love, so much pain.



I have not included Masses that were very significant to me, such as my brother's wedding, or my sister's, the Mass in the cathedral in Mexico City or in Paris. I apologize for not including moments that have been important in the lives of many people. It is not possible for me to express them all in this book, but I know that God writes

His story on the crooked lines of our existence, and I know with certainty that each of those Eucharists is written in the heart of God.

I have seen thousands, perhaps tens of thousands of faces, countless **faces of Christ** in all these Masses: some indifferent, or at least so they seemed, some joyful, others weighed down by pain. I have contemplated hundreds, thousands of crosses in these churches,



because every soul carries one, or even several crosses. I have often fallen into the temptation of judging the motivations or thoughts of others, and for that I ask forgiveness. My role is not that of a judge, but that of a priest. I am not here to judge, but to forgive and to sanctify, to bring or at least to draw closer to God. My mission is not to point out guilt, but **to pour out forgiveness**; not to condemn, but **to sanctify**; not to withhold judgment, but **to bring people closer to God** in the bread and wine, and to say, with the authority of Christ: *Go in peace*. For this intrusion into the secret of souls, I ask forgiveness from God and His people.

I know that I have begun a new stage in my life. The time of travelling between continents, of mountain-climbing, of missions in the mountains, and Masses in the crater of a volcano is over. I have seen many of my brother priests live a time of greater solitude, of "being less useful," of handing over to others the responsibilities of management and administration. I know that the years to come will be filled with more silence and solitude, but they will also be more filled by God, and will hopefully be more peaceful. They will be times of solitude, but solitude with God. Times of silence, but the silence of God. A new adventure begins...

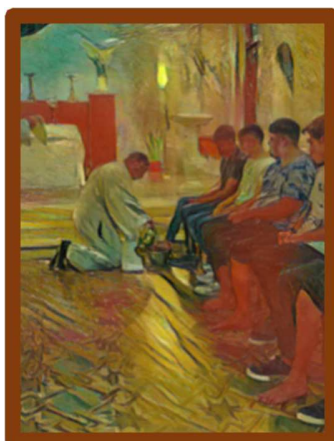


PART TWO

THOSE OCCASIONS THAT WERE ALMOST A MASS

I felt it necessary to add a second part entitled "Those occasions that almost became a Mass." Indeed, throughout my life as a priest there have been countless occasions when the Grace of Christ has made itself present in a wonderful, quasi-sacramental way, moments when Jesus has manifested Himself with that silent and demanding love that has guided me throughout my life. I want to share them with all of you, so that together we may see the wonders of God and praise His Name!





"Not you, sit down."

WASHING OF THE FEET ON HOLY THURSDAY

Holy Week retreat for the students at our university campus in our Marist retreat house of La Jordana in 1992. The *Kerygma* group was in charge of organizing it. Of course, they are super-efficient, they know everything, nothing is left to chance.

Holy Thursday: the washing of the feet. When I arrive at the chapel, everything is ready. The guys from the liturgy team come up to me: "Father, everything is ready. We have chosen 12 young men (no women, of course!), and they have even washed their right foot so that they're all clean (we don't want you touching smelly feet, that would be wrong!). Everything is clean, washed, and purified, just as the liturgy requires. Water, soap, towels, everything is ready. There is even special soap, reserved for the priest so that he can wash his hands thoroughly at the end, and not with the dirty soap used for the feet of the others. The liturgy with all its rubrics...

I don't like it. Sorry, I just don't. Something doesn't add up, it's not right. The whole staging is ready, the actors are ready, the "audience" is waiting. Actors, audience... Where are the People of God? All that's missing is for the director of the play (that is, me) to give the order.



- You know what, guys? It's not going to work. Take all that away.

They look at me in disbelief, open-mouthed:

"What? Father, I don't understand!"

"Yes, take everything away, take away the benches, everyone goes back to their places, this doesn't make sense.

And it's true: it doesn't make sense. It's a play, a performance. They "pretend" to be the apostles, and I "pretend" to be Christ, and we all "pretend" to be very humble, very helpful. We lower

ourselves to wash the feet of people we don't even know, people we dislike, people we never want to see again in our lives!

It's not even a liturgy, because it no longer represents the original meaning. I feel it tonight more than ever: sure, I'm humble, I'm helpful, I wash feet... Once a year. And the rest of the year? What? I'm still the same as always. I don't change. Liturgy isn't that. Liturgy is making an effort, taking a step, doing something real, a change, a conversion.

However, they do what I ask them to do. There is no longer a stage, no actors, no spectators... just a church, some kids who don't know what's next...

M. asks me: "What are we going to do, Father?"

"I don't know," I reply, "I have no idea."

"What's next? Tell us, Father!"

"I'm telling you, I don't know! I don't know what to do, I don't know what comes next!"

A pause. along, awkward, uncomfortable silence. I am in front of everyone, dressed in my white alb (a symbol of purity, of authority?). Everyone is waiting for me to say or do something. I don't know what to say or do.

Suddenly, it hits me! I take a step forward and say to the kids:

"Guys, you are all very kind and generous, and I appreciate all your work. Thank you for preparing everything. But something has been lost. The meaning of service and humility has been lost. It has disappeared behind the liturgy, the prepared gestures, the soap, the rubbing alcohol, and the towels. Washing feet is not about that. If this beautiful gesture does not come from true humility, if it is only to fulfill a duty, to appear good and look good, because today is Holy Thursday, it is useless.

So, tonight, we will try to recover the true meaning. We are going to wash each other's feet. But I need you to trust me. Because I know you all, and have known you for many years, so I ask you to trust me and do what I ask of you. Are you with me?"

They stare at me: what is Father Pancho going to come up with now? What is he going to do to us? H. looks at me with a face that says, "The bishop will know about this!" A. looks me straight in the eye, smiles, and says, "Yes, Father, whatever you say!"



Once everyone is seated, I take a towel and a basin and say to R., "Here, wash G.'s feet." R. looks at me incredulously, and then suddenly understands! He smiles at me, takes the basin, and says, "Yes, Father, of course."

I take another bucket and towel and approach F.: "Here, I'll let you choose."

- Excuse me?

- Yes, you choose whose feet you will wash. You approach them

and invite them to let you wash their feet.

- "If anyone wants to wash feet, just raise your hand and say so, and I will tell you whom, okay?"

I ask the choir to sing, to accompany this celebration with songs.

A beautiful atmosphere begins to form. The students have also "got the message."

There is a festive atmosphere, there are smiles, hugs, even laughter. Something is being born.

A approaches me again: "Father, I would like to wash D.'s feet. May I?"

- You'll have to tell me why him and not someone else

- Because I dislike him! Because we've had problems and because I feel in my heart that this is what Jesus is asking me to do." Wow!

J. also approaches me. I dislike him. He is conceited, handsome (or he thinks he is), and knows a lot: "Father, if *Usted* (really, "*Usted*"? So formal!) allow me, I would like to wash your feet." His smile is obsequious, repugnant.

- Not you, sit down!

- Excuse me????

- I said no, sit down, you won't wash anyone's feet."

He can't believe it! He looks at me with anger, with hatred even. He's hurt, or at least his pride is hurt. He sits at the back of the church and stays there without moving.

Mass ends much later than expected, amid laughter, hugs, and simple joy—the joy of having understood something of the Gospel and Jesus' love of service, and of having put them into practice. The Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament begins immediately and will last all night.

I am praying before the Blessed Sacrament, and I feel someone approaching. It is J. He looks me straight in the eye: "Father, I want to tell you that no one had ever humiliated me as you did tonight. It hurt my soul... and I want to thank you! I needed that! I realize now that I didn't really want to wash your feet, I just wanted others to see me washing your feet. I was so wrong! Thank you!"

- Well, I tell him, there's no one here to see us...

- I know, I brought the towel. Father, can I wash your feet?





"You want to help? Good, you can wash the dishes!"

YOUTH MISSION ON CHIQUIHUTE HILL

On this occasion, it wasn't really a Mass as such, but it had all the significance of a redemptive sacrifice!

April 1997. Three years ago, I was appointed vicar of the parish of La Asunción, in the Ticomán neighborhood. It is a parish with more than 60,000 inhabitants. Years later, it would exceed 100,000. Four of us priests serve two churches and seven chapels. There is no shortage of work.

This summer we organized an Urban Youth Mission for Holy Week, and about 80 young people volunteered to participate, many of them from the Jornadas youth movement, our parish, and other places.

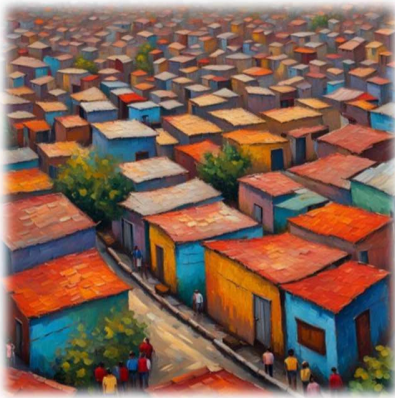
We have formed teams for visiting, and in the mornings, we go around the entire neighborhood. In the afternoons there will be talks and Mass in the different chapels. The young people go out in pairs, dressed in their white shirts and blue bandanas, with their wooden missionary crosses. For many, it is their first experience.

Chiquihuite Hill is a gigantic slum area. The poverty there is indescribable. I never thought people could live in such conditions. Late in the afternoon, the missionaries call me; they have found a family that really needs help. An elderly woman, how can I put it? She is not quite right in the head... and her granddaughter, a 14-year-old girl, dressed in rags, dirty, probably already on drugs. The "house" is a single room with adobe walls and a tin roof. The smell of filth and rotten food is unbearable.

G, an engineering student, approaches me: "Pancho, the roof is falling down, it's about to crush them, we have to do something!"

About 20 boys are standing around the house, waiting, not sure what to do. They look at their hands, their empty pockets, without a penny, without a tool.





"Do something?" I reply, "I'm not going to do anything! I have to go celebrate Mass! I don't have the time or the means to help these people, sorry! Come on, everyone, its time, it's time for Mass, let's go pray!"

I turn around and start walking down to the chapel. They all stare at me: What's wrong with him? Is he really going to leave without doing anything? They don't know how to react. Fortunately, I've learned to walk slowly (on purpose, of course) and G. catches up with me and stops me: "No, Pancho, wait! We have to do something! We can't leave them like this! That roof is dangerous!"

The boys surround me, waiting. They want me to take the initiative; they want me to do something.

"You want me to do something? I'm not going to do anything! You are the young ones; you are the strong ones! What? Haven't you said a thousand times, "the priests should stay in the sacristy or convent and pray"? Well, I'm going to Mass, that's my job, I'm not an architect, it's not my job to rebuild houses!"

I look at them, as if challenging them with my gaze. They go crazy: "It's unfair! How can you say that? We have to help them!" (Not everyone shouts; some remain silent, not knowing what to do.) Well, I think they understand now. I gather the whole group together again:

"Okay, guys, let's do the following. We're going to divide up the work, and everyone will do their part. Sound good? You guys, start cleaning that house and take off that roof. You, the engineer, quickly draw up some plans to see what needs to be done. You and you, come with me. We're going to find money or materials to repair it, okay? Everyone does their part! And no, I'm not going to Mass! Today, "Mass" is in this house!"

We quickly return to the parish... and I don't know what to do! Well, I talk to Father Vicente, we make a couple of calls, I rummage through some drawers, and soon a truck delivers some beams and brand-new sheets of metal! Everything is organized: we take the building material up to the house where everyone is working. The dirt is unbelievable, but no one backs down.

"Pancho, what do we do with all this?" Rags, dirty dishes, rotten food... "Throw it all away, I'm going to talk to the lady and her granddaughter." I tactfully explain what we are doing. They half understand, but they are afraid.

The beams are too short! Who is the idiot? We won't be able to finish the roof before tonight. Some neighbors agree to take the family in. The boys will return the next day to finish the house. In a special way, the missionaries are building the Church of God. But the "mass" is not over yet...

PART TWO

In the middle of the work, J., a young woman from another group of missionaries, arrives. I don't like her. She is conceited, haughty, thinks she is perfect, she is "consecrated" to I don't know what congregation, has told us *ad nauseam* how she has been a missionary for years and will soon travel to Peru to consecrate herself for two years. She really knows what missions are all about! She thinks she is the best; I can't stand her! Her attitude humiliates others, and that is not right.

She comes over and looks with disgust at the cleaning work we are doing, but she sees me there and feels obliged (in my opinion, I should clarify) to offer her help: "Father, how can I help?" But she lacks enthusiasm.

And I think to myself: now I'm going to teach her a lesson!

"You want to help? See those dirty dishes? (They weren't dirty, they were disgusting! I had told G. to throw everything away.) Well, they need to be washed. I'm asking you to please wash all of them!"



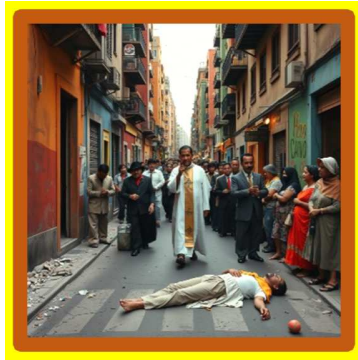
J. looks at me with horror in her eyes, sees the dishes lying there, and can't believe I'm asking her to do that! I wait with a smile for her angry or humiliated reaction... and J. says the words I will never forget: "Yes, Father," and she starts washing the dishes...

Wow! So, it was true! She does love Christ, she is willing to help, she is willing to obey and do the most disgusting tasks. She's not the one who learned a lesson today!

I approach her, take the plate from her hands, look her in the eyes, and say, "Leave it like that, you've done your duty. And thank you, you've taught me an unforgettable lesson."

The boys finished the roof the next day. The house was clean. Something changed that day on Cerro del Chiquihuite, when "Mass" was celebrated by a group of young missionaries, young men and young women with hammers and nails, with energy and dedication, with soap and humility, all together, not just the priest. We all shared in the same work and the same love. "We can go in peace, the mass is not over, not by a long shot!"





"Pray for me, Father!"

WAY OF THE CROSS ON CHIQUIHUIITE HILL WHERE PAIN BECOMES PRAYER

Holy Week 1994. I am at the foot of *Cerro del Chiquihuite*, an infamous labyrinth of steep streets and makeshift wood and concrete houses, which on that Good Friday was transformed into an improvised Calvary. It is my first Holy Week in the parish of Our Lady of the Assumption of Ticomán. A parish with a main church and eight chapels to attend to every Sunday. This morning, the four priests lead this Way of the Cross procession, a human column climbing this hill. It will not be an ordinary journey. It will be a discovery of a world I have only seen from afar. A world of pain, violence, sin, and human suffering.

The first station, at the foot of the hill, marks the beginning of a journey that would last more than three hours. There are few people. The student band arrives late. As we advanced, the crowd grew, adding faces weathered by the sun, bodies tired from life. Each station was a scene of pain and hope. A drunkard lying on the ground, his gaze lost, begged me: "Pray for me, Father." His words, an echo of Christ's abandonment, resonated in my soul. How could I judge him, when suffering had brought him to his knees? But above all, the question: What can I do for him?

The houses on either side of the road were silent witnesses. Some watched from their windows, others joined the procession, carrying makeshift crosses or holding religious images. The old women, with slow steps and canes, moved forward with difficulty, but with unshakeable faith.



The vendors of popsicles, pork rinds, and sweets broke the solemnity with their yelling, reminding us that life, despite the pain, goes on. The children, oblivious to the tragedy unfolding, ran and pushed, filling the air with their laughter and shouts.

One encounter left a deep impression on me. A woman, her face lined with wrinkles and her eyes full of pain, approached me. "Father," she said, "my son is sick. Can you pray for him?" Her words, an echo of the cry of all suffering mothers, reminded me that pain knows no boundaries. Yes, I can pray for him. But I don't know if I can do anything else...

As we climbed, the landscape changed. The houses became more precarious, the streets steeper, the suffering more palpable. The Way of the Cross became a mirror of reality, a reflection of the injustice and marginalization that plague the most vulnerable.

At the top of the hill, the last stations, the crucifixion and the tomb, confronted us with the harshness of death. But in the midst of the pain, hope shone brightly. The Resurrection, though distant, loomed as a promise of salvation, of redemption, like an emergency exit door.



I said earlier that Cerro del Chiquihuite was transformed that Good Friday into an improvised Calvary. Perhaps that was not the case. Perhaps it has always been a Calvary, with gangs, violence, drugs, and rape. It is a purgatory (or hell) disguised as a city. Perhaps I saw for the first time what our people experience every day. And that is why they come to Mass, or to talk to the priest, not to be scolded or lectured, but to seek a little charity, a little light in a truly *ciudad Perdida*, a "lost city" or slum.

That Way of the Cross in Chiquihuite presented me with an unexpected challenge: Now that you have seen all this, perhaps for the first time, can you embrace it? Can you take on that human suffering, that Cross that you only carry for a few moments on Good Friday, but that those people carry every day of their lives? Can you change that reality without accepting it, without making it your own, or will you do as Christ did, accepting it with his own life? Accepting it does not mean justifying it, resigning yourself to it. It means changing it from within, sharing the pain before transforming it.

The procession is over. People disperse, returning to their homes. They return to their daily Cross. I return home with a wounded soul, feeling that I have participated in a sacred ritual, an encounter with the pain and hope that dwell in the human heart. And I asked myself: how can I bring this experience into my daily life, how can I turn my faith into action, into a commitment to those most in need?

A temptation crosses my mind: I should have been a doctor, or an engineer, or a social worker. My life would be more useful if I were a dentist or a cancer specialist or a businessman. If I had more money, or more power, I could really do something for others. Instead of praying empty words, or sprinkling holy water on those broken homes, I could really do something for others! How useless my hands are!



For a moment, I see Christ crucified again. His hands nailed to the cross are truly useless, unable to move, unable to save Himself, much less others... And yet, He gave His life for us, and everything changed... From within... from within mankind, from within each person. Only in this way will humanity change: when their hearts change, because they feel loved and capable of loving.

There will be many other "Way of the Cross": the Way of the Cross of the sick, where no one carried the Cross because they already carry it every day, carrying their wheelchair, their

crutches, their oxygen tank or their dialysis machine... The Way of the Cross through the streets of Paris... in the northern mountains of Puebla, from one village to another... The Way of the Cross along the *Via Dolorosa* in Jerusalem... And those that are ongoing or yet to come: the Way of the Cross in Ukraine... that of the victims of drug trafficking and gangs... that of the mothers of the disappeared and the kidnapped... And so, it will be until the end of the world, until Christ returns, until our Love is greater than the Cross...





You're going to die one day...

HOLY WEEK MISSION 1996.

On this occasion, a group of young missionaries, members of the Shadday group, have come to Puebla. As there are so many of them, we have divided into two groups, one in Tepezintla and the other in Tlamanca. These villages are about 5 km apart.

The first few days are dedicated to visiting the people in their homes, and on Wednesday of Holy Week we decided to have a gathering of all the missionaries in Tlamanca. The Tepezintla group leaves early and we easily cover the 5 km. We spend the day singing, playing with the children, cleaning the church a little, and eating the cakes we brought with us.

Time passes quickly, and since everyone is having fun, no one thinks about the return trip. Except me. I see the sun setting quickly and think about the journey we still have ahead of us.

"Okay, boys and girls, it's time to go!"

"Yes, yes, right now. What's the rush?"

I try to explain to the coordinators that the rush is because we can still see the road now, but in an hour, it will be dark, and the last stretch will be difficult, if not dangerous.

- Yes, yes, right now, don't be a pain!

Finally, I get angry. I gather them all together and say, "Either we leave now or we stay here to sleep, there's no other option."

Reluctantly, they say goodbye, separate, and give me dirty looks as they pass by (who brought this guy, anyway? Just cuz he's a priest?), but finally we are on our way.

No sooner said than done, it's almost nighttime, and we still haven't reached Tepezintla. The group walks more slowly, moaning and complaining. Alicia trips and hurts her knee. No choice, we have to keep walking.

Suddenly, Roberto starts singing. The others look at him in disbelief, but then they understand. And they all sing: "Walking is prayer, walking is the way..." Everyone forgets their fatigue, but they realize they have to push hard on this last stretch.



Only Liz doesn't sing. She grumbles, complains loudly, everything hurts, what am I doing here? Who would have thought? And things like that. She walks alone, separated from the group.

And I approach her... I take her arm and say:

- You know, you're going to die one day...

Liz looks at me with incredulous eyes: "Really, Father? At this moment of exhaustion, fear, tension, walking along a dirt road without light, almost nightfall, unable to see where I'm going or know how long it will take, and the only thing you can think of is to tell me... that I'm going to die?"

- That's right, Liz, one day you're going to die... "One day you'll be in your room, or in a hospital room, surrounded by your loved ones, after a long and happy life, and little by little your eyes will close, your breathing will slow down, and your heart, so big, that has known so much love, will slowly stop..."



And then... you'll open your eyes again, and you'll be walking on a dirt road just like this one... You will walk uphill, you will see the setting sun before you, and you will walk slowly toward the horizon... And suddenly you will hear children laughing and dogs barking, and you will see all these children from Tepezintla coming toward you, you will see those little dogs that have accompanied us, and they will run towards you, jumping for joy, happy to see you. And the children will run towards you, with big smiles, with happiness on their faces, and they will take you by the hand and lovingly say to you: "Many years ago, you came to see us, you came to visit us, we spent beautiful days with you, holding your hand. You sang with us, and we were happy because you came to see us. Now it's our turn to take your hand and sing with you and laugh with you. Today it's our turn to take you home."

You see, Liz, Heaven, Eternal Life, is nothing other than what we are experiencing here, in these days of mission. It is exactly the same, well, without so much cold, and without sore knees, and multiplied by a million times over. So, welcome home!"

Liz looks at me with wide, incredulous eyes: "I had never seen it that way... I always thought I came to help you because I want to be a good Catholic. But you're right, Pancho, I'm home." I take her hand and give her the traditional greeting among our indigenous brothers and sisters, and I realize that I am home too.

The group returns during the Christmas holidays to continue their mission. They will not spend Christmas with their families. They have decided to stay here, in Tepezintla and Tlamanca, to celebrate Christmas with their indigenous brothers and sisters, with their friends, with their children. At home.







My daughter is going to make you some tortillas.
EASTER MISSION 1996.

A new Holy Week mission has begun, with about thirty missionaries. Most of the young people are from the *Jornadas* youth movement, and they are very committed to the sharing of the Gospel, yet for most of them this is a new experience, with a thousand things to discover, and that's true for me too.

On Monday, the visits began. The missionaries go out in pairs, visiting all the homes in the parish, letting everyone know that there is a mission this Holy Week. Part of their job is also to see where there are sick people who want to go to confession, talk to a priest, or receive Holy Communion. After the first two days of visiting, it will be my turn to visit those sick people they have found.

- Hey Pancho, there's a man who wants to go to confession, but he lives a little far away. Is that okay?

Sure, of course it's okay, it's part of my job. Each of us has a role in this mission. The next day we set out early for a couple of hours' walk. We finally arrived at a small house surrounded by coffee fields. The bushes no longer have leaves, they are just dry sticks, but they are covered with cherries, ready for harvest. But there will be no harvest. The people have told me no one is harvesting because coffee prices have collapsed, and it is more expensive to harvest the coffee than to leave it there. Dozens of families are losing their income because there is simply nothing to sell.



Upon entering the house, as is customary, we greet the saints on the altar and say our prayers. The whole family has gathered to welcome the priest. The two missionaries accompanying me and I greet everyone, and then I go to see the sick man in his room. He is a man of about 60 years of age who has injured his foot and cannot walk or work. We chat for a while. He gladly accepts confession and communion. For communion, he invites the whole family to come in, and so we have a moment of prayer

together. The mother and two granddaughters who live there with him are very grateful. As we were saying goodbye, the man said to me:

- Wait, Father, my daughter is going to make you some tortillas.

I thank him warmly. I have already learned that one should never refuse a gift from these people. I turn to the two granddaughters, girls of about 12 or 13, and thank them with a smile. But they don't move. They just stand there, waiting.

That's when the other daughter comes in. She had been hiding until then. She must be about 40 years old, and she still lives with her parents, and she will always live with her parents; that is her destiny. She approaches the stove and, with difficulty, takes some dough from a basket. And she starts making tortillas. She makes them with great effort, with great difficulty. She can't shape them properly, they fall apart, they're all crooked. This daughter, whose name I never learned, is not like the other daughters and granddaughters. Well, yes, she is the same, except that she suffers from cerebral palsy...



A huge smile spreads across her face! She looks at me with admiration, with affection. The priest has come all the way here, to my house, and I'm making him something to eat! And this simple task, so simple for other people, is a Herculean task for her, almost impossible, and yet so important! I look at her without knowing what to say. I feel sorry, ashamed perhaps, I feel unworthy of the gift she is preparing for me. How many times have I eaten without even saying thank you, without thinking about the person who cooked for me...

Little by little, the little wicker basket has filled up, and the daughter hands it to me with such affection, with a smile that her physical condition distorts, but which reflects all the love she has put into making tortillas for the *tata* and his missionaries.

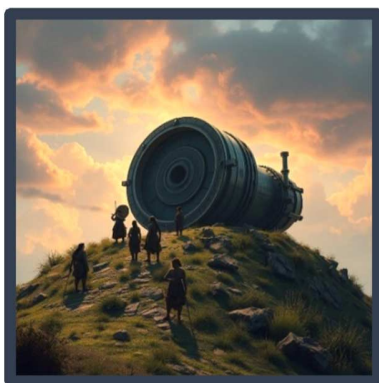


I take the basket from her hands and press them both against my chest, the sick daughter who has given me something of her life, and those tortillas that I receive as I have so often received the ciborium or the pyx where I place the Eucharist that I take to the sick. At that very moment, I understand something about the Eucharist: In the offertory of each Mass, I thank God for the gift of this bread, "fruit of the earth and the work of human hands." That expression, "human hands" has taken on a

whole new meaning for me today. I understand that, like these tortillas, the bread of the Eucharist is often the fruit of the labor of men and women who suffer, who are sick, who are tired, who give what little they have, who give a bread that is imperfect, with imperfect prayers, with an imperfect heart, even with imperfect love, yet so valuable, so beautiful, because it comes from hands that are wounded and hurt, but are nevertheless willing to love, to offer what little they have, knowing that most likely, this year, there will be no harvest, there will not be enough money, but there will always be tortillas offered with love.

The return to the parish is long, much longer than the journey there. I carry an enormous weight in my hands and in my soul. I carry the weight of a family, of a sick woman who will never, ever get better, I carry the alms offered to me by a family who will hardly have enough to eat this year. But I take it to God, a God who is surely closer to them than to me, for He ultimately sees not faces, but hearts.





I'm sorry, but there is no Mass today.

MISSION IN SANTA RITA DE LA CUESTA.

Summer 1987. I have recently convinced the CPP missionary group, *Pedro Sembrador*, that they need to change the place where they go on missions. This year we began our missions in Santa Rita de la Cuesta, in the State of Mexico, not far from our Marist house in La Jornada. This weekend, about 20 young people have gone on missions, and we agreed that I would join them on Sunday to celebrate Mass, and I would go with the van to facilitate the return trip.

A fairly passable dirt road takes me to the little village. It is a beautiful place, with the church at the bottom of a valley and a small stream. In the distance, on a small hill surrounded by woods, you can see the large pump that supplies water to the whole village.

I am glad to see the boys. They have done a good job. They chat with people in front of the church and prepare the songs.

"Come on, guys, let's go to Mass."

"One question," I say to them, "do you have a little water for me to wash my hands?"

"Guess what, Father? There's no water in the village. That's how it is."

I look at them a little puzzled. From where we are, we can see the pump on the nearby hill.



"What do you mean there's no water? I can see the pump!"

"Yeah, well, it doesn't work. Oh well, that's just the way things are! Okay, let's all go to Mass!"

"Wait a minute," I say. "What do you mean it doesn't work? I know it was installed recently."

"Well, it doesn't work, Father! What do you want us to do about it?"

- What do I want you to do? I want you to go see why it's not working, darn it! You're college students and you're not interested in

knowing why a pump that supplies an entire town isn't working?

"Well, we're coming from missions, Father. We're not social workers. Besides, who knows how much it will cost to repair it?"

"That's exactly why we're here, so that the Gospel can change the lives of our brothers and sisters, and if we can do something for them, that's our duty. And if we don't know how much it costs to repair it, let's go take a look, don't you think?"

- What about Mass, Father?

- Mass can wait. This is important. Come on, all you future engineers, go take a look up there!

They return shortly carrying a small electronic gizmo: "Well, this is what's not working. We have to replace this with a new spare part."

- Very well, I say, what's next?

"Well, we could replace it, but we'd have to buy it in Mexico City, and who knows how much it would cost."

"Well, let's divide up the work. Are you sure you can replace it?"

"Yes, Father, it's not complicated, but we don't have the..."

"Yes, I understand. Let me see what I can do..."

- Let me see, one of the guys says to me, I think I can get it...

Back in Mexico City, the guys get to work, and I contact some benefactors of the Newman center where I work. They gladly give us the money needed to buy the part. Since the missions are every 15 days, it takes two weeks before the guys return with the spare part.

"Don't worry, Father, we'll install it. When you arrive on Sunday, everything will be working!"

Sunday arrives, and I head back to Santa Rita de la Cuesta.

- The priest is here; let's all go to Mass!

- Have you repaired the pump?

"Yes, Father, but guess what?"

- Let me guess: there's no water.

"That's right, Father, we have another problem. Don Julián will explain."

Don Julián is a very kind man, one of the village authorities, who patiently explains to me that the person in charge of the pump is a very bad person, yes, very bad!

- Yes, Father, this man, Roberto is his name, once a week, early on Saturday, rings the bells to let us know that he is going to start the pump, well, when it was working, but he only turns it on for 15 minutes and then turns it off. People barely have time to put their buckets out before he cuts off the water. Until the following week. This is not acceptable!

I'm starting to get angry. This person, Roberto, must be very bad. We decided to go talk to him.

"No, Father, they didn't explain things to you right. What happens is that people don't have taps in their houses, they only have a pipe, and when I turn on the pump, I ring the church bell, and they put their buckets under their water pipe, but after 15 minutes the buckets are full, and then the water is just wasted, so I turn off the water and that's it."

"Well, Father," one of the boys says to me, "shall we go to Mass?"

- I look sternly at him: Really? You want to go to Mass when there's a problem in the community? Don't you think we can do something?

I gather all the missionaries and invite them to reflect on this situation before going to Mass. Because I don't think Mass is acceptable to God if your brother is in need and you can help him but do nothing. I don't think that's right.

- Well, I don't know what we can do, Father! What do you suggest?





No, it's not about what I suggest, it's about you seeing a situation and reflecting on what we can do.

- Well... I suppose we could install the faucets in every house, but we don't have...

- Yes, I know, we don't have any money, just like we didn't have any money to fix the pump, right?

- Do you think your friends can help us again, Father?

- No, I don't think so, and I'm not going to ask them for money again,

because I think you can find a better solution.

A long silence. Finally, someone raises their hand.

- Well, no, Father, I don't know what to do.

- Okay, and what do we do when we don't know something?

- We ask!

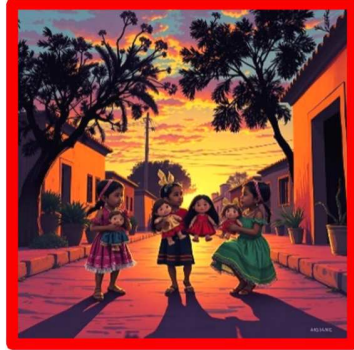
- Exactly! Why don't we ask the people in town?

After Mass, I meet with all the heads of families. I know this meeting will take quite a while, but little by little we are achieving our goal. In the end, everyone agrees to give 50 pesos, and the boys commit to installing the faucets starting with the next mission.

For the third time, I return to Santa Rita de la Cuesta.

- What do you think, Father? Now there is water!





The dolls
YOUTH MISSION IN PUEBLA

- Son, do you have a minute?
- Sure, Mom, what's going on?
- I've been looking at the photos you brought back from your missions...
- Yes, I left them in your room. What do you think?
- They're all very nice, congratulations. It looks like you and the kids are very happy when you go. But there's something that caught my attention...
- Yes, tell me.
- Well, I noticed the photos of the little boys and girls in particular, and I get the impression that they don't have many toys...

I think about it for a moment. I had never noticed that.

- Well, I don't know what to say. I think I remember that the children did have some toys.

"Well, I'd like to do something," my mom says. "How about we buy the girls some dolls?"

Again, I don't know what to say. Nothing like that had occurred to me. I realize that there is a whole area of missionary work that I haven't even seen.

- Look, here's some money. Why don't we buy the girls some dolls? It would be a nice Christmas present.

"That's an excellent idea, Mom. Thank you so much!"



And of course, I forgot. It wasn't until we arrived in Tepezintla, a week before Christmas, that I remembered the gift. Bravo, Pancho! Another huge success! Obviously, the only store in town doesn't have any dolls, and I have to go back to Zacatlán to buy something. I'm really embarrassed, so I start looking for some kind of solution.



A week later, we returned to Zacatlán. Well, not all of us. Some of the young missionaries decided to spend Christmas not with their families, but with their family here in the mountains. To celebrate the birth of

Jesus among these simple people who have opened their hearts to them. I just stand there looking on with empty hands...

Suddenly, it hits me! I approach Mr. R, who has come with us from Tepezintla:

"Hey, Don Roberto, I need to ask you a favor."

Tell me, Father, how can I help you?

I explain the situation, my mother's gift, my forgetfulness, Christmas approaching...

"Don't worry, Father, everything has a solution. Let's see, I know a man who often goes to Mexico City to bring things back from the *La Merced* market. I can ask him to help us."

What a great idea! Everything will be solved in no time. "About 50 rag dolls, what do you think? Do you think it's possible?"

"Of course, Father, just give me the money and I'll take care of everything..."

I give him almost everything I have. I'm happy as can be. This will be a special Christmas. I'm just sorry I can't bring my mom any photos. I return to Mexico City very happy, perhaps even proud of having made up for my oversight and accomplished my mission. I plan to return at the end of February to prepare for the next Holy Week mission, so I'll be able to take all the photos I want! Mission accomplished!

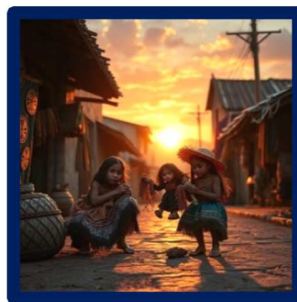


The dolls never arrived...

I arrive in Tepezintla and ask for Don R. No one has seen him. He hasn't returned from Mexico City. No one knows anything about him or the dolls. There were no Christmas presents for the girls. Because I'm a ... and they took advantage of me...

A long time later, I don't know exactly how long, I just remember that my mom had already passed away, I went to La Merced, and I bought 50 rag dolls, the simple kind, very pretty, although they don't last long. I take them to another town, with another group of missionaries, for other girls, for another Christmas. And although I see the joy on their faces, I can't help thinking that I wasted an opportunity, that I could have done good when I passed through Tepezintla, and I didn't. I don't know if God counts those opportunities that His children waste. I only know that we have no right to have the opportunity to make others happy and not take advantage of it.

There were many more missions. Each one with its own story, its girls, its dramas, its masses, each one different, each one a treasure. I have tried to write the story of some of them. The rest are written in a great book in Heaven and in the hearts of so many boys and girls who together tried (and keep trying) to be Missionaries.





You mean, you want my blessing?

OAXACA MARKET, 1994



I have come to take a walk around the central market in the city of Oaxaca. I am fascinated by this place. It has its roots in the secular traditions of our people. It is a restless sea of noises, colors, food, vegetables, animals, a kaleidoscope of colors and joy, a coming and going of bodies and souls in a wonderful place covered by high vaults, a closed universe that seems to cry its joys and sing its sorrows in a

hubbub that no longer seeks or finds any apparent order.

I enjoy every moment in this wonderful world and seek to fill myself with the noises and colors that surround me. I look closely at each person, each soul seeking its path, which seems to be immersed in and inhabiting a world beyond the visible world.

- Don't you have a few cents to give me, young man?

A poor old woman has approached me, holding out her hand. Her face shows thirst, hunger. She has been like this for centuries, for generations, begging, pleading, wringing a little food and warmth from life.

- Of course, ma'am, here you are!

Today I feel generous. I find a 10-peso coin in my pocket (this was a few years ago, so 10 pesos was a considerable amount for alms) and I give it to her with affection and discretion.



The old lady looks at the coin with surprise. She wasn't expecting so much; perhaps it's been a long time since she's seen a coin like that.


"Thank you very much, young man, God bless you!"

She starts to walk away, but I call her back before she leaves.

"Wait, wait, you're forgetting something."

She stops, surprised.

"What is it, young man?"

(I love it when people call me "young lady"!) 

- Wait, ma'am, now it's your turn!

She looks at me even more surprised.

"What? I don't understand you, young man."

- Yes, now it's your turn to give me something. I gave you 10 pesos, now it's your turn.

The poor woman doesn't understand.

- But young man, you want me to give you back...

- No, ma'am, I want you to give me something else. You have something very important that I need.

- But young man, what do I have, what can I give you?

- Yes, ma'am, you have something very important. I want you to give me... your blessing!

Her eyes fill with tears. She looks at me with special affection. I want to think that no one had ever asked her for her blessing before. She takes my hand affectionately.

"You... you want my blessing, young man?"

"Yes, ma'am, give me your blessing!"

And I bow before her.

"Well, young man, if you give me another 10 pesos, I'll give you my blessing!"

I burst out laughing, and my laughter echoes throughout the market. People turn around to see what is happening. I walk away, half laughing and half angry: she tried to take advantage of me... Only later, too late, will I understand that this is her life: begging for "alms." She goes out begging every day. She humbles herself before each person. She faces contempt and rejection. Not me. I have my house, my car, my comfort, my salary, my security. She lives on the charity of others. So do I, but I forget. I will never experience the hunger and insecurity that she (and millions like her) live with every day...

Boy, do I need that blessing...





Oh well, in that case, Father...

EASTER MISSION 1993.

I think you never forget your first mission. That Holy Week in Tepezintla was something truly wonderful that marked my life as a priest and as a Mexican. Above all, it was a learning experience, life lessons that will stay with me for many years but that I sometimes seem to forget and need to relearn.

Today is Good Friday. I was able to get up a little later than usual and enjoy a delicious cup of coffee on a sunny morning. There are no major activities until this afternoon's liturgy, so I am enjoying a well-deserved rest.

- Father, they're looking for you...

See? I knew it wouldn't last. But if people are looking for Father, it must be for something important, so I have no problem going out into the courtyard.

An elderly couple is waiting for me, a married couple of many years who want to talk to Father.

- *Chimosewi, chimosewi*, please sit down, rest for a moment, ...

- *Tlazocamate, Tata.*

- *Amotleno!*

I feel overjoyed with the few words in Nahuatl that I have managed to learn, wow, a whole conversation! Honestly, I feel quite proud of what I have achieved this week!

- Well, you see, Father, we have come to ask you for some Masses.

- With pleasure, but I'll have to celebrate them in Mexico, because I'm leaving on Monday.

- Yes, Father, no problem.



- Tell me, where are you from? You can stay for today's Mass.

- Well, you see, Father, we come from Xochitlasco, and we heard that you were here, so we came to ask you to celebrate some Masses.

From Xochitlasco, wow! That's more than a three-hour walk, and it's only 9 a.m. I suddenly realize they are out of breath and tired. Besides, how did they find out I was here?

It makes me sad to think that I only have to roll out of bed to go to church, and they have walked three hours just to leave me their little note and ask me to say some Masses. And they're going to pay me for the Masses, I mean, really?

I should explain here that they told me I can't charge less than the priest who lives here, because that would be sabotaging his only source of income. I have to charge the same five pesos he asks for each Mass. But hey, if no one finds out...

"Yes, Father, we want 10 Masses. We want you to pray for our departed loved ones, our animals, the harvest, and our son who is far away... How much will that be?"

After a quick calculation, I tell him: The 10 masses will be 25 pesos!

He looks at me a little puzzled as he does the math in his head.

Are you sure, Father? Don't I owe you more?

No, no, 25 pesos is perfect.

Here you go, Father, here you are.

And he hands me a \$50 bill.

"Of course, let me go get your change."

I return to the parish house, very pleased with myself: Wow, how nice I am, how generous! How could I take their money? No, no, besides, they need it more than I do. It's a discreet way to help them. It's obvious that they don't value money, but I'm going to help them! After all, I come from the city, I've studied in a university, I'm well read and learned! And it's my duty to help them, help them save their money! After all, I don't need it and they do! There's no doubt that I'm a very nice and very generous person! I'm a light in the darkness, a benefactor among the dispossessed! (Hold on, it's coming...)

I return shortly after with 25 pesos, which I give back to him with a smile and a sense of satisfaction that I hope is not noticeable.

He stares at the coins I have given him with a rather puzzled look, turns to his wife, and they chat a little in Nahuatl. They are surely thinking about how to thank me!

"Are you sure, Father? Is it \$25 for 10 Masses?"

Yes, yes, that's right, don't worry. For the 10 masses, it's \$25.



For a moment, I wonder if he knows how to count or not (yes, I'm that classist).

-Oh, well, in that case, Father, we want another 10 masses!

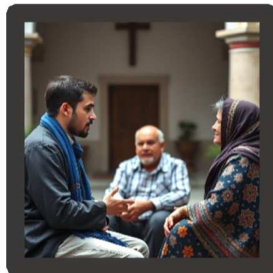
Touché! That'll teach me! So, children, what did we learn today???

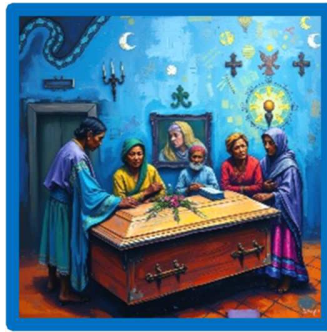
Generosity is not giving something from what you have in excess, but sharing what little you have. And charity, that overused word, is nothing more than respect and recognition of the other.

That's what I get for wanting to tell people what decisions to make and how to spend their money. I understood that *humility is not given, it is learned*, that charity begins with respect and recognition of others, that true generosity is not giving what you have left over, or what you don't need, it is not feeling superior, but sharing what you are and what you have. It is not about counting things, money, or people, but about recognizing and honoring what each person, their work, their heart, and their love are truly worth. You have to love from within...

That day, I thought I was being a teacher, and I discovered I was a student, I had so much to learn. That day, I understood that my charity was only a form of vanity. Since that day, I have tried to look at the world with different eyes, to discover wisdom in humility and wealth in poverty. That day I understood that God is in our hearts, and that each person expresses what is inside them, the true magic that resides in the heart, in simple and humble gestures, but full of meaning, which express love for the deceased, for their animals, for the harvest, for the son who is far away, expressing their full capacity to love. And that is more important and more valuable than ten measly pesos...

I don't know if I've learned my lesson yet, but I had the best teachers!





No, Father, we just want a blessing...

AT THE ISSSTE FUNERAL HOME, 1993

It's almost 9 p.m. And like so many other evenings, just as I'm ready to go home, the phone rings. "We're looking for a priest, and the parish gave us this number. My brother passed away last night. Could you please come and celebrate Mass here at the IMSS chapels? We can come and pick you up."

And like so many other times, like so many other priests, I head to the funeral home with God's little suitcase, the little suitcase that contains everything I need: bread, wine, and the power of Jesus.

When I arrive, they look for the name of the deceased person on the board placed at the entrance. I go to the small chapel where a whole family is waiting for me. They are all strangers to me, and yet they are my brothers and sisters, they are now my family. It is easy to read the pain on their faces. It is a simple, short Mass, where I try not only to repeat words that have been said so many times before, but also to speak to this family that has lost their loved one.



I leave around 11 p.m. I head for the exit: "Excuse me, are you a priest? Could you celebrate a Mass for my mother who died?" I feel my knees buckle slightly. I turn to these people, smiling at them with some effort. Tired? Who said anything about being tired? I say to myself, let's go again!

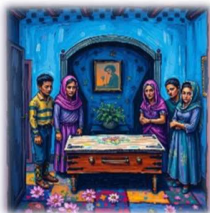
No two Masses are alike. Each one is unique. But at this time of night, it is not easy to find new, meaningful words that truly comfort. I try to let the Spirit speak for me.

It's already midnight. I gather my things and head for the exit again. I do so quietly, trying to be almost invisible. "Excuse me, Father..."

I feel like a sword is cutting me in two. I simply can't take it anymore. I feel my knees buckling and a pain in my stomach. I'm going to have to say no, I'm so sorry, I just don't have the strength.

"Excuse me, Father, we wanted to ask you, to see if you could..."

I turn around, searching for the words I'm going to say to them, and I see two faces, two faces I will never forget, two sisters, already grown up, poorly dressed, with that look, those gestures that express fear rather than shyness, fear of disturbing, fear of being inappropriate, as if "knowing" that they don't deserve anything because they've never had anything, because they don't have money to pay for Mass, fear because



one day someone told them they were nothing, they were inferior, that they weren't worth much, because they were women, because they were poor, because they were uneducated, because so many times they have been told "NO," so many times they have been rejected and humiliated, but their brother died, so they have to ask: "Excuse me, Father..."

"Ma'am, I don't know what to say to you, look at the time..." The words get stuck in my throat, they don't want to come out, I don't even know what I'm saying.

"Excuse me, Father, we saw you arrive, and we wanted to ask you..."

"Ma'am, I'm sorry, but celebrating another Mass..."

"No, Father, we don't want to ask you for a Mass, we know you're very tired, we just want a blessing... You see, we've come from far away, the whole family is here, they've arrived from the village, tomorrow we're taking him away because everything is very expensive here, and my brother died without confession, so please, Father..."

Of course, ma'am, just a blessing. Please show me the way, I'll follow you.

The whole family is already there, gathered around a coffin that seems to take up the entire chapel. There's the wife, the children, the relatives who have come from far away, all sleepy, all tired, all hurt because their brother, father, friend is gone, leaving a huge void that I can only try to fill with "just a blessing."

I put on my stole and take out my prayer book. I feel the thirsty gazes turning toward me, the tears of everyone I want to collect. And I speak to them. I speak to them about God, on behalf of God, in the name of God. I try to help them understand the meaning of this disaster called death, this pain called separation, this emptiness called absence. I try to fill it, even if only partially, "with a blessing."



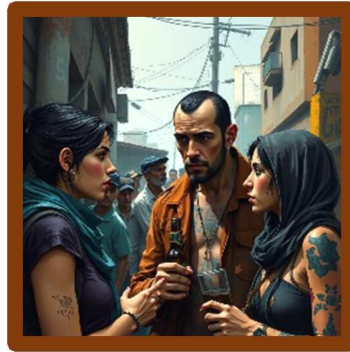
"We just want a blessing..." Poverty is also that: not finding a priest, not being able to get one to come, and if we do get one to come, not being able to pay him or give him a small donation.

I stay with the family for an hour. They tell me everything. They don't expect an answer, an explanation. They just want someone to listen to them. Some sit down; others fall asleep. They offer me a cup of coffee. Early tomorrow morning they will go back to the village where he was born to bury their loved one. There, too, they will not have the consolation of a Mass or a blessing because there is no priest in the village, and the parish is very far away, and well, we don't have the money.

And so, another life ends, that of a brother of mine whom I never knew. In the poverty of having "only a blessing."

I never saw them again... However, they are still present in my life. I am indebted to them. I owe them a mass.





"I know you come from God..."

YOUTH MISSION IN ACUEDUCTO, 1995

January 1995. Like every year, we are preparing for a Holy Week mission. But this year will be different. We will not go to the *Sierra Norte* of Puebla. We will do it right here, in our parish in Mexico City, and it will be a youth mission.

About 50 young men and women from the parish have come together. They are all very enthusiastic. There have been several preparatory meetings, especially to make sure we do the visits well. Unlike the missions in Puebla, we will not go to people's homes, but rather we will go throughout the neighborhood, in pairs, looking for young people, inviting them to know Christ, to open their hearts to His love, and to change their lives. This is the famous "Kerygma" or first proclamation of God's unconditional love manifested in Christ Jesus.

The mission begins on Palm Sunday, after Mass, when the missionaries in uniform receive their missionary crosses and go out in pairs throughout the neighborhood. We will meet again this afternoon at the parish.

It is already past 7 o'clock when the last missionaries return. You can feel the tiredness, but also the joy, the enthusiasm, the joy of knowing Christ and making Him known. Monica and Azucena, who went together to give the first proclamation, also arrive. Monica is trembling, on the verge of tears. Azucena, on the other hand, has a mixture of joy and fervor on her face. Something happened.

I approach them: "How did it go?"

"Oh, Father, if you only knew!"

"Well, tell me!"

Azucena tells me everything: "Well, you see, we were walking down the street very happily looking for young people, and when we turned a corner, we came face to face with a group of kids doing drugs, drinking, and making a racket over by the viaduct, you know, where all the bad kids hang out.

And we saw them! And they saw us! And they just stared at us! We thought we were going to die.

Monica grabbed my arm and pulled me away: "Let's go, it's really dangerous here!"





"No," I said, "Father Pancho said we had to go to everyone, look for all the young people, even these ones."

And Azucena approached the one who seemed to be the leader, a big guy with tattoos and a lost look in his eyes, with a beer in one hand and a joint in the other. She stood in front of him and looked him in the eyes and said:

"You know what? God loves you!"

"Wh-what? Excuse me?"

"Yes, my friend, God loves you. God is your Father who loves you with infinite and merciful love, and He sent His Son Jesus Christ to save you, to give you new life, to free you from sin."



"Are you serious?"

"And you have to abandon sin, everything that pollutes your life, that alcohol, that weed, they are sinful, that is not what God wants for you, you have to accept Christ who died and rose again for you. And for all of you, my friends!"

Silence. Incredulous looks. There is enormous tension.

- Okay, girl, hold on a minute, I'll be right back.

The big guy walks over to his friends, and they talk for a while, laughing, swearing, glaring at each other threateningly or lustfully.

After a while, he returns:

"You know what, girl? *I know you come from God.* Because normally, two girls like you alone on the street in our neighborhood, we would have already beaten you up, raped you, and thrown you out there. But no, you come from God, so come on, sit here, and tell me more."

"I know you come from God." Since that day, those words have stayed with me, more as a question than a statement. They are the question I ask myself every day, which challenges me and makes me straighten my path. They are the question I sometimes try to avoid. But there is no escape. Because whatever my path may be, always, along all the paths of my life, whether I realize it or not, I come from God and I am walking toward God.

Azu and Monica burst into tears. Tears of joy, tension, relief, gratitude. The group listened to her story in disbelief. We surround them with our affection and our presence. Today Christ has been proclaimed with courage and love.





Are you sure I don't owe you anything?

FIRST YOUTH RETREAT IN ECUADOR

Mexico City, Mexico, and Latacunga, Ecuador, March 2009.

- Yes, hello?
- My dear Edgar, how are you? This is Chauvet!
- Father, it's good to hear from you! I'm fine, thank you, and you? How can I help you?
- What are you doing the second-to-last week of March?
- I don't have any plans at the moment...
- Well, now you do! I need your help, my friend! We're going on a *Jornada*!

(Going on a *Jornada*, for those who don't know, means going on a very dynamic retreat for young people).

- Of course, Father, my pleasure!
- I'm glad you accepted, because... we're going to Ecuador!
- You don't say, that's great! I'm in! Who else is on the team?
- Well... That's exactly what I wanted to talk to you about...



And so we went to Ecuador. Edgar and I. Just Edgar and I. Only Edgar and me. The *Foyer de Charité* community in Latacunga had invited me to preach at their Holy Week retreat, and we agreed that it would be good to take advantage of the opportunity to hold a retreat for young people, and what better than a *Jornada*?

The problem, of course, was putting together a team and getting them there. And of course there was no budget, so I thought of inviting Edgar. It was even funny (well, a little embarrassing too) to explain to him that he would be the only member of the team, and that he would have to give five or six talks, lead the meditations, and cover all the responsibilities

(liturgy, schedule, materials). He would also have to lead a small group and I don't know how many other things. But I knew his answer in advance: "When do we leave?"

Sixteen years later, the memory is still vivid. The details, perhaps the names, have faded. But two things are unforgettable: the response, or rather, the dedication of the young people who heard about Christ and His Grace as never before (thank you, Marist Brothers, for inventing the *Jornadas!*). One of the young men shared his experience: "to live in God's Grace and be holy? Become a saint? No one had ever told me that!" And the second: Edgar's dedication and generosity during those four days! He did everything! I learned that you can be generous and dedicated, give everything without looking back.

After the retreat, I accompanied Edgar to the bus station in Latacunga so that he could make the return trip alone. I am staying another week to preach the Holy Week retreat to the adults. Edgar would have liked to stay, but he has to return to Mexico for family and work reasons.



"Do you have everything? Are you sure you haven't forgotten anything?"

"No, Father, everything is here, passport, ticket... The good thing is that I was able to get a cheap ticket! Don't worry about anything!"

I forgot to mention that Edgar paid for his own ticket and covered all his expenses himself! We said goodbye with a hug. Before getting on the bus, he asked me, "Hey, Father, are you sure I don't owe you anything?"

Wow...

I'll let Edgar speak for himself:

"When they first asked me if I wanted to go to Ecuador for a Jornada, I said yes almost immediately, moved by the need to continue giving others the word of God. I took a chance and found another Christ in each young person, joyful, eager to live, with many concerns. I realized that we want to live life to the fullest, that we have many dreams in common, and that is pure gold to me.

Complete strangers became people I will carry in my heart for the rest of my life. The retreat is just a tiny taste of what it is like to live in God's grace. The joy, typical of Ecuadorians, their spark, their way of treating people, tells me that we can keep going. I even wrote them a letter after the Jornada: "This is the great test in your life. Don't let yourself be discouraged by what people say. You know that you have a Friend who is Jesus Christ, who loves you just as you are, no more and no less. God has your name tattooed on the palm of his hand since before you were born, and he wants you to be happy. Don't stop at that desire; spread it to those around you. Your way of life may be the only gospel that the people around you will ever see. Live in such a way that they want to live the style of the Risen Jesus."

One of the boys said to me during the campfire: "My heart is burning inside after what I have experienced these three days!" It is a phrase that I have carried in my heart ever since. Thank you, Ecuador. Thank you, Lord Jesus, for allowing me to bring your word to my brothers and sisters.





"This is useless."

SIERRA NORTE OF PUEBLA, HOLY WEEK 1995

- "This is useless."

His words fall like a ton of lead on the group: "This is useless!"

Tired from a whole day, a whole week of work, days of visiting, catechism, visiting the sick... His words fall like a judgment on how little or how much we are doing.

Perhaps I shouldn't say it like that, surely it's uncharitable of me, but I never liked him. What's more, I dislike him. Yes, I know, I'm sorry, but there are people like that...

He arrived unexpectedly, sent by the bishop, "to live a pastoral experience here in the mountains." He arrived like that, unexpectedly, a seminarian from the archdiocese, and a "theologian," as he himself says, and he came to see "what we are doing." Everything sets him apart from the group: his clothes (elegant black cassock), his gaze, his attitudes, his smile... or lack thereof.



He has accompanied us all week, especially during the liturgies, and this Good Friday, at the evaluation meeting, his words shake the hearts and spirits of all the young people.

"This is useless."

"Excuse me," I say, "what do you mean?"

"Well, everything, this mission, everything you do, I don't see how it really helps anyone, I don't see anything changing, we're just wasting our time."

Everyone turns to look at me, waiting for me to say or do something. Those who know me best bow their heads, expecting a confrontation, an argument.

I try to stay calm:

"You may be right," I say, "but I really don't know. I think that question is not for us to answer. I think we should ask our brothers in the village."



The next day, I call the *mayordomos* and the *fiscales*, the local authorities who have been accompanying us. We all greet each other very kindly, and finally I ask them:

"Sorry to bother you, sorry for asking, but the young people and I would like to know if you are happy with our presence, with our work." We're not sure if it's been helpful, if you're comfortable, if you've understood everything we've said in the talks and at Mass. Sorry to bother you, but this is important to us. We want to know if our presence has been of any use to you."

The small group of people looks at me in astonishment. They can't believe what they've just heard. They look at each other, not knowing how to respond. Their eyes scan the entire group of missionaries, looking at me and the seminarian, not really knowing what to think or say.

"Give us a moment, Father."

"Of course, go ahead."

They move away a little and talk among themselves. They engage in a discussion that I don't understand, that I can barely hear, but their passion, their discomfort, their concern are clear. They express themselves in a language I don't know; their Nahuatl is like a song, or rather like a dizzying dance of emotions and feelings.

Finally, the *mayordomo* comes back to us. His hands clutch his hat, but he doesn't really know what to do with it. His tone is flat, his head slightly bowed; you can see that this is very difficult for him.

"Well, look, Father, I want to tell you... You ask us if we have understood anything you have told us, about the meetings and the talks, and if we are happy that you are coming... Well, look, Father, about the first thing, whether we have understood everything you have told us, the truth is, Father, that we have not understood a word... Forgive us, Father, but for us it's very difficult, we don't understand many words, no, we don't understand much... But you know, Father, about the other thing, about whether we're happy that you've come, I want to tell you that... Well, the thing is, no one comes here... No one ever comes to see us. We're not important. Sometimes the mayor or the justice of the peace comes, every six years the people from the elections committee come, and they give us some papers and we have to sign them and then they never come back, at least for another six years. The people from the government, the people from the school, they don't come either, nobody comes, Father. You are the only ones who have come to see us, the only ones who have spent time with us, it's been you, Father... So, Father, the answer is yes, Father, we are very happy that you come, because you are the only ones, no one else comes, and you know, Father, since you have been coming, something has changed here in the village, we love each other more..."



We hugged each other and cried. His arms held me and I felt welcomed, accepted, loved by these brothers of mine whom I did not know, whom I ignored for so many years.

Days later, on my way home, the question has not left me: Did it help? Did anything change? There were confessions, first communions, we distributed some toys, some blankets... I really don't know how much things changed up there in the mountains. But here inside, they did change.





Where else would you like me to be, Father?

EMERGENCY HOSPITAL

MAGDALENA DE LAS SALINAS, MEXICO CITY

Father Pedro Herrasti, director of the Polytechnic Center for Outreach, our campus ministry, has founded a new group. Its mission: to visit the sick at the local hospital. One day Pedro was called to visit a patient at the National Traumatology Hospital, not far from the CPP, and there he discovered the immense spiritual need of both the patients and their families, not to mention the hospital staff themselves.

So they are going to form the group "Servants of the suffering Servant Jesus," which young polytechnic students can join to accompany a priest on visits to the sick. But they are not mere companions: they are sent on a mission to the hospital to visit the sick, pray with them, and make a list of those who want to talk to a priest.

For me, visiting the sick will always be one of the most difficult apostolates. Facing human suffering is very difficult for me. I find it hard to find words of comfort and support for the sick. But one has to be there. And the presence of a young student from the CPP on these visits is a source of support and strength for this very difficult apostolate.



I go on Thursday afternoons, and that day Enrique accompanies me. He guides me, and we go through several wards in the hospital. Finally, we arrive at a room where the half-open door seems to invite us in. And there, lying on the bed, half covered by a sheet, a young man lies unconscious, his arms outstretched, his whole body forming a cross. His head is shaved and covered with a huge scar. He seems to be asleep.

"Look, Enrique," I say, "there is Jesus, lying on his cross."

"Yes, Father," Enrique says, "and there is the Blessed Virgin Mary."



Indeed, sitting near the bed is a woman, one of those Mexican mothers, one of those humble and simple women who take care of their family day after day, cooking, washing, educating, always present in their homes, always accompanying their children, even in the hospital. So often invisible, unnoticed, but always there.

I am ashamed that I did not see her when I entered the room. I approach her and greet her, we chat a little, together we pray for her son while I give him the Sacrament of the Sick. She takes my hand gratefully, and the words get stuck in my throat, but as always, I manage to say something silly!

"Look, ma'am, it's late. How long have you been here with your son?"

"Since they brought him here, Father, a week ago..."

Wow...

"Well, ma'am, it's time for you to rest. Your son will be fine here, they're taking care of him, and he'll recover. Don't you think it would be good for you to go home and get some rest? Your son will be fine..."

The woman looks up and stares at me with big, sad eyes that nevertheless reflect great strength.

"Oh, Father, where else would you like me to be if not here with my son?"

I am overcome with shame. Years later, Pope Francis would say that priests are often bureaucrats, businessmen, interested in efficiency and not in people. How right he was about me!



I understood the passage from the Gospel (John 19:25-27) that tells us that Mary stood at the foot of the Cross with the other women. Where else would a mother be, if not with her son who is sick, suffering, dying, with her alcoholic or drug-addicted son, with her violent or needy son, with Down syndrome or cerebral palsy?

Where else would I want her to be, ma'am? What a great lesson you have taught me. You are right where you should be, suffering alongside your son, like Mary at Golgotha, like so many mothers throughout the world. I want you to stay right here, next to your son, even if he is unconscious or asleep... Stay next to your son, like Mary. Today is Good Friday, but the Resurrection will come.

Perhaps the only thing I would like, ma'am, is for your husband to be here too. I don't know why he's not here, maybe he's working, taking care of the other children, maybe he's suffering because he can't be here... Maybe there is no father, and you, ma'am, have to bear the burden alone. But how I wish that every husband, every father, were also here, with his child, and not at the office, or at the bar, or spending money and saying, "I've done my part," "that's a woman's job".... I wish every brother, every uncle or nephew, every friend were

here, alongside the one who suffers... even if he is asleep, even if he is unconscious, even if he is dead.

The "Father Pancho" who left the hospital that day is not the same one who entered a few hours earlier. I can glimpse what God expects of me with a little more clarity. I also understand a little more about a hidden dimension of human suffering: God needs you to be there!

Years later, in 1999, it will be my turn: lying in a hospital bed, struck down with Leukemia, fighting for my life.... And Mom was there, by my side, often alone, just praying, just watching. As I woke up and saw her there, I promised myself I would survive; I couldn't leave her alone...





If you want, we can go...

SIERRA NORTE DE PUEBLA, SUMMER OF 1997

This year, several groups from *Jornadas de Vida Cristiana* youth retreats movement have come to do missions here in the Sierra Norte de Puebla. More than 10 groups have signed up, and we will be doing missions throughout the month of August. We hope to cover all the communities in the parish of Tepezintla. In total, almost 100 young missionaries will come.

In fact, in these missions, the main activity is not liturgies or catechism, but visiting the families. As the Gospel tells us, the young missionaries go out in pairs to visit all the families in the parish and share with them the *Kerygma*, the Good News of salvation in Christ Jesus. These are beautiful experiences, and the young people are eager to participate, and of course, Father Pancho has to join in too!

We have been here for two weeks now. The groups from Mexico City have been taking turns, and each time we visit more homes and more families. In these first days of the Mission, my job is mainly to visit the sick, but for that I need the support of the young people. And this morning, with a small group of missionaries, I am heading to the most remote village, Omitlán, more than two hours away from Tepezintla, a very tiring climb, and it is only the beginning...



It is almost 11 a.m. when we arrive at the church in Omitlán. We begin our visits, which will last more than five hours. We cannot stay any longer. We have to go down to Tepezintla before dark, otherwise the walk back can be dangerous. Everyone will eat wherever they are invited, and there is always plenty of tortillas and beans!

It is after 5 p.m. when we gather again in the small church. Some people from the village come to say goodbye. It has been a wonderful experience. We will be back on Saturday for Mass and confessions. Gustavo, the coordinator, gives the signal, and we set off on our way back.

But we didn't get very far! We had barely left the village when a group of our indigenous brothers approached us. Their faces showed signs of exhaustion; it was obvious that they had walked a long way. They greeted us with the respect typical of this region.

- *Tzinu, Tata*, how are you?

- *Cualli, cualli, tlazocamate, huan Tewatzin?*

- *Cualli*, thank you, *Tata*... Excuse me, *Tata*, forgive me... Aren't you coming to visit us?

Oh, darn! I thought we had already visited the whole village! Gustavo approaches me: "I don't understand, Pancho, I thought we were done!"

- "Tell me, where are you from?"

- We come from Tlaxco. We worked half a day and came here because we heard that you and the holy Missionaries are visiting all the houses and we want to ask you to come and see us. I know we are far away and we are poor, but...



What a problem! I look at my watch and see that the sun is setting. We can't stay here any longer. We have to start our return journey before nightfall. Everyone turns to look at me, waiting to see what I decide!

"You'll have to excuse us, the boys and I are tired, and we have to get back to Tepezintla before nightfall. I don't know if..."

"There are a lot of us there, Father, people already know you are here, they are waiting for you..."

My heart is breaking! I'm between a rock and a hard place: we can't go, and we have to go back, we have to be careful... How can I explain this to them without offending them?

"It's only two hours away, Father, it's not far..."

"I'm very sorry, it's not possible..."

And suddenly, like a bolt of lightning, Gustavo's words hit me:

- "Pancho, if you want, we'll go!"

"Yes, Pancho, no problem!"

Wow!

The guys in the group want to have their say, they want to decide too. "We're going!"

"But you won't make it back, you won't get to Tepezintla!"

- No problem, we'll go with our brothers, sleep there, and tomorrow we'll visit! We'll be back tomorrow afternoon."

- "We can give you lodging, Father, we can take you in."

I look at my young men (I'm sorry, I don't remember their names, or even their faces). They are asking me to trust them, to let them go, to send them on a mission without controlling them, without watching them, without being on top of them all the time. I feel like they are asking too much of me.

They, on the contrary, feel that they are offering what people expect of them, what God expects of them.

"Okay, guys, go for it! See you tomorrow!"

Suddenly I realize that I expected nothing less from them, without even realizing it.

"Sure, Pancho, see you tomorrow! Give us your blessing!"

I watch them walk away quickly, full of energy. I stand there thinking for a moment. I have to learn to trust.



And "tomorrow" we didn't see each other. I waited for them, we waited for them, and they didn't show up. I was dying inside! But it taught me a lesson. I understood what their parents feel when they tell them, "I'm going on a mission with Father Pancho." Like them, I had to tie a knot in my stomach and repeat a thousand times, "They're fine, they'll be here any minute."

Finally, they arrived, a day late... and full of joy!

"It was awesome, Pancho, you should have come with us! There were a thousand houses to visit! We couldn't let you know, so we had to stay an extra day!"

I didn't know whether to kill them or hug them. Thank God everything turned out fine. And I learned my lesson: We must trust them, just as Christ himself trusts all of us.

Part Two

But not everything turns out well every single time...

"Pancho, hi, Gaddafi here on the phone!"

Although his name was Fernando, we called him "Gaddafi" because he looked exactly like the Libyan dictator.

- "Well, what do you know, Pancho? I can't go on missions with you this year. My parish priest has asked me for help, and I'm going to lead a group of missionaries. We're going to... So I'm sorry, but count me out!"

I feel angry and happy at the same time. Gaddafi's help is invaluable, but this will be a great experience for him, a way to spread his wings, so to speak.

"Well, good luck, my friend. We'll talk on Easter Monday!"

I never saw him again. The call never came. But I wasn't worried; after all, there was no rush. He'll get in touch.

Another call came: "Father, did you hear? Gaddafi's dead!"

I couldn't believe it! He was 28 years old. Apparently, on that mission for his parish, he did everything: he organized, led, walked, sang, preached... He gave his all, as only he knew how, as I had seen him do so many times before. He came home on Easter Sunday, late at night, tired, exhausted: "Dad, Mom, I'll tell you all about it tomorrow. It was awesome, but I'm exhausted. I'll tell you tomorrow. I'm going to sleep. I love you both very much."

He never woke up... His heart failed him, he had a heart attack, perhaps it was too much effort, too much generosity, and it all ended there, in the hills of rural Mexico, all his projects, his dreams, his life.

I know that within God's wonderful and inscrutable plan it all makes sense. Gaddafi fell into the bewildering hands of a God of Love. But he did not fall there on the day of his death. He fell into God's hands on the day he went to a *Jornada*, when he said, "Yes, Lord, I love you, live in me!" He fell into Jesus' arms on the day he let himself be embraced by Him. And he gave everything. Because God doesn't ask for much, He just asks for everything. Sometimes suddenly, in an instant, sometimes throughout life, yet it will always be bewildering. There will often be the temptation to say "I can't take it anymore," "I've already given everything," but God's inexhaustible Spirit will always guide us toward a greater Love and a greater surrender, until the day when that love and that surrender are infinitely infinite in His Heavenly Kingdom.





The Cave

HOLY WEEK, 1997, SIERRA NORTE DE PUEBLA

The "Telpocatzin Totatzin" missionary group from the parish of Ticomán has once again come on a mission to this corner of Mexico that we love so much. Father Eleazar has asked us to work in the main parish, Tepezintla.

As a group, we already have tons of experience and things are going very well. We have carried out our usual activities: visiting families, teaching catechism to children, visiting the sick, and also holding a large bazaar of clothing and toys that the people of the parish of La Asunción de Ticomán have given us. It is impressive how the inhabitants of Ticomán, one of the poorest areas of Mexico City, are extremely generous to their brothers and sisters in the Sierra.

Today is Good Friday, and we have already finished the ceremony of the Adoration of the Cross. It is still early, but we are all tired. Fortunately, tomorrow is Holy Saturday, and we have the whole morning free. At least that's what we think...

"Father, excuse us, if it's possible, we wanted to invite you..."

As I was leaving the church, a group of elderly people from the village stopped me. They are happy with everything that has been done. They have welcomed us with open arms, and we are all experiencing a very special Holy Week. Things are about to improve in a wonderful way.



"We wanted to invite you, Father, we want to ask you to accompany us to the cave!"

I am not distrustful, but there are many things I still do not know well about the way of life and religiosity of my indigenous brothers and sisters. Right now, I remember that time, on another mission, when the village elders came to tell us that they would not be coming to Mass tomorrow because the whole village was going to "pray to the Lord of the mountain"...

and... we were not invited! I innocently offered to accompany them, but they explained to me with great sadness that, well, Father, this time we have to go alone, you understand...

"We'd be delighted," I replied, "let me just go and talk to the group, I'll be right back!"

I rushed to the phone booth and called Father Eleazar. He would know better than I what to do in this case.

"What? They've already invited you to the cave! It took me two years to get invited! Of course, go, it's a wonderful experience."

We agree to leave tomorrow at 7 a.m., everyone on time. Perfect!

The next day, shortly before 7 a.m., I leave the parish house as I do every morning, with a strong, tasty cup of coffee, because I know it's going to be a long day. I head to the store to see if I can find something to eat. But before I can cross the street a woman rushes toward me... and takes away my coffee!



"No, Father, excuse me, but... You have to fast today!"

Fasting? Really? Oh, darn! I didn't see that coming! I look sadly at my cup of coffee.

"But ma'am, the kids won't want to go on an empty stomach."

"Oh, no problem, they can eat something, only you, Father!"

Okay... I know I have to respect their customs, so after a while we all set off for the cave, the missionaries and many people from the village.

It's more than an hour's walk. We climb up a path we haven't taken before, singing and happy about this new adventure, and finally we reach the entrance to the cave.

It's a small entrance, no more than 2 meters high, and a group of elders is waiting for us there. They have decorated the entrance with a wooden arch covered with flowers, and they have brought copal and offerings, and they are praying at the entrance to the cave.

"Let's wait, Father..."

"Okay, you tell me..."

An hour later, we are still waiting. The boys in the group look at me impatiently. I approach our guide very slowly:

"Excuse me, what are we waiting for?"

- "We have to wait, Father, that's how it is..."

- "Yes, okay, but what are we waiting for?"

"They're asking for permission, Father, we have to wait to get the proper permission..."

I'm about to ask, "Who's going to give us permission?" but I stop myself in time. We have to wait.

Another hour passes and finally our guide arrives: "We can go in now, Father, they've given us permission."

- Perfect! I turn to the group: "Come on, everyone, boys and girls."

Our guide stops me: "Guess what, Father? Women can't enter the cave, only men. You tell them."

Sure, of course! No problem! What could go wrong? A revolt breaks out: "Oh no!" "That's sexist!" "We're just as much missionaries as the others."



I'm in a real bind! I approach our guide again. It's obvious that he is the intermediary between us and the elders, and I explain to him that, well, it's a problem. Can something be done?

"I'll be right back, Father..."

He returns 20 minutes later: "It's okay, Father, all the Holy Missionaries can come in."

Since this is totally new to me and to everyone else, I ask them to be careful: no laughing, shouting, or pushing. Just like in elementary school: "I don't run, I don't shout, I don't push." And we enter the cave...

It is completely dark, except for the small lamps we are carrying. It is a very narrow, very long cave, reaching the walls on both sides. Everything is going well until we reach the water! Jump in, everybody! We go in and wade our way through.

"Follow me, Father, we have to get into the water."

Fortunately, it is not very deep, only up to our knees, so we wade through, and with the excitement we do not feel the cold. We can admire the stalactites that surround us, although very small, they reflect the light of our lamps in a special way. It is so much more than a cave. We all feel the magic, the transcendence of this place. We enter into a mystery, a kind of liturgy, a baptism of sorts. Someone is waiting for us...

Finally, we reach the chamber. At the end of the tunnel, a much larger space opens up, several meters wide and high. There, a group of elders is waiting for us. They have brought flowers, copal, the wax they always use, and long yellow candles.

"Now, Father, let's pray together,"

The elders sing a sad and melancholic song in Nahuatl. It is almost a cry. It is a prayer that rises from the bowels of the mountain, echoing off the walls. The candles cast shadows that seem to dance.

"Now, Father, it's your turn. It's your turn to dance the *tapachuwan* with us!"

I explain to the missionaries and the elders that we are going to pray with them, but that our prayers are a dance, a centuries-old dance, a sacred dance, often used in Mass instead of the Gloria.

- And how do you dance that, Pancho?

"It's very simple! It's just two little steps. Follow me."

Everyone looks at me with surprise, not sure what to do, but finally they understand and join in the dance, at first fearfully, but very soon they understand that this dance is a way of praising God with our souls **and** with our bodies. And we dance... like never before.

It's 4 p.m. when we finally leave and start our way back. I'm starving! Fasting all day is not for me! But thank God we finally arrive at the village and I rush home to find something to eat!

"Father, everyone is waiting for you!"

Wow! The church is already full of people, they have already lit the New Fire, and everyone is waiting for me to begin the Easter Vigil! Food will have to wait.

I don't know how I did it, but two hours later I can finally sit down and eat something. The missionaries are also exhausted, but their faces shine with joy. They have experienced something so special that, like me, they will surely never forget it.

Because it wasn't just a cave. It wasn't just a prayer or a dance. Since that day, I look at that beautiful Mexican mountain range with new eyes. It is a magical mountain range; it is an enchanted landscape that is alive. Its deep, mysterious inner world hides the secret of an ancient religion, a secret kept by the elders, but on that day they invited us, they said to us: "Dance with us, pray with us, be poor like us, understand that God is praised not with complicated prayers and mysterious rites, understand that *Totatzin God* is pleased by songs, and dances, and flowers, and candles, and the hearts of those young people who came to evangelize others and were evangelized themselves.





By the way, they don't have a Bible...

SIERRA NORTE DE PUEBLA, HOLY WEEK 1993

This is the year I began coming to the Sierra Norte de Puebla, invited by Sister Diana, to the communities of the parish of Tepezintla. It will be an unforgettable Holy Week and the beginning of a great period in my priestly life.

Precisely on this Good Friday, Father Eleazar, the parish priest, has called all the pastoral workers to a meeting in Tepezintla. About 50 people from different communities are expected to attend. Diana explains to me that it is a very important meeting and that Father Eleazar hopes to motivate everyone.

"We wanted to ask you, Father, for tomorrow..."

- Yes, Diana, whatever you say.

- Well, since there will be a lot of people there, it would be good for them to hear a different voice, so we wanted to ask you to give them a talk about the Bible, the Word of God.

- Of course, I'd be happy to.

I can't help but feel a little proud, or rather vain, because all those years of study are going to be useful for something! Wow, I get to give a talk! I have to prepare it very well and say brilliant and interesting things! Yeah, right...

Diana says goodbye and adds with a smile:

"By the way, I forgot to tell you, the people coming tomorrow don't have Bibles."

No matter, I think to myself, I can hand out sheets of paper and pencils so we can work.

"But it really doesn't matter," Diana adds, "because they can't read either!"



Um... That could be a problem...

"Oh! And many of them don't speak Spanish! But we'll get you an interpreter!"

Wait a minute... Are you serious?

"But don't worry, Father, I know you'll do great! Good night!"

Obviously, I hardly sleep that night, and I wake up super early, mulling over the question in my head: How am I going to do this? I have no idea. Well, maybe I'll put some drawings or diagrams on the board...

I forgot to mention: there's no blackboard either! The talk is outdoors, in a very beautiful setting, where we are going to spend some time together. After the introductions and some songs, Diana announces: "Now Father Pancho is going to give us a talk about the Bible!"

I freeze. There are 50 pairs of eyes on me, friendly, open faces, ready to listen to me, to listen to the *padrecito* who has come from the city and who is surely going to teach us something very important!



I don't even know where to start. I greet everyone kindly and the interpreter translates everything I say.

"And now I'm going to talk to you about the Bible..."

- Please take out your Bibles and open them to page such-and-such...

- Let's all copy this text...

Who can please read verse such-and-such...?

All the phrases that come to mind are ridiculous, meaningless, and say nothing to the people who want to listen. Fortunately, I don't say any of that and simply remain silent for a moment...that seems forever. The minutes pass...

And suddenly it dawns on me! I don't even know how the idea came to me, but suddenly I discover something I will remember for the rest of my life.

"My brothers and sisters, let's play a game. I need all of you to help me. It's very simple. Here's how it works: I'm going to say a phrase, and you complete it, okay? I'll repeat it: I say a few words, and whoever wants to can tell me what words come next! Let's begin!"

And I launch into it:

- In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and...

Of course, everyone crosses themselves!

- No, no, I need you to say it loudly! Let's do it again.

"In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and..."

A couple of voices respond: And the Holy Spirit!

- Very good, brothers and sisters, very good! Let's all say it together:

- In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, amen.

I try to encourage them, to get them involved.

- See, you do know how to do it! Everyone knows those words! Let's take another example!
"Our Father, who art...

A couple of voices respond: "in heaven, hallowed..."

- Very good, let's see, everyone together: Our Father, ...

Several voices dare to answer: Who art in heaven...

- Very good, my brothers and sisters, very good! What we have to do is search our hearts for the answer. Shall we do it again?

I see some smiles. They look interested.

- Let's see, another phrase! Hail Mary...

Many do not respond, but their faces light up. They know these words, their meaning, their significance.

- Come on, help me out: Hail Mary, full of grace!

Again: Blessed are you among women...

Some children respond: And blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus!

Little by little, they are, as young people say, "getting the hang of it"! But it's not easy. They are not used to speaking up, to raising their voices, to being heard: Who listens to an indigenous person? When was the last time we asked an indigenous person for their opinion, their experience? Neither the government, nor the Church, nor the political parties, nor the unions are interested in them... Neither you nor I... At 38 years of age, I have begun to discover a magical and wonderful world, the indigenous world, yes, wonderful, but marked by hunger, exploitation, alcoholism, a wounded world that can save us...

- Let's complicate it a little! Let's see who can complete this sentence: I was hungry...

Silence. No one responds.

- Never mind, brothers and sisters, let's complete it together. I was hungry and you gave me to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me to drink.

I pause for a moment in silence and look around at the whole assembly.

- What I want to say to you, brothers and sisters, is that the Bible, the word of God, is already in your heart! You may not know all the words, but your parents, your catechists, the sisters,



the priest have been sowing the word of God in your heart. I invite you to realize that God Himself is within you, that you are His son, His beloved daughter, and that God will continue to speak to you, will continue to give you His Word. Receive it with love and joy, as you have done today.

And that is a truth that has lived in my heart since that day, not because I have read Karl Rahner or Joseph Ratzinger, but because I have experienced Holy Week in the Sierra Norte of Puebla: that the word of God dwells in the hearts of the poor and the humble, and that is the best place to hear it.





"Share your testimony with us!"

ASSEMBLIES OF GOD CHURCH, WINDOM, MINNESOTA

Spring 1973

I have been living in Windom, a small town in Minnesota for almost a year, welcomed by a wonderful family, the Amundsons, whom I still consider my second family. Although they belong to another church, the *American Lutheran Church*, they accept and respect my Catholicism. Thanks to them, I am discovering my vocation.

At that time, this part of the United States was experiencing a period of religious renewal, a little charismatic, a little apocalyptic, in which I participated enthusiastically while at the same time understanding more and more my Catholic roots.



This Sunday, a friend has invited me to visit her church. She belongs to the *Assemblies of God*, which are totally unknown to me. In fact, I don't really understand the differences between our churches, so I'm happy to go. I will learn later on that they are Pentecostals who emphasize the experience of Baptism in the Holy Spirit. They are very dynamic and committed.

It is a tiny wooden church that can hold no more than 20 people. And on that day, there aren't even 20 people. At most, four people humbly occupy the few pews. But something happens that I will never forget.

The pastor, Mr. Wilkinson, an austere, slender man dressed in black with a white shirt, launches into a sermon that I don't understand at all, but which I try to follow, try to understand. Suddenly a discreet hand touches my shoulder from behind. I turn around and find myself face to face with the smiling face of Mrs. Wilkinson, who discreetly hands me a folded piece of paper on which she has written a few simple but powerful words: "Please, Poncho, stand up and give us your testimony."

I freeze. Just thinking that I have to speak, in my poor English, talk about Christ, talk to four people, what do I have to say to them? I start sweating profusely. My friend looks at me strangely, and I give her the paper. She reads it and smiles at me from ear to ear: "Go on, stand up and speak up for Christ!"



And I stood up. I don't remember what I said. It probably wasn't very coherent. But I remember that I was happy, and that I ended with a loud, "Praise the Lord!"

That was the first time someone asked me to talk about Christ.

It was the first time anyone in church had asked me for my opinion, my testimony.

For the first time, the voice of a 17-year-old kid was important, it mattered, it was taken into account.

That day I made a commitment: to speak about Christ, whether well or poorly, to few or many, it didn't matter. The important thing was to speak, to raise my voice.

Years later, after being ordained a priest, as I remembered this moment, I made another commitment: to give others the opportunity to talk about Christ, to give their testimony, to make their voice, their life, their experience take on its full importance and be a witness to others.

I have not always done so, I have not always succeeded; on the contrary, I have failed many times... But the commitment remains in force... until the last day.





But who would come up with such a dumb idea?

PARISH OF ST. FRANCIS AND ST. BLAISE

Brooklyn, New York, August 1998

I have been working for a year as a vicar in this Marist parish in the heart of Brooklyn, in a neighborhood predominantly inhabited by people from the Caribbean, the vast majority of whom are black, and a majority of whom are Haitian (although they are numerically the majority in this neighborhood, Haitians are discriminated against by other blacks from other Caribbean islands because they have a lighter brownish skin and speak Creole rather than English).

This Sunday evening, after the 6 o'clock Mass, it is my turn to close the church, secure the gates, and put the locks on. Alex, a member of the youth group, accompanies me. We have to walk around the entire perimeter of the church to make sure everything is closed. As we close the main door with a chain and a strong padlock, we are struck by the sound of loud voices at the front corner. A small group of "bad boys," the neighborhood drug addicts, have gathered there to smoke, do drugs, and cause a disturbance. They are bothering passersby. The tone of their voices rises, and threats can be heard.



Alex looks at me with panic in his eyes: "Let's go, Father, this could get ugly."

Well, that's precisely the problem, I tell him, those kids could hurt themselves or others.

- That's right, Father, but it's dangerous. What can we do?

Then he remembers an old expression from Father Pedro Herrasti: "Let's divide up the work!"

Well, look, Alex, let's divide up the work! You go call 911 and ask them to send a patrol car, and in the meantime, I'll talk to them.

- What are you going to do? No, Father, that's very dangerous. Let's get out of here!

- You go call the police; I'll take care of the rest.



Alex quickly returns to the rectory, while I adjust my Roman collar (in Brooklyn, priests always wore Roman collars) and head toward the group of drug addicts.

Just as I arrive, they are harassing a girl who is passing by, and it is obvious that the situation is becoming dangerous. Then I do what they would never have expected.

I stand right in the middle of them, look at them with a smile, and say in a friendly voice, "Good evening, guys, how are you? Let me introduce myself: I'm Father Francisco, and I work at the parish across the street. I'm here to help you. I see you're having fun. But I'm afraid I have some bad news for you. You see, I just called the cops, and they will be here in a few minutes. If they see you all like this, high on drugs and bothering people, I'm afraid they're going to arrest you. And nobody wants that, right? There's enough trouble in our streets. But I'm a nice guy, so I came to tell you that you have a couple of minutes to pick up your things and leave."

They all look at me in total disbelief. They can't believe that the young skinny white priest is standing there among them, without fear, without trembling, telling them to leave.

- "You did what?"

"Like I said, I called the heat, and they'll be here soon, but I came to warn you because, well, because I like you, and I think we all have enough problems without making things worse. So I suggest we all leave, and I repeat, I am Father Francisco, I work at the parish across the street, and I am at your service.

- "And you called the heat? You gotta be kidding! Who would come up with such a dumb idea?" (Okay, they said it with slightly more... colorful language, but that was the message).

- Well, you see, I guess only me, but time is passing, so I hope you do the right thing.

One by one, they get up, look at me with a mixture of anger and incomprehension ("Boy, you're dumb!"), and finally walk away, disappearing into the darkness of the night.



Once they're all gone, I walk away too, heading toward the parish. But as soon as I cross the street, two patrol cars arrive. The police officers get out and look around. They're surprised not to find anyone, so I walk up to them and introduce myself:

"Good evening, officer, I'm Father Francisco, from the parish across the street. I'm the one who called you."

"I see. We were told there was a group of drug addicts causing a disturbance, but there's no one here."

That's right, officer. While you were on your way here, I went to warn the kids that the cops were coming and that it would be best for them to leave.

- You did what? You gotta be kidding! Who would come up with such a dumb idea?"

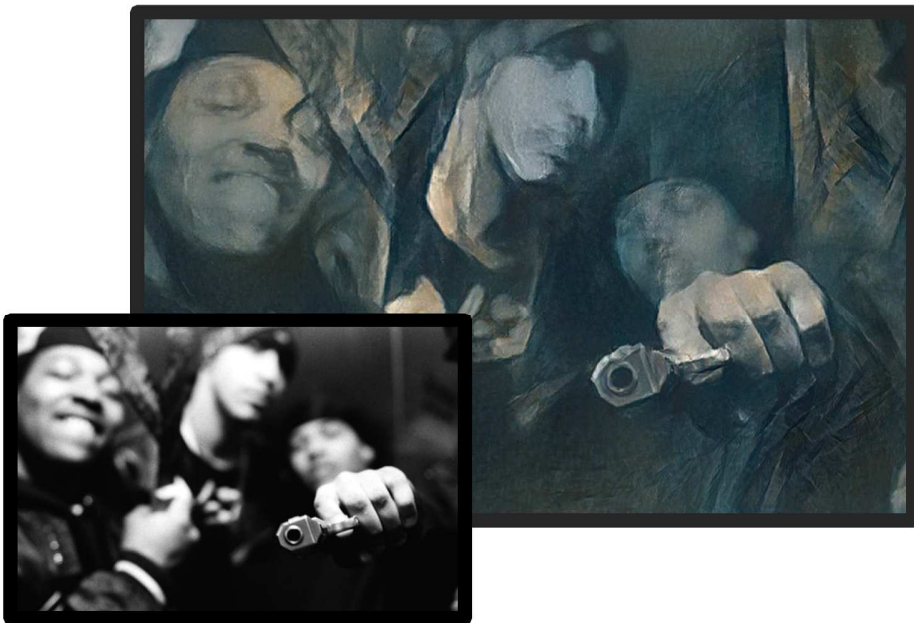
- Well, you see, officer, I came up with it. I thought those kids, and you too, already had enough problems. So I solved it. I hope I'm not in trouble with you for a possible false alarm.

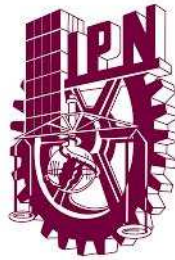
The police officers exchange glances, shrug their shoulders ("I'm not going to arrest a priest, are you?") and say goodbye politely.

- It's okay this time, *Father*, but don't do it again. I don't know if you realize how dangerous that was.

Apparently, everyone agrees on this: Alex, the police, my superior to whom I tell everything: "Are you crazy? Do you realize the danger you were in? Never do that again!"

I don't know if I was in danger. The ones who were in danger were the people passing by, maybe me too, but even more in danger were these kids themselves, drugged, hurt, wounded by life, who got lost in the darkness of the night and I never saw again... Was I in danger? Maybe. Christ was too. I only gave a few minutes of my life, without any major consequences. The Lord Jesus, and many others like him, were certainly in danger! And they gave everything... I'm still here...





That's the one! That's the teacher!

ZACATENCO UNIT OF THE NATIONAL POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE.

Mexico City, 1989

I have been working for the last five years at the *Centro Politécnico de Proyección*, CPP for short, the youth ministry run by the Marist Fathers. Our goal is to evangelize the young students of the IPN, the second largest university in Mexico, and under the leadership of Father Pedro Herrasti, the ministry has been growing: the number of groups and communities now exceeds 20.

Our board has decided to hold a large Catholic polytechnic gathering at the Zacatenco campus itself! This is a totally new initiative, and we don't know how it will be viewed by the authorities, given the lost story of anti-clerical history, but we're going for it!

Years earlier, in November 1984, there had already been a Mass for the victims of the San Juan Ixhuatepec explosion, which caused reactions from some people at the IPN.

This morning, there are about 100 students from the university, plus two Marist fathers, young people from the vocational schools, and the atmosphere is fantastic: balloons for decoration, a couple of guitars, singing and dancing, Catholic hymns resounding for the first time in this stronghold of Cardenista anticlericalism! (Okay, I'm exaggerating a little, but there was still some of that back then, I don't know about today...)



Many students passing by stop and stare at us: Who are these guys? What are they up to? Some approach us curiously, and I tell the young people to go talk to them! It's time to talk, to bear witness, to invite other polytechnic students to know Christ!

Then one of the young people comes up to me and says, "That's him, Father! That's the professor I told you about!"

"Let me see, remind me a little."

Oh, Father, I already told you! That professor puts us down all the time, attacks us in class, accuses us of being fanatics, conservative, obscurantists, and I could on! And it makes us angry because we can't say anything...

- Why not? Come with me, let's go talk to him.

- Hey, teacher, how are you? Can I get you a soda? But first, let me introduce myself. I'm Father Francisco. My friends call me Father Poncho, so I hope you and I can be friends!

I grab his hand and shake it vigorously before he can react. He stares at me as if he's seen a Martian! I don't think he expected to find me and all the young students giving glory to God and singing songs to Christ in the middle of the campus!

"Hey, professor, the young people here tell me that you're kind of aggressive with them, that you look down on them because of their religion, because they're brave Catholics who aren't afraid to bear witness to Christ. What's up with that?"



- No, well, Father, you understand, here at the university that's not allowed, it's government policy, the teachers and all the staff have to follow the law and enforce it.

- Yes, professor, I understand, but there's no reason to be aggressive or attack others because of their religion. If you have any questions or want to know more or want to talk to someone, I'm at your service over there, at the CPP! (I'll even give you the address!)

- Yes, yes, Father, don't take it the wrong way. Well, excuse me, I've got to go, I have an appointment, I'll say goodbye now. Have a good day...

I watch him walk away with his head down, and I'm left with a bad taste in my mouth... I would have liked to talk to him more, maybe ask him... I don't know...

Then I see the teacher turn around and come back, and he says in a deep, sad voice:

- You know what, Father? The truth is, I envy these young people, I even admire them. They have the courage that I don't have. They sing and dance and are happy proclaiming Christ. You can see in their faces that they truly love Him. But I can't... If I do, I'll lose my job, my seniority, my retirement, I'll never find work again... My family would be left with nothing; we'd be out on the street. So I keep quiet... Sometimes I go to Mass on Sundays, but I know it's not enough.

We look at each other without saying a word, we hug each other, like brothers, like believers, like men, each with our weaknesses and faults, but both with a deep desire to know and love Christ despite our weaknesses.

God bless you, professor, and all the teachers, all the staff at the National Polytechnic Institute, the government, the states, municipalities, city halls. God bless all the men and women who would like to do more... and cannot. And God bless also those who can, those who dare!





If you would like to give a small donation, is the place...

DEIR ES-SULTAN MONASTERY, JERUSALEM

I am on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land with members and friends of the Foyer de Charité in Chateaufort, France. Father Michon comes every year with a group and has been kind enough to invite me. It is a dream come true! I never thought I would have the opportunity to visit the places where Christ lived, suffered, died and rose again!

The Holy Land is a holy land, yes, but it is also a magical land, still inhabited by the Spirit, full of surprises. It is a land of unexpected encounters, of joy and sadness, of epiphanies and conversion, and Father Michon has prepared a very special encounter for us.



It is our second day in Jerusalem. We have just celebrated Mass at the Holy Sepulcher and visited this wonderful place, the Golgotha, where Christ died for us, all the holy places in this holy land. But just outside, next to the immense walls of the Holy Sepulcher, there is another church, a very different church.

Father Michon gathers us together and speaks to us, his voice filled with emotion: "Friends, we are now going to enter a very special place. For many of you, it will be a totally new experience, even disconcerting. I ask you, therefore, for a lot of understanding, a lot of charity, and a lot of openness to the Spirit of God. Follow me!"

We leave the Holy Sepulcher and immediately turn left, and father Michon leads us down a long corridor, up some stairs that seem to climb to the roof of the Holy Sepulcher. And indeed, there we are, on the roof of the Chapel of Saint Helena (as I later found out), and we enter a small monastery, the monastery of Deir es-Sultan. It is a dark, mysterious place, but it shelters us from the rays of the burning sun, and little by little I am filled with a sense of peace, while at the same time feeling a tension, a fragility. Something is not right.

"We are in a monastery, an Ethiopian monastery belonging to the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church. Perhaps some of you know that..."



Father Michon's voice is lost in the echoes of the hallway. Memories of my ecclesiology classes come rushing back to me: the church of Ethiopia, deep in Africa, far from the borders of the Roman Empire. Christianity was brought to these distant lands by Queen Candace's eunuch, who was baptized by the apostle Philip (Acts 8:26-40). Isolated from the rest of the world, in one of the poorest regions of Africa, Ethiopian Christians became a flourishing church surrounded by a sea of traditional animist religions. They are one of the oldest churches in Christendom. One memory in particular strikes me like a brick: they separated from the church in 431, after the Council of Chalcedon, because they rejected that Council's doctrine on the two natures of Christ. They are considered Monophysites or Miaphysites, because they affirm that in Christ there is only one nature, the divine nature, with no human nature,

"And nobody wants them here!" I hear Father Michon's words again: "Nobody wants them because they are heretics, because they are poor, because they take up space in a city where people fight to the death for every inch. Their access to the Holy Sepulcher is very limited, and there have been disputes over the ownership of the monastery. So let's go in and a monk will welcome us and give us a blessing."



We enter the small chapel in silence, where an elderly monk is waiting for us. He couldn't be poorer! His habit is falling apart at the seams. He lights some candles and takes a book from the lectern, a unique, different book: when he opens it, it is shaped like a cross, and the monk reads in a slow, emotional voice. Father Michon explained that he had read the passage about Philip and the Eunuch, the founding text, the very root of his faith, of his Church. When he finished, he raised the book and gave us a blessing with the book/cross, slowly and deliberately.

A nun has also entered the chapel, an elderly woman in rags, with a look that wants to be sweet but reflects centuries of suffering: rejected, persecuted, accused of heresy, she seems surprised to see such a large group. Without knowing why, our eyes meet: theology and dogmatic definitions separate us, but we are united by the same search for God in Christ.

Father Michon addresses us again: "If you want to give alms, this is the place... They really need it. But above all, they need someone to tell them that they are accepted, loved despite doctrinal differences. This is our opportunity to give them some of the love we have received so many times!"

I put a couple of bills in the basket... today I feel so sorry I didn't give more! Perhaps I should have approached this elderly woman so beloved by God and so rejected by men. A kind of shyness, a kind of fear stopped me: I don't speak her language, I don't know the appropriate gestures, I wouldn't know what to say to her. Today I understand that we must overcome

these obstacles, even if we make mistakes. I am left with the (enormous) consolation of knowing that our Heavenly Father looks upon us all with the same love...





Give me another shift, I can do this, please give me another shift!

MEXICO CITY, DECEMBER 1997

La Purísima Parish, Ticomán, Mexico City

This afternoon I am on duty at the parish office, and as every day, the phone never stops ringing. Sometimes it's for an inquiry, a question, to schedule a Mass, ordinary office work...

And then there are the other calls: the seriously ill, the accident, the wake at the funeral home in the State of Mexico... On the occasions when I have worked in the SANE (nighttime spiritual assistance service) of the Archdiocese of Mexico, I have discovered that behind every door, in every house, there is so often a tragedy, suffering, an absence... And we poor priests try to do something, and this afternoon is no exception.

"Please, Father, come and see my husband, he is very ill, I think..."

A short time later, a woman comes for me, and we walk together through the streets of Ticomán. I carry my small black case under my arm: a small cross, a tiny stole, the Blessed Sacrament. Jesus walks with me through the streets of this hellish slum in the big city...



At the end of an alley, among rooms made of plywood and cardboard, we finally arrive at the sick man's room. I am struck by how clean the room is, with clean sheets on the bed, small curtains on the windows, and pictures on the wall: this room feels like a home.

Don Ramón is already in bed, his torso and face swollen, his hair uncombed but clean: you can see that he has been well cared for. We start to talk.

- Well, Father, I don't want to confess, but I want to tell you that when I was young, I was very careless...

Ramón begins to cough uncontrollably, his face turns red, he can't continue talking. You can see that he is very weak (Yes, Father, the doctor has already come, but he says...)

With a quick but respectful gesture, I touch his forehead and lean toward him: "I absolve you of all your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit..."



- He's very ill, isn't he, Father?
- I couldn't say, ma'am. Let's let him rest. I'll come back in a little while, but before I go, tell me a little about him.
- Well, what can I tell you, Father? You've seen him, you've seen how he is, and he doesn't drink anymore, Father. He stopped drinking 20 years ago, when...

The poor woman bursts into tears. Memories overwhelm her like a giant wave. I feel that she has been carrying an enormous weight for years.

"Well, Father, let me tell you, it was when we lived on the other side, when we were undocumented, wetbacks, they called us, and he worked like all his friends in the construction business, back in *Califas* (that's California), and we didn't have any money, Father, and what little money we did have, he would drink it away, he would spend it on alcohol with his friends, sometimes he wouldn't give us anything, I didn't know what to do, because the truth is, Father, I love him very much, he's not a bad person, it was his friends, he was good, but his bad friends led him astray, and then one day...

One day he came home in the early hours of the morning, dead drunk, with a six-pack of beer in his hand, and my little girl had fallen ill, she was dying, Father, I didn't know what to do, and I ran out of the house, carrying my little girl, and I found him there, drunk, in the street, and I yelled at him: "She's dying, my little girl is dying, she's dying, my little girl is dying!

And my husband just looked at me, with a blank stare, drooling and talking nonsense, and he saw me crying, and he saw my little girl, our little girl, and he looked at the damn six-pack of beer he was carrying, and at that moment, everything changed. He grabbed the beers, threw them on the ground, where they all broke, took out his wallet, gave me the few dollars he had in it, and said, "Take her, take her to the hospital quickly. I'll catch up with you there. You go quickly, take a taxi!

- To the hospital? But we don't have any money, and the ICE agents are always around there. If they catch us, they'll deport us...

"You go, and I'll be right there!"

And then I found out that, drunk and without sleep, he went to work and told his boss, "I know I'm not well, but I need to work. Give me a shift." And the boss gave it to him. When the eight hours were up, he told the boss, "Please pay me right now," and the nice *gringo* paid him right away. Then my old man said, "Give me another shift!"

"No, how could you think that? You won't be able to..."

"Give me another shift, I can do this, I promise, please give me another shift!"

And the boss gave him another shift, and when those 8 hours were up, he said, "Pay me, boss, pay me right now, please, I'll be right back."



The boss paid him, just like that, without asking any questions, and my old man came to the hospital and paid what he could, and went to sleep for a while, and then went back to work, and he just kept going, until my little girl was well. In the hospital they gave her IV fluids. I was dying, father, but thank God the girl got well. and now she's all grown up, she's married, and then we came back here again to Mexico, father, and my old man worked here in the neighborhood, but it was too late, father, alcohol doesn't forgive, and his liver was already damaged, he was very sick, and that's why he's leaving us, and what am I going to do without him, father....

The funeral was two days later. I met the daughter, the little one, the one who had been miraculously saved, and the two grandchildren, and we buried Don Ramón there in Ticomán, in the La Asunción cemetery, and every time I go to Mass, I see him there, and all the others, the good and the not-so-good, those who made the grade, those who failed, those who loved and those who hated, there in the cemetery, along with Don Ramón, there are so many others, so many stories, we are all together, in that mysterious and divine way of being saints and sinners at the same time, of being the Church, of being the body of Christ.





You leaving already?

CPP: ONE MORE DAY..

In 40 years of priesthood, how many youth retreats have I gone to? 50? 100? If you count all the groups I've worked with: Kerygma, Maranatha, Shadday, Saddai, all around Mexico City, Tepojaco, Zacatecas... I can't remember! Each *Jornada* was unique, incredible, challenging, moments of grace, of work, of failures too, each young man, each young woman, a thousand moments that marked lives, in many cases forever.

It's impossible for me to remember them all, but in that sea of encounters, talks, confessions, and Eucharists, I still carry many of them in my heart, for what we did and for what we could have done. I remember one in particular, the *Jornada* of the Kerygma group, No. 117...



"Hello everyone, my name is Joaquín, I study at the National School of Biological Sciences, and I am an atheist. I believe in Marxism and dialectical materialism, and I only came to see what you Christians believe." Okay...

At the beginning of the day, each kid introduces himself, says his name, which school he comes from, etc. A little bit to break the ice. But this intervention takes us by surprise. The bucket of cold water falls on all of us. At least he's honest. The kids on the team look at each other: Who invited this guy? It's definitely going to be a challenge.

But the retreat is always full of God's Grace. God intervenes with all His power, and from the first talk, it is obvious that Joaquín is already "breaking down." Like so many young people today, he has only received a minimal Catholic education, from First Communion catechism, and like many, he lives in an environment of strict, outdated religiosity. He has never had that encounter of "open eyes and a beating heart with the risen Christ," in the words of St. John Paul II.

And he is suffering. The retreat has become a real torture for him, a constant questioning. He says nothing, but his face, his attitude, his body language say a lot. He has withdrawn, he doesn't want to talk to anyone, he doesn't participate, his face shows immense sadness.

The team doesn't know what to do. "Let's gang up on him!" I don't think that's a good idea: "Look, guys, you know the drill. The coordinator of your small group can talk to him, and then the coordinator of the retreat, and finally me, as the priest advisor. But we have to respect his timing, his process, his past..."

And he doesn't break down. Joaquín doesn't say anything during the whole retreat. When I invite him to talk, he just tells me that everything is fine, that it's very interesting, but that he never went to catechism, he hasn't made his First Communion, and he hasn't changed his mind.

And the retreat ends. Like so many others, the closing ceremony at the CPP is a joyous celebration, where parents and friends have come to welcome the boys and the team, and everyone gives their testimony, amid applause, laughter, and singing. Everyone except Joaquín.

Joaquín did not go up to receive his cross during the last liturgy of the retreat. Each participant is given a cross with a special blessing: "Remember that you are a man (woman), a Christian, a saint, and an apostle." They receive it while kneeling, from the hands of the priest, as a gesture of humility, of gratitude, as a sending forth to the mission they must now live. Everyone except Joaquín.

The last Mass has ended, and we begin to say goodbye: "See you next Saturday, don't miss it, your group and your community are waiting for you here at the CPP!"

It is always a sad moment, but one of trust, trusting that yes, they will come next Saturday, we will see each other again. Needless to say, many will not come back. But that's another battle. Everyone gathers their things, and among the guys who are already leaving, I see Joaquín who has taken his backpack and is starting to leave. He has not said goodbye, he has not spoken to anyone, he has just taken his things and is leaving...

- "Give me a cross!"

- What?

"Give me a cross, I tell you, one of the crosses we give out, » I say to Gustavo, the retreat - coordinator.

- "But why...?"

- "Give me a cross! Don't be stubborn, man! Trust me!"

- I only have mine, the one you just gave me!

Oh, darn it!

- "But okay, here, I'll give it to you. You know what you're doing!"

And with the cross in my hands, I block Joaquín's path as he was about to leave.

- What's up, Joaquín? You leaving already?

"Yes, Father, um... Thanks for everything..."

"And you're just leaving like that, without saying goodbye?"

"No, yes, of course, this... See you later, Father."



And he holds out his hand. I take it with both hands and, before he can react, I place his cross in the palm of his hand.

He jumps back as if a snake had bitten him! He stares at the cross as if it were burning him, looking at me in astonishment.

"No, Father, I don't believe, I can't..."

"That doesn't matter, Joaquín, it's your cross, you've earned it, it's your cross of the retreat, it's the same as all of ours, we all carry a cross, it's not a medal or a prize, it's the Cross of Jesus Christ, it's the Cross that Christ himself wants to entrust to you, as I told you: Carry your Cross and it will carry you!"

I don't think he expected that! Not that he felt rejected, far from it, but he had already decided that he didn't fit in, that this wasn't for him, and suddenly, without expecting it, there is his cross, his cross for the retreat, his cross for his whole life.

I leave him by himself. We did what we thought we could do. Joaquín has a right to his space, his time, his conscience, his own life.

The following Saturday, Joaquín returned. And he stayed for many years: Jornadas, missions, work in the ENCB community... He made his first communion a couple of months later, learned to be a Man, a Christian, a Saint, and an Apostle. We are more than friends...





Would you like to come to dinner, Father?

A MEXICAN FAMILY IN BROOKLYN

Brooklyn, New York, May 1998

I have been working at the Marist parish in Brooklyn, New York, for six months. Although I am in charge (sort of) of the Haitian community (and am trying hard to learn a little Creole), it is a multicultural parish, with Catholics from 27 different countries, so I often meet many Latinos. While it is a very lively parish, it is also a community in great need, with very high rates of violence and drug abuse. Every day brings a new adventure.

I don't remember exactly how I met them, but apparently this family heard that there was a Mexican priest at the parish and they came to visit me. I welcomed them to the parish office and we talked for a long time. They come from Michoacán and...

"Why don't you come to dinner, Father?" And there we told him our whole story!

"I'd be delighted. My mother is visiting me too. May I...?"

"Of course, Father, come on over, both of you, today at 7."

My mother has precisely come to spend a few days, in theory to see New York, but I think she mainly wants to know where I am, if I'm okay, how people treat me! So she gladly agrees to dinner with our fellow countrymen.



It takes me a while to find the apartment in this huge housing complex. The building is huge and has several entrances, but we finally find it. They welcome us warmly and have prepared a dinner of Mexican appetizers, but the most wonderful thing of all is their story.

"Well, Father, we arrived just two months ago, and we're trying to survive. My husband has already found a job in sanitation, and I'm here at home with the baby. My uncle, my three nephews, and another family also live here and share the apartment with us."



Wow! A total of 12 people live crammed into a three-bedroom apartment. Although it is messy, you can see that they try to keep it clean, to make it a home. The uncle stops by to say hello and leaves quickly. The others don't show up; they have left us by ourselves in the dining room.

- But tell me, ma'am, what are you doing so far from the land where you were born?

"Oh, Father, it's just that we couldn't live in the village anymore. There's no work, it's very hard, and then the drug traffickers arrived, we had to pay protection money, and there's a lot of violence, so we thought about it a lot, but with an uncle here, we said it would be easier, so we sold everything, the farm, the animals, everything, everything, and then we found someone who said he could help us..."

- A smuggler, a *coyote*, right?

- Yes, Father, and we paid him USD \$5,000, everything we had, and they took us by truck to the border, through Tijuana, and we waited there for several days, and then that man came and told us, today we're going to try to cross, so bring your things and get in the trucks." It was night when we got to the middle of the desert, and they told us, "The men on this side, and the women on the other, and give me the baby, I'll give her to you on the other side." You don't know how I felt, Father, but there was no other way, we had already paid, so we had to take the plunge. They lined us up and told us to hold on to a rope. There was a rope on the ground, and we grabbed it. The rope was tied to a donkey with a man riding it. They told us to hold on tight to the rope and not make any noise. As long as the donkey was pulling the rope, we were to keep walking. but if you feel the rope slacken, it means that the immigration police are around, and that he'd cut the rope, so run and we should hide.



And so we succeeded on the third attempt. It was on the third night that we were finally able to get through, and when we reached the highway, there were other trucks there that we hadn't expected. Everyone got in, put on the clothes they had told us to bring, our best clothes, and we left like that, and we arrived at the airport in Los Angeles, and everything was ready there, and they put us on the plane without any problems. It was a several-hour flight, and when we arrived here in New York, it was nighttime. Thank God they gave me the baby back before we got on the plane. I was dying, but thank God everything turned out fine. When we arrived here at the airport, they put us in another van, and the driver said, "Give me an address," and we gave him my uncle's address.



and there we went, scared to death and cold, because winter was approaching, and suddenly the van stopped, and the man said, "The address you gave me is two blocks ahead. Turn left and walk three more blocks, but I warn you, when you get out, don't turn around, don't say anything, don't say goodbye. If you try to talk to me or ask for anything, we already know where you live, and it will be very serious, you could get into trouble, so be very careful, and don't talk to anyone.

Imagine how we felt. I felt I was dying. My old man just hugged me. Well, we finally arrived, and there was my uncle. He looked at me as if he had seen a ghost. I don't think he ever thought we would arrive, but he let us in and took us in. and the next day a fellow countryman arrived, a "*compadre*" who said he was from the *Caballeros Aztecas*, the Aztec Warriors. Apparently, they are fellow countrymen who help each other out, and that everything was going to be fine. That same day, my old man started working there in *sanitation*, in the garbage, and yes, it's ugly, but it makes ends meet, and I have a lot of faith in God, and God will decide... Would you like another cup of coffee, Father?

My mother and I returned to the parish in silence. For a moment she looked at me with a mixture of sadness and fear, as if to say, "What have you gotten yourself into, son, why did you come to New York?" But her expression soon changed and she said with a smile, "You did the right thing in coming"... No, Mom, *we* did the right thing in coming, in coming to share a meal with this family. Somehow, all of this makes sense.

There are millions of them... Our countrymen, our fellowmen, our brothers and sisters who live in the shadows, hiding from immigration, from ICE, exploited, frightened, and they don't give up... I also came to the United States... By plane... With a visa... With a job... With money, insurance, and vacations... I don't think it's the same. For a while, I worked in migrant fields, in the beet fields in Idaho and then in Washington State. For a few months, I shared their lives, their fears, their faith. But it's not the same...





We would like to dance in your honor, Father

THE DANCE OF THE BLACK PEOPLE

Holy Week 1994

For this Holy Week, I am returning for the second time to the parish of Tepezintla, in the Sierra Norte of Puebla. This time I am accompanied by a large group of young people from *Jornadas de Vida Cristiana* (Christian Life Retreats), who have already had their first encounter with Christ in these wonderful retreats invented by the Marist brothers, and who now seek to deepen their faith in God and their commitment to their brothers and sisters, especially those who are most distant, as is the case with these indigenous communities.

Every day has been full of surprises, and on this occasion, as usual, a surprise awaits me!

We have spent five days visiting the different communities of the parish, visiting the sick, teaching catechism, and celebrating Mass. The young men have even worked in a "*tequio*," which is community work in which all the men participate when it is necessary to fix a road or repair a school. To be honest, after five days, I am quite tired, and this afternoon I am glad that the day is coming to an end so that I can rest a little. Apparently, there are not many activities planned for tomorrow either, so I intend to rest before the weekend.

Yeah, well, God has other plans...

- Poncho, there are some gentlemen who want to talk to you...

- Well, let's go talk with them...

- Well, you see, Father, we are from the community of Omitlán, and we have heard that you and your young missionaries are here, so we wanted to see, Father, if it would be possible, tomorrow, which is the feast day of our patron saint, Saint Bartholomew (August 24), we would like you to accompany us to the village, I don't know if it's possible...



I'm looking for a way to say no! Another walk tomorrow! And their village is more than three hours away, it's the furthest from the parish, one of the few Totonac villages here. I begin to explain that, well, I am very grateful for the invitation, that it is an honor, etc., etc., when a

hand touches my shoulder, and Luisa, one of the missionaries, whispers in my ear, "You can't refuse!"

Let's see, I think, I'm not Superman, I really need a rest tomorrow, I don't see how...

"That's right, Father, what I want to say is that we are the folk-dance group, we are the *Negritos* group, and now we have been able to get together, and tomorrow we would like to dance in your honor..."

Wow! It's in my honor! I didn't see that one coming! Obviously, they don't know me!

Luisa whispers in my ear again, "They already explained it to me. Of course it's not in your honor, don't be silly! And they don't even know you (see? I told you so!). What they're really asking is for you, as a priest, to honor them with your presence, so let's all go!"



Well, yes! If they're all going, how can I refuse?!?! So I gladly agree, while something inside me tells me that this is really important. And fatigue be damned!

So forget about the day off! At 8 in the morning we are already walking (breakfast was highly symbolic) and shouting "no hill is too steep for me!", we all set off for Omitlán!

We arrive in the village around 11 a.m. and, of course, there's no one there! We have to wait. Little by little, a few people start to arrive, the missionaries take the opportunity to play with the children, and finally my host appears.

"Come on, Father, sit down. Would you like some coffee?"

Okay... Here in the mountains, things have their own rhythm, time passes at a different speed, so we sit down, have some coffee, chat with the people, and I take the opportunity to practice a little Nahuatl... oops! They're Totonacs here!

In due course, the dancers arrive. There are about twelve of them, with their black costumes, their mirrors, their bandanas. We greet each other kindly, and I feel both closeness and distance at the same time. I even wonder why I'm there, but soon I'll understand.

They have brought out some benches from the church and, of course, they have brought a special chair for me. A couple of musicians have also arrived, and the group is getting ready.



I don't remember the dances. I don't remember the faces of those brothers of mine; time has erased them. But I remember the music, I remember their desire to celebrate the presence of the little father and the missionaries, which is like a visit from Totatzin God. I remember their gestures and their voices, which are the echo of ancient voices, of their ancestors, of their traditions. I remember their presence, the presence of the dancers, who take us into their mysterious world, the presence of the young

missionaries who listen and admire in silence, aware that they are before something that surpasses us all.

They are dancing in my honor... But not in Poncho's honor (no such thing), they are dancing in honor of the priest who has come with his "holy missionaries" to be with them, to celebrate Holy Week, in honor of Christ and Mary who come to see these children...

They are dancing in my honor... Not exactly. They are dancing because someone has come to see them, to be with them, to share with them.

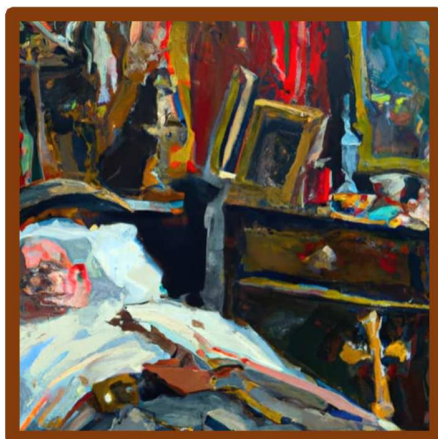
They are dancing in my honor... They are rather dancing in honor of Life, which is frail, burdened with hunger, fatigue, exploitation, but also filled with faith, hope, Presence.

They are dancing in my honor... Rather, it is I who am listening in their honor. I feel like standing up, hugging these dancers, telling them how much I love and admire them, but standing up would mean ending the dance, so I intuitively understand that my role at that moment is to listen, to accept that they are dancing in my honor, because that is how I can honor them today, with my presence. Today it is my turn to receive... Tomorrow, hopefully, will be my turn...

- Father, if you could please tell the people to support us, that this is for everyone, for the people, so that our traditions are not lost...

I am beginning to understand so many things...





Everything will be thrown away... Perhaps not everything...

"FATHER ARNULFO HAS LEFT US..."

I received this morning a call from the nursing home where he had been living for seven years, with few visitors. They have already contacted the funeral home, and they are taking care of everything. We just have to go and "clean the room"...

- Will you come with me?

I reluctantly agree to accompany the superior. We take large plastic bags to the nursing home "to put everything in." When we arrive, I glance around the small room, at the familiar objects that accompanied Father Arnulfo. "This is my whole life," the father once told me once: The photo of his parents, his favorite book, his profession cross, souvenirs from Oceania and Africa where he had been a missionary, his chalice... Dozens of objects, memories, books, and images that faithfully accompanied him until the end. And today, everything is going into the trash bin...

I caress each object before putting it in the bag. They are sacred, because objects accompany us for a time; they are our friends, our companions. They speak to us of times past, of better times. They remind us of friends, of loved ones who have gone away, who are no longer here. They are faithful, loving friends who cry out in silence and know how to listen, who conjure up forgotten presences that will never return. One day, their mission ends. They have faithfully fulfilled that mission of giving us points of reference, of finding our place in life, of reminding us of loved ones, of happy moments... They make the past become an enduring present. They make the absent present...



"Moving is the worst." That phrase hits me like a sledgehammer, reminding me of the times I have left, that I have left places and friends, that I forgot and was forgotten...

Another reality envelops me: one day another call will come: "Father Poncho has left us," and I too will leave, and all these beloved objects—the photo of my parents, my copy of the

«Petit Prince" bought in Paris, the chalice my parents gave me, Chin-Chin, the panda teddy bear that accompanied me to Rome and Ireland—will all go in the trash.

Perhaps not everything...

Perhaps Father Arnulfo took with him the most important things...

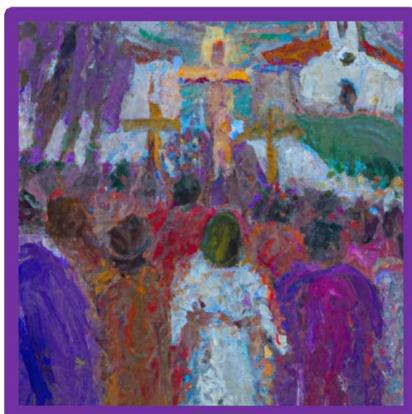


Perhaps, in a somewhat contradictory way, we only take with us what we leave behind: a blessing, a Mass, a smile, a friendship, a loved one. Jesus himself warned us about attachment to material goods. But I am not attached to these objects. I am attached to what they represent, to what they "re-present," that is, what they bring back to the present: my parents, my family, my loved ones. Father Arnulfo did not take his books, his vestments, or the chalice from his altar. His life will not be measured by the things he left behind, but by what he took with him: his faith, his love, his service. Above all, he took with him all that he accomplished in the silence of his spiritual life, far from either applause and praise. He took with him what only the Heavenly Father sees in secret, treasures that do not rust or moth-eat, those that transcend time and space.

I am sitting at my desk, alone in my room.... I see my book, my chalice, Chin-Chin... Objects, yes, material things, yes, but not only that... Much more than that... My dog Newton comes up to me, as if sensing my sadness... One day he too will be gone...

And yet I am certain that in some way, we will meet again in the Kingdom of Heaven, where God will be all in all, where we will lack nothing...





"It was because of the faces..."

THE ENCOUNTER

La Jornada, Mexico, Holy Week 1987



It was during a Holy Week retreat with the students from the CPPP, our campus ministry, that I first heard about the *encounter* between the risen Christ and his mother Mary. Father Pedro Herrasti, director of the CPP, led the morning prayer on Resurrection Sunday and asked us:

What's the first thing Christ did after he rose from the dead?

For me, a young priest, my head still full of seminary classes, the answer was clear, and it came from the Gospel: He appeared to Mary Magdalene and the other women, and then to the apostles to send them on mission.

Well, no, Pedro tells us, Jesus, as any good son from a well-respected family, and to set an example for us, went first to see the Blessed Virgin, His mother, to comfort her and show her that he had risen: We did it, Mom!

In other words...

I don't know what to say, or even if I should say anything, but later I dare to say: Eh... but that's not in the Gospels.

No, says Pedro, but we have the famous *argument of convenience*: It was convenient for Jesus to go and see His Mother because He is a good son and, like any good son, He wanted to comfort her so that she would no longer be sad.

I mean... "It was convenient"? Convenient for whom?

Again, I didn't know what to say, but I don't think a Holy Week retreat is the right place for a theological discussion. Although I have that theological discussion with myself: That does not come from the Gospels, therefore, it is not important for the truth of the Gospel, for the

Faith, it is only a tradition—to make the Risen Jesus a good, dutiful son and for that to take precedence over being the Savior of the world and announcing the Resurrection to every creature seems to me to be a watering-down, an impoverishment of the Gospel message. Furthermore, I think to myself, what is gained by this? Does it take importance away from the mission, from the proclamation of salvation, because *family comes first*? Is Mom first? I don't want my mom to be sad? Am I not supposed to leave my father and mother to follow Jesus? I mean... is it more important to be a good, dutiful son, preferably submissive and obedient to your parents, than to be a Messenger of the Gospel?

And I got stuck on that.

Almost 40 years had to pass...

León, Spain, Holy Week 2024



This year I have come to spend Holy Week with the Marist Fathers in León, Spain. My confrere Ramón Fernández and the other fathers welcome me warmly, and we agree that this Holy Week I will be accompanying Ramón to celebrate Mass in the villages of La Milla del Páramo, San Martín del Camino, and Celadilla del Páramo, in the diocese of León. It will be a busy schedule, as there are Masses at 10, 11, and 12 in the morning, in addition to the other ceremonies typical of Holy Week.

Incidentally, I will also get to see the processions of the confrerías in the streets of León, I have heard so much about them since I was a child, they are a wonderful manifestation of faith, tradition, and community. The whole city participates in one way or another. But that's another story...



Palm Sunday: Ramón and I leave quite early and go by car to the first mass. These are three small villages, about an hour from León, with another 10 minutes between each village, so the masses are celebrated quickly and we rush off to the next one. It reminds me fondly of my time in the parish of Ticomán, where I had a motorcycle to get there faster!



People welcome us very kindly. They are happy to see Ramón again and to meet a Mexican priest, "*hombre chaval!*"

I am happy to be here.

The week goes by very well and finally Easter Sunday arrives. We leave early, the morning is quite cold, and we arrive in time for the 10 o'clock Mass at La Milla del Páramo.

Where a surprise awaits us there.

"Father, look, before Mass we have to hold the *Encuentro*."

"The Encounter? What is the Encounter?"

"Well, Father, it's the meeting between our Lord and the Blessed Virgin after His Resurrection!"

It can't be! They do that here too?! But it's not in the Gospel! (I only thought that last part, I didn't say it!)

But we won't have time, we have to leave quickly for the next Mass.

- But Father, we've always done it this way, and people have come, they've already prepared the statues.

Indeed, inside the church, the women are preparing the statues: the risen Christ dressed in white, the Virgin Mary still in mourning, but they have prepared her festive clothes. Several men are also there, helping with everything.



I think about it for a moment: I can be strict, I can criticize, I can judge, but... what will I gain? Did I come to share the Gospel with my Spanish brothers and sisters (maybe there's a relative here, my grandmother on my father's side was Spanish!) or to take away what they have? Who made me judge of anything?

- Well, let's have the Encounter!

And that day so much changed.

Not so much because of seeing the statues or following the processions ("you go with the Virgin and I'll go with Christ," Ramón tells me, "and we'll meet at the church entrance"), nor even because I was in that deep Spain, so ancient and so beautiful, in the Spain of centuries of battles, of reconquest, of kings and saints, of deeply rooted Catholic faith (I have before my eyes those wonderful landscapes of León, a land that is both harsh and generous...).

Seeing the faces has changed my life...

First the faces of the women, their heads covered with *mantillas*, their skilled and quick hands dressing the statues, their hands removing the mourning clothes and putting on the festive clothes (isn't that the role of a mother?), the faces of these women who have been waiting a year for this encounter between the Virgin Mary and her Son, an encounter that surely has a meaning for them, mothers of families, that I can barely comprehend.

Also the faces of the men. Men from the countryside, working men, with calloused hands and sunburned faces, faces that do not smile easily and hands that apparently do not know how to cross themselves. But they are men who are present, on this day, this Easter Sunday, who have come solely and exclusively for the Encounter. Perhaps they do not go to Mass very often, nor do they know the difference between the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, but today, on this cold Spanish morning, here they are, accompanying their wives, accompanying Jesus, accompanying Mary...

There are a few children. There are no young people. There is no work in the village. The young people, all the sons and daughters, like Christ at Nazareth, have left the village and gone to work in the city... Who knows when they will have their encounter.

Today I understand that what is important in the Church is not so much the rites, nor the traditions, nor whether we use Latin or the vernacular. well, yes, they are important, but what is really important is the people, these men and women who today, Easter Sunday, have come to Mass, have come to the Encounter, have rejoiced because once again, after many years, Father Ramón has returned, and he has brought a Mexican priest, and we have found each other!

After the last Mass in Celadilla del Páramo, we all go to the inn for coffee, some bread rolls, and why not? A beer. There is a joyful and unforgettable atmosphere. I talk at length with people we have only just met. It is another Encounter. It is another liturgy.



Postscript

As I write this text, I am curious to know more, so I look it up on the internet:

The Encounter of the Resurrection

The Resurrection "Encounter" symbolizes a moment of great joy. As in the Passion, two separate processions move toward each other. One procession carries the image of the triumphant **Risen Christ**, often with a banner. The other procession carries the image of the **Virgin Mary**, who is still dressed in mourning for the death of her Son.

The climax occurs when the two images meet. It is then that the image of the Virgin bows before that of her Risen Son. In a gesture of great emotion and symbolism, her black mourning cloak is removed and replaced with a white or light blue cloak, symbolizing the transition from sorrow to the joy of the Resurrection. This act is often accompanied by bells, applause, and a choir singing Easter hymns.

Theological and Spiritual Meaning

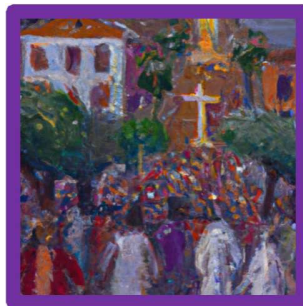
Although the Gospels do not recount it, tradition reflects a profound truth of faith. The Church has always taught that Mary, as the person most closely united to Christ in his earthly life, was the first to receive the fruit of the Resurrection. In fact, St. John Paul II, in his catechesis, stated that "it is logical to think that the Virgin was the first person to whom the risen Son appeared."

This tradition invites us to meditate on:

- **The primacy of Mary's faith:** Just as she was the first to believe in the Annunciation, she is the first to believe in the Resurrection. The removal of her mourning cloak symbolizes the end of the faith she has hoped for and the entry into the joy of faith that has seen God's promise fulfilled.

- **The Church of the Resurrection:** The Virgin Mary, as a figure of the Church, moves from mourning to the joy of Easter. Her transformation is a reminder that the Church is not a community of mourning, but a community of joy that celebrates Christ's victory over death.
- **The Joy of Those Who Wait:** The separate procession of Mary, dressed in black, symbolizes all believers who have waited in faith throughout history. Her encounter with Christ is an image of the joy that awaits us all when we meet the Lord.

The tradition of the Resurrection Encounter is a beautiful testimony to popular faith, celebrating the victory of life over death and the joy that follows mourning, all through the central and loving figure of the Virgin Mary.





"It does not speak, it shouts!"

SUMMER 2021, TURIN, ITALY

I have come this year to spend my August vacation in northern Italy, in the Marist communities of Turin and Brescia.

Turin is a wonderful city, with more than 15 museums, and the two weeks I spend here, in a city steeped in history, culture, and faith, in the company of my Marist confreres, will leave unforgettable memories in my soul: the open-air opera "Pagliacci," the Mass I celebrated in Italian at the Shrine of Lourdes, the visit to the Sacra di San Michele, where "The Name of the Rose" was filmed, the Egyptian Museum, but best of all was going on pilgrimage to the Church of the Holy Shroud of Turin.

When we hear about the Holy Shroud, the question always arises: Is it authentic? Is it a forgery? Is the Church trying to deceive us? How can we believe in it? But I have not come to debate, I have come to pray, I have come above all to meet the people who come here.



The church is spacious, wonderful, it is more than a church, it is a ship, an immense vessel that seems to sail the sea of time, crossing the centuries, a sanctuary where an invisible and silent heart beats continuously.

As soon as I enter, I notice the confessionals on one side of the entrance. I immediately notice the small red light, which indicates to me, like that of a tabernacle, that Christ is present there, in this case in the person of his priest.

I first approach the reception desk, where a very kind lady explains to me that the Holy Shroud is only on display during Lent: "And can't you make an exception for a nice Mexican priest?" I say with a smile. She smiles back at me, understanding my sense of humor, but she gives me a better option: "If you've come from so far away, why not take the opportunity to go to confession?"

The priest is a young old man, laden with years, experiences, and prayer, yet young in his faith and apostolate. He welcomes me with a rough and demanding kindness, as if to say,

"Don't waste my time with a bad confession!" I appreciate his fraternal and demanding affection, which makes me kneel before God himself.

And the elderly priest speaks to me. He opens his heart to me. He has spent many years here, perhaps waiting for the final call: "Many people come here, they come from all over Italy, from all over the world, perhaps out of devotion, out of curiosity, or in search of something. They come to see, they come to listen. They want to see Christ, they want to pray to Him and listen to him, but more often they don't come to listen, they come to be heard! But the Holy Shroud does not speak, no, it does not speak, it cries out! It cries out with a silent voice, it cries out the love of God made man, made flesh, made pain and suffering. It cries out the



pain, the passion, the suffering of a man who died for you, who died for love of you, and whose cry can only be heard with the ears of Faith! Every drop of blood, every thorn, every mark from the whips cries out loudly the truth of a divine love that not only becomes man, but becomes a servant, a slave, pain... But not everyone knows how to hear it because they seek a rational explanation, a scientific justification, and here the only explanation

is Love..."

This morning I was his last penitent. The priest leaves the confessional and walks away slowly, even heavily. It is obvious that his leg hurts him. He carries my sins on his back, just as Christ also carried them to Golgotha. I have also confided in him about so many of my loved ones who are suffering: from a death, a divorce, a failure, an absence. In the figure of this priest with years, decades of service, there is no joy, no laughter... There is passion! There is fire in him! In the life of this priest who wants to give a voice to this Silent God, so many people have passed by, with their sins, yes, but above all with their doubts, their sufferings, their anxieties, their joys too, their dreams. This priest is like a living shroud...

As I watch him walk away, I want to call out to him, to go to him, to tell him that I am grateful, that thanks to him I have been able to hear that silent, deep voice that I have often tried to silence, and also to ask forgiveness for the times when I have been a bad priest, for the times when I have remained silent and have not raised my voice with the fire of God's love!

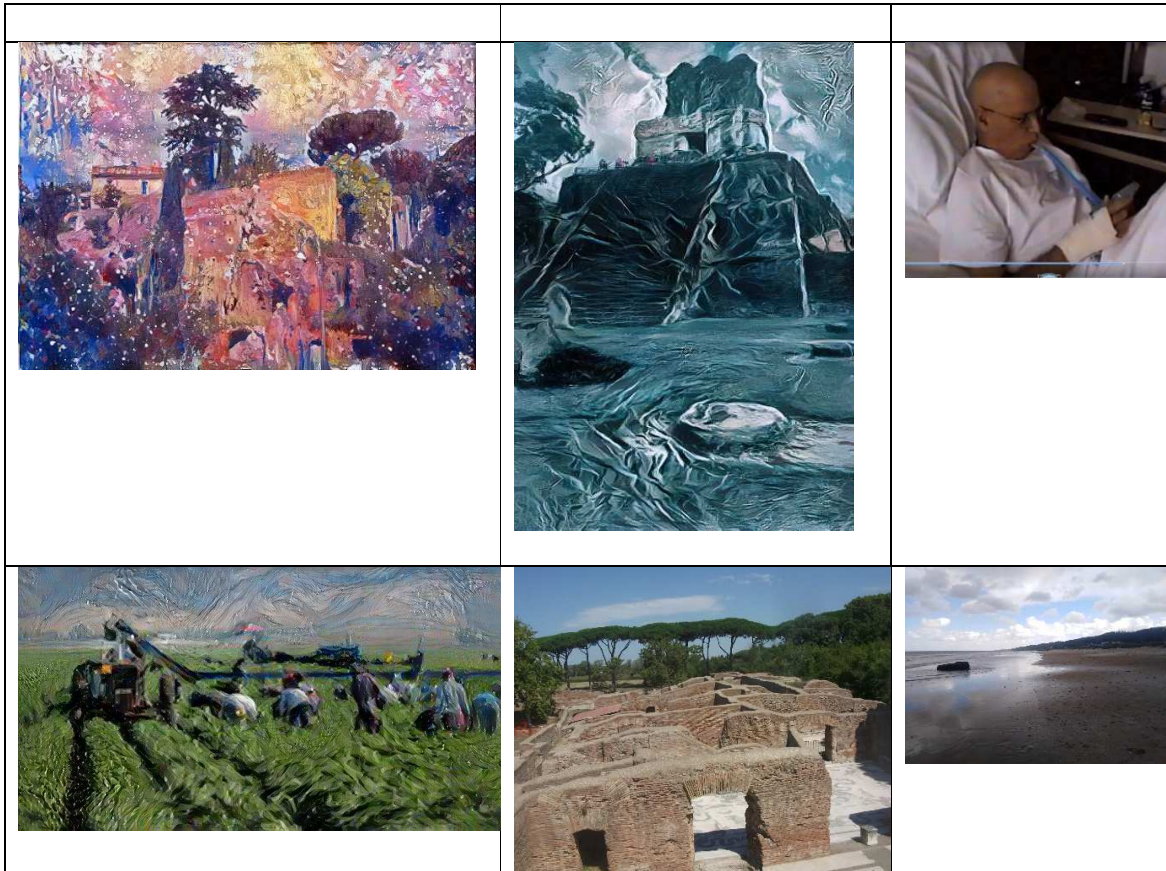


But it is too late, he is already gone... The church is dark and empty...

I leave the sanctuary and resume my journey, and suddenly I understand, I understand the message of the Shroud: Finally, the Shroud speaks to us of Life, of the full and rewarding Life that Christ offers us, but the only way to reach that life is the Cross: "Whoever wants to be my disciple, let him take up his cross and follow me... even if he stumbles... even if he makes mistakes, even if he fails... it is not too late, it is never too late, because repentance is not confession but changing one's path, changing one's life..."



... AND SO MANY OTHER PLACES...



There are places, people, events that have marked my life. They are indelible. They are unforgettable. I carry them in my heart and in my mind, they are engraved on my soul, and they will always be with me until my last day. I could not forget them, even if I wanted to. They are an important part of the fabric, the framework of my life. There are too many of them. I could never narrate or acknowledge them all. They are part of my life because they have shaped me, they have helped me to become who I am or who I want to be. In a mysterious way, they have helped me to live my vocation. And today I want to express them because they are part of the treasure I carry in An earthen vessel.

This section, which I have titled "There are so many places," could also be called "The other holy places." These are places where, for one reason or another, it is not possible to celebrate the Eucharist. But they are nevertheless sacred places. They are places where, in one way or another, sometimes because of the joy they bring, sometimes because of the suffering they have seen, Christ has always been present and will be until the end of the world. Some are places with a universal vocation; others are more personal. They are places where human suffering, reverence for an unknown God, and the beauty that inhabits them are expressions of that not-so-unknown God who would one day die for all men, even for those who never knew Him.

I share these stories with you in the hope that you too, on the path you have traveled on this journey, will see the footprints of a God who is Love, but who is sometimes a hidden, concealed, even unknown Love, which can only be revealed to your soul and no one else's.



You don't need to go to the Louvre...

LOUVRE MUSEUM, PARIS, FRANCE

March 12, 2024. I am arriving at the Louvre Museum in Paris, France, where I have lived for the last six years. I have come to say goodbye.

Or maybe not, maybe I'll be back in the coming weeks or months. But I know that the day will come when I will have visited those galleries and seen those masterpieces for the last time.

There is no doubt that I have been privileged in so many areas of my life, and yes, museums are not really a priority. There are more important things in life. Unless, on those visits, someone important accompanies you...

Over the course of sixty years, I have visited the Louvre twenty times. Sometimes alone, sometimes accompanied by loved ones. In some cases, those loved ones are now gone, or have simply moved on, but in practically all cases, whether they have died or moved on, they have died and moved on "out there." Here, inside me, they are still alive and present, and today I want to honor their memory and their love by remembering some of those visits and touring the museum for the last time. And the only way to do that properly is to remember my first visit, in 1964.



I am 8 years old. The Chauvet family has come to live in France. A new world to discover, totally unknown. And in this adventure of discovery, we have come to visit the Louvre museum as a family. I have a unique memory of this visit: My father has taken me by the hand and we are walking down a beautiful corridor of marble and light, passing dozens of small and large statues, but I don't really see them. My gaze was fixed in the distance, ahead, on the gigantic staircase at the end of the corridor, a staircase that gradually led us up to a work of art that has lived in my heart ever since that day: the famous Winged Victory of Samothrace! A huge, beautiful marble statue, with a stone dress blown by the wind, powerful wings spread out as if lifting her off the ground. It looks enormous, beautiful, triumphant, its presence filling the immense room. I think I understand, despite my young age, that I am standing before a marvelous work of art, before something that surpasses me but that in some strange way also calls to me, encourages me, invites me to keep climbing. Like my father, who also encourages me to climb those steps, who climbs them with me, and I am filled with the absolute certainty that I am seeing something that no one else can see...



1985. We only spent a year in France... I have returned to Paris twenty-one years later, and I will be staying for a couple of weeks. On the first day, I rush to the Louvre. I rediscover all those wonderful places, I climb the steps again. But this time I am alone...

A week later, my mother joins me in the City of Light, and we spend a few wonderful days together, including, of course, a visit to the Louvre. Twice in two weeks! We don't need a map! My mother knows it perfectly! These are very happy days!

The visits follow one after another: 1993, before the General Chapter in Rome... In 2000, with Christian and Eloísa, whose marriage I had blessed a few years earlier. The visit lasts six hours... 2009: another visit before another chapter! 2018. My namesake friend Françoise comes to spend a few days in Paris. The torture, sorry, the visit lasts eight hours!

And more visits! Luz María, Andy, Luis Enrique and Lidia, Rick and Heidi, Manuel and Gisel, the Monterrubios, Meche Orozco from the CFI, Javier and Janet Gámez, Collin and Audrey... Once I couldn't get in because the staff was on strike... And finally, this last visit, on January 24, 2024. Today I say goodbye...

On each visit, I experience a special emotion, or rather, I relive a special emotion, after many others, that moment when I walk down the hallway and climb the staircase that leads me to the Winged Victory of Samothrace. Because every time, whether I go alone or accompanied, my father is there... My father is there and he takes me by the hand and accompanies me on this staircase of life...

There will be those who think I am very conceited (okay, I won't argue!), and that not everyone has the opportunity to go to France and visit the Louvre so many times. But my message is more important. In a way, what I mean is this (and I have told it this way because that is how I experienced it):

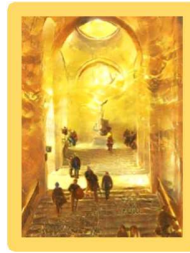
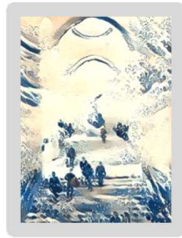
You don't need to go to the Louvre...

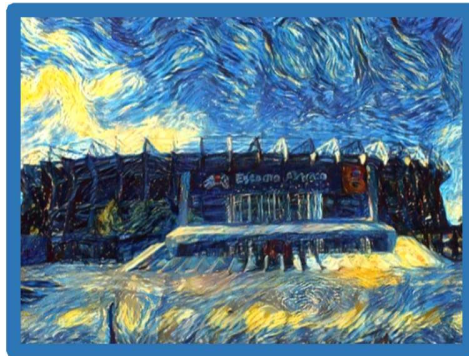
You don't need to come to the Louvre, you don't need to go abroad or to any museum, to take your child, to take your father by the hand and walk with him. You don't even need that child or that parent to be present. You just need to want, yes, want, long for, desire to take them by the hand and walk with them. And if this is no longer physically possible, it will always be possible to take their memories, your memories, and carry them in your heart. It will always be possible to talk to them in the prayer that comes from your heart.



P.S.

The lesson I learned from my father was burned into my soul 61 years ago. It took me a long time to understand that not everyone is so fortunate. At a youth retreat, I asked the group, "What have you learned from your father?" One boy stood up, and with tears in his eyes, said, "I learned from my father that alcohol can destroy a family...and he taught me that lesson without saying a word." I pray to God that this will never happen again in anyone's life. I pray to God that in the life of each and every one of us there will be a Winged Victory of Samothrace...and a father to guide us.





"You know there's a game today at Azteca Stadium?"

AZTECA STADIUM WITH MY DAD

June 1966, Saturday afternoon.

My father is reading the newspaper, and I am playing in the living room. My mother discreetly approaches my father and whispers in his ear: " " "You know there's a game today at Azteca Stadium?" That's all she says. That's all she needs to say.

My father interrupts his reading, scratches his head (as he usually does), turns to me, and asks, "Would you like to go to the stadium?"

Really?! Azteca Stadium! The fabulous Azteca Stadium! And I'm going with my dad! The drive from Ciudad Satélite to Santa Úrsula takes almost an hour. The black Valiant seems to fly at a thousand miles an hour. In the distance, I see the silhouette of the stadium, majestic, in the middle of the countryside, seemingly far away from the city. We finally arrive. The parking lot is huge, and we have to walk to the stadium, which grows larger with every step we take.



We pass through the turnstiles and climb the stairs. It is an absolutely gigantic structure of concrete and steel. We are in the bowels of an enormous gray creature that, despite its coldness and gray color, is welcoming and even alive.

I run up the last staircase that leads to our gate. I walk quickly, and when I look up, suddenly the green field of the Azteca Stadium opens up before me like the crater of a volcano (but I will only learn this years later when I climb Popocatepetl). It is an image that I hope I will never forget.

"Dad, we're late! The game has already started!" I shout when I see the players on the field!

"No, man, it's the reserve game!"

"Ah! What's a reserve?"

We found our seats, which were right at the halfway line. The halfway line separated us.

Today, almost 60 years later, go ahead, ask me the score. I still remember it: Necaxa two, Irapuato two. Irapuato scored first, Necaxa tied it, Irapuato scored again, Necaxa tied it again. That day I became a Necaxa fan. Because I went to the stadium with my father.



I went to many places with my father. He took me to school, to mass, to museums, for walks, and he took me to the stadium. That's what fathers are for, to walk alongside their children...



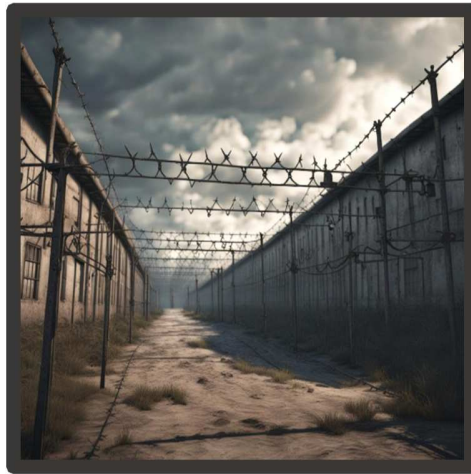
Part Two (written in 1998)

"Who do you support, Father?"

Mexican Soccer Final. The last time I went to a final at the Azteca was precisely América-Cruz Azul with P Pedro Herrasti. Many people ask me, "Who do you root for, Father?"

Well... I root for soccer! I root for the parents who take their kids to the stadium! I support the dad who promotes sports, love for the team, teamwork, and giving it your all! I support the kids who try hard, who sweat it out, who hug each other, celebrate, and cry! I support the moms who worry, but wash the uniforms and socks, who take their kids and their friends to practice and make sandwiches and ice tea for everyone! I'm rooting for the uncles who accompany their nephews and cheer them on! I'm rooting for... I'm rooting for Mexico, my homeland, my kids, I'm rooting for all of us who one day put on a jersey and stepped onto a field and laughed and ran and scored a GOAL!!! I'm rooting for those of us who love soccer, I'm rooting for América and Cruz Azul (not because they're on Televisa or TV Azteca (who cares about that, for God's sake!), I'm rooting for the dad who took me to the newly opened Azteca Stadium to see Necaxa... and yes, we will play soccer in Heaven!





"Some people were worse than the Nazis..."
AUSCHWITZ, JANUARY 2011

I am participating this year with the priests responsible for the *Foyers de Charité* in a pilgrimage entitled "In the footsteps of St. John Paul II." It includes visits to Krakow, Warsaw, Wadowice... and Auschwitz.

Auschwitz. The Nazi German extermination camp where 1.3 million people died, mostly Jews, but also Poles, Gypsies, political prisoners, priests, homosexuals, and many others. Back in high school, we were shown a terrible documentary, "*Nuit et Brouillard*" ("Night and Fog"), which showed the horrors of the Nazi concentration camps during World War II. (You can see some scenes on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0zG_1DN5aBk and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iR_ioOsB8UE). I saw this film 56 years ago and have never been able to forget it.

In a way, I am prepared for this visit. It is more a visit to a holy place than to an extermination camp.



Our guide is the daughter of a camp survivor. She speaks calmly, firmly, but also with an emotion that reflects the soul of someone who has faced, albeit through a loved one, the worst horrors and has come through.

I walk like a sleepwalker. I have seen this place many times on television and in the movies, but never like today. The place pulsates with a strange, almost muted, but tenacious life, as if those thousands of victims were still clinging to life. No one says a word. We are treading on sacred ground, the land where evil seemed to conquer all, and yet here too forgiveness and peace have sprung forth.

We see the gold rings torn from the victims. We see a room filled with the hair of those murdered, hair that would have been used to make wigs, mattresses... In one room, the toys of the murdered children are stacked up in an ungodly pile.

I walk among the crematoria. I slowly walk through the cells and narrow corridors that led to the gas chambers. A reverent silence envelops us all: we are faced with the mystery of Evil, with a capital "E", an evil so terrible and frightening that only Love can overcome it.

The visit is to the cell where St. Maximilian Maria Kolbe, the Franciscan friar who gave his life to save that of a father, died of starvation. We often forget that hundreds of priests, religious men and women, and even bishops died in the concentration camps . The Church paid a very high price.



The visit ends at the site of a gallows in front of the crematorium.

The guide tells us that this is where the last person to die in Auschwitz died: *Obersturmbannführer* Rudolf Höss, former camp director and responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people, sentenced to death by hanging in 1947. I am left with a very bitter taste at witnessing a sort of crippled justice.

We leave in silence. I am exhausted, emotionally and spiritually. How quickly we forget the horrors of war, how quickly we forget the evil that dwells in our own hearts.

Back on the bus, a father turns to me and says, "There were people worse than the Nazis! Do you know who they are? Those who helped the Nazis, those who didn't see, those who forgot what they did."

Part 2: Encounter at Niagara Falls.

In 1976, I crossed Canada by bus with my sister Gina. A mandatory stop is Niagara Falls. We enjoy a magnificent spectacle.

An elderly woman tried to get on the bus, but with great difficulty. I heard her speaking Spanish and French. Apparently, the driver didn't understand her. I went over to see if I could help, and we soon became friends. She told me she was French of Jewish origin and lived near Paris. I asked her why she also spoke Spanish, and she told me a story I will never forget.



It is 1940, in France, and the hunt for Jews has begun. Aided by the French police, the Germans are seeking to arrest and deport all Jews. Some friends warned her, and she ran to the train station with her young son and daughter, aged ten and seven respectively. They arrive at the platform just as the last train is pulling out and run to catch it. She can hear the Germans shouting at them to stop and start shooting. With superhuman effort, she lifts her son and throws him onto the train, but she

and her daughter are exhausted, fall to their knees, and watch as the train pulls away. Her son cries out, "Mom! What should I do?" Crying, she shouts the first thing that comes to mind: "See you in... See you in... Chile!"

Smiling, she tells me she doesn't know why she said "in Chile!" It was like a bond of hope that one day she would be reunited with her son.

Separated from her daughter, sent to a forced labor camp, and then to a concentration camp, she miraculously survives until the end of the war. She never sees her daughter again. But one day, she is finally able to travel to Chile and, incredibly, she finds her son.

I notice a certain serenity in her face. She has lost so much, she has lost her dearest loved one, she has lost years of her life. But she does not want to lose the rest. Now elderly, she wants to live in this wonderful world that God has left us and that we insist on destroying.





The door to the afterlife...
TARQUINIA, ITALY

Summer 2020. Once again, I have the opportunity to travel to Italy, and once again, I am fulfilling a childhood dream: to visit the Etruscan tombs in the Tarquinian region, just north of Rome.

I have always been fascinated by history, and the Etruscan civilization, precisely because it is mysterious and unknown, has always attracted me.

I travel to Monterozzi, north of Rome, where there are some **6,000 tombs** carved into the rock, some of which date back to the 7th century BC. The memory of my high school history books, where I first discovered so many fascinating cultures and events, comes to mind (and to my heart)!

And today I am here, at the entrance to a tomb. I feel like an invitation, a voice telling me, "Here you will discover something important." I admire the frescoes, the images of dancers and banquets, reproduced in thousands of books. But something more important presents itself to me.



Before my eyes, directly in front of me, I see the painting I came to see, a painting that powerfully attracts my attention. At the back of one of these tombs, about twenty meters underground, is the burial chamber where the remains of some important person once rested. I know that many valuable archaeological objects have been found here, and that they are now in various museums around the world.

But I have not come to see any objects. I have come to see a painting that has a very, very special meaning.

You see, while many of the tombs are decorated with paintings of banquets and parties, the back wall of this tomb is very significant. The artist has painted, in bright red, a door, or perhaps an entrance. I like to imagine an ancient Etruscan, kneeling before the wall, with his brushes and paint, drawing this door that somehow opens onto the afterlife, as a hope for eternal life, for something more, for transcendence: "it is not possible for man to die completely." This man is not painting a familiar scene, or something he has seen and knows. He is painting the unknown, the transcendent, what the eyes cannot see and the mind does not know, but what the heart hopes for.



This door that seems forever closed, which does not open, this painting represents the hope of so many men and women who never knew Christ, nor the revelation of eternal life, and yet there is in them, in their art, in their hearts, a door. This God whom they do not know, or only know in darkness, has sown in every heart the hope of Eternal Life, of a door that will one day open for each of us and lead us to the definitive encounter with Love. I wish I had known that artist. I would like to be like him: to show my brothers and sisters the way to eternal life...





"Where are you going now?... I will pray for them."

THE TARPEIAN ROCK

Summer 2020, Rome, Italy. I have come to spend my summer vacation in the Eternal City, the beating heart of Catholicism, the city of countless saints and martyrs. I have been here for a couple of weeks now, and I have been able to explore fabulous places: the churches of the early centuries of Christianity, the catacombs, the Roman circus. But today I am expecting a special visit.

"Where are you going now?" Father Franco Messori, a Marist like me and parish priest of Santa Francesca Cabrini, asks me with a wry smile. I smile back. We know each other well. He already knows that I like to explore the most unexpected places.

"I've decided to go to a very special place, one I heard about in high school, a place whose story captured my imagination, and which I swore I would visit one day. Today I'm going to the Tarpeian Rock."

Franco smiles at me again: "Ah! Are you going to pray for all those children?"

I am glad to know that he knows me so well! Yes, I am going to the Tarpeian Rock to pray for those children...



Rome is complicated, chaotic, with an unreliable public transportation system. It takes me over an hour by bus, subway, another bus, and a long walk through the Circus Maximus and a maze of small streets. But I've finally arrived.

In fact, I came here more than 50 years ago, when I "traveled" carrying my history books, guided by my teachers. Trips where I discovered the greatness and tragedy of ancient Rome, a "civilization" marked by terrible injustices and barbarities. And for some reason I don't know, this place has been with me since those days when I was studying at the Franco-Mexican High School.

I find myself at the foot of this steep precipice located on the southern part of the Capitoline Hill. All tourists know this hill in Rome, one of the seven hills of the city. They know the

Campidoglio, the statue of Marcus Aurelius, the square designed by Michelangelo. But almost no one knows this part of the same hill, the Tarpeian Rock.

In ancient Rome, it was used as a place of execution for certain criminals and traitors to the Roman state. It was a form of "civilized" justice where the guilty were punished with an infamous and dishonorable death.

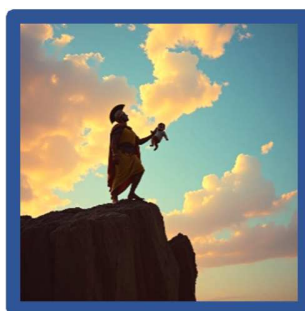
But there is more. Because the Romans also practiced a form of eugenics, birth control, social selfishness. When a baby was born, it was placed at the feet of *the paterfamilias*, who had to take him/her up in his arms to acknowledge the newborn. Otherwise, the baby was exposed or, according to some accounts, thrown from the Tarpeian Rock. The authority of the father of the family was absolute; the mother counted for nothing.



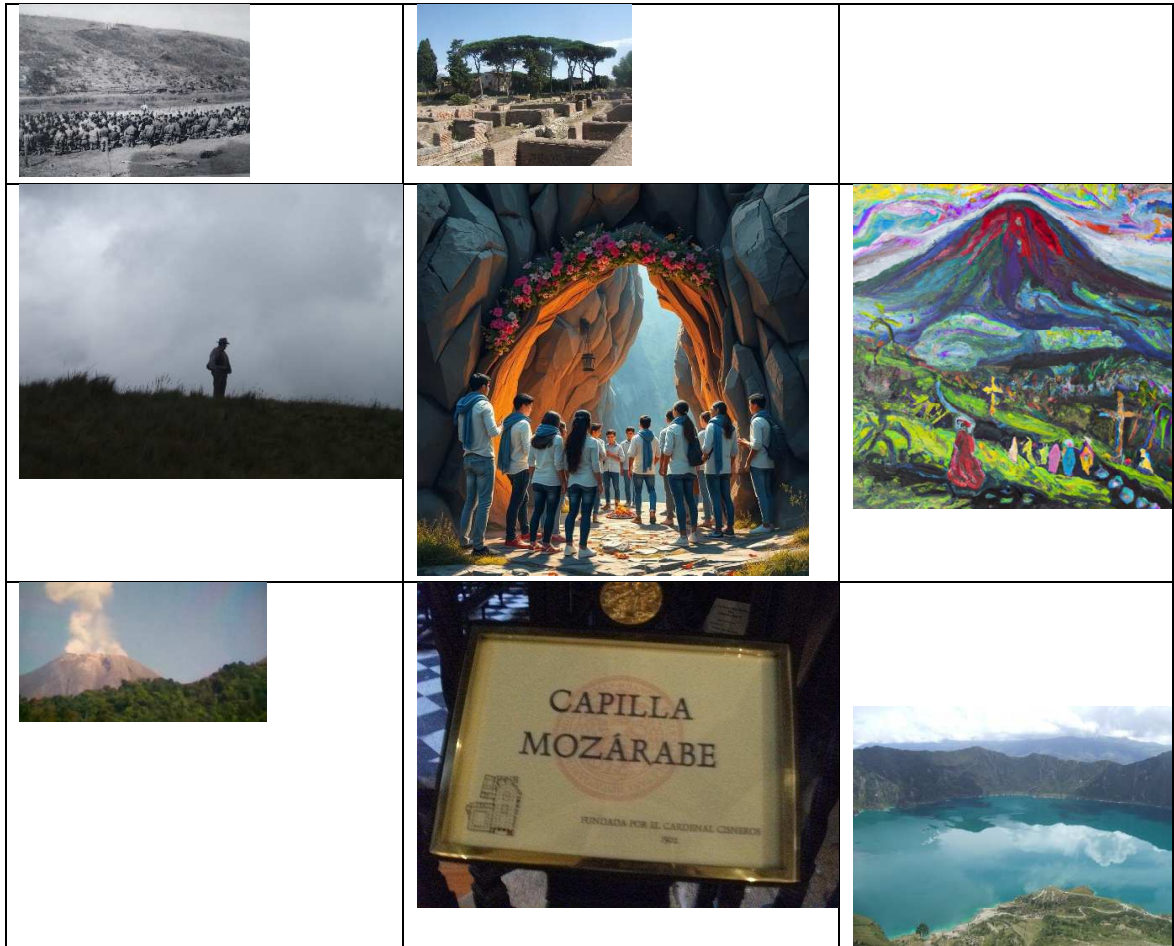
Although I am surrounded by the hustle and bustle of the street, my heart finds a space of silence. Here they died. Thousands, tens of thousands of innocent children whose only crime was to have been born at this time, sick, perhaps deformed, or perhaps simply unwanted, or because they were not "useful to society." I would have liked to celebrate Mass right here, where they died, for them, for their mothers, for all those who loved them or could have loved them.

Many guilty people also died here. This was a place of public execution, where murderers and criminals were executed. I also pray for them, for all those whose lives and hopes were cut short here...

Perhaps our society is not so different from ancient Rome...



AND MANY OTHER PLACES...



There are many, many more places: the home where I grew up, on Musset Street, and later in Ciudad Satélite, my school "Liceo Franco Mexicano," my aunt and uncle's house where we played, the Amundsons' house in Windom, Minnesota, the beet fields of Hazelton, Idaho, where I worked as an illegal immigrant, the beaches of Normandy where the Allies landed in 1944, Ostia Antica, near Rome, where the Gospel first resounded, my father's office in London during the War, the Mozarabic chapel in Toledo, the menhirs of Carnac, the cave in the mountains of Puebla, in Tikal, in Quilotoa, sacred places of indigenous America... So many places where I was able to see and experience Christ, where I could see the light through His light...

There were places where Christ was present... through His absence, through His silence: in hospitals, schools and universities, government offices (because we have expelled Him), places where so many sought God before His coming, and found Him with a different gaze, with a different heart, because to long for Christ is already to know Him. Places where so many men and women thirsting for Christ, thirsting without knowing it, somehow remain among us, through traditions, language, the land we inhabit.

Hence the great task entrusted to us: not so much to preach or share the Gospel, but to live it, or rather to live it, to share it before we preach it, because around us there are thousands, millions of "thirsty" people, and we, our lives, our words, our gestures, are the only Gospel they can read. Those who seek or have sought God constitute what I would call a special dimension of the Universal Church: they constitute an "open" universality not based on concepts or philosophy or religions, but a universality constituted because they share that faculty so fragile and so strong: *to love and be loved*.

That is the unfathomable mystery of the Incarnation, God among us, God one of us, an incarnation hidden in the history of humanity, which submits to human nature while at the same time transcending it.

Perhaps it is up to us, in this strange, lost, apathetic, "millennial" 21st century, to live a new kind of holiness; based not so much on Grace and the sacraments and catechism, but a holiness lived in simplicity and humility, through works of mercy and brotherly love.





CONCLUSION

*"When you hear that I can no longer celebrate Mass, consider me dead."
St. Francis Xavier Bianchi*

As I finish writing this book, I realize... that I have been so blessed! I have received so much from God and so much from so many people, so many people who have touched my life in a wonderful way!

I thought I was giving up having a family, and I have had the most wonderful family anyone could hope for, made up of hundreds, thousands of people whom I have been able to lead, even if only for a few moments, in prayer to God! People who have left an indelible mark, a scar made of light and love in my heart.

I thought I was giving up material possessions, and instead I have been blessed abundantly by being welcomed into so many homes, so many houses that opened their doors to me, from luxury apartments in Paris and New York to small mud-and-wood huts in the mountains of Puebla. I have been enriched by sharing bread and wine, the Bread and Wine, laughter, sorrows, joys, grief, deaths, separations more painful than death. My treasure is made up of thousands of smiles, hugs, scoldings, corrections, tears in my eyes and in the eyes of those who look at me, waiting for a word of comfort and peace. My poverty is that of the Kingdom, made up of the treasures that God made me accumulate in other peoples 'hands...



I thought I was giving up my own will, my own life plan, by agreeing to obey Christ and his representatives in the Church. In fact, I have been blessed with a full, beautiful life, an exciting adventure through life, but not MY life, but the lives of others, when I wanted to be present, to talk about God, to share that Grace that God had placed in my soul.

Many times I stopped, I was afraid, I was weak... I did not follow Christ... I wanted to show off, to show how intelligent and brilliant I am, to humiliate others in order to aggrandize



myself, I wanted them to applaud me , while pretending to do it for Christ... when it was simply not true. Even now, as I write these words, I feel that my pride and vanity soak these words... Many times I stopped on my path; I did not give the hundredfold that the Gospel demands; And I know that if I had the chance to start over, I would do it again... just as badly. I have not been a saint. I often settled for mediocrity. And yet, for a reason I don't fully understand, here I am, at the beginning of a new day, a new opportunity to love, to

forgive, to help, to speak of Christ, to break bread and serve wine... I don't understand this immense and bewildering patience of God!

There will be other Masses... there will be other mistakes... there will still be opportunities to help, to serve, to share the Bread and preach the Gospel, even with my life.

But I also feel the growing fatigue, the illness (this darn Crohn's!), I no longer move as I used to, I can no longer (do I want to?) do everything I used to do. I feel that a stage in my life is approaching in which God will become more present, more transcendent, but He will also ask more of me...

He will ask me to give what I don't think I can give, He will ask me to give what I have not yet given.

I have had everything, I have received everything, but I have not given everything. Perhaps that is why I am still here: so that, in what is perhaps the last stage of my life, I can truly follow the One who loved me and gave himself for me...



P Poncho, sm

