

Visions of Hope



A moment of friendship during our visit to the settlement of landless peasants, *Felicidade*.

This is a time of suffering for our world. How easily we can begin to list peoples, places and situations that fill us with sorrow -- perhaps, even with dread. These feelings are not abnormal, and they should not be repressed through distractions that hold no meaning. Yet, they must not become the totality of our heart's concern or attention.

Now, more than ever, we need to open our eyes to the whole of our reality as a human family, a family with a long history affecting us all.

When we open our lives to this 'postmodern' world, we will recognize the suffering and pain, but also the possibility for ever-greater horizons of joy and compassion.

Do we have the courage to accept this challenge?

Our community, in recent months, has been blessed by the opportunity to travel to Mexico and to Brazil, to share in the life of two Latin American Benedictine communities.

Just by being outside of the United States, we could notice our perspectives changing, as we lived among people with their own appropriate concerns, pains, and joys.

Among our many encounters in Mexico, we were able to visit with Gerardo Thijssen, born in Holland and now married to a Mexican indigenous woman.

Inserted among the reality of the majority of Mexicans, their life is simple, if not frugal. For over thirty years, they have embodied what has come to be called the "preferential option for the poor."

The Dutchman Gerardo, like us North Americans, has known first-hand the isolating individualism and accompanying competition characteristic of Western culture.

Yet, in this new context, he discovered a whole new world opening up -- a world in which the indigenous poor live every day. It was wonderful to experience him on fire with the journey of his chosen life-path.

He had embraced a world where the life of each person is woven into the fabric of the local community, where education stresses its contribution to the community for the welfare of all, and where people relate as subjects, not as objects.

Among the poor in Brazil, we also glimpsed visions of hope.

We were invited into the "homes" of very impoverished people -- shacks created by wooden poles, covered by black plastic -- in order that they might share coffee with us in whatever would serve as a cup (even old plastic margarine containers).

These people had just been forced off of their old land, which the mayor now wanted for a dump, and they were setting up a new camp on the other side of town.

One of their members, a sixty-year old man, had recently collapsed and died in the center of town, and the community was grieving for him.

"It was too much for him," they said. Yet, after their forced relocation, their extreme poverty, and the sudden death of their friend, they still dreamt of holding title to their own land.

They knew, however, that they would have to stay together in order to make their voices heard. Providing a future for their children was the reason for their hope.

In these far-off places, we began to see our daily lives back home with a new depth and clarity. We are not the indigenous poor, nor do we live in black plastic shacks. We are Benedictine monks, who have been enabled to experience the world differently through our being accompanied by our Benedictine sisters and brothers.

Once home, we are challenged to realize the Gospel message in the way we live, to know within our hearts that the lives we touch are also filled with the potential of building a new future.

During this time of pain, fear, and confusion, we have a choice: our minds and hearts can either close down, or continue to open up. Each of us must make our own choices, but we know that we cannot continue the journey alone.

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