

The Local and the Global: Reaction and Response

brother Michael

IT IS NOT UNCOMMON IN THESE DAYS TO FIND ourselves overwhelmed by the ubiquitous pressure of our culture. Our hearts are wrenched by the images of suffering that we encounter daily. Not only in the international news of Haiti, Chile or Nigeria, but in the actual presence of the homeless and addicted in our towns and cities. We are confronted with questions of meaning and response.

How do we address their pain, our pain and societal deprivation? Do we find ourselves reacting by limiting ourselves through withdrawal and fear? What is an imaginative response that comes from prayer and the active engagement with our times? What does it mean in the year 2010 to keep our faith vibrant and active?

When we visit Mexico and the Guadalupe Benedictine Sisters, we bring these questions with us. One may mistakenly think that, after some thirty years of visiting, there is nothing new to learn or to see. That is not true. We travel to Mexico in order to change our perspectives. Our own culture can put blinders over our eyes. Our blindness requires the presence of "the other" to free our sight.

This year's annual trip had its usual twists and turns. We encountered the rich and ancient culture of the native Mexicans, as well as the creation and destruction of their cities, places of worship and way of life. We were acutely sensitive to the struggles of the present inhabitants to recapture their heritage while at the same time being relevant in this age of instant electronic dialogue.

Most of our time was spent in Cuernavaca, home of the Guadalupe Center and our Benedictine Sisters. From there we traveled to various places of historical interest and to communities the Sisters serve.

Xochicalco is a pre-Columbian archeological, mountain site about an hour west of Cuernavaca. It was a major religious center. It was founded



Coatetelco museum, director at left

At the archeological site with Memo, our guide, in center

in about 650 CE by Mayan traders from Campeche. This city had a population of 20,000 people before it was burned and destroyed around the year 900 CE. Its temple system, ball courts and observatories cover many acres of land and must be visited to be appreciated. The site has a modern museum that tells their story in a way that transports the imagination back through time and into a vibrant, yet past culture. The name of the site is translated as "the house of flowers." A main attraction is the Quetzalcoatl pyramid, also known as the temple of the plumed serpent, in a style that includes the apparent influences of Mayan art. The feathers are symbolic of heaven, and the serpent is the earth. It touches upon the spirit of the Incarnation for us.

This year we visited a Nahuatl village a short distance from Xochicalco. The village has a single temple mound, a ball court site and a museum, all in a space the size of a city block, located in the middle of the town. The mountain where the ruins of Xochicalco lay could be seen across the wide sweeping valley. Much to our delight, in our immediate vicinity, just over a low stone wall, turkeys called to each other. The museum was the size of a traditional single family home, having two rooms with a modest display of artifacts found on the site. We felt right at home. Our male guide explained to us that the ball court contained the remains of a woman who founded the community. He then assured us that women did not play the sacred ball game, and that they do not have a special role within the leadership of the present community. This left us a bit skeptical.

In the book "The Sport of Life and Death," edited by E. Michael Whittington, the possibility of women playing the ball game is explored. There is serious questioning if women did not have major roles within these societies. The questioning was affirmed when, after our museum tour, we visited an 86 year old woman, Teódula Alemán Cleto, who is



Teófila Alemán Cleto (center front) at Coatetelco with Weston brothers and Benedictine Sisters

Aztec dance at Coatetelco

now a leader in the community. She is a retired school teacher and dynamo of cultural heritage. She is presently organizing young men and women in the community, teaching them traditional Aztec dances, while at the same time writing a book about the history of the village so that “we can tell everyone what really happened here.” She is not the mayor, but everyone could see she had the presence to inspire a new generation. While we wondered if our guide had met this enlightened woman, we recognized that some struggles transcend all our cultures.

Popocatepetl is an active volcano located 43 miles southeast of Mexico City and two hours east of Cuernavaca. It is an active volcano and at times sends showers of ash over the land. The mountain is a living, active and awesome presence. On the east side of the mountain (Cuernavaca side) we visited a family-run cooperative which makes food products from an ancient Aztec grain named “amaranth”. It is so nutritious and valuable that the Aztec lords of Mexico City required tons of the grain as tribute. Its importance is likened to corn. What was surprising, as well as inspiring, is that on Friday afternoons there is a market in the town and there the business of the community is based on bartering and not on currency. I wondered how much amaranth would be necessary to exchange for a chicken or a meal of tortillas.

We were then escorted to their factory, which had two large rooms for preparing the grain. In one room there were ovens for making a delicious granola, and in the other they served amaranth glued together with fresh hot honey heated over a wood fire. They spread the mixture with a hardwood board that made sheets of the healthiest snack that can be imagined. Their market is strictly local since there are no preservatives used in the mixture. The taste reflects the vitality held within the volcanic soil.

From there we all shared lunch together, including deep-fried amaranth pancakes, in a compound that housed four living generations of the same family, along with their chickens and corn field. The gentleness and



Weston brothers and Benedictine Sisters at Amaranth Coop in Huazulco and at Coop Store

humility of our hosts were as nurturing as the food.

Each trip to Mexico is unique. Each time we bring our present concerns, questions and doubts with us, as surely as we bring our luggage. On this trip, we experienced the gift of communal life. As we traveled with the Sisters, it again became clear that whatever our responses would be to our suffering turbulent world, the response would be a communal one. This does not do away with personal initiatives, which are crucial, but rather gives these initiatives a larger perspective and context.

For the grandeur of Xochicalco, there is the Nahuatl pueblo with its homespun stories. While the family cooperative near Popocatepetl volcano has no access to the global market for its goods, it has the perishable delicacy of the amaranth seed. While we see and feel the vast destruction of earthquakes and injustice near and far, we have the gift of each other to discern and challenge one another to respond.

The responsiveness of the Guadalupe Center is central for us. The Sisters at the Center are a living community. They invite all of us to start or continue the formation of other living communities. Our Lady of Guadalupe spoke to Juan Diego in order to free a people from bondage, sickness and death. The formation of small reflective groups who meet, possibly for one hour a week, to share their lives and witness are authentic responses to the suffering of our world today. It seems that when we come together, something always happens. The journey of our lives together is much lighter when, as at our Midday Prayer, we can pray “Let us share one another’s burdens.” Perhaps one day, for a change of perspective and for the opportunity of learning, your community of friends will visit Mexico.

Yes, the questions linger. What is our response, prayerfully inspired, to a world that groans for peace and a healing touch? How do we bring the presence of “the other” along our shared and redemptive journey? “Let us set out, on a pilgrimage of the heart.” ■