

Of Cabbages, a Cat, and Our Lady of Guadalupe

—*brother Peter*

THEY WERE ROSE-LIKE IN FORM, BUT MULTI-COLORED and really beautiful—and edible. What a wonder! I was weeding around the decorative cabbages in my section of our community garden when two elderly women guests with cameras came along, admiring and inquisitive. I was happy to point out the qualities of the cabbages and how pleased I was with them. The two guests clutched their cameras but paused hesitantly. As I hovered over the cabbages, I asked, “Would you like to take a picture?” “Yes,” they said, “We’re just waiting for you to step out of the way.”

Our yearly visits with our Mexican Benedictine sisters (Las Misioneras Guadalupeanas de Cristo Rey, OSB) in January/February have enabled deep encounters between our two communities, our peoples and our cultures. The art of it for both of us has been in knowing when and how to “step out of the way.” In the course of over thirty years of interaction and association, our two communities have become one family. We are both at home, renewed and yet challenged in our companionship with each other.

This year, despite the drug wars so constantly and prominently in the news, we were not afraid to go to Mexico to be with our sisters. An outing with them to visit the murals of Desiderio Hernandez Xochitiotzin in the *Palacio de Gobierno* in Tlaxcala, symbolized this for me. The major wall space was given over to the wars and triumphs of the indigenous population of this area. In the nooks and corners around these, the mundane daily life and everyday routines of the people were depicted—marriage and family customs, planting and harvesting corn, making cloth from the fibers and drink from the sap of the maguey plant, selling and buying produce and crafts at the open market.

The extraordinary military and political events celebrated in the murals are now history. But the ordinary social and familial life of the people shown in the periphery continues almost unchanged in the life of today. Our sisters assure us a safe time and space in which to touch the timeless, underlying realities of people’s lives. This is



not to dismiss the tragedy of the drug wars and the political and social turmoil that results, but to underline the constancy and faithfulness of the sisters' own community life and their presence with and accompaniment of the people of Mexico. They make it possible for others like us to encounter through them the enduring life and values of this people.

We next went to meet with the Human Rights Committee of the Tlaxcala Centro "Fray Julián Garcés". This visit brought our attention to the hard fact and usually hidden experience of human trafficking today—the ensnaring or abduction of young women into a life of prostitution in Mexico and extending into US cities. The Human Rights Committee ministers to these women, works to make people aware of this reality and pressures for laws to address the problem both locally and at state and national levels.

During a break in the sessions I noticed a cat eyeing me from an alley between the buildings. It was quite pregnant. I read somewhere that a cat sees further and in a wider arc than humans. Details that escape the human eye are immediately clear to a cat. As part of our time in the area, we were given a tour of the ruins of a great temple complex at Cacaxtla. The guide spoke of the sacrifice of virgin girls and babies in ancient times. With the eyes of a cat can we see that slavery and the sacrifice of women, though hidden, still persists in our own time and societies?

Another image remains strongly with me from an incident at Santa María Ahuacatlán, near Cuernavaca. While photographing an indigenous folk-art statue of Our Lady of Guadalupe just outside the old, colonial-era, parish church there, a young school girl came by, shyly holding a handful of bright red bougainvillea. She waited patiently for me to finish so she could offer them to Our Lady. Seen through the camera's lens, it was as if the Guadalupean statue was bending tenderly towards the young girl. God's mercy is deeply felt and visualized in the tradition of the Mexican people.

The touching of the daily life of people can be a rich source of wisdom if we can learn to "step out of the way" to let it impact us directly. ■