A Pilgrimage through Latin America

by

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Why would anyone ever want to leave their own country and often their children and parents, to live in a place where they don’t understand the language, the culture, the legal system, and much more?? How can we in the United States ever begin to comprehend the joys and the struggles of immigrants?? What would it be like to actually spend significant time in the homes of people in little pueblos and the sprawling cities of Latin America??

I have been ministering with the Hispanic community in Louisville and Southern Indiana since January 2001. The people have been very receptive to me, in spite of my continuing efforts to learn more Spanish and to understand the cultural differences. In 2003 I applied for and received a grant from the Lilly Endowment Clergy Renewal Program to try to respond to those questions. The program is developed to benefit both the local congregation and the clergy person, and requires that I continue this ministry for at least one year after the experience ended.

My goal as I designed the program was to give me a first hand experience of the various Latin American countries from which our local people originate. I wanted to become a pilgrim and live as they live, travel as they travel, and come to a deeper understanding of both the cultures from which they come, and why they have chosen to immigrate to the United States. People spoke often of their families and I wanted to meet them personally so that I could create a bond with them, and be enriched by their wisdom and experience. This would help the families left behind feel more in touch with their loved ones, and help me to be a direct part of their lives. Writing in a journal in Spanish during the trip allowed me to reflect on the impact of the pilgrimage and to record names, places, and feelings throughout the journey and afterwards.
One of the early steps in planning was to invite people to give me names and contact information for their families in Mexico, Central America, South America, and the Caribbean. Many were quite excited, and said such things as: “Oh, you have to go to Panama to see my parents and grandparents!” or “We will be in Michoacan, Mexico, this summer and we will meet you at the airport and have you stay with us for a couple days.” With this rather lengthy list I arranged my trip to be able to visit them and often stay in their homes. I asked about special local celebrations and tried to be present at those times. Their hospitality was very warm, as they were delighted to welcome me and to share stories, food, traditions, and all aspects of their lives. In a few cases I was able to see people whom I already knew and who were there visiting or staying with their families. In most cases, however, it was a pilgrimage to meet people I had never seen before, but with whom I had a connection through their relatives living in Kentucky or Indiana. They proudly took me to their local churches, shrines, markets, neighbors, and cultural activities. They introduced me to many local relatives, to the local pastor or bishop, and wanted me to get a full experience of their country. I ate many unusual foods and tasted such a variety of drinks that I will never remember what they all were. Amazingly, I was never really sick throughout the more than four months that I traveled.

My sabbatical began in July 2004 and included a month in Mexico, since that is the country from which most of the people I know come. Then I had a month in El Salvador, Panama, Honduras, and Guatemala. I returned to the U.S. in September for a Franciscan renewal program. In October and November I traveled to Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Colombia. I returned briefly to Mexico, then went to Puerto Rico, and finished with a little vacation time. I also wanted to go to Cuba and applied for a religious visa through the US Department of Treasury. It was not approved in time for November so I went to Cuba for eight days in early May, 2005. Thus, I had the opportunity to be a pilgrim in ten countries plus Puerto Rico. I could have visited other countries as well, but since I did not have any contacts there I chose not to go only as a tourist.

During this program I estimate that I went to from 125 to 130 different homes. Sometimes I stayed for as many as four nights, other times I just visited briefly for a blessing, prayer, or to become acquainted with more local people. I also visited eighteen Franciscan friaries, and I stayed three days with the Poor Clares nuns in Mexico City. When I went to the Poor Clare monastery it was to visit someone’s aunt, and I did not realize that it was a religious community of women till I entered the building! However, they were quite welcoming and I was able to enjoy both them and the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe which was nearby. It was fascinating to learn of mutual acquaintances almost everywhere I went and to feel welcomed in so many places.

I flew between countries, but traveled by bus, taxi, or occasionally in a personal car while moving between cities or within a town. Walking with people in their
pueblos or on pilgrimage was also significant. In many ways this was an important part of the journey, because I met people along the way and endured the inconveniences of waiting for buses, standing in crowds, and walking along the streets. I rented a car in Cuba because apparently the public transportation there is not reliable, but it left me somehow less engaged with the locale. I stayed in a hotel only once when the journey between cities was too long, and when my plans had to change because I did not get permission to go to Cuba when expected. What was interesting during both those times was that I felt like a tourist and disconnected from the people themselves. It was also one of the few times I spoke in English.

My whole sense of pilgrimage has evolved as I saw how many individuals and families have traveled from their homelands to work or make a new home here in the U.S. This is not an easy journey for many reasons, and it sometimes causes a real sense of loneliness and loss as they miss their family and traditions. I visited with a man who had lived in Indiana for three years and had recently returned to Mexico. Marcelino told me how he didn’t even recognize his youngest son playing near his home when he first returned because he hadn’t seen him for three years, and his son was too young to remember him. He lived in a very poor pueblo, with only one phone for the whole community, no running water in the house, and limited electricity. In fact, he moved a light bulb from one room to the other so that I could have light while staying overnight with them. Toward the end of my visit with them he told me that he was faced with a difficult decision—between love and money. He could stay there and share the love of his wife and four children, but where there is almost no chance for decent work; or he could return to the United States where he could make enough money to support his family but he would be separated from them. It made me deeply aware of the struggle involved in making these decisions, and their consequences.

I visited the family of another man, Asunción, and learned how much he had sacrificed to provide for his children. He has worked in the U.S. for over twenty years during most of the year, and stayed with his family during the winter. He proudly told me how all three of his children have graduated from the University, because he has been able to support them financially while they went to school. All this comes from a man who had not finished the fifth grade in school himself.

I was also touched by the pride of those parents who saw their young adults make great strides in establishing themselves in the United States. Some young adults received scholarships for the University of Louisville and have completed their education, with a masters or doctoral degree. Now they are established and starting their careers and applying for permanent residency. One set of parents in Loja, Ecuador, told me about their son who is a professional pianist and their daughter who lives in New England. The daughter of a family in Guatemala is now a bilingual counselor, married, and the mother of two children. The son of a couple in El Salvador where I visited now has a doctorate and lives in Louisville.
with his wife and a set of twins. The parents miss their sons and daughters, but on occasion are able to come to the U.S. for a visit and I am able to see them again and reestablish contact. This is especially touching when they come to visit their grandchildren.

However, I was saddened when I realized the toll that living apart can take on some families. In more than one case, the husband has lived away from the family for a number of years, sometimes not returning for three to five years because of the cost and difficulty crossing borders. One woman suspects that her husband is unfaithful, perhaps with another family in el norte, and she is afraid that he will gradually stop supporting them and never return. Others know their growing children only through phone calls and pictures. Why would someone choose to live apart like this? One man told me that in the U.S. he could make $12 to $14 an hour pouring concrete and often more with overtime. At the rancho (farm) where he came from they work with horses and mules, and he makes perhaps $7 or less a day. With poor economies, disastrous effects of hurricanes, loss of jobs through the North American Free Trade Agreement, limited educational opportunities, and violence or oppression, it is easy enough
to see why some Latin American countries have a hard time retaining their young workers.

I journeyed for a day with a group of pilgrims in Queretaro, Mexico, as they continued their 90 year tradition of walking up to 14 days to the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City. We sang “Juntos como hermanos, miembros de un iglesia, vamos caminando al encuentro del Señor… Un largo caminar, por el desierto bajo el sol. No podemos caminar, sin la ayuda del Señor.” (Together as brothers, members of the church, we go walking to meet the Lord. It is a long way to journey, through the desert beneath the sun. We cannot walk without the help of the Lord.) Many in this country have walked not only for pilgrimages, but through the dangers of the hot desert to arrive here in el Norte. It is a song about their lives. I was delighted to meet the same group of pilgrims again at the Basilica and concelebrate the Eucharist in the plaza with 35,000 peregrinos. They even stood in the plaza in the pouring rain for a half hour rather than miss part of the Mass!

I became a pilgrim myself as I trusted in their generosity and was able to discover Christ’s presence in the joyful feast day processions and the quiet moments in the home. Going to eleven different areas gave me a sense of both the similarities and the uniqueness of each culture. I saw more different images of Mary, the Mother of Jesus, than I ever knew existed! Our Lady of Guadalupe is the main image in Mexico. In Honduras it is La Virgen de Suyapa. In Columbia they have a special love for Señora de Chiquinquirá. In Cuba I went to see La Virgen de la Caridad de Cobre. Each country, each culture has a special love for Mary and the saints that is unique to their history and traditions. It is important for us here in the United States to celebrate these special days with them as well to preserve their religious heritage. Their faith is inculcated in most every aspect of daily life. We of the United States can learn much from them.

I have been able to share pictures and stories with many people, and I smile when I see how pleased and excited they are to see that I have been in their country, in their homes, and with their relatives. My Spanish has improved, but more importantly I have a deeper sense of the rich religious and cultural heritage which we experience when we welcome the Latino community into our local Catholic communities in the United States. I hope that our sense of hospitality and service here can be as strong as what I experienced during this wonderful pilgrimage.

I have also seen the importance of public displays of faith, such as outdoor processions, murals on walls, churches built as landmarks, and how the church can be a sign of hope and a place of welcome for many immigrants. Most Latin American countries are at least 80% Catholic. The Churches were often built by the Spaniards around the central plaza, with the market, and government offices on other sides. In many ways it is a Catholic culture, where people don’t work during Holy Week so that they can participate in the religious ceremonies. These
are places where religious processions in the streets are the norm and large crowds gather to participate. The major events of the year are not civic celebrations, but religious fiestas, with bells ringing, music and dance, and lots of fireworks and flowers. A good percentage of the people may not be well educated in the doctrine and Scriptures, but they have a deep sense of personal faith and share that with others. Questions about the future might elicit the response, “Si Dios quiere.” (If God wills.) Faith is not just a sense of duty to attend church on Sunday, but more interwoven into the daily fabric of life, where most homes have a little altar with saints and candles and flowers in the home, where a death will be followed by nine days of visits to the home to pray and offer support. Faith is part of the culture.

One significant revelation was the difference between Cuba and the rest of Latin America. The structure of the government and the economy and the whole infrastructure is really quite different and it impacts the values, ethics, and faith of the people. As someone said, “Cuba is not like Central America!” I would agree. The influence of the government is obvious in all aspects of daily life. Prices, housing, availability of food and staples, transportation, education, and medical care are all controlled by the government. There seems to be limited incentive to work hard, because it does little to improve their lives. If they do not have relatives outside the country who can assist them financially it is extremely difficult. Before I left some families asked me to take items to their families—pens and paper, vitamins, clothing…things we take for granted can be scarce there. Many people are very poor, using horses and bicycles for transportation, living on a limited diet. Some would say this is because of the United States embargo. Others say it is because of the failure of the communist system.

While there, a young man offered to park my rental car in a safe place, but instead took it for a joy ride and wrecked it. The insurance would not cover it, and I needed to pay over $3,000 for the repairs. With the restrictions on Americans, someone could only send $300 every three months—obviously unworkable. I could not use a credit card drawn on an American bank. There is no US embassy, only an office of “US Interest Section.” I spoke with an official, and he said it might be possible to send money via the State Department, but he was not allowed to leave Havana. Since the police would not allow me to leave the city I was in a real bind. The man at the US Interest Section had no legal authority to assist, but said, “We know about your situation.” (So what…) I spent many hours in the police station and with the car rental agency trying to resolve the dilemma. The police chief was a bombastic man, who flaunted his authority, and wanted to put me in jail until I paid the money. I told him it would be impossible to pay unless he allowed me to travel to another city. Only the efforts of the rental agents kept me from being incarcerated. Finally, after three days of rather tense negotiations, we worked out an arrangement where two men from the car company drove me to the city of Matanzas, where some Franciscans arranged to
pay the money, loaned by the Catholic Church. Later, I was able to repay it by sending money to the Vatican and then back to Cuba.

This experience gave me a vivid awareness of the frustrations of the Cuban people and why some might want to leave the country. It also gave me a direct experience of the fear of many undocumented people who live in the United States without legal status, without many options, and often wondering what will happen if there is any problem with police or immigration. In the same city where I was threatened with incarceration, one woman I went to see was not there. She had paid $8,000 to be smuggled out of Cuba, to Mexico, across the border, and then to southern Florida where her daughter lives. The distance is only a couple hundred miles if she was allowed to travel directly, but after many years of waiting in vain for official approval she chose to go this much more difficult route.

The Catholic Church in Cuba is restricted though there have been improvements since the visit of Pope John Paul II in 1998. Gradually, some church communities are being renewed and the clergy are speaking out in support of human rights and freedoms. They sometimes have to work around many regulations just to be able to function. In spite of all this, I felt welcomed by the families and the Franciscan friars in Cuba and would return if given the opportunity.

The people in the congregations where I serve have been touched by my willingness to travel and visit in local homes. Those whose families I visited were excited to hear from me, to see pictures that I placed on the parish web site, and to talk with their own families. They feel so much more important, and that where they come from is also important to me and the church. New people that I meet are also impressed that I have visited somewhere near their home, and that I often know landmarks or cities nearby. I am not just another gringo pastor, but someone who has experienced a bit of their world.

Moving from one country to another, adjusting to a new culture and all that involves, learning a new language—these are challenges that many of us never face except perhaps as a short term visitor somewhere. As a minister within the Church, I want to create a hospitable environment for those who are living in a strange land. The Bible gives us some important guidelines in this regard.

"When an alien resides with you in your land, do not molest him. You shall treat the alien who resides with you no differently than the natives born among you; have the same love for him as for yourself; for you too were once aliens in the land of Egypt. I, the LORD, am your God.” Leviticus 19:33-34

And again:
For the LORD, your God, is the God of gods, the LORD of lords, the
great God, mighty and awesome, who has no favorites, accepts no
bribes; who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and
befriends the alien, feeding and clothing him. So you too must
befriend the alien, for you were once aliens yourselves in the land
of Egypt.” Deuteronomy 10:17-19

We are called by God to treat immigrants among us no differently than anyone
else, especially recognizing that the Hebrew people of God were often traveling
from one to another, to Egypt, and back to the Promised Land. Along with
Matthew 25: 35, (“For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you
gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me.”) Deuteronomy reminds us of
the importance of meeting the physical and personal needs of people as well.
Because the Church is so central in all aspects of people’s lives in Latin
American countries, and because they often come to the U.S. with very limited
resources and English abilities, this sabbatical made it clear to me how as a
Church we need to extend our assistance in all areas of life. Thus we hire
bilingual staff and promote volunteers who can help people find a place to live,
jobs, education for children, medical care, assistance with immigration papers,
learn English, and respond to so many other daily needs. They are not just
“illegal aliens” or “foreigners” trying to come take jobs and disrupt our lives, they
are people of God who have a deep love for their families and for this country as
well as their own. Having traveled in other countries I have a sense of what it
feels like to be an alien. It was easier for me because I know enough Spanish to
get along. It is hard to imagine encountering the same obstacles in travel, food,
and everything else if I did not know the local language! We are called to treat
others as we would like to be welcomed. We are all one.

The story of the hospitality of Abraham and Sara to the three guests in Genesis
18:1-9 makes clear the importance of extending warm hospitality to not just
friends and neighbors, members of our churches, but to everyone. Because of
their kindness, Abraham and Sara received a child in their old age. God blesses
us abundantly when we extend hospitality, and when we are able to accept it
appropriately. One of the things I learned was to accept hospitality and gifts
graciously.

Many of the people I stayed with were poor, and the houses were small.
Bienvenidos a mi pobre casa (Welcome to my poor home) was a common refrain.
Yet in almost every home, someone gave up their bed, (often the best room in the
home) so that I could stay with them. In Panama, I stayed in a small two bedroom
apartment with five other people who were family members of my friend, Daysha.
I had one room to myself, and the other five slept on the other bed, couches,
floor, or wherever, just so that I would be comfortable.
Meals were also very important. My hosts would often buy Coca Cola or some kind of drink just for me because they realized that I had to be careful about drinking water which could upset my stomach. They fixed special meals with traditional foods and spent extra money so that I would be able to eat pupusas (two tortillas with vegetables or meat closed inside) in El Salvador, Seco de Chivo (goat with gravy, rice, and potatoes) in Ecuador, Mofongo (fried green plantains) in Puerto Rico, quinoa (ancient grain) and chocolo (large kere neled corn) in Peru, and llajua (a spicy salsa with rocoto, tomatoes, and an herb called kirquiña) in Bolivia—to name just a few of the traditional foods. I was courageous enough to eat saso (cold, pickled pig’s feet), menudo (stomach lining of a cow), and drink mescal (a strong Mexican alcoholic drink) for breakfast. Because I experienced this, my sense of these countries has been enhanced. I felt that they sincerely appreciated my willingness to share their special foods. Saying “No thank you” would have been an affront to them, and would have limited my appreciation for their culture. I have been the beneficiary of their hospitality, and have received many, many invitations to return for another visit.

Taking this sabbatical has deepened my passion for Hispanic Ministry. I feel their hope in the midst of real struggles and separation from families, and their joys in
times of baptisms, quinceañeras, weddings, etc. As Archbishop Thomas Kelly, O.P. of Louisville, Kentucky, says, “The Hispanic people are a blessing to the local church.” Their presence has enriched me in so many ways and has broadened my sense of how the Spirit moves in different cultures. I try to maintain the balance between helping people sustain and grow in their own heritage while also helping them adapt to life in this country. Thus as we foster traditional dances and music, teach religious formation classes in Spanish and in English, they continue to teach me about their love for God. I hold up the Hispanic community as a witness of sharing whatever they have with those in need, of finding simple joys, and surviving disruption and changes that many of us can only imagine. I have become even more committed to work for social justice, for helpful immigration reform, and have participated in many rallies, letter writing campaigns, personal visits with legislators, and other activities to give the Hispanics a more secure place in our society.

It is with delight that I can now welcome some those who welcomed me when they are able to come here to the US for a visit. Since my sabbatical I have returned to Guatemala for a baptism and to Mexico for a wedding. My world has expanded beyond these national borders and our national consciousness to include the pride others feel in their own homelands. I am convinced more and more that we need to call forth and train leaders from within these communities so that they can address the congregations and their needs in their own ways. I can learn Spanish and visit them in their homes, and that is indeed very much appreciated, yet there is a wealth of faith and wisdom within themselves that needs to be nurtured. We have a man from our church who has prepared for four years and recently been ordained a permanent deacon in the Catholic Church. He will be a great asset, and we seek out more leaders as well in a variety of situations.

The other church staff are pleased that I had the experience to deepen my awareness of the traditions and the Spanish language and they look to me for suggestions as we continue to plan for the future.

I am deeply grateful to The Lilly Foundation Clergy Renewal Program for their financial and personal support in making this sabbatical possible, for allowing me to find some responses to my earlier questions. I may have had the opportunity to visit a few of these countries at some point, but it would certainly not have been as extensive and enriching as this wonderful experience.

One final little note…I use the pictures I took on the sabbatical as a revolving screen saver on my laptop computer. Often when I am visiting with someone they will see the pictures and ask questions, renewing the memories within me and sparking their interest. But the best time is when someone will see a photo, and say “That’s my town!” or “I know those people in that picture!” Somehow for them home doesn’t seem quite as far away at that moment.