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Know when to fold 'em

Pat Marrin | Apr. 2, 2010 NCR Today

Holy Week: Accompanying El Salvador

The real question for Good Friday is why Jesus, with victory over evil within his grasp and backed by absolute power, chose to be struck down in apparent defeat?

To our modern sensibilities, schooled by violent sports and the permanent war on terror to accept the axiom that "winning isn't everything -- It's the only thing," Jesus' death on Good Friday was a disaster.

Even theologically, we needed to quickly posit the triumph of the resurrection to spare God the embarrassment of anyone thinking He either didn't care or couldn't prevent the death of an innocent man who had placed all his trust in Him. This was Dostoevsky's anguish, the crisis of the Holocaust and the argument against God's very existence that has embittered so many artists and philosophers over the centuries. What sort of God would countenance the destruction of so much innocence?

Jesus, light of the world, the hope of Israel, Mary's child and God's beloved son, friend of the poor, and the most eloquent spokesperson for peace and justice in history, hangs on a cross. Soldiers hold back a crowd of gawking bystanders. Robed clergy have come holding their noses to this city dumpsite to make sure the blasphemer really dies, is not rescued by his followers. These stalwarts are nowhere to be found. Only a small clutch of women, one young man, stand near the crucified convict. They are in shock, so marred is his appearance, beaten beyond recognition, his chest heaving up and down as he slowly suffocates and bleeds to death at the same time.

Oscar Romero, in his earlier days as bishop of San Miguel, witnessed the work of death squads against protesting peasants, their bodies hacked to death, the mutilated corpse of a mere boy left half-naked in a ditch, his eyes open, fixed in horror. Romero asked the pastor of the church that had helped the farmers organize, "How can one human being do such things to another human being?" The priest, frustrated at his bishop's

slowness to grasp the war being waged by the rich against the poor in El Salvador, said, "Monseñor, don't you get it? This is what Medellin was talking about." The bishops of Latin America, meeting in Medellin, Columbia, in 1968, had declared God's "option for the poor" in a world where institutionalized poverty and violence were systematically destroying the lives of the poor majority, the "crucified of history." It was the beginning of Romero's transformation from a shy, bookish apologist for the status quo to the champion for the poor that emerged when he became archbishop of San Salvador.

The buff, magnificent Jesus on crosses we wear as jewelry was perhaps more fragile, his body softer and more refined from years of eating and drinking with sinners, verbal combat over manual labor. People loved him and lavished attention on him wherever he went. He may have even survived to adulthood with childlike transparency, charm and innocence, spared personal brutality up until now. His execution this way was unthinkable, unimaginable. This was the death of a favorite son, stripped by his own jealous brothers of the many-colored cloak their father had given him. This was the royal son murdered outside the vineyard by delinquent tenants who had produced nothing. This was Joseph's boy, Mary's child, grown up but still vulnerable to every beggar, leper or abused and abandoned child he had encountered during his time of public ministry. It was for them that he went up to Jerusalem to expose the nerve of complicity between church and state that was sacrificing people for things, destroying the poor for money.

Jesus' death became the birth of a mysterious paradox he had preached so often, that true strength comes out of weakness, power comes from service, the first shall be last and the last first, and that even death can be duped into yielding new life, as seeds cast to the ground naturally give back a hundredfold. We have only parables to prove this, but they are compelling, potent in the imagination, able to turn whole lives in a new direction.

My lack of Spanish was a terrible handicap as our SHARE delegation engaged El Salvador. But I do speak origami, a simple but universally understood language of folded paper, and I did not hesitate to share small flapping birds, peace cranes, barking dogs, praying nuns and colorful butterflies wherever we went. Children could not resist, and I count these moments close now. Gabby, a lovely 10-year old in Cabañas, let me teach her how to fold a butterfly, and then she taught me how to make a boat.

Origami is an exercise in patience and in the truth that a small piece of colored paper holds more power than a bulldozer to build lasting community through friendship and mutual respect. Later in the trip, I would fold for 11-year-old Maria Fernando and her 7-year-old brother Andre in their gracious home, a short respite of such hospitality. I will always treasure it's sweetness because it reminded me that children are children everywhere. No adult crisis exists that cannot be dispelled by having a child take you by the hand, lead you to a garden where her late grandmother planted every flower, and where her brother is still allowed to practice his soccer kicks.

The high schoolers from Seattle did their overnight in Chalatenango, another department where some of the war's worst atrocities occurred. I heard with delight that they had helped organize a soccer match with local youth. This was more origami, the leveling of holy ground between a group of eager American teenagers and their counterpoints in El Salvador. Such miracles were multiplying as we traveled deeper and further into paradox.

On the bus ride back from Cabañas, we drove through areas of rural poverty that shocked me; naked children standing by the side of the road, habitations made of cardboard and branches in dirt yards, an endless procession of women carrying children next to the highway, people coming home from work in the city, carrying plastic bags with basic provisions for waiting families in the simplest of dwellings without water or electricity. As the sun set, in the fading light as we sped by, I saw a child standing alone in a dusty yard. He held a blue plastic ball like one my son had once, many years ago, cherished and played with every day in the back yard of our home in Atchison, Kansas. Again, reality was overtaking memory, and I knew my heart would break if I didn't get back

to the hotel for a quick shower before dinner and find a way to dodge this image to keep my world from falling over a cliff.

I will join my church and the local Catholic Worker community later this Good Friday for the annual way of the cross through downtown Kansas City. We visit and pray at different sites where decisions get made about employment, legal status, incarceration, and general survival in our modern city, where race and poverty still define most of who we are, where we live, and how we make community, or not.

Severe thunderstorms are predicted, so we may not walk this way of the cross at all. I hope we do, because I need it more than ever this year.

Tomorrow, Easter Vigil: "Know when to hold em"

[Pat Marrin is editor of *Celebration*, *NCR*?s worship resource. He was in El Salvador covering the events surrounding the 30th anniversary of the assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero, which was March 24.]

March 29: Holy Week 2010: Accompanying El Salvador [1], an introduction

March 30: Anointing [2]

March 31: Darkness will have its hour [3]

April 1, Holy Thursday: Fools rush in [4]

April 2, Good Friday: Know when to fold 'em [5]

April 3, Easter Vigil: Know when to hold 'em [6]

See also

- Sainthood for Romero? Not yet [7]
- Books: The essential Romero [8]
- Commentary: A Cold War perspective on Romero's death [9]

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Links:
[1] http://ncronline.org/node/17628
[2] http://ncronline.org/node/17644
[3] http://ncronline.org/node/17689
[4] http://ncronline.org/node/17708
[5] http://ncronline.org/node/17719
[6] http://ncronline.org/node/17727
[7] http://ncronline.org/node/17560
[8] http://ncronline.org/node/17667
[9] http://ncronline.org/node/17668