



MISSIONARIES IN ACTION

DOMINICAN MISSION FOUNDATION

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We Are One in the Spirit



Dear Mission Friends:

To the right is the opening stanza from a meditation by Fr. Timothy Conlan, O.P., our missionary in Rabinal, Guatemala. It appears to be simply describing his parish's traditional Holy Week procession as it sets out from the church. With the last couplet, however, it becomes at once personal and universal. Haven't we all pondered the mysteries of the Crucifixion and the Resurrection? Had doubts about our faith? Questioned the meaning of life?

Often it is terrible suffering, ever-present throughout the world and throughout history, that makes us all, Christians or not, question life's meaning. How to make sense of concentration camps during the Holocaust—or ever—or of genocide in general? Of the hundreds of thousands of civilians killed with the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki or the vile acts committed during the Vietnamese War or at Guantanamo Bay? Of willing suicide bombers? **Of the mass kidnapping of school girls or of any sort of human trafficking? Of the death of children anywhere?**

*The church bell high in the tower rings out,
The Lord beckoning on the Friday nights of Lent.
Music erupts from the band at the church door,
And we are swept into the line of marchers in cadence with the big drum.
Jesus the Nazarene, robed in splendid cloths, glides above it all,
Carried on the platform, down the steep steps to the street.
We follow, the funereal music of trumpet, horn, flute, and trombone
Vibrating in our ears, pushing us ahead with its deliberate beat,
Our minds searching for the meaning of this engulfing wave
As we wonder what the death of one can do for all the rest.*

In this our twenty-first century, when cars steer themselves, computers can read our minds, artificial intelligence is no longer science fiction, and there's an app for everything, it is indefensible that extreme poverty is still pervasive, violence is just as ubiquitous and ruthless as it ever was, terrorism is rising, and the number of refugees—over 50 million—is multiplying rapidly, as is the number of those would-be refugees who die during their treacherous escapes from their even more treacherous living conditions. Is there an app for any of these?

This newsletter is meant to update the Dominican sisters' ministry in Iraq, but the grippingly familiar themes in Fr. Tim's meditation (*continued on the back*) remind us of our shared humanity, a vital

lesson for many of us who look upon the Middle East as a world apart. Another Fr. Timothy, O.P., who has visited the Dominican Sisters of St. Catherine of Siena in Iraq three times since their exile in 2014, describes witnessing that same struggle for meaning in the face of suffering, underscoring that we are **"one body and one Spirit...members one of another (Ephesians 4:4,25)"**

In his report to the 2016 International Eucharistic Congress, Britain-based Fr. Timothy Radcliffe, former Master General of the Dominican Order and long-time promoter of social justice and human rights, suggests that **"hope is the most profound challenge for humanity today."** As part of an early delegation to visit the sisters, Father was privy to their suffering and resultant waning of hope.



Some months earlier, ISIS had captured Mosul and its neighboring towns, forcing the sisters, along with hundreds of thousands of fellow Christians, to flee their homes or risk having to convert, being sold into sex slavery, or being horrifically murdered. The sisters fled with thousands to Kurdistan and, by virtue of their congregation's centuries-old penchant to serve in any way they can, they quickly began organizing camps, acquiring supplies, caring for any wounded, and counseling. **The sisters' apparent sense of control, however, belied their growing despair, as evidenced in the following excerpts from their letters at the time:**

It is hard to have hope in Iraq...Many have reached their breaking point and despair is setting in...People cannot endure this marginalization, persecution, contempt, and rejection anymore... We do not know when this ordeal will end...There are no signs of hope that the situation...will be resolved peacefully...The problems are overwhelming and we are extremely exhausted...Every day we hope that tomorrow will be better, but our tomorrows seem to bring only more tears and hardship.



Understandably, the persistence of such suffering obscures any hope for a better future. Moreover, it defies any logical explanation. To face “**the mystery of evil**,” however, Fr. Radcliffe offers the Resurrection. While it is an even “**deeper mystery**” than suffering, its promise of a new and better life is sometimes the only glimpse of hope to be found.

In the meantime, suggests Father, we can draw upon “**that last night before the crucifixion [when] Jesus gathered his disciples together for supper... there seemed to be no hope. The community was disintegrating. One disciple had betrayed him and another would deny him; most of the others would run away. Ahead lay suffering, loneliness and death.**” But “**in this darkest moment of human history, Jesus performed an amazing gesture of hope**” by establishing the sacraments of the Holy Eucharist and the priesthood, thereby laying the foundation for the Church: “**This is my body, given for you...This is my blood, poured out for you.**”

Father explains, “**It is when everything appears to be finished,**

Left, Sr. Marie Hanna, O.P., the sisters' prioress at the time of their exile, in a rare display of sadness and despair during an interview; to her right is a middle-schooler's recent joyful drawing of returning home and taking back the key to their town.

whether in our personal or communal lives, that the Lord appears in some new and intimate way” to give us “**tiny glimpses into the ultimate meaning of our existences.**” Even as the sisters wrote, “*People are still living the same misery, which is only worsening...as our cries are ignored and the world turns a blind eye to our sufferings,*” the Lord was giving them the strength not only to remain in Iraq when they could have left safely, but also to continue alleviating as much of their community’s suffering as they could, even when, as they wrote, “*It seems as if our efforts are amounting to nothing...*”

While weighed down by despair, they did not succumb to it, determined to keep hope alive among those they served. In time, the world saw and reacted, sending supplies and donations, volunteers and delegations, prayers and hope. The re-energized sisters were now able to update and expand upon the crude temporary schools and clinics they had somehow built from nothing. And they’ve allowed themselves no respite since.



Today, three and a half years later, Mosul and its surrounding towns have been taken back from ISIS, and the sisters' rebuilding of clinics and schools, along with trust, relationships, and community, has only accelerated.

For all who have returned, however, relief and joy are tempered by fear and anxiety—they are distrustful of fellow citizens who had stayed and collaborated with ISIS, and they are also aware of the presence of sleeper terrorist cells. Sr. Clara Nacy, O.P., current prioress of the Iraqi Dominican sisters, writes, *“If ISIS is defeated, that does not mean that the Plain of Nineveh is entirely cleansed from that mentality.”* But once again, the sisters have chosen to stay and continue serving. *“We as community decided to return with our people, and pray and hope all people will have the courage to go back to their hometowns and be able to start from the beginning again.”* They have in fact inspired others to return. One teacher told Fr. Radcliffe, **“Because the sisters have come back, we can.”** And, once again, they have been able to perceive and be energized by some “tiny glimpses” of meaning:

Left, a bombed Dominican school in Qaraqosh, the sisters' hometown on the Nineveh Plain; and right, it stands proudly restored, ready to welcome back its occupants.

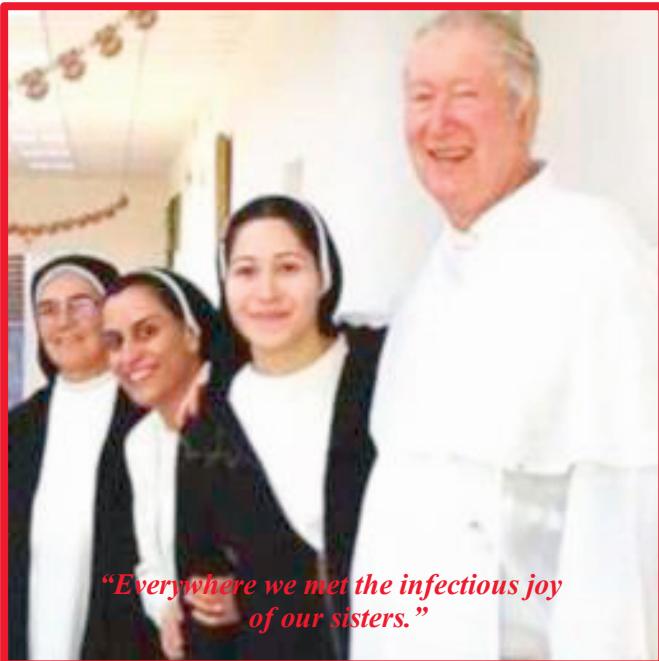
“It was badly painful to see all that overwhelming destruction. We immediately realized that it was not the military forces or smart weapons that caused all that damage, but hate. Hate leaves both oppressed and oppressor deeply wounded. Only God knows how much love we need to heal these deep wounds...we believe that God is able to raise us again in a new way...There are some signs of hope.”

Indeed, for so many—from those they serve to those, like you and me, humbled as we observe from afar their energy and tenacity—the sisters themselves are the most vivid signs of hope.

Whether in exile or back home, they have always ensured that all within their reach, regardless of ethnicity or religion, are fed and clothed, healed and comforted. In the language of Carl Jung’s *Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, they would represent our life force, our vital energy, our soul. “Were it not for the leaping and twinkling of the soul,” says Jung, “man would rot away in his greatest passion, idleness.”

Like all good Dominicans, the sisters value education, itself an affirmation of hope that there will be a future and that it will be better. More than that, though, they are keenly aware that teaching children to think is an indispensable weapon against the meaningless hatred and violence that their students and families endured. Visiting a classroom during his most recent trip, Fr. Radcliffe noted, **“The faces of the children are marked by fear and exhaustion. Some applaud us when we arrive; others cower under the desk with hands over their ears, afraid of the noise.”** Indeed, the sisters’ young charges became painfully aware of evil much sooner than most, the vestiges of which will haunt them always. But if anybody can give them back their childhood dreams, it is these women, whose hope, as expressed by Fr. Radcliffe, **“runs deeper than feeling, emerging sometimes in exuberant joy, but often running underground like a hidden river.”** Its roots are ancient, intertwined with those of genuine goodness and inherent selflessness, loving forgiveness, and trust in the way of the Lord. Chapter 4 of St. Paul’s letter to the Ephesians (p.4) seems to be modeled after them.

As we rejoin our own Fr. Tim in the Holy Week procession in Guatemala, a land widely separated, historically and geographically, from Iraq, we nevertheless perceive recurring motifs that not only link the two peoples but also resonate with each of us, wherever we may be, affirming our common humanity. We all belong to the whole, sharing ancient memories, traditions, and roots, from which grew the devoted annual Holy Week marchers, the good friars, the vibrant, hopeful sisters, the Christian martyrs, the Son of God. And as such we know that, while we may occasionally tire,



Live in a manner worthy of the call you have received, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another through love, striving to preserve the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace: one body and one Spirit, as you were also called to the one hope of your call...

All bitterness, fury, anger, shouting, and reviling must be removed from you, along with all malice, and be kind to one another, compassionate, forgiving one another as God has forgiven you in Christ (Ephesians 4:1-4, 31-32).

Can we finish the march? Will we tire, need help, lose interest?
We know the world burns with religious fervor to erect dynasties of purity,
But three or four hours walking in the crowd?
Will the march carry us over the hard pavement when we are weary?
This Jesus, who cleansed the Way with his blood,
Emptied himself of all self-aggrandizement;
Then he freely gave all he was to all of us.

The sacrifices of Christian martyrs and other targets of self-willed despots
Were seeded from the rivers of blood
Flowing from the side of Jesus mounted on the cross.
They too gave all they had, but in emptying of self, gained much more,
Confirming that there is truly only one God, the God of Love.
All else is illusion, chasing after nothingness.

Can we follow their steps and simply rejoice in others
As they enjoy their new-found hope?
Can we put the needs of others ahead of our own fleeting comforts,
And do so without seeking gratitude?
Can we empty ourselves in order to be free to accompany Jesus
With total abandonment as he sweeps us along on the Way of Love?
If Jesus offers you all that is, was, and will be, what do you still need?
Nothing. You have him. His gift, his Spirit of Love, is all there is.
It is empty of self, yet full of joy when offered to others.

~ Fr. Timothy Conlan, O.P.

need help, lose interest, put our own needs first, or seek gratitude when putting others' needs first, we have it in us to follow the holy steps of others, to empty ourselves, to accompany Jesus, to finish the march—and we will. May you be blessed with many "tiny glimpses" of joy and hope during this Easter season,

Lesley Warnshuis