



# MISSIONARIES IN ACTION

## DOMINICAN MISSION FOUNDATION

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## Let Light Shine Out of Darkness

2 Cor. 4:6



Dear Mission Friends:

We are in the midst of Lent in preparation for Easter—the holiest and most all-encompassing season of the liturgical year, when sorrow and joy live side by side, when Christ’s Crucifixion and Resurrection remind us of the two simultaneous truths: that **life is filled with suffering and loss and that life is filled with happiness and hope.**

Ash Wednesday has come and gone, but it is not just a day to kick-off Lent; its significance begs repeating and should be recalled throughout the season—ideally throughout our lives. When the priest admonishes us to *Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return* as he marks the cross of ashes on our foreheads, we are reminded of life’s most difficult but essential teaching—that **dying is an inescapable component of living.** Held as a sacred tenet by many spiritual traditions—it is what the Buddhists, for example, call the *impermanence of everything*—it is the root of that joy and sorrow paradox.



Acknowledging the certainty of loss and death should inspire us to treat ourselves, beloved family members and friends, and all fellow human beings with more love and care, to hold dear our own lives and those of everybody and everything as the gifts that they are.

Indeed, it requires “a familiarity with both sorrow and joy to fully encompass the complete range of being human.”\* Grief comes from the Latin *gravis*, or heavy, from which we also get grave and gravity. Following a significant loss, it is normal for grief to bring us to our knees. We don’t want to get up; we don’t want to be cheered up. The world has been turned upside down. If we ignore or deny our grief—returning to work too soon, refusing to talk about it, not accepting help—we will not be able to make sense of this upside down world. The wound will become infected and we will never heal.

\*Quotations with an asterisk are taken from Francis Weller’s *The Wild Edge of Sorrow*.

Many become depressed, filled with unresolved guilt, anxiety, or despair; some anesthetize with drugs or alcohol, gambling or shopping; others seek constant distraction with the TV or social media. Such lives become flat and shallow and dull.

Embracing our grief brings depth, contrast, and fluidity to our lives. The Scandinavian culture, among others, actually refers to times of intense grief as ‘living in the ashes’ because in ancient times, those dealing with loss were allowed to spend a year or more mourning and weeping in a special space alongside indoor fires. Ashes, they say, “speak to what remains, [leaving only] the barest semblance of what once was...all thoughts and routine matters dissipate into ash”\* when one is grieving. It is when we are our most human, our most authentic selves.

If we don’t embrace the inevitability of loss, our full participation in life will be forever dimmed. Only “love tempered by grief allows one to cherish the ordinary, simple moments of everyday life, even as [or *because*] we know they are passing away.”\*



Of course, because loss and the resultant suffering are inescapable, they are universal. We will all experience them, regardless of who we are, where we live, or how we live, and that awareness of shared suffering surely deepens our bond with others close to us. In fact we feel great relief when we are able to describe our pain to others, revealing our vulnerability and need for extra understanding and love. If we feel like our family and friends have had enough of our tears, that we are being a burden to them, we need only remember that they will in turn need our time and embrace at similar points in their lives.

**Shared suffering does not just deepen our bond with those close to us; it connects us to everyone, everywhere.** If we feel like our loss does not compare to that of others enduring the horrors of war or earthquakes, daily hunger or inescapable poverty, we must realize that loss is relative, that it's all real and mustn't be dismissed. With each loss we are better able to have true compassion for the suffering of others.

We are wrong if, as Tolstoy said, “We imagine that their sufferings are one thing, and our life another.” We are all connected in the inevitability of suffering and loss.

Throughout his Passion and Crucifixion, even Jesus, as man, was one of us. Every Holy Week our compassion for him is reignited as we envision him enduring many events that contain an element common to our own experience: The first day of Holy Week, Palm Sunday, recalls the people laying down palms in joy and honor to cover Jesus' path as he arrived in Jerusalem—just days before they turned on him and demanded his death. [*In this era of social media popularity, having to deal with gossip, lies, and fickle friends is not uncommon.*] (Ironically, the Ash Wednesday ashes come from burning the palm leaves of the previous year's Palm Sunday remembrance, a day of both joy and pain for Jesus.)

To continue with the Lord's relatable afflictions, writer C.S. Lewis, in *Letters to Malcolm*, provides his list: “First, the prayer of anguish; not granted.” [*In his fear of suffering and dying, Jesus asks that he be spared;*

*like all of us throughout our lives, Jesus seems to have forgotten for a moment that his death is non-negotiable, that it must come to pass.*] “Then He turns to His friends. They are asleep—as ours, or we, are so often, or busy, or away, or preoccupied. Then He faces the Church, the very Church that He brought into existence. It condemns Him [just as] in every church, in every institution, there is something which sooner or later works against the very purpose for which it came into existence.” [*Think of today's ubiquitous scandals, greed, and corruption.*] “But there seems to be another chance. There is the State, in this case, the Roman state...It claims to be just...Yes, but only so far as is consistent with political expediency...” [*That should sound familiar during this election year.*] “But even now all is not lost. There is still an appeal to the People—the poor and simple whom He had blessed, whom He had healed and fed and taught, to whom He Himself belongs. But they have become over-night...a murderous rabble shouting for His blood.” [*Again, think cancel culture.*] And of course, like any of us, Jesus is sad for having to leave his mother and sad for her sadness.



Because as man, Jesus endured such agony, he will accompany us in shared suffering when we are grieving. Certainly Jesus' agony and the Crucifixion itself are worst experiences than most of us will ever have, but the fear and sadness we do have as humans—due to pain or suffering or loss or our own inevitable death—enable us to walk beside him, sharing his suffering with authentic compassion.

Likewise, we may not know what it feels like to go to bed hungry every night, but because we know suffering, we can surely offer to the poor true compassion, in whatever format we are able—prayer, teaching, donating money, food, or time, abstaining... Indeed, **the fasting and self-denial that we choose to do during Lent should not be ends in themselves but rather should help us hear the cry of the poor more clearly and grow in solidarity with them.** Our common bond of humanity should impel us to search for ways to heal the whole of which we are a part.

But embracing our common bond or seeking solidarity does not mean working toward a society or a world in which we are all alike. In our missions over the years, a constant priority has been to help the indigenous maintain and stay true to their ancestral roots.



We have also supported them in their fight to protect their land and way of life from corporate interests whose motives have nothing to do with compassion. But sadly, “every few weeks a language is lost and, along with it, a nuanced imagination of a people who were rooted to a place for perhaps thousands of years.” If left unchecked, this will eventually create “a ‘monoculture of modernity,’ depleting the complex, multilayered song of the world...”\*

One way our missionaries have always shown their solidarity for the indigenous poor whom they serve is by recognizing their traditions and culture as gifts to be cherished and thus affirming and celebrating their identity. Our friars and sisters learn all they can about the natives' often ancient struggles and current needs while sharing the message of Jesus and his Church with respect and humility, not superiority or pity.

As Fr. Timothy Conlan, O.P., our man in Rabinal, Guatemala, once wrote,

My work has been to preach the Gospel message that **each person has great value for God, who loves us in our individuality.**

Unlike their society which has always promoted assimilation, disrespecting their identity, I have always honored the Achi identity by, for example, promoting their Mayan language in the liturgies through song and Bible readings,

In spite of the devastating poverty of the people of Rabinal, they are famous for their religious celebrations throughout the year, welcoming the public with a myriad of dances, bands, and local foods. One of last year's Holy Week processions lasted eight hours from beginning to end! And each day there was a new procession, similarly extravagant and with 1,000 participants and onlookers, culminating on Good Friday when 5,000 filled the church and the plaza. And every year just after Easter Sunday, preparations begin for the next year, raising funds, designing, organizing, and eventually decorating till midnight for weeks. It is impossible to impart with mere words a sense of the richness of it all. While celebrations in the capitol are even more elaborate and certainly more professional, I am always in awe of those in Rabinal. Created from great sacrifice and pride out of practically nothing except what can be grown or made from scraps, their celebrations are much more meaningful.

Their home-grown nature is, after all, in keeping with the true nature of Jesus, who came down to our level, preaching in the street and being rejected by the establishment. Rabinal's rituals seem to arise from deep within the hearts and souls of its people and are indeed a sign of love in action.

Many of these rituals are in response to great sorrow, loss, and grief, from Our Lord's Crucifixion to commemorating those lost in massacres to honoring the death of an elder. Rituals comfort and renew the community as a whole. Common indigenous thought is that when one of their village is ill or suffering, all of them are. "Nearly every indigenous culture has utilized ritual as a means of maintaining the health of the community, which has helped them endure for thousands of years."\*

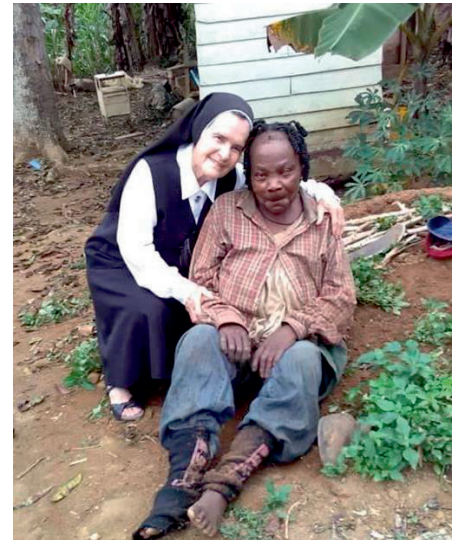
Indeed, for all of us following a loss, a community's traditional rituals of witnessing and sharing others' grief are hugely important for healing, enabling us to eventually move forward and more clearly see and appreciate the beauty and wonder that fills our day-to-day world. (We all have loved ones whose funerals were private or cancelled altogether due to Covid, causing lasting pain and sadness.)

Holy Week is packed with rituals helping us understand, relate to, appreciate, grieve with, and love Jesus in all his humility and humiliation, fear and vulnerability, sorrow and agony. Let us accompany him with genuine compassion as we commemorate the last week of his life on earth.

What better teacher to learn from about facing and embracing suffering and grief; about cherishing all people and things of the earth as gifts; about daring to love in spite of the inevitability of loss; and about transforming suffering into something sacred and eventually joyful as he did with his glorious Resurrection on Easter morning?

*For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all...what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal (2 Cor. 4:17-18).*

Peace, hope, alleluia!  
*Lesley Warnshuis*



**Only people who are capable of loving strongly can also suffer great sorrow, but this same necessity of loving serves to counteract their grief and heals them.**  
~Leo Tolstoy

### Captions

- p.1 Palm Sunday Mass in Ocosingo, Chiapas.  
p.2 Scenes from Holy Week procession in Rabinal, Guatemala.  
p.3 (left) Rabinal women enjoying working together on their weavings to sell.  
(right) Mass encompassing traditional customs in typical chapel in Chiapas.  
p.4 (top) Good Friday procession at mission school in Ayene, Equatorial Guinea.  
(middle) Sr. Teresa Martin, O.P. in mutually loving embrace of a disabled villager in Ayene.  
(above left) Annual Achi gathering in commemoration of massacres in Rabinal.  
(above right) Moving and burying bodies of massacre victims in Rabinal.