

June 27, 2010

Fifth Sunday After Pentecost

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

The airport at Guatemala City re-opened on June 2. When our mission team landed the next day, there was evidence of devastation on all sides. Hardly a prosperous country to begin with, Guatemala had just sustained one of the worst calamities in its history.

Volcán Pacaya, a smaller among the twenty volcanic peaks forming the country's geological spine, began erupting on Thursday, May 27, exactly six days before our arrival. In addition to lava, the eruptions spread a layer of heavy ash over an area of many square miles. Even in the capital city, 19 miles to the north, we saw the disgusting ash piled up everywhere. Indeed, relying on news reports of air pollution, I arrived with a box of surgical masks in my luggage.

These proved to be unnecessary, however, because of an even greater catastrophe that befell the country two days after the volcano's eruption: The extreme heat emanating from the crater was among the atmospheric conditions that brought Tropical Storm Agatha roaring in from the Pacific Ocean. Nearly 200 people perished in the resulting floods and landslides, with more than 100 others missing. That rain did, however, wash the vestigial ash out of Guatemala's air and soaked what was already on the ground. There was no danger of breathing the stuff.

Because the landslides destroyed or obstructed so many roads-including major arteries-extraordinary congestion gripped the flow of traffic in and around the city. All those conditions placed a great emotional strain on the population.

Not that Guatemala City is a relaxed place, even in the best of times. It pays to stay on your toes in this town. Last year, for instance, it reported 25 murders a week, with equally disturbing figures in assault, theft, armed robbery, carjacking, rape, and kidnapping. Gangs are active; smuggling and drug trade are common. Last year, armed robbers killed an average of one driver or passenger each day on regular city busses.

Visitors are warned to stay off the streets at night and never to take a taxi unless the hotel makes the arrangement. Going shopping? Private security guards, armed with sawed-off shotguns, maintain the parking lots of the shopping centers. You get a pass when you drive in, have it stamped at the store, and then return it to the guard in order to leave the parking lot. No

exceptions. Compared with Guatemala City, Chicago and Detroit seem like pretty laid-back places.

Our team came to work at the Orthodox orphanage, Hogar Rafael Ayau, an extraordinary compound in the heart of the major prostitution section of Guatemala City. This home of some 50+ children is surrounded by a twenty-foot wall, which has one heavy steel gate. The gate is locked; its guards carry both pump rifles and automatic side-arms. There is a rumor, I learned later, that the guards were recruited from criminal elements that had originally offered "protection" for the orphanage!

Inside the wall is another world, a little paradise, as it seemed to me, supervised by the Orthodox nuns of Holy Trinity Monastery. Everything in this loving and wonderful home is directed to the full education of young Christians. Each day begins with Matins and ends with Vespers, both services sung by the children. When they have a priest (as they did on the Sunday I was with them), they sing the Divine Liturgy. When the children outgrow the orphanage school, the nuns send them to study elsewhere, including the university.

For the better part of a year our mission team had planned various projects they hoped to accomplish at the orphanage, but in fact most of their time each day was spent cleaning up the ash spewed out from Pacaya. Much of the sooty mess was still there---including about half of the swimming pool---when we left a week later. It will likely be months before the compound is entirely clean.

A new orphanage is currently under construction outside the city, on the grounds of the monastery itself. The future of this ministry, nonetheless, is far from clear. After a decade of placing the children into adopting families here in this country, the nuns now find their hands tied by UNICEF's tight restrictions on international adoptions. Although the government of Guatemala is disposed to take a flexible approach to those restrictions, the bureaucrats in our own State Department are not. Current international policies, in my opinion, are not in the best interest of those children. At some future date, I may comment further on this theme.

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