

Litany of Liberation

Sandy Spencer (formerly S. Philomena, SSND) remembering the refugee women

As we gathered together, it was still light enough to see. We sat around in a huge circle. The woman who invited us (I had asked another Sister from our group to come with me) introduced the evening. The sharing began with an older woman far to my right in the circle.

The dialog as I remember it went like this. (Each paragraph is another person speaking.)

1. "We all come from northern El Salvador. As the war became worse and our men were either in the army or in the Movement we had no sense of safety. We had to move on toward Honduras and cross the border. On the way to the river that divides the countries, many things happened."
2. "We could only move at night. We had to hide in the fields, in the hills or in caves by day. We could not cook because the smoke from the fire could be seen. We shared our food together. In our crossing through the river there were about 200 people."
3. "I remember hearing the jeeps coming at a distance. Word came that the soldiers were stopping the jeeps, jumping out and starting to look into the fields. My baby was crying. It was loud enough to give away our hiding place. I held her tight to my chest until the danger was past. I realized I had smothered her to death."
4. "We came to Rio Lempa at night. It was a broad river and deep only in parts, but the current was strong. I had my three children. Two were small enough to carry. I told my 5 year old son to hold onto me and not let go. We came to a deep part of the river. I could barely keep my balance and as I tried to hold onto my smaller children my son lost hold of me. My last memory of him was hearing him scream out for me – and then he was gone."
5. "We heard the helicopters coming. We had started to cross the river. There was no place to hide. Their planes had huge spot lights that lit up the whole river and all of us. They began to shoot. It was horrible. Were there even 25 of us left?"
6. "Honduras knew we were coming. UNCUR (The UN Commission for Refugees) found us the next day. There were some medical supplies. They gave us rubber tarps to make kind of a tent. It was steaming hot, and then they left us."
7. "And then the helicopters came again. We all ran into our tents. They sprayed us with something that made it difficult to breathe. Within a day several of our children died, and some of our people developed boils all over their bodies."

8. *These are some of the stories that I remember. From every part of that room the grief, anguish, anger, sadness, quiet tears – no holding, no embracing – just deep human pain as no more stories came. Every person in that circle had lost an immediate family member; husband, father, brother. Then following the three or four hours of pouring out their suffering there was a profound silence. No one moved. There seemed a deep companionship in that women’s community. Then out of the pitch darkness, from my right came that old, strong voice that had started the night. Again – each paragraph that follows comes from a separate woman, in a different part of this dark room...like a litany.*
9. “Mother of God, our sister and companion, you had gathered your Son’s friends together for a last supper. You knew what it was like to feel the fear and the premonitions in your heart that night, as you moved among them and listened to their talk. How often we had tried to quiet the fears of our loved ones and minimize their danger.”
10. “Maria, our sister, you knew what it was like to receive the news that they had arrested your son and taken him away. Each of us has heard that news too, sometimes after long hours of waiting, that our husbands, brothers, fathers, were surrounded, given no reason for being arrested and then taken to God knows where.”
11. “Mother of God, you knew what it was like to hear through some grapevine that your son was being tortured that night. Most of us have received scraps of information too – that our loved ones were being tortured somewhere in some holding place.”
12. “Mother of God, where were you when you received news of your son’s death sentence? Sometimes we heard it from radio announcements, sometimes word was leaked through the military to families. But by the time we heard it there was nothing we could do. We were also powerless in the face of the government. And like you we found family and friends with whom to grieve and share our pain and fear for them.”
13. “Mother of Jesus, they came with the news that your son was being taken from one place to another, and if you would get to a certain corner you might get a glimpse of him. And they tell us you did look at each other. How many of us have also received such notice. We have run to the spot, hoping to get a glance of our husbands, sons and grandsons, to let them see us. After seeing our loved ones sometimes we wish we would not have gone.”
14. “Mary, what must it have been for you to watch Jesus being stripped naked, to see him stretched on that cross, to hear the pounding of the nails, and then to watch the soldiers pull him up and let him hang?”

15. "Mother of God, as terrible as that must have been for you, not many of us have been able to even know where our sons and husbands have been killed."

16. "Mary, after the death of Jesus, they let you take his body. You could finally hold him, wash him and prepare him for burial. Some of us have gone to where bodies have been thrown and searched there for our people; but too many of them are just 'missing', too many of them are so decomposed we could not identify them. We will never know the consolation of laying our loved ones to rest."

Again there was a profound silence – several minutes, as I recall. Then from my far right came that strong almost ancient voice:

- *Maria, nos debe esperanza en la Resurreccion.*
- Mary, you owe us hope in resurrection.

There was no signal given. But we started to stand, embrace each other in the dark, and move toward the door. There was no moon. Without electricity it was pitch black.

When I got back to our tent and found the flashlight and looked at the clock – it was 11:15pm. I will never forget these courageous women and their profound trust in Mary.