

2 Lent C – February 28, 2010. (Using Special Propers)
Saint Peter's Church, Glenside, PA.
Linda and Frank Toia on Seeing the Face of God in Guatemala

In the name of God. Amen.

Frank:

Phillip said to Jesus, "Lord, show us the Father and we will be satisfied." (Jn 14:8)

The Psalmist sings his plaintive song: "As the deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God?" (Ps 42)

Isaiah recounts his mystical experience saying, "I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up." And he ends with these words, "Here am I. Send me." (Isa 6:1,8)

Many years ago when I first started working with a spiritual director, the first question she asked me at our very first session was, "What is your hope for our time together?" The response that came out of my mouth totally surprised me more than it did her. Through a flood of tears I said, "I want to see God!" "I want to see God!"

Something there is in every human being that yearns for an encounter with the Divine. We may hide from it, ignore it, pretend it away, cover it over with projects and possessions and pretensions, but it's there. Human beings are hard-wired to seek an encounter with that which is beyond us and bigger than ourselves. Saint Augustine got it right when he prayed to God, "Thou hast made us for thyself and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee."

You don't **have** to go to Guatemala to find God. But it helps. Gandhi once said, "If you can't find God in the very next person you meet you may as well give up the search." So you don't **have** to go to Guatemala to find God. But, as I say, it helps. And the reason it helps is that when you encounter someone very different from yourself and you are given the grace to go deep with that person, beneath the superficialities of possessions and appearances and language – deep into that commonality which **is** the Divine, then the experience is profound and has the power to change your life **and theirs** in deep ways.

So this morning we simply want to introduce you to a few of the people that have touched us into the Divine. Linda will begin, I'll add a couple of stories and then Linda will wrap up.

Linda:

I'd like to introduce you to Marta Julia Santis de Castellanos. For the third consecutive year, Marta was mi maestra, my teacher. This means that each weekday for two weeks we were

together from 8:00 until 4:00, studying Spanish. Marta was not just my Spanish teacher, however, but also my theology partner. We began each day by reading the Forward Day by Day lectionary and reflection in both Spanish and English. What followed was a profound discussion related to the reflection.

The Friday before "el dia del cariño" (the day of affection or Valentine's Day), Marta brought me a gift. She had been trying to decide what she could give me. As Marta was walking to our school, she decided to buy me a candle because she knew I did a lot of work in the church. Marta said she thought this candle would be a good reminder of the love of Jesus Christ, which would help me when facing the many distractions of life. As we explored this thought further, Marta shared some of her personal faith journey with me. She described the change she experienced when she finally stopped running from one task to the next and invited the LUZ (or light) of Jesus to be her guide in life. Marta said, "The candle is a very simple thing but the symbol is very grand.

Marta and I on the surface have lived incredibly different lives. Like many Guatemalan women, she married very young and had children early in her marriage. About ten years later, Marta took the risk of saying she wanted to get a college education. She didn't receive help from anyone...financially or at home. Marta worked during the week and completed her education by going to classes every Saturday for several years. She has shared many of the challenges of women living in her country and for me is the embodiment of the deep love of God in this world. Marta is an incredibly warm and generous person who is totally committed to her family and her work. I am a changed person as a result of living so closely with Marta and will keep my candle close by as a reminder of the love of God throughout the world.

I would also like to reintroduce you to Doña Carmelita, the Elizabeth Miller of Campo Dos. Carmelita lives with her children and grandchildren in a thatched hut in the highlands of the northeastern part of Guatemala. For years, we have shared greetings between Elizabeth and Carmelita and talked about the incredible similarity in the way they looked as well as the deep involvement they both had with the people of their churches.

Carmelita's spiritual life is deeply rooted in God. Without the distractions of the bustling world, Carmelita opens the space around her to hear God's word in a profound way. Iris, Carmelita's granddaughter, told us a story illustrating this. Iris explained that her grandmother had gotten up and put on a nice dress in the morning. When asked why, she responded that someone was coming to visit her that day. And, by the end of the day, good friends from the United States were unexpectedly at her home!

Carmelita cried and prayed when we told her Elizabeth had died. Carmelita asked Iris to bring out the two pictures she had hanging by her bed – one of Elizabeth that says "The Doña Carmelita of St. Peter's and the one of herself that says, "The Elizabeth Miller of Campo Dos". I felt God's presence in a palpable way during our visit on this remote hillside, and believe this was enhanced by the love connection between these two spirit filled women.

Frank:

Usually when we go to Guatemala we visit each of our five companion congregations. The pastors invite members of the congregation to come to the church and we have a time of sharing, singing and praying. It's always a good encounter but it's with a relatively large group. This year Linda very wisely suggested that, instead of in-church gatherings, we visit a few people from the congregations in their homes.

Meet Rigoberto Perez, a soft-spoken Guitar-playing teen-ager. Rigo is blind and he has a kid sister who is blind. He also has about seven or eight other siblings and they all live in a three-room house with a dirt floor, an outside kitchen and an outhouse. We were, of course, expecting poverty, but this visit to the Perez home was more than we expected – more poverty, more hospitality, more warm smiles, more laughter, more open acceptance.

This visit and others like it brought back to the surface the pain we always feel in Guatemala – the pain created by the radical difference between what **we** have and what **they** have, just because we happened to be born in North America and they in Central America. As we were saying our goodbyes, one of Rigo's teen-aged sisters made a little speech about how much the family appreciated our visiting in their very humble home. I was choked up with gratitude for their open hospitality. I don't remember what I said but Linda remembers that I said something in Spanish about our common humanity which is far deeper than our differences. That Perez family gave us a gift that day which neither they nor we will ever fully understand.

Meet the Guatemalan Emily Richards. Her name is Marcia García and I met her on the street next to the central park in Antigua Guatemala where she sits each day in a wheelchair with a basket for contributions beside her. What struck me about Marcia the first time I saw her was that she had the same childhood illness that Emily had: infantile arthritis. I stopped and asked her just to be sure. And the next thing that struck me was that she was drawing pictures – with her feet. We talked for a few minutes and then I commissioned a drawing for Emily. Over the next several days I got to know her a bit and met her daughter, Cristina. I commissioned two additional drawings: one for Linda and me and one for Bishop Michel. They are not great pieces of art but they're done by a great artist. What she and Emily have in common, I believe, is the determination not to capitalize on people's pity and not to allow their difficulties deter them from becoming all that they can be. I sensed a deep spirituality in Marcia although we never talked about God. Linda suggested we give her one of the prayer shawls made by the Knit Wits. We did, and we showed her the picture of the Knit Wits and explained that there was a prayer in every stitch. On our last day in Antigua, as we were leaving, we drove past Marcia's place. She didn't know we were coming but she was wearing the prayer shawl.

Linda:

Thank you for your prayers and support during our pilgrimage in Guatemala and for your ongoing support during the year. I genuinely believe God's love is flowing between and through our connection to our brothers and sisters in Guatemala. May we all take a moment each day to light a candle in our hearts and remember that we are loved deeply and unceasingly. Amen.