

Witnessing Jesus in Haiti

This is an excerpt from a reflection by Rhonda Miska. Rhonda is the Social Justice Minister and Hispanic Minister at the Church of the Incarnation, which is twinned with the Little Brothers and Little Sisters of the Incarnation in Pandiassou. The full text can be obtained by Rhonda at rhonda@incarnationparish.org

As the five of us prepared to go down to visit the Little Brothers and the Little Sisters of the Incarnation in Pandiassou, Haiti, I thought about what it meant to go somewhere as a ‘witness,’ and what it meant to ‘witness Jesus’ in Haiti. I looked it up in the dictionary. Witness (verb): to see or experience directly, to furnish or service as evidence; witness (noun): someone who sees an event and reports what happened, a close observer, one who testifies.

We witnessed much of Port-au-Prince, and it was certainly a lot to take in. Members of our group later said that it was a difficult day. I agree - urban poverty is draining. At least in the rural areas there is the beauty of nature, the stars at night, the rolling green hills, the idyllic pastoral views. And, what’s more, we weren’t doing anything. I have heard mission group members comment more than once that as long as they are actively helping, doing something, they feel okay. But as we drove around Port-au-Prince, we weren’t ‘doing’ anything we were just looking, listening, watching, absorbing...witnessing it all.

Yes, it was uncomfortable, disturbing, and sad. ‘To witness, to see or experience directly.’ Is there value in taking a break from ‘doing’ in order to see, to experience, to witness? I think the answer is yes. Of course, performing the works of mercy is necessary, indeed, crucial. But there is value in just seeing, stepping out of our comfort zone, going to a different place to see with a different perspective.

Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, the Superior General of the Jesuits, has written that, “there is a tendency to organize society in such a way that one may pass one’s whole life without having contact with the poor nor let oneself be affected by them.” Both in our U.S. cities, and in the world, we can live our whole lives detached and undisturbed by the realities of the distribution of wealth. We can benefit from the economic system without ever seeing, or even needing to be aware, of its underbelly.

As Catholics who believe that we are one Body in Christ, to develop solidarity with these people so that a concern for their well-being stems not from some vague, idealistic altruism or (worse yet) out of pity, but out of an awareness of the spiritual truth that we are deeply interconnected, members of one human family despite racial, ethnic, or economic differences.

Dorothy Day, foundress of the Catholic Worker movement, wrote that it is not enough to love in the abstract, to love an ideal, a concept, a theory. We must love people – specific, real people. In my life, the Gospel challenge to love the poor has been manifested in face-to-face interactions with a HIV positive Haitian orphan cared for by the Missionaries of Charity, a fourteen year old from inner city Milwaukee doing time in juvenile detention for gang involvement and sexual assault, a Nicaraguan *campesina* mourning the death of her ten-month-old daughter from lack of access to clean water. They are not ‘the poor,’ they are Jean, David, Francisca and Manuel. How can we love the poor that are our neighbors until we really see them, know them, witness Jesus present among them?

So, how did we ‘witness Jesus’ in Haiti? We witnessed Christ in the distressing disguise of the poor, as Mother Teresa was fond of saying. Jon Sobrino, SJ, reflecting on

his experience of violent repression of the Church in El Salvador, makes it clear that Christ is present in what he calls 'the crucified peoples.' The historical Jesus was poor, marginalized, tortured, rejected and put to death. Surely in our modern world, Christians must strive to recognize Jesus in people who live in similar circumstances as he did 2,000 years ago, and Haiti seems as apt a place as any for American Catholics to start.

Certainly it is easier simply to go and support our programs, and take our pictures and feel good about our projects and how we are helping 'those poor people over there' – all the while keeping them at an arm's length and not asking the deeper questions of the structures and systems that have created and perpetuate their poverty. Easier, yes, but I don't think this is the Gospel mandate for our times. I say, let us go to the Two-Thirds World to do our work of charity, as Jesus calls us to do. But let us slow down enough to see, to witness, to be penetrated by that which disturbs us. We serve neither the Haitian people nor ourselves nor our God when we go and fly hundreds of miles to paint a school or work on a project but never become aware that we are treading on holy ground, that we are a mission field as well as missionaries. Let us be affected, and let us be uncomfortable! Let us be witnesses, and may our witnessing change us, uproot us, dislodge us, challenge us, and stretch our souls. Blessed are those who see and are troubled, for they shall be transformed and transform the world.

There is a Haitian proverb that says 'we see from where we stand' and I think there is value in us as Americans coming to stand in another place simply with the goal of seeing with new eyes – to see both the difficult and the inspiring, the tragic and the miraculous, the distressing and the beautifully awesome. When people were curious about who Jesus was, and asked Him where He lived, His answer was 'Come and see.' Perhaps this is the same invitation made to Christians in the Global North – to witness Jesus, crucified and resurrected, among the people of the Two-Thirds World.