

Healing Ethnic Shame

Roque Daniel Delgado's stepfather was Mexican. Real Mexican. Santiago dressed to the nines, stuffed his Chicago home with colorful paintings and big furniture, insisting on speaking Spanish, and took pride in his Catholic family which extended throughout the Guadalajara area like a fast-growing bougainvillea vine.

Actually, Santiago started life in Mezquitic, an impoverished village 100 miles from the big city. He worked as hard as a man can. Strength and tenacity propelled him north and into the Rio Grande; he swam to America and did not look back till he reached Chicago.

At age four, Roque met Santiago. He was the father he knew. Besides teaching his kids gratitude for what they had, and a reverence for God, Santiago was also an alcoholic, a sexual addict, and fought explosively with Roque's mother.

Mostly, Roque checked out. He was at best ambivalent toward his stepdad and relieved when Santiago abandoned the family after his mother's mental health breakdown when he was 11. When Santiago left, so did speaking Spanish and Mexican pride. For Roque, good riddance. His life digressed into homosexual then transgender chaos until Jesus reclaimed him through His faithful members (another story....)

One memory of Santiago remained with Roque. Just after their marriage, Santiago took his new wife and kids in a new, snazzy camper-van on a 2000 mile journey from Chicago to Guadalajara. Throughout the December of that year, Roque marveled at the breadth and depth of Santiago's Mexican family. The small Chicago clan was subsumed by this greater one with whom they gathered constantly, usually around meals and Advent services in ornate churches and cathedrals. Roque also remembered the bleak poverty of Mezquitic and the shack Santiago grew up in. It frightened Roque in its filth; the kids relieved themselves with the pigs.

Beauty, poverty, ambivalence. When Roque returned to Mexico last year to help us out with our third Living Waters Training, the Holy Spirit whispered to him that He was going to reclaim what was precious from Roque's Mexican roots. All roads led to Santiago, whom Roque had barely seen for twenty years. God began to stir up memories, mostly negative, which required that Roque open his 'stepfather wound' and wash it in the fountain of forgiveness. Beginning to speak Spanish again and engage with his fellow Mexicans demanded that Roque own who he was as son of Santiago, a man of Mexico.

Last week Roque and I (and a host of others) returned to Mexico for our fourth training there. This time we centered on Guadalajara; Roque recalled sites he had shared with Santiago 27 years prior, especially the cathedrals. In the light of love of Jesus and his new family, Roque beheld the past with renewed vision. He remembered a strong, proud man surrounded by his family who tried to give his son good things.

Our training was a couple hours north of Guadalajara. En route, we got lost as we (including Roque) drove slowly through the choked streets of a village; it was primitive, fiercely poor. When we asked for directions, a woman said: 'You are in the wrong place; this is Mezquitic.' God on the move through a faulty GPS-- Roque connected with memories from decades earlier, and inhaled the hardship that had forged Santiago.

Little had changed in this forgotten town. Roque could not forget his first exposure to the poverty of the only Dad he ever knew. Tempted by revulsion, he opted for compassion. And pride in Santiago for what he had achieved. In truth, Roque bears the good of Santiago—his strength and tenacity, the proud dignity of a Mexican man.

As we drove out of the town, we came upon a small plaza with a church. 'My dad and the whole bunch of us went to a fiesta there after church one day.' The sun shone on Roque that day: his heart is now able to reclaim what is good and true about his roots. As our training progressed, I welled up with pride as Roque humbly and deeply shared his ethnic wound and its redemption. In Spanish!