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A VISIT TO COLOMBIA: THREE VIGNETTES

This was my first trip to Colombia, and I am so glad that I went. **BILL RIEGEL** and I were traveling together on New Year's Day 2006, and the fact that neither of us spoke any Spanish was compensated by the excellent travel companion that **BILL** is: funny, chatty, observant. We were traveling to attend the first profession of the three Colombian novices: **EDSON CAMILO MORENO** and the twin brothers **WILIAM RUBIO VIASUS** and **JOAQUIN RUBIO VIASUS**. This was to be followed by the ordination of **JUAN CARLOS ROJAS RAMOS**. I had met **JUAN CARLOS** in Toronto during World Youth Days, and I was impressed by his youthful zeal, his interest in the Basilian apostolates in Canada, and his faith.

One tends to forget about travel distances within North America. Nearly six hours of flying time—the length of travel between Toronto and Bogotá—across Europe would mean, well, that one was in Asia! Our flying time brought us to South America, bracketed on the one end by a cold and snowy Toronto New Year's Day and, on the other end, the promise of temperate and the more equatorially friendly climate of Colombia, warmed by the southern waves of the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans.

My first taste of Colombia was at Bogotá airport where I drank a small cup of coffee. And while I am by no means a connoisseur of coffee, the smooth texture of this drink was a wonderful restorative. Well treated by the polite services of Avianca, Colombia's national airline, we arrived in Cali and were met by **RAFAEL LOPERA**, **ALBERTO FERRARA**, and **OSCAR GOMEZ**. It was a lovely clear night, nicely mild, and the first sight of Palm Trees, with their warmth, perennial sturdiness, and their whitewashed trunks, took me back to my early life in Karachi. We drove through Cali, the time being well after 11.00 PM. A new country and city late at night: I was interested in ordinary things: the style of the architecture, the business of a street café, the changing scenery, the speed of the traffic. And so to my first vignette.

The next day, the 2nd of January, St. Basil's Feast Day, is what we had traveled for. The day began with Morning Prayer and the First Profession, and it was held at the Church of Nuestra Señora de la Asunción, which is a large church, and with the exception of a few doors and the roof, metal grills sufficed, and thus was open to the morning breeze and several feathered friends. The sanctuary had some Christmas buntings. The cross on the wall behind the altar is what caught my attention. A wooden cross whose vertical bar was purposefully broken at one end thus freeing the resurrected Jesus. For a barrio that knows both violence and poverty, this powerful Cross was surely more than just traditional Catholic sentiment. And as if to add to the heavenly merriment of the resurrected Jesus, at the foot of the cross stood a simply decorated Christmas tree, with twinkling lights.

The church soon filled up with parishioners. The novices sat in a row facing the sanctuary and **KEN DECKER** presided. The hymn was sung, the psalms were recited, the reading from St. John's Gospel (1 John 19-28) was proclaimed by **BOB BARRINGER**, and we then sat to hear him preach. I understood enough to gather that the homilist began with the question: "who are you?", the same question that the authorities posed to John the Baptist in the Gospel reading. The homilist then went on immediately to say something about Shakespeare, and even though I forgot to ask what exactly was said, I would like to think that **BOB** said that the question: "who are you?", in relation to Christ

and the Christian life, is more fundamental than Hamlet's predicament and question: "to be or not to be." Following the homily, each novice knelt before the Superior General, and holding a candle, made his profession of vows. The vows were received, the kiss of peace was exchanged, and the intercessions were made. And so three young man were added to the number of those who strive for Christian perfection under the patronage of St. Basil. The ceremony concluded with the English rendition of "Hail Glorious Apostle, Saint Basil the Great", and it was one of the few moment of the ceremony where those linguistically challenged like me could make some small verbal, and I hope melodious, contribution.

The ordination ceremony, my second vignette, was set on the same day for 4.00 PM. Archbishop **MICHAEL MILLER CSB** was to be the ordaining prelate; he had traveled from Rome to Madrid and then made a sixteen hour journey from Madrid to Bogotá. Our trip from Toronto seemed a mere trifle. The priests gathered in the sacristy and **JUAN CARLOS** appeared in his alb and deacon's stole. I wondered what was going through his mind as he was about to undergo the most fundamental change in his life since his baptism. **FRANK AMICO**, the Master of Ceremonies, gave us our instructions, and we were off. The procession wound its way through the school courtyard, passed the Basilian residence, and then around to the front of the church where it halted as the Master of Ceremonies ensured that all was in readiness. While waiting, an old, frail women, dressed in her Sunday best with her hair oiled, caught my eye. And with hands outstretched and a deep smile she came towards me, and saying something softly and slowly to me in Spanish, embraced me. Her eyes were tearful, and amidst those tears lay oceans of experience that did not need the revelation of language. It was a tender moment for me. She had come for this great celebration, and her faith and devotion shone through; they were not hidden by the accidental boundaries of language. And for one who knew neither of his grandmothers, it is the closest that I have come to experiencing what a grandmother's love and embrace might feel like.

The church was packed and the congregation were caught up by this solemn procession. Many had traveled from Bogotá and from Medellin. The altar was incensed and thus begun the holy ceremony of an ordination, so well known by Basilians. The first reading was taken from the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah 1: 4-10; Psalm 119 was sung at the ambo by a young man with his guitar; the second reading was taken from St. Paul's Letter to the Romans; and the Gospel, St. Luke 5:1-11, was proclaimed by **RAFAEL LOPERA**. The Archbishop preached his homily, and from what I learned, he spoke of the priest as a pastor, the priest as a minister of the universal church, and the need for the priest to be one with Christ prior to any undertaking, including preaching.

Basilians will recall different moments from their ordination ceremonies, but the imploring and beseeching in the Litany of the Saints is, without doubt, universally moving . There we were, no longer in Cali but at the very gates of heaven, imploring the saints, row upon row of them, ancient and recent, to bless this deacon lying prostrate in this sanctuary: the universality of heaven, where time has no say, now concretized in this moment. And so the choir sang with great rhythm a litany that came from Brazil. Without doubt the laying on of hands by a bishop must be a very prayerful moment for him, and all the more so for this bishop officiating over his first presbyteral ordination. The concelebrating priests were then invited to lay hands on **JUAN CARLOS**, and so we came: **KEN DECKER, BOB BARRINGER, RAFAEL LOPERA, AL SINASAC, FRANK AMICO, PEDRO MORA, ALBERTO FERRARA, JOHN BOSCOE, JACK WHITLEY, BILL RIEGEL, PAUL RENNICK, VINCE THOMPSON, TERRY KERSCH, WALLY PLATT, MARIO D' SOUZA** and two visiting priests. Another heart-swelling moment for me was at the kiss of peace. Suddenly the sanctuary was filling with a host of children who had come to extend their peace. Their natural shyness revealed that they were only slightly overwhelmed by the solemnity and grandeur of the occasion, but they came nevertheless, and they came to each of the concelebrants. In their number was a young girl with a

facial deformity, but with a radiant smile that would have done more than launch a mere thousand ships! She could have commanded me to march to the ends of the earth, and I would have done so. The choir sang confidently, happily introducing the melodies of The Carpenters and Simon and Garfunkel. Through all of this ceremony, the congregation listened and were raptly attentive. The symbolically and mystically rich ceremony of an ordination is always moving, and no doubt this congregation linked its experience of sharing in the cross of Christ to that of **JUAN CARLOS** as he promised to follow and serve Christ as a Basilian priest.

My third vignette took place a few days later. After lunch at the house, we went for a tour of the school and the barrio. **RAFAEL** led the tour of the school, and he did so with great love, dedication, and justified pride. We met some teachers—preparing for the opening of the school the following week—were shown classrooms, and language and science laboratories. In the computer-layered technology room we were introduced to a young man, a former student of the school, and now a computer teacher who spoke English. With enthusiasm he told us about his class and what his students accomplish, including the construction of web sites, a skill that is only theory to me. When I complimented him on his English, he proudly pointed to **WALLY PLATT** as his former teacher. The walls of the school exhibit stunning posters of the great works of art. In the context of the material poverty of this barrio, these posters stood out as reminders of the universality of beauty. The great works of Caravaggio and Michelangelo and others lined the corridors. Frames with sketches of Bach, Beethoven Mozart, Schubert and Schumann, Verdi, Wagner and Tchaikovsky all stood ready to make their contribution to goodness, truth, and beauty. If education is about liberation, and if true liberation begins with the human spirit, then this school was playing its part, and playing it so well. Amidst the material and financial poverty of the barrio, the priceless quality of this great art, gloriously depicted in these colourful posters, gave this school a great lightness and freedom. And, mingled with this high art of yesterday was a poster of the high art of our day: the Beatles! I was so impressed with what I saw, and as a Basilian, I was so proud of the great Basilian tradition of education living and active, especially its versatility and conviction in the context of great material poverty. Maritain once said that there is nothing greater in life than intuition and love, and, my heavens, both were in abundance here. But in case I become too sentimental, the principal, **RAFAEL**, assured us about the place of discipline and accountability in the school. Liberation and freedom without discipline are impossible, but, of course, realized through love. At the back of the school, high on the wall, emblazoned in bright colours, is the Basilian crest and its proud date of 1822. What a wonderful way to effect change, and to do so in the midst of deprivation, violence, abandonment, and want, by turning around and teaching the young of the marvels of a life transformed by goodness, discipline, and knowledge.

We were then given a tour of the barrio. On the other side of the school and the Basilian residence is a modest convent of the Sisters of Charity. Two of the sisters work at the school. A sister emerged and with great happiness and a broad smile welcomed us. Then, through **RAFAEL**, she began to ask us where we were from. She then turned towards me and asked whether I was a native Colombian, telling **RAFAEL** that we looked like brothers. Now all that remains is for me to work on my Spanish. Outside the precincts of the school, but opposite the entrance to the church, is a single-story structure, fairly large and very poor looking: a home for the elderly. The one qualification for residence is that one is truly destitute and abandoned. Over a hundred such elderly people reside here and are taken care of by those noble women to whom the poverty and brokenness of humanity is simply another invitation to encounter Christ: The Missionaries of Charity. At another side of the building is a soup kitchen, one which serves a hundred and eighty warm meals from Monday through Friday. And with the exception of a single person who is paid to coordinate the work of this soup kitchen, everybody else is a volunteer.

We then walked through a part of the barrio. An open field was hosting an enthusiastic football tournament for a few boys. They were doing what young boys would do just about anywhere on a holiday, and their enthusiasm did not seem encumbered by anything. The houses along the route showed signs of Christmas and on the road inscribed with coloured chalk were the greetings: Feliz Navidad and Feliz Año Nuevo. The simplicity of these greetings were touching, and they beat any of the more flamboyant signs that we associate with these seasons. We walked to the Convent of the Missionaries of Charity. The door was opened and there stood a young Indian sister who greeted each of us with the words "welcome." Bedecked in her white cotton sari with the three blue borders symbolizing the evangelical counsels, she led us in. A large photograph of Benedict XVI and Mother Theresa adorned the entrance. The Indian sisters, fluent in Spanish, also administered a daycare centre. Attached to the convent is another Church administered by the Basilians. Its corrugated roof and its simple furnishings were home to the same Lord as any shining mosaic church.

On our way back, a bare-chested man was wheeling a small wooden cart, and waved to us. **RAFAEL** hailed him to come across, and he did. His cart had a layer of ice and on it were scattered small fish. As he stood speaking, I noticed a substantial horizontal scar across his stomach. Surgery; a stabbing; some other outrage committed against his flesh? He offered **RAFAEL** some fish. As we had eaten fish for lunch, **RAFAEL** told him that he would prefer a pineapple, and amidst laughs and waves we set off back to the house.

A trip such as this one can induce all kinds of emotions and feelings: guilt, sadness, anger. But I also experienced feelings of immense pride and joy because of this Basilian work and ministry. The work being done is noble work, and the nobility of the spiritual, educational, cultural, and economic welfare of this one barrio is a work that all Basilians should be justly proud of.

I am so glad that I went to Colombia; I am so glad that the three men professed vows; I am so glad that Juan Carlos stands shoulder to shoulder with the Basilian Congregation doing what needs to be done; I am so glad I walked through the barrio and visited the Basilian school to see how education for freedom and liberation are confined neither to books and timetables or classrooms, but, rather, are realized when human beings inspired by love and devotion interact with other human beings who are ripe for the seeds of love and devotion. Heidegger said that language is the house of being. But the language of the Gospel is a universal language, and those inspired by the Gospel and propelled into action speak a language more universal than the particularities of these words or those. I am so glad I went; my life and experience as a Basilian expanded enormously.

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