

Reflections from the Pew...

Marcelline Koch OP, Kathryn Raistrick, Julie Wullner and I volunteered November 12th through 19th at the Budget and Sol Luna sites of Annunciation House in El Paso, Texas. These sites offer hospitality to people released from detention centers and assist them with the process of reuniting with their families. My thoughts are based on the “what” and the “why” that moved me to tears when Marcelline and I participated in the Saturday evening liturgy at St. Joseph’s Church in El Paso.

I am not certain whom to credit for the version of the Gloria that was sung, I just know that I gasped and tears started rolling down my face when I heard the words and connected them to my memories of the previous days. “...and on Earth peace to the people, people of good will...”

The face of a little girl who was so shy at first haunts me. Kathryn was able to get just a hint of a smile from her in response to Kathryn’s silly comment about the little one’s t-shirt. And she is now forever in my mind as *la chica con la sonrisa bonita* (the girl with a pretty smile.) The next two days I called her this and shortly before she left, it was her hug as well as her dimples, that nearly knocked me over. This little girl and all the other individuals we met—guests, hotel staff members, volunteers, folks we encountered along the way, the family and friends who sent us on our way—**all** seek peace; **all** are people of good will.

From M.D. Ridge’s song *Parable*, “*To everything, there is a season, a time to meet and a time to part. A time for joy and grieving.*” Yes, another version from the profound reading of Ecclesiastes and for me, a poignant lesson in present moment living. But I **want** to know, what is the end of the story? Did the woman and child who had seven bus transfers make it to their new home okay? (And really, whoever thought this many bus changes were a good idea in the first place? Surely, there was another option? No?) What will *la chica con la sonrisa bonita* be like two years from now? Will many others tell her she has an incredibly beautiful smile? Will our paths ever meet again? Would we be able to recognize each other if we passed each other on the street five years from now? And what about the families we left at the airport that were supposed to fly to areas affected by the nor’easter? Did they arrive okay without long delays? Did we give them enough food? Did someone else share their food with them? I **want** to know the end of the story. A baby girl was born during our stay; what is her first name? Was she a healthy weight? I don’t want to just “meet” and “part”. And yet I wonder, too, how soon can the shelters close? When can the motel staffs return to life that was once normal for them? Is there such a thing as normal after an experience such as this? I remember the woman at Sol Luna who remakes the beds as soon as she could get the sheets washed and dried. Liz and her mother at Budget and **all** the others working so hard to keep up with the daily turnover of guests. How many rooms will be empty and cleaned by 2 p.m., ready for more guests? Shouldn’t the number of guest papers match the number of rooms in use? It doesn’t look like they do; now what? We don’t want *anyone* out on the streets of El Paso tonight. One evening Marcelline patiently listened to my fears as I realized that I might have reported to the next shift the wrong number of available rooms. Gracias a Dios, somehow it all worked out for everyone.

From the *Our Father*, “*Give us this our daily bread*” in the form of frosted flakes, peanut butter and jelly, bologna

and cheese sandwiches, hot dogs, watermelon, oranges, bananas, apples, and lettuce salads. “Mas pepinos por favor.” (More cucumbers please.) “Poco mas tomates por favor.” Arroz con pollo, no picante (Chicken with rice that was not spicy) that mysteriously appeared in the afternoon when extra food was needed. And agua, “tan rico” as Marcelline was told by a little boy. (Water, so tasty.) I picture Liz and her mother who served pots of homemade chicken soup and the following week, a complete Thanksgiving dinner. Julie’s organizational skills in the food room overflowed to the meals. “But we **must** have hot coffee, it’s barely above freezing outside in the tent in the mornings.” Marcelline reacquainted with her friends Scott and Jean who spent their Thanksgiving Holiday as guests among guests.

We, who served the meals, never knew where the next meal was coming from. We knew where it was supposed to come from, but in reality, we never knew where it was really coming from. “Here is \$20; use this to buy milk,” said a woman at Liz’s mother’s church.

Lamb of God, “Grant us Peace.” How many times and for how long must we request peace?

David Haas’ *Song of the Body of Christ* has never failed to move me; this liturgy was no exception.

“*We come to share our story. We come to break the bread*” (or pieces of chicken into **fourths** until all are fed).

“*We come as your people*” (from various cultures, countries, faith traditions, speaking different languages.)

“*We come as your own. United with each other, love finds a home.*” (Stories from the airport: “Here’s how you read the departure schedule TV monitors. Here’s the family rest room.” “Here” says the agent at the ticket counter: “Use this gate pass to accompany your friends to the gate.”)

“*We are called to heal the broken, to be hope for the poor.*” (Chicken pox? Let’s hope not. The google symptoms don’t match your child’s behavior. Sore feet, cut feet, feet with fungus, that was a new word in Spanish for me!)

“*We are called to feed the hungry at our door.*” (I see the face of the father whose daughter was craving something chocolate as well as the four-year-old who refused to eat during the days of detention.)

“*Bread of life and cup of promise, in this meal we all are one.*” (Julie’s and my invitation to share in the delights of the fresh watermelon. “You need to try this!” we were told.)

“*In our dying and our rising, may your kingdom come.*” (In our dying to policies and laws that have created the injustices in the first place.) “*You will lead and we shall follow.*” (Beatrice said on our first day: “You write this down, you need to know this! The border patrol wear green and they will ask su nombre, su edad, su fecha de cita – your name, your age, the date of your court appointment. The TSA will wear blue, they will search you and your belongings, not your children though. You need to explain what this really means.”)

“*You will be the breath of life; living water, we are thirsting for your light.*” (I image the children playing with their parents alternately tossing Hula Hoops in the air or rolling them across the parking lot.)

“*We will live and sing your praises. “Alleluia” is our song. May we live in love and peace our whole life long.*” (Amen. So be it.)

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