

Growing in Heart in Mexico -- A 1975 Unification Church Missionary Testimony

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Photo date and location unknown

When my dad would get out the photos of himself driving a twelve-ox team dragging huge logs through the rough land of northern Paraguay to clear roads, I used to feel a bit envious. Why did I have to be born after my parents returned from Paraguay, where they were on assignment from the Mennonite Central Committee, helping East European refugees begin a new life in a remote corner of South America. My parents would talk German to each other when they didn't want us children to understand what they were saying. I resolved to study German.

Well, I studied French and Spanish in high school before I had a chance to take any German classes, and I still haven't paid a visit to Paraguay. I did jump at a chance when in 1974 Rev. Sun Myung Moon started talking about sending out representatives overseas. I told Neil Salonen, the American Unification Church president, to remember me when it came time to assign missionaries and that I wanted to go to Africa. He did remember me, but I was on the list to go to Mexico.

It wasn't until the airplane started descending that I began to get cold feet. Mexico isn't that far away from the United States. Hey, a flight from New York to Mexico City takes less time than a flight to California. Our countries share a border and a river. I had studied Spanish. I wasn't going that far away. Or was I?

I arrived in Mexico in the spring of 1975 with a thousand dollars in my pocket, to be used sparingly. I would need to work to meet most living expenses. And in Mexico, as I guess in many non-English speaking countries in the world, if you can speak English, you can earn enough money to survive by giving English classes.

You cannot go to Mexico without being assaulted by many new sights, sounds, smells and tastes. About one fifth of the 60 million inhabitants of Mexico live in the capital, and that was my destination. Since I assumed I would be there for several years, if not the rest of my life, I wanted to plunge in.

It seemed like a plunge. In mid-May the weather is hot and dry, and the atmosphere is polluted. At 7,000 feet above sea level, oxygen is sparse. Nestled in a mountain basin, where little air circulates, and being home to an oil refinery and untold thousands of cars with no emission controls, Mexico City has few equals around the world in poor air quality.

My German companion, Sylvia, had arrived a few days earlier. She had rented a room a few blocks from the tourist area, the *Zona Rosa*. It was a ground-floor room with no window. The adjacent bathroom had a toilet stool with a showerhead immediately above it. No sink. I guess it was designed so you could take care of all your personal necessities at once. Whole families lived in rooms like ours that lined the narrow courtyard. The children stared at us. The women found us amusing.

Sylvia had bought some lovely-looking green peppers at the market and decided to cook them for me to

eat along with some fresh tortillas, to celebrate my arrival. A neighbor let us use her charcoal brazier. Our faces turned red and sweat poured down our forehead as we chewed. Later we learned that the veins of the chili peppers contain most of the aromatic oils, and if you clean out the veins before you cook them, they don't burn your mouth and stomach quite as much. We learned a lot of things the hard way, by experience. We were willing to go almost anywhere and try almost any kind of food.

The women in the markets were delighted to tell us the names of exotic fruits and vegetables, give us samples, and tell us how to cook or serve them. It takes an entire year to experience the whole array of Mexico's bounty. Of all the fruits, mangos were my favorite. Fresh off the tree out in a village. Lush piles of yellow, orange or reddish green fruits in the market. Juice dripping down your chin. Cool in the hottest of days.

We stayed for a while with a Japanese family, and I gave the children English lessons to help pay rent. Our third companion in mission was a Japanese man named Sato. If people from three formerly enemy nations can get along, there is hope for world unity. The three of us had our ups and downs.

We lived in an apartment building where washing is done at corrugated sinks lined up on the roof and hung up on clotheslines. Being an American, I like to do things efficiently. Therefore, I would fill buckets with water and put my clothes in them, on the theory that it is less difficult to get the dirt out if you pre-soak the clothes. However, all the other women would wet each piece, rub soap on it, scrub it, and then rinse it before going on to the next piece.

One old woman constantly criticized me. "Didn't your mother teach you how to wash?" she would nag me. Well, we did have a wringer washing machine when I was growing up, and I could probably still use one. However, Americans do as little hand washing as possible. After observing things for a while, I learned that people paid this woman to do their wash. When I started paying her to wash clothes for me on occasion, she stopped criticizing me.

I love music. Mexicans love music. Their traditional ranchero music is similar to American country music in its rhythms and tales of lost or betrayed love. Sylvia plays guitar, and she kept talking about wanting a guitar. Our simple prayers were answered, and at one point, we had five -- none of them much good -- and she taught me some basic chord cycles. We learned to play Mexican music, and with my guitar and repertoire I was welcome at any party.

People kept asking for Beatles music, which I thought had gone out of style, so I learned to play a couple of their simpler songs.

We went to high mass on Christmas Eve in the Metropolitan Cathedral in Mexico City. Those who don't have a car have to walk home, because public transportation ceases at midnight, in expectation of Christmas. We were an international conglomerate of young people living 7,000 feet above sea in the high central plateau of Mexico. Foreigners and native-born belted out carols and folk songs in Spanish, English, German, Korean, French, and Japanese, and maybe Italian. We surely sang "Silent Night" in at least four languages, each system of phonology overlaying its special vibration. Even the guttural German of "*Stille nacht, heilige nacht*" softens in the universal awe at the emergence of divinity into our world!

On festive occasions Mexicans hire *mariachi* bands to serenade a beloved one in the wee hours of the morning, and neighbors snuggle under their covers to the sweet baritone voices booming out: "*Qué linda está la mañana en que vengo a saludarte; venimos todos con gusto, y placer a felicitarte....!*"

We sang for free. We serenaded and raised up the spirits of the living and the dead as we stretched the radius of the Eucharistic peace from the metropolitan cathedral to our humble house near the Chapultepec Park holy ground, sanctifying each block and every kilometer. If the stars and angels that heralded the Christ-child's birth at the turning of the age didn't find resonance on earth then, we provided the echo that was 19 long centuries in the coming.

An American in Mexico runs into puzzling situations. There seems to be a mixture of admiration, envy and resentment for Americans. I remember in high school reading about the Mexican-American war of 1948 as a kind of interlude between our westward expansion and the Civil War, our heroes the valiant men who defended the Alamo against hopeless odds. Mexicans learn about the various times the United States military invaded Mexico.

I would get so frustrated when I saw Mexicans adopting some of the worst aspects of our popular culture. Visible evidence was the emulation of Saturday Night Fever styles of dress and talking. I would think of the American proverb: "You cannot keep the birds from flying over your head, but you can keep them from building nests in your hair." Translations of that proverb were not very favorably received.

Mexico is a land of abundance. Its geographic shape has been likened to a horn of plenty. It has bountiful resources of food, minerals, climate, and people. Mexicans blame their economic woes on the United

States, but when a recent Mexican president left office after his six-year term, he was the sixth richest person in the world.

I couldn't make up for all the wrongs committed by my country. All I could do was offer a listening ear, a caring heart, and a hand of service. You meet a lot of beggars in Mexico. I gave people food. I collected clothes and bedding for people who came knocking at our door. But I seldom handed out money. A friend wanted me to meet his sister, who was in need of some guidance or counseling. We showed up at her house, much to her surprise, around mealtime. She fed us the stuffed chili peppers she had prepared for her children's meal, much to my dismay.

When an American or European tries to give advice in Mexico it is often dismissed with the comment, "Oh, that works in an advanced country such as yours, but it wouldn't work here." However, Mexicans do admire the Japanese. Japan never invaded Mexico and at that point did not exert a major economic influence on the country, so the roots of resentment are not so strong. When Japan wanted to end its centuries-old isolation it sent emissaries around the world to observe the best aspects of each culture, which could then be adapted by the Japanese. Japan rose out of the destruction of war to become a major world power. Mexico could also.

We visited churches and schools. We talked to people on the streets and in the parks, asking them if they were interested in talking about God. Some were. Some weren't. We gave lectures and held seminars on the Divine Principle, a systematic study of the nature of God and the universe that encompasses three main topics: the way God envisioned the world, how things went wrong, and how God has been working throughout history to restore the lost ideal.

Few young people knew very much about the Bible. They were interested in learning to know us, and they invited us to their home villages to meet their families. However, the idea of applying spiritual principles in daily life seemed pretty foreign to many young people. Some of the most serious-minded young people we met were martial arts practitioners, and Sylvia and I enrolled at a taekwondo-do school. We engaged in spiritual and physical training and discipline. Among the students and professors we found people who could grasp the vision of a life of sacrificial love and service for God, for the nation, and for humankind.

We reached out to both Catholics and Protestants in a country there is little communication between the two versions of Christianity. I became close friends with a Jesuit priest, Padre Carlos. He had spent years of missionary work with the Tarahuamara Indians in northern Mexico. His experiences there were the high point of his spiritual life, and it broke his heart to be reassigned to the capital. Padre Carlos asked me to help with a project in a poor section of the capital, where he and several families who were involved in the Catholic charismatic movement hoped to spark a difference in the lives of the people. I was asked to offer some English conversation classes and lead and lead an evening song and prayer service. With some of the women, I went door to door explaining about the school and inviting children and families to participate. Sylvia and I had collected various simple songs and choruses, some of Catholic origin and others from Protestant churches, which I taught those who came. We would read Bible passages and pray, both recited prayers and spontaneous prayers. I was so moved by the earnestness of the people.

Sometimes I stayed with one of the families who were spearheading the community efforts. I offered to cook an American-style dinner for one family. They were delighted. I realized I had nearly forgotten how to cook American food. The first year I was in Mexico I ate whatever was available and got sick about once a week, until my body was able to adjust. However, after four years a bout with hepatitis seemed to indicate that it was time to return to the United States.

One of my most vivid memories is a trip with a Baptist evangelist to Chiapas, a state in southern Mexico. Emilio traveled from village to village selling Bibles and showing filmstrips of the life of Jesus. He invited me to join him and his family on a trip over the Easter break. Having a *gringa* along would be a drawing card for getting people to attend the gatherings. I had my guitar, as usual, and taught people the simple choruses. Sometimes, as we were walking towards the meeting place, Emilio would say, "It's your turn to speak tonight." I would look at the roomful of faces lit up by the single electric light bulb hanging from the ceiling and talk in a simple way about our Heavenly Father, who created the world out of love and who sent His son Jesus out of love for us. The audiences were attentive, but I wondered how many of the people understood my American-accented Spanish.

Traveling with people offers an unequalled opportunity to learn to know them more deeply. Emilio and his family took me to villages not found on any map. At Emilio's home village, where we spent Easter, people lived in mudbrick houses. We sat on sections of tree trunks and slept on woven cord mats suspended from four posts.

I met Emilio's mother and several of her children, as well as his sister and her children. The children were pale, thin and listless. In contrast, Emilio's three children were chubby, bright and energetic. Emilio's wife bought food at the market and prepared it for her children, who ate while their cousins stood with empty

eyes in a circle around them.

I had nothing to offer the people but my efforts and heart. Each morning I made tortillas for the day. It would take a couple of hours to shape the tortillas, pound them flat and even between the palms of my hands, and cook them just so on the round tin sheet balanced over a wood fire. A properly cooked tortilla has a thin skin on top and bottom, with a thicker core. The women and children watched me shape and cook one tortilla after another. If it wasn't exactly round, I had to re-shape it.

On Easter Sunday, someone bought a scrawny chicken, cut it up into nineteen pieces, and cooked it in a watery broth. I will never forget the eyes of the village children as they looked at the one precious cube of meat and bone that was their holiday treat. As the honored guest, I was served two pieces of meat.

The drive back to Mexico City took about 16 hours. Emilio was exhausted, so I did most of the driving. Three adults, three children, a teenager returning to school in the city, and a puppy filled the medium-sized car.

As midnight approached, our road wound up the escarpment from the semi-tropical seacoast of Mexico to the dry central highlands. Perched on the border between the two climates is Mexico's highest mountain, the Pico de Orizaba. An extinct volcano capped with eternal snow, the Pico de Orizaba is usually shrouded in fog and clouds. I was at the wheel, the only person awake in the car, when suddenly, rounding a bend, I saw the shimmering splendor of the Pico de Orizaba emerge in the moonlight. I pulled the car off the road and walked over to the edge of the lookout, to absorb the awesome sight. It was as if I was alone, facing God, the Creator and eternal loving Parent.

Clouds and fog, often of our own making, obstruct our view of Him many times. Still God is always near, watching, waiting, longing to embrace all His children.