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*"Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened,
And I will give you rest." ~ Matthew 11:28*

Dear Friends,

I stood behind a long line of faithful Catholics on Ash Wednesday in the crowded, colonial grand church of San Francisco/ St. Francis in Antigua, Guatemala to receive ashes to begin the 40 days of Lent. The woman distributing the ashes parted my bangs and traced the cross on my forehead with last years' blessed burnt palm branches and spoke a solemn command, "Repent and believe in the Gospel." I returned to the seat in the back and was one in the crowd now 'marked' with the sign of the cross. Throughout the rest of the day I ran into people in the street with these ash crosses prominently displayed on their foreheads. I felt an unspoken bond with them. We shared the cross.

I think about these crosses now – no black cruciform ashes seen on foreheads- but the weight of the seen and unseen trials, difficulties, wounds we all bear; some of our own making, others crashing into our lives beyond our control. I think of a little girl in my village, 9 year old, Victoriana who often comes to my home.

Victoriana already carries a heavy cross. She is the oldest girl. She and her 4 younger siblings live in a one room dirt floor house. Her father farms growing corn and can barely keep food on the table and her overburdened mother barely manages the household along with nursing her 8 month old baby girl. They have no electricity or running water. Victoriana and her little brothers haul water in plastic jugs balanced on their heads to their house from a nearby underground well. Being the eldest daughter, Victoriana is the one who rises in the early morning darkness carrying the lime soaked corn kernels to the mill ground into fine dough transformed into tortillas. Maybe the cross is like this I think - the grinding, the breaking up of the stuff of our lives that will be transformed into what sustains and gives life. At least that's my hope. But still, all that grinding and crushing is hard.

Victoriana knows hard. She washes clothes by hand in the river and hauls the wet clean laundry on her head in a plastic container which is way too big and way too heavy for her frail waif-like frame. But still she does it. She helps look after and care for her 3 younger brothers and baby sister when in fact, she should be cared for. She lives in the jungle sloshing in the mud during the rainy season and bearing the scorching heat in the dry. She constantly deals with parasites that keep her stools loose, her stomach bloated and her head aching. She's a "cross carrier", I think.

A while back I asked her parents if I could help Victoriana with medical needs, clothing and school supplies and if she could come and visit. They said, "Yes." And so she comes sometimes with her brothers, more often alone. I think she comes for a reprieve from the cross. I know she is hungry. I know she is tired. So she eats, colors a coloring page, and takes a nap. I am teaching her the sign of

the cross and how to pray the Our Father. This is our routine. It's a heavy cross she bears. But she is alive.

Her aunt, the aunt she is named after – Victoriana – is not. That cross of those murdered that day by the revolutionary soldiers in a massacre the people call the *Masacre de la Playa* – still reverberates in the lives of the survivors, many who were only children and teenagers at the time.

Victoriana was one of the young people with the rest of the band of children, teenagers and adults who went to weed the corn planted in the communal fields outside the village in an area near the Xalbal river the people call “The Playa.” They thought it was safe. They thought the violence during the 36 year civil war was over. It was May 1983. Without warning the unsuspecting innocents were gunned down. Carmen, Victoriana’s older sister remembers that day with tears recounting the death of her sister, “She fell right in front of me. A bullet passed through her heart. She died instantly.” Carmen escaped crawling on her hands and knees to hide. In the end, Victoriana along with 7 others were killed. That cross is etched on the peoples’ hearts forever.

In truth, I often feel powerless and humbled before the hardships of the people’s lives here. But in the end *they* testify to the power of the resurrection by their faith and their power in Christ to carry on.

It takes eyes of faith to see the hope of new life and resurrection in the crosses that come. I am looking hard these days. Sometimes on a good day, I imagine I see Victoriana in Carmen’s tenacity in providing for her family and in Victoriana’s smile. I keep believing that love is stronger than death; that the cross is redemptive; that life and Resurrection have the final word. That is where the cross leads us. That is Easter.

We continue to thank God for you. May your Lenten journey be graced with the promise and hope of Resurrection.

Peace and All Good,

Kathy
Kathy Snider



OUR MISSION STATEMENT

Ixcán Ministries provides a prayerful, pastoral presence through lay missionaries living in solidarity with the poor of the remote Ixcán jungle of Guatemala to learn from as well as to assist both spiritually and materially the people with whom life and ministry are shared. The organization strives to be a bridge between two cultures and nations allowing for the exchange of varying gifts between the rich and poor for the ultimate purpose of empowerment and transformation of lives and society.

Ixcán Ministries is a 501(c) 3 organization. Your contributions are tax deductible. You may contact us at:

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