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"Those who trust in him shall understand truth, and the faithful shall abide with him in love: Because grace and mercy are with his holy ones, and his care is with his elect." ~Wisdom 3:9

Dear Friends,

I returned to Guatemala on the Eve of All Saints Day – Halloween – just in time for the Feast of All Saints and All Souls. In Sumpango, twenty minutes from Antigua where I am staying, residents celebrate this feast traditionally by visiting the graves of their deceased loved ones – clearing debris, placing flowers (particularly marigolds also known as ‘flor de muerte’) and lighting candles. I have seen this before in Santiago Ixcán and other parts of Guatemala. What I haven’t seen before is their custom of flying kites – not just any but kite creations of elaborate color and artistic genius ranging in size from small to gigantic (20- 50 in feet diameter!)

So on Nov. 1st – the Feast of All Saints – a friend and I went to Sumpango. As we walked through the crowds to the knoll outside of the cemetery our mouths dropped while we weaved through rows of these giant displays of color and design standing like sentinels against a blue sky. Surrounding these on the edges of the hill were myriads of children and youth everywhere flying small kites, their multi-shaped frames and bouncing tails dotting the sky like splashes of paint on an empty canvas. A local man told me that kites floating and gliding in the sky symbolize the souls of the beloved dead. To me the kites seemed to dance a graced and light-hearted ‘hello in the midst of good-bye.’

It was the goodbyes that impelled me to travel while in the U.S. during my most recent visit.

While visiting relatives in Aberdeen, SD, I learned that Blue Cloud Abbey (a Benedictine Community 80 miles away) was closing after sixty-plus years. My heart dropped. A priest friend, 96- year old Fr. Cleto (Cletus), who I had met in a Benedictine Monastery in Cobán, Guatemala was living at Blue Cloud Abbey. I wanted to see him. I wanted to say good-bye to this kind, gentle man who had returned to the U.S. just two years ago after countless years of missionary service in Guatemala. Was he still there? Frantically I called the



monastery. The recording said the abbey was closed but then a man picked up the phone. “Is Father Cleto there?” I queried, relieved to be talking to an actual live person. “This is Fr. Cleto,” the voice said.

And so my 51- year -old Uncle Scott and I took a quick road trip on his Harley Davidson to the closed Blue Cloud Abbey. We wheeled to the back entrance of the monastery accompanied by the roar of motorcycle engine to Fr. Cleto waiting outside; the last of three monks who would leave the monastery for good in two weeks.

He was not overtly sad. We talked and I discovered in him a deep acceptance of what was happening. “There just wasn’t any new vocations coming in to keep the monastery going,” explained Cleto. Most of his brother monks had already relocated to different monasteries throughout the U.S. He had decided to go to St. Meinrad Abbey in Indiana, to “meet the angel of death,” he said with a grin that made it seem like a joke.

I think Scott and I were the last persons to tour the now silent but impressive Blue Cloud Abbey. We walked with Fr. Cleto in awe and sadness down the long semi-lit hallways, empty dormitories, vacant dining area, lonely retreat rooms and the chapel waiting for the next Mass as he told us stories of the history of the place. Finally, it was time to say good-bye. “The last hug,” said Fr. Cleto, a big smile lighting up his face. I smiled in return.

There was no sadness in our leave-taking; just a thankfulness that dropped down into our hearts to have been with one another one more time- one last time. I knew that I wouldn’t see Fr. Cleto again on this side of heaven.

I drove away on the back of Uncle Scott’s Harley with Fr. Cleto’s smile, that broad smile beaming from his thin, boney face, sending me off. I know that he loved it that I had come to see him and on a Harley to boot! I was so glad that I had.

But it didn’t end there – the travelling. The idea came through Leo, my friend and a faithful supporter of Ixcan Ministries who lives in Seattle, WA. Leo, a long-time lover of foreign missions was a short-term missionary himself in his younger days in Mexico and Bolivia. Now at age 86, he lives with a serious heart condition. “I could go at any time,” he explained matter of factly on the telephone. “Can you come?” he asked. “I’m not sure, Leo; I don’t know.”

“Can I go?” “Should I go to Washington State?” I pondered and I prayed. In the silence I heard a resounding “Yes,” to go, and to go as a pilgrim, not on foot but driving in a car making the trip a pilgrimage – a holy journey praying along the way. So, I called Leo and told him, “I’m coming!”

And so I drove long miles along long stretches of open highways and in big city trafficas a pilgrim – praying and visiting friends and benefactors along the way in Butte, MT, Spokane, Seattle, Whidbey Island, Vashon, Poulsbo and Forks Washington. I felt guided, protected and blessed staying in the homes of friends and benefactors, basking in the long overdue “hello” and in sharing stories of God, our lives, and Guatemala mission. The inevitable “goodbye” eventually followed. There was one goodbye however, I wasn’t expecting nor prepared for.

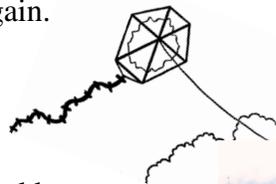
Before leaving ND, I had called my friend Rena, from Whidbey Island to let her know I was coming. During our brief conversation Rena’s voice dropped and said, “Rita has cancer.” “Oh my God, I didn’t know.”

Rena and Rita are twins and friends of mine I met in Forks, WA in the early 1980's. When in Washington, prior to my planned visit to see Rena ,I received a phone call from her husband Don saying, "Kathy, we want to see you but we can't visit long. Rena just received a call and has to leave for Alaska. Rita isn't doing well."

During our visit Rena called Rita. Rena handed me the phone. "Hi girlfriend," said Rita. "I'm so sorry, I didn't know, I've been praying for you," I began. Rita was clear. She said, "Kathy, I want you to know that I have known love. My husband Jack has loved me well." I knew Rita had been in a painful previous marriage. I knew she had remarried and moved to Alaska. Now I knew that she had known love. Then we prayed for each other. "I'm going first-class," she said with a chuckle, "I'm going home." And we said goodbye. Four days later Rita died.

I've said a lot of goodbyes lately. Fr. Cleto, Leo, and Rita remind me of the importance of those goodbyes but also the importance of the hellos - the ministry of presence, of relationship, of taking time. Rita knew what was important and she shared that with me in our last conversation. She didn't talk anything about her home décor, the car she drove, or even the garden she loved. She was dying. She told me about the love of her husband and her faith in God. She was ready.

Yesterday I bought some small, colored kites made of tissue paper held together by sticks. I'm taking them back to the village for the children. We need to fly these, I think. I'm going to fly one in honor of my friend Rita, and one for my uncle Mike Snider who died on October 16th. And one for me and the living... to not forget to live well the floating, the dipping and sometimes the crashing in the wind of life -only to pick up the frame, tighten the string, catch the wind and rise again; the promise of resurrection on the Day of the Dead. Yes, that's what the kites remind me of -hello, goodbye and HELLO again.



As we remember the memory and honor our deceased loved ones this month, we also celebrate the gift of so much on Thanksgiving. May our hellos and our goodbyes be deeper this Thanksgiving, as we share a special meal, as we give thanks.

Thank you for all you are and all you do for me and the people of the Ixcán. We are deeply grateful.

May God bless you and yours.

Sincerely,

Handwritten signature of Kathy Snider in cursive script.

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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