

Arrhythmias in the Heart of Mexico

Dear readers, today, Saturday, I'm in Seattle. Dad has suffered some further set-backs with his heart condition, and so we kids are coming together to help him and Mom move up to Bellingham. There, the oldest and most stabilized sister will be able to give our parents more attention. I can't think of a better way to spend Father's Day.

The following article was written from a place far, far from Seattle:

It's Wednesday night in Mexico City. Loud English soft rock beats out love and hard times in an Internet Café in the very heart of this humongous ocean of human beings. Two blocks away, 300-500 riot police and "federales" in military gear surround the Palace of Fine Arts. There, President Felipe Calderon is attending the inauguration of a comprehensive collection of Frida Kahlo's legendary works.

Now and then, armored vehicles, military transport trucks, and patrol cars with lights and sirens blaring rumble by. The reason is obvious: protesters who have opposed the presidency of Calderon from the beginning have found a new justification to hit the streets. It's not just that they don't trust his party, which they call "PRI-AN", a corrupt fusion of the two parties that used to be locked in mortal combat. It's that Frida Kahlo stood for everything that he and his party seem to be undermining. The bitter taste of Carlos Salinas is still in their mouths.

Monday night, in a similarly tense scene, President Calderon attended an operatic tribute to the socialist iconoclast and wife of Diego Rivera.

I ran back to the Palacio with a video camera to record whatever data would later help me share the experience. Though the cover of dark made it easier to walk among the protesters within a few yards of the riot police, it carried with it the added risk of being in the wrong place at the wrong time, and never seeing what hit me. Today, four of us mingled in broad daylight among protesters and spectators for nearly an hour. People were less willing to talk, but much more visible.

We were part of a group of 24 pilgrims visiting major sites in the capital of Mexico. Although I was reluctant to take vacation time to lead another group here, I accepted the organizer's invitation because I believe that this is truly the naval, the dynamic vortex, the spiritual epicenter of the Western Hemisphere. Besides, my parish being named for Our Lady of Guadalupe, and my patron saint being Juan Diego, how could I refuse? So here we were. We'd already visited

and prayed at the Shrine and the location where the Virgin healed Juan Bernadino. We'd already wandered among and climbed the pyramids.

We'd walked also among the ruins of the Great Temple which once dominated the landscape of Tenochtitlan. But one couldn't meditate on these sacred places and their history without facing the devastating effect of the Spanish Conquista of ancient Mexico. True, the Aztecs themselves were a nation who, upon establishing their new home in what was once a 7,000 foot lake, conquered the surrounding tribes.

But that fact, and their propensity for brutality in offering horrendous sacrifices by the hundreds and thousands to placate bloodthirsty gods, does not justify the Spaniard's brand of brutality and exploitation in the eyes of many modern Mexicans. Yet even if they accept this as the unalterable reality of who they are as a people, few accept the policies of a government which consistently has favored the wealthy and appeared to sell out vital resources and products to foreigners.

Add to this a generic bitterness of many toward the institutional church, whether Catholic or otherwise, and you have a formula for continuous protests. Any number of otherwise antagonistic causes have found common ground in their disillusionment with Mexican politics. As we walked among the protesters, we heard contradicting themes. The most outspoken voices tended to brandish their own favorite version of totalitarianism. Whether socialist, anarchist, extreme left, or just plain angry citizens, the loudest protesters were also those who seemed least interested in any democratic dialogue.

In fact, our guide told us, the city center has become the stage of daily protests of all descriptions. Stopping traffic for at times a collection of contradictory causes, disenchanted Mexicans at least hope to get a hearing. Maybe that's why so many rally behind Obrador, the charismatic Socialist mayor of Mexico City who narrowly lost to Calderon last November. It was a near-tie reminiscent of the Bush-Gore divide of the year 2000. Obrador, at least, has made a successful political career of the concerns that many are voicing.

Since much of the commentary toward the police over bullhorns was sloganistic or, simply put, offensive, I searched out people who showed signs of having some common sense. Monday night, I had spoken to two Catholic activists. Mauro, wearing a rosary and a scapular, took pains to explain why he, as a believer, feels his church has betrayed the people of Mexico. His older friend summarized a bitter history of American intervention in Mexican internal affairs and economics. I had already studied some of what they criticized, and

therefore didn't argue with them. I only responded that history is written in favor of its authors. I challenged them to re-evaluate their sources before a comprehensive dismissal of the institutional church. Without the Church, their lives and histories would be far, far worse.

But what troubled me most was the sight and sounds of this chaotic crowd, assembled with a common enemy but with so little agreement (or even understanding) about truly functional solutions for the future.

They reminded me of the people on whom Jesus had compassion, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. My question for them would be: if you reject the One who alone knows how to shepherd us to life, then who will be your pastor? But how will you know and follow Christ if you reject the Church which he established?

Why do you blame the founder for the sins of his followers? Do you think that the politicians are going to display more integrity than the men and women who have given their lives in the service of the Lord?

But the great divide existing between church and state in Mexican politics since the time of Benito Juarez may make these questions irrelevant. Here we are talking politics, not religion. And as the weary, armor-clad officer explained tonight as I was finishing this article (at 11 pm), "Some problems don't have solutions. You just have to live with them. And as for the protesters...we just let them vent their anger. If we don't, they will keep on multiplying."

The music has changed. Laura Paucini, an Italian with angelic voice, is singing the songs she always does: ballads of a broken heart. The noise has subsided; traffic has died down, both police and protesters head home for the night, and Mexico City can gather its energies for another day. Looking down from heaven, God has other worries: how to provide water for over 20 million people who have drained the immense reservoirs once surrounding and sustaining Tenochtitlan, how to keep them from suffocating under the heavily polluted atmosphere, how to inspire these harried human beings with hope and vision for the future, how to provide them shepherds who can guide them to green pastures and the waters of eternal life. Frida Kahlo looks down (or up) from wherever she is, and realizes, after all, that her agonies were not meaningless. A higher power was calling her to great heroism. Those who do not yet know the redemptive power of suffering united with the Passion of Christ can at least draw strength from her courageous confrontation, face to face, with the angel of death. *6/14/07, Fr. Dean McFalls, Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish, Lathrop, California*