



The Vine

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Becoming a community through which God's healing and hope can flow to the world

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The Varieties of Religious Experience in Southern Mexico

P. Gregory Springer

In January, I set out to investigate the annual San Sebastian festival in Chiapas, Mexico. My reason for doing so was not academic, journalistic, missional, ecotourism, or in any way selfless. I long had wanted to visit San Cristóbal de las Casas as a possible place to winter, summer, and/or retire, and I picked the week of the festival as a good time to check it out, having had a similar experience of hybrid Mayan/Catholic religious festivals in Guatemala with my son Ernie in 2003.

San Cristóbal did not disappoint. I met many people and spoke with expatriates as well as native Mayans and Mexicans, and the 20-day festival in neighboring Chiapa de Corzo was an overwhelming blur of colorful processions, marimba music, feasting, noise, and fireworks. In addition, throngs of “parachicos” – oddly garbed men wearing eerie wooden masks and mushroom-like headpieces, shaking deafening noisemakers – spontaneously clogged the streets and swept bystanders away. (There are also extravagant displays of cross-dressing and transgender acceptance, both in Chiapas and neighboring state Oaxaca, but I’m leaving behind any analysis of this tradition for another visit.)

What any of this had to do with Saint Sebastian was never explained. It was only on subsequent days, in tiny indigenous villages off the beaten paths and off the map, that the transcendental worship aspects of these days became more clear.

I was fortunate to visit two of these villages at precisely the time that their unheralded celebrations were unfolding in the Catholic temples.

The day I went to Zinacantan (“place of bats”), a town-wide ceremony was underway. The colonial Catholic church was festooned with wall-to-wall flowers and melting candles, and filled with families in pilgrimage, while heavily garbed elders stood outside in a circle chanting, swaying and shaking rattle gourds. Photography was strictly forbidden inside the church; phones were confiscated. Outside, a separate phalanx of drummers kept a steady rhythm, while riders on horseback approached, men and boys labored to construct a wooden totem-like structure, and explosions erupted from many directions. This was not a performance for tourists. The city-wide ritual was one of immersive participation. There were no spectators, no leaders, no center. I hardly knew where to look or to turn.

In the church in Chamula, a Tzotzil town known for cultivating flowers and colorful textiles, a different kind of ritual, dedicated to healing, offered shamans in furs, families coming in to worship together, men assembling on the floor in groups, some drinking, others having already drunk too much, and the floor was strewn with dried grasses dangerously close to the hundreds of burning candles.





On February 15, Pope Francis addressed the indigenous populations in Chiapas. He visited the grave of Bishop Samuel Ruiz García, the 1960s revolutionary priest who allowed native religions to merge with Catholicism, creating an “autochthonous” church that incorporated indigenous traditions. When Ruiz authorized the ordination of indigenous deacons, the Church banned the practice.

But in 2013, Pope Francis reversed the ban and approved translations of the prayers for Mass and the celebration of sacraments into Tzotzil and Tzeltal. The translations include “the prayers used for Mass, marriage, baptisms, confirmations, confessions, ordinations and the anointing of the sick.”

The Mexican government would have preferred that Pope Francis had not chosen San Cristóbal as one of his few stops. It is here that the Zapatista rebellion erupted in 1994 on January 1, right after the signing of NAFTA, the North American Free Trade Act. The Zapatistas brought attention to the fact that “discrimination ran deep in Chiapas, to the point indigenous people were prohibited from walking on the sidewalks of San Cristóbal de Las Casas.”

Today, Tzotzil Catholics are everywhere in San Cristóbal, their tongue floating over the market and their presence accepted. The important thing I learned is that the participants consider this amalgam of traditional worship with Catholic ritual to be Christian, not an aberration from the Church, and perhaps no different than comparing Mennonites to Mormons or any of the other 30,000 denominations of Christianity.

If passing tourists mistake these indigenous practices to be quaint, or naive, or pagan superstition, Pope Francis apparently has recognized and confirmed that these worshipers, sometimes considered the least important citizens in Mexico, are actually among the most fervent guardians of the faith.



Hello from Mike Genau at Jubilee Partners

Mike Genau, who attended FMC for a number of years, recently began a volunteer assignment with Jubilee Partners in Comer, GA. Jubilee Partners is an intentional Christian service community whose primary ministry is offering hospitality to newly arrived refugees. To learn more about their peace witness, see: www.jubileepartners.org.

Greetings from Jubilee! The first month here has been full of newness and opportunity. My jobs for the term are teaching both the beginning and advanced classes for our refugee families, felling and bucking trees for firewood, keeping the bikes maintained and running, cooking the occasional meal, and helping to care for the chickens and various fruits/orchards. No shortage of things to do! I’m enjoying the work and find each thing fulfilling in its own way.

We have three volunteers from Europe this term and have had the privilege of introducing them to American BBQ, Blueberry Crisp, and Super Kroger (haha). My roommate, Nathan, is from Switzerland and has been involved with refugee work there. He has a bachelor’s in theology and will return to working with refugees at the end of the term. We both enjoy playing games to-

gether (Dutch Blitz and Tichu) and reading and have been getting along well.

The refugee families currently here are from The Democratic Republic of Congo by way of Kenya and Burma (Myanmar) by way of Thailand. I get the privilege of interacting with both groups in class. The Congolese students are already pretty fluent so have been placed in the advanced class to prepare for taking the GED and SAT with hopes of enrolling in college within a couple of years.

The families from Burma are an ethnic minority in the country called Karen and they speak Kareni. We have a huge diversity of English language ability among our Karen guests from non-literate to fluent. I work with two Karen families in the beginning class on topics ranging from how to write one’s name in English to



basic language skills and phrases for navigating life in America.

Jubilee has been hosting Karen people for about the past six years and even has a partner who is fluent in Karen. The writing of the language looks beautiful, organic and futuristic, like something out of Avatar. Another interesting thing about the language is that it contains six tones and each tone can be indicated in writing with the equivalent of a letter. In some ways the writing also mirrors Arabic in that vowels are added on to existing consonant letters.

Zac, the partner fluent in Karen has given me a basic crash course in the mechanics of the language and a few phrases. My class gets a kick out of me trying to say "How are you?" in Karen, "Nuh o su a?" (literally, "You have strength?"). To which the reply is "Yuh o su." ("I have strength").

Many of the Karen here are accomplished naturalists adept at hunting, trapping, and foraging. It is remarkable how some have adapted so quickly to a new environment and are already successfully foraging and trapping amongst the new local flora and fauna. An aside, I inadvertently wound up eating possum my first night here. It was dressed up in a spicy Karen dish with some herbs and oil over rice, it was actually pretty good (haha).

The schoolhouse where we teach serves as a focal point for the community and all families enjoy playing ping pong. The most popular game here is round robin with three strikes before a person is out. If we're short on paddles people have been known to grab a textbook and join in the fun.

That's all for now, hope this letter finds everyone well.

-Mike

The Modest Mennonite Song

SOLO:

I am the very model of a modern, modest Mennonite
I hate to be confused with Amish, Brethren, or Hutterite
I'm passively aggressive but I know that I must never fight
I banish every conflict with a smidgen of "Gelassenheit"

My church is solar powered, never burned an ounce of an-thracite

I shop Ten Thousand Villages, where fair pay is a human right

I'm frighteningly frugal, though I know it's not conspicuous

(**CHORUS** spoken: not at all!)

My Prius cost a bundle, though its mileage is ridiculous

CHORUS:

His Prius cost a bundle, though its mileage is ridiculous

His Prius cost a bundle, though its mileage is ridiculous

His Prius cost a bundle, though its mileage is ridi-i-i-culous!

SOLO:

The sermon on the mount remains my scriptural apotheosis
And transubstantiation is a dangerous hypothesis
As spiritual kin to Amish, Brethren, and Hutterite
I am the very model of a modern, modest Mennonite

CHORUS:

As spiritual kin to Amish, Brethren, and Hutterite
He is the very model of a modern, modest Mennonite

SOLO:

I name hymns by the number and expect you all to harmonize

I love the four-part classics, though their texts I often modernize

I change the "He's" to "God's" in hymns to quiet certain malcontents

I always know which book to pick from color-coded supplements



I know my part to six-oh-six without turning to one eighteen
My potluck fare's nutritious, full of lentils (they have good protein)

My grandma made me zwiebach, borscht, with shoo-fly pie, and pepper nuts

(CHORUS spoken: pfeffernüsse?)

I own the cookbook trinity, but often eat at Pizza Hut

CHORUS:

He owns the cookbook trinity, but often eats at Pizza Hut
He owns the cookbook trinity, but often eats at Pizza Hut
He owns the cookbook trinity, but often eats at Pi-i-i-zza Hut!

SOLO:

My glasses may be passé, but my hair cut's economical
My hem lines may be modest, but my plainness is methodical
A worldly sibling of the Amish, Brethren, and Hutterite
I am the very model of a modern, modest Mennonite

CHORUS:

A worldly sibling of the Amish, Brethren, and Hutterite
He is the very model of a modern, modest Mennonite

SOLO:

I always knit in worship, then I must crochet in Sunday School
I want others to knit too, so my habits fit the golden rule
I've never used a prayer card but I always speak in sharing time
I'll introduce all visitors, so don't sit by me if you're shy

The Martyr's Mirror by my bed is bookmarked for my daily use

But now the martyrdom I face comes in the form of kale juice

Dirk Willems is my hero and I'm not afraid of showing it

(CHORUS spoken: represent!)

Our softball team are martyrs too 'cuz we're not good at throwing it

CHORUS:

Our softball team are martyrs too 'cuz we're not good at throwing it

Our softball team are martyrs too 'cuz we're not good at throwing it

Our softball team are martyrs too 'cuz we're not good at thro-o-wing it

SOLO:

The Anabaptist vision forms the core of my theology
I live to serve my neighbor without thought for eschatology
Far holier than any Amish, Brethren, or Hutterite
I am the very model of a modern, modest Mennonite

CHORUS:

Far holier than any Amish, Brethren, or Hutterite
He is the very model of a modern, modest Mennonite

Tune by: Gilbert or Sullivan, whichever it is that writes the music

Lyrics by: Emily King, David Horst Lehman, Claire LePage, Liz Mallott, Seth Morgan, and Matt Yoder

More New Books in the Library

The Cross and the Lynching Tree, by James H. Cone

Reconcile: Conflict Transformation for Ordinary Christians, by John Paul Lederach

What Did Jesus Ask?: Christian Leaders Reflect on His Questions of Faith, by Elizabeth Dias

All the Light We Cannot See, by Anthony Doerr

From the Believers Church Bible Commentary:

Deuteronomy, by Gerald E. Gerbrandt

Lamentations & Song of Songs, by Wilma Ann Bailey

Galatians, by George R. Brunk