



Ephraim with Bro Carmel

THE BLIND OPENED MY EYES

BROTHER CARMEL DUCA MC

Graciousness Personified

If you ever happen to pass by the Collector's Office in Guatemala City (in Central America), you have to go to the ground floor at the entrance hall and Xerox some copies. It is a must. It is an opportunity you should not miss. Even if you do not need any copies done, just waste some quetzales (local coins), and do it. Trust me! You will meet two older persons—a man and a woman—who will treat you as a king, with a gracefulness I have never experienced before and a serenity every Alcoholic Anonymous would envy. You will give them the pages you need to photocopy, they will ask you which side, and then off to work. You see! Ooops! Pardon me I shouldn't say "you see" because—both husband and wife are blind. So, then, when the copies are done and you have to pay, they will ask you the denomination of the bill you just handed them and if you need change, they will ask you to make sure they gave you the right amount of coins in return. What service! What serenity and peace they radiate!

Rude, Resentful...yet Thoughtful!

I remember the first time I came in close contact with a blind person. It happened in 1990, when I was a postulant in Paris. We had a few poor aged men and women living

with us. One of them was an Algerian immigrant whose name was Zouaghi. He was blind. Zouaghi made it a point to be rude and resentful towards everyone who crossed paths with him. So, it was no surprise at all when you saw the residents in our community, even the Brothers, quietly but rapidly move out of Zouaghi's way when we saw him coming towards us. Nobody dared to talk to him. Hair dishevelled, wearing the same drab coloured raincoat even in the sweltering humid hot summer of a European city like Paris, Zouaghi spent his whole day locked up in his small room smoking his Gauloises endlessly. One finally professed Brother was in charge of Zouaghi. It always seemed to me that Bro Anton had a way with Zouaghi, maybe bribing him with cigarettes, I have no idea. But he managed! Especially in convincing Zouaghi to take his weekly bath. But, one fine day, Bro Anton announced to the community that he was due for his eight-day retreat. Tada! Who would take care of Zouaghi? Our junior and finally professed Brothers all had their responsibilities, poor things, so they couldn't. So, who else could, if not the postulants? We were only two and the other one did not speak French. So? Carmel will have to do it. I was young, enthusiastic and had to impress the

superiors. So, I accepted—I had no option, by the way!—even though I was scared stiff of Zouaghi. So, every day I would go to his room, give him his daily packet of cigarettes and out again as quickly as I had entered. But then Saturday arrived—the big day for his weekly bath. I had to prepare his clothes, make sure they were folded the way he always wanted them to be and put them on the chair next to his bed so that he could find them easily. I knocked on his door, and heard a grunt of Entrez! (Come in!). But that day something different happened. As soon as I came in the room, Zouaghi got up from his bed, came towards me (I was still at the door) and he switched on the light! Thoughtfulness at its best!

A Bit of Light...and More Years

Efraim had been living in our home in Bogotá for quite a while. He was the oldest of the "gang" of about thirty-five old men. I don't know whether Efraim was blind since birth or whether he had lost his eyesight in some accident. He was approaching one hundred! I happened to be the local superior of that community at that time, so I made it a point to celebrate it with a Mass and a nice meal. After the homily, the priest asked Efraim what he would ask God

Our eyes perceive the beauty around us. If only we could perceive the beauty within!

for on this special day. He promptly said, “A little bit of light and some more years.”

Born Blind. Trained to be Independent

Tonio is a thirty-five years old, handsome, well-built Peruvian. Tonio and his sister were both born blind, deaf and dumb (excuse me for the politically incorrect words, but politically correct terminology changes every other day, and I don't know what to use today!). And yet that was not a situation for self-pity. Their mother Pilar was a tough lady. Her husband had left her for another woman, and she had to raise both children on her own. There was no time for crying and self-pity. “If you do not learn how to tie your shoelaces, you are the one who will arrive late for school, not me,” Pilar would tell Tonio, whenever he would go into his bouts of self-pity. Today, Tonio and his sister Anna are both happily married and have their own families.

When Tonio got married, he came to live very close to our community in Lima and so I used to cross paths with him often. At times we would be in the same bus and I would notice Tonio paying his fare, and getting down at the right corner (Lima is like Kolkata, there are no fixed bus stops). But I could not communicate with Tonio because I did not know the sign language he used—his wife and other family members would spell the letters of the words on the palm of his hands with their fingers. Between Tonio, his wife and me, we had to invent a way of at least letting him know that I am in his presence, say, on the same bus. It was fun! Still, many times I would just contemplate his silent and nonintrusive presence on the bus. People never noticed his “disabilities.” I was and still awed at the stamina and courage of such a man!

Three Tough Burdens, and Yet...

As if being HIV positive and a leprosy patient were not enough, Ganpat Chaudhury lost his eyesight some years back. Originally from Uttar Pradesh, Ganpat was a truck driver.

I don't know much about his past and that is OK—I don't need to know. He's been living with us for quite some time now. He is grateful to us Brothers but above all to “Allah, Ishwar and Bhagavan.” Never angry or indignant, Ganpat spends his time sitting on his bed listening to the battery-operated radio—his only possession in life.

Our eyes perceive the beauty around us. If only we could perceive the beauty within! The beauty of each other, not with our eyes, but with... I have no idea what Ganpat, Zouaghi, Tonio and his sister and so many others “use” to perceive this beauty.

A Precious Moment

About a year ago I had to travel to Lucknow for work. Close by our community in Mohanlalganj, I visited Nav Jyothi School for the Visually Impaired. While I was talking to the Sister in charge, in came four young girls, sat down on a mat on the floor, and started playing the sitar for me as a welcome. Sheer bliss!

No words can ever describe that special moment. ☺



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