

The Grace of Living on the Margins: A Special Invitation for Returning Missionaries

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Returning to the United States after missionary experience in another country can often be a disorienting experience of feeling like a foreigner in one's own land. But this same experience of disorientation may be one of the richest gifts offered to the returning missionary, because it is also an invitation to live the spirituality of creative marginalization. Virgilio Elizondo, in his book *The Future is Mestizo*, speaks of this reality:

As the missionaries become members of the group they go to serve and enter into true dialogue with them, they will never cease being who they are culturally. Yet they will be changed in such a profound way that they will feel like foreigners when they return home for visits. They never fully become the other, yet they become more and more foreign among their own home people. Thus true missionaries become cultural *mestizos* to be agents of fellowship among the various peoples of the world.

(p. 104, Virgilio Elizondo, *The Future is Mestizo*, Boulder, CO: University Press of Colorado, 2000)

Once one has experienced the “many faces of God” one cannot be satisfied in ignoring the suffering that is all around. The experience of serving the marginalized is a transformative one if the experience is allowed to touch the heart and bring one to conversion. Thus one of the greatest gifts that returned missionaries bring to ministry and to community is the ability to be comfortable with the marginalized. This gift can also challenge us to look at our spirituality and realize that, just as Jesus was marginalized in his own day, we too get marginalized to the degree that we keep choosing to live and be with the marginalized.

Our experience of serving the poor in Guatemala and El Salvador was marked by stark contrasts. On the one hand, we were welcomed by loving, humble, faith-filled people who taught us about the important values of faith, family and celebrating daily the presence of God. But these same people lived in extreme poverty with the suffering, brutality, and violence from years of civil wars that ravaged their countries. Initial ideals of “helping” others were quickly changed to being the one received and held in the soul of a people who knew the reality of God's daily providence in desperate times.

The return to the United States brought unexpected challenges of disorientation and feeling like a stranger. The years of violence and fear had taken their toll in every cell of our physical bodies, and our minds were not ready to deal with the complexities of life in the dominant U.S. culture. The journey to integrate the many experiences has stretched over several years, requiring reflection, honest soul-searching and letting go. If one is willing to trust, the Spirit will take the returning missionary on the most profound journey of transformation into the depths of the pain, violence, and purification. It takes courage to stay on the journey and to be willing to accept that life back in the United States will never again be the same. However, this experience of having lived both realities is the gift that is so badly needed in today's world where suspicion, hate, and discrimination are the obstacles that minority groups and new immigrants meet in this country. Those who have walked for a while in another culture, in another reality, can be the bridge builders of transformation and welcome for the members of our society who walk and live on the margins.