

Pat Kennedy



While I was in the Dominican Republic I stayed with Apolonia. With my limited Spanish and the fact that we were both widows, an immediate kinship evolved. Apolonia is beloved in her community, and she spends much of her time at the Church. When I was walking around Sevana Yegua with her, I felt like I was walking with the mayor of the town. Everyone knew her, and I could see that she was well respected. There were a number of profound experiences on my Lenten trip which I can still taste and feel; one of the most memorable was when I accompanied her to minister to the sick.

It was overwhelming how I was embraced by the people we ministered to. Our common language was the deep faith that we share and these were spiritual moments for all involved. I remember entering tiny rooms, which were soon filled with the entire family to share the Eucharist and prayer with their loved one. Women, who were in their 90's, some not able to move from their beds, but physically embracing me, "the Americana" from their Sister Parish. One woman thanked God for my visit. We ministered to many other sister parishioners with varying degrees of disabilities and frailties. One situation was more moving than the next and I had a hard time holding in my emotions. Because Fr. Juan Manual had given Apolonia prayer cards that the Cathedral had sent with instructions to spread them around, she dutifully and shamelessly evangelized for both of our parishes. Needless to say, that was the most exhausting of the days I spent there. I learned that evangelizing can be done subtly and effortlessly when you don't let words distract you.

Walking the Stations of the Cross was another profound experience that I shared with our Sister Parish. It was very well organized by the community, with many residents taking part as much as they could. It was inspiring to see so many young people involved in the procession and participating in the readings. When we arrived at each station, we bent down to make the sign of the cross on the ground. I truly felt like I was walking on holy ground.

Once I got back home I journaled and reflected on my experience in the Dominican Republic. I remember never caring what time it was; that I should bring a hat next time, that I had no fear, that I left with my heart open to new experiences, that my heart was full when I returned and I learned what true accompaniment is. That's probably why I feel like part of me is still there. The day before we left, I went to visit the grave site with Apolonia because she wanted me to see where her husband was buried. She knew I shared her grief and the knowledge that prayer was always what comforts us. We gave each other prayer books, and I gave her the Spanish version of a book that I use for daily reflection, so we are saying the same prayers each morning. We promised each other to do this until we meet again.

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