

MAY 12 2019

Fourth Sunday of Easter

If I were to ask you to close your eyes for a moment and imagine heaven, what would come to mind?

Maybe you would see God the Father, Jesus at his right hand, all the saints and angels gathered around the throne, along with all of the faithful praising God in their white robes. We heard about it in our second reading today from the Book of Revelation.

Now if I asked you to imagine the faces of those gathered around the throne in their white robes, what would they look like? How would the believers in heaven look to you? Would your image of them be very inclusive, where they would they look like a multitude of every nation, race, people and tongue, or would they look mostly like your family, people at work or school and people in your neighborhood?

If I'm honest, I'd have to say that in the past, what typically would come to my mind was the latter. They were like the people that I knew; the faithful that I was familiar with; like family, co-workers or neighbors.

I'd like to share with you an experience that changed that.

One of the places I've been able to travel to has been to our twin parish, Parroquia Santiago in Boaco, Nicaragua. It is there that I get to experience what real life is like in an impoverished, third world country. This experience is not simply by driving past the impoverished people while sitting in an air-conditioned tour bus, but rather by directly interacting with the people.

One of the most profound experiences I've had of this interaction occurs right after Mass every Sunday, when I and others who have joined us on our mission trips have been led down the streets of Boaco by eucharistic ministers to give communion to home bound, elderly people. It takes one right into the dwellings of the poorest of the poor. When I enter a home, I never know what I am going to see.

On our first mission trip in 2011, I remember leaving Parroquia Santiago right after Mass with a eucharistic minister to visit several homebound parishioners to pray with and give communion to. The eucharistic minister's name was Tania, who incidentally will be our next visitor from Nicaragua this fall. She, like all the eucharistic ministers there who fan out through the town after Sunday Mass, was dressed in white.

We went to several homes, and as we did, I noticed we were gradually walking downhill. We were walking closer and closer to the river that runs along the lower part of the city. As we entered home after home to give communion, it became apparent to me that the closer we came to the river, the poorer the people were.

After about an hour we came to our final home. It was obviously very humble, even for Boaco standards, and as I entered my heart was moved by what I saw.

Upon entering I saw a very feeble, elderly woman seated on a plastic chair. The room she was in was only about 8 feet by 10 feet. Behind her, most of the room's space was taken up by what appeared to me to be piles and piles of her important papers and keepsakes. She had just a small space open where she was seated, and she was seated on her only chair. Her feet rested on the dirt floor. She was expecting us, and so as I remember, she was dressed in white. With a sense of her holiness in the midst of her poverty and with tears running down my cheeks, we prayed the Our Father together in Spanish and I gave her communion. "Cuerpo de Christo," I said. "Amen," she replied.

The image of that poor Hispanic woman dressed in white receiving the Body of Christ has been etched in my mind ever since, and I have never thought of the church in the same way since.

It is my hope that I will see her once again, in heaven, dressed in white.

So, I ask each of us again, if we imagined the faces of those gathered around the throne in their white robes, what would they look like? How would the believers in heaven look to you and me? Would they look like the diverse group God would have in heaven, or would they look mostly like our families, the people at our work or school, or in our neighborhood?

God is inclusive and welcomes into heaven a great multitude of those with faith in Christ from every nation, race, people and tongue. In our lives, are we as welcoming? How might God be calling us today to reach out to those who are different than us?