

La Posada: Hospitality to Those Displaced by the Push and Pull of Empire

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The ancient Mexican tradition of Las Posadas is celebrated every evening from December 16 to 24 throughout Mexican America. It commemorates Mary and Joseph's difficult journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem in search of shelter. In a typical "Posada" (meaning lodging or shelter), each night at dusk a procession is led through the neighborhood. It is usually led by a child dressed as an angel, followed by children carrying figures of Mary and Joseph, followed by adults and musicians. Everyone sings carols as they walk, and carry candles. When they reach the appointed house, the group divides in two. One half remains outside and begs for shelter from the other half, which is inside the house. At the conclusion of the litany, the doors are opened, and a celebration ensues (parts of the traditional litany are reproduced below).

In 1993 Roberto Martinez, a colleague of mine with the American Friends Service Committee at the time who was working on immigrant and human rights at the San Diego border, suggested that perhaps a Posada litany should be held at the border fence, with the U.S. side representing the Innkeeper, and the Mexico side the Holy Family. This began a powerful tradition of public liturgy that has continued each year since: the "Posada sin Fronteras." Church and immigrants rights activists from Tijuana and San Diego gather on their respective sides of the fence, watched carefully by the Border Patrol (and this year, by the "Minutemen" anti-immigrant vigilantes).

We sing songs in English and Spanish, hear from immigrants, organizers and church leaders, and then recite the litany. At the end, of course, the border fence does not open; but solemn commitments are made on both sides to work to bring the wall down, and to refuse to let it be internalized in our hearts. Then both sides shower each other with candy thrown over the fence, and tamales and champurrado (Mexican hot chocolate) and ribbons of hope passed through the holes in the fence. It is a poignant reminder of the contemporary terrain of justice and hospitality. Below is Ched's homily at the Borderfield State Park.

I want to begin by honoring the two brothers we are remembering today. The late Franciscan Brother Ed Dunn was a gentle but strong presence in this movement, always looking for deeper solidarity with the dispossessed. Roberto Martinez, my friend and colleague for many years at the AFSC, tirelessly, courageously and compassionately defended the rights of immigrants at this very border. He was, of course, one of the founders of this *Posadas sin Fronteras* tradition. I spoke to Roberto a few nights ago—his health has been failing and he isn't able to join us—and he sent his greetings. So I want to call upon the spirits of these two men to join

this wonderful gathering of *companeros/as* on the journey toward justice, as we reflect together on this year's theme: "Do not be afraid."

We are here this afternoon to reenact the ancient pageantry of Posadas, which remembers the story of a poor couple, pregnant with a prophet, who became homeless because of the push and pull of imperial forces. The center of this liturgy is a conversation that takes place through a door: a tense, dramatic exchange between insiders and outsiders. This door represents the ultimate liminal space, the threshold between home and homelessness. In this space we stand today, bearing witness to a story that continues in our time.

We are gathered at the new "Golden Door," to borrow Emma Lazarus' metaphor for the Statue of Liberty. But at *this* door what immigrants and economic refugees see first is not the hospitable face of a woman holding aloft a "lamp," which a century ago meant to welcome the poor "yearning to be free." Rather they encounter the stern face of the Border Patrol, whose intent is to apprehend, incarcerate and deport the "homeless and tempest-tossed." It is difficult *not* to be afraid.

At this conflicted, contested, and increasingly militarized door we again re-enact, for the 13th straight year, the old, sacred story about how God struggles to enter our world, and about our hard-hearted inhospitality. The word "hospitality" comes from Latin roots; it originally connoted the room set aside for the guest or stranger. Which is exactly what is *lacking* in the drama of Posadas.

We find this story in the gospels of Matthew and Luke, two distinct narratives about the birth of Jesus of Nazareth that have few details in common, but which agree on one important theme: namely, that God-in-Christ slips unnoticed into a world of brutal rulers and hard-pressed refugees; and that a few ordinary people manage to recognize the divine Presence, and act *conscientiously*.

The classical literature of antiquity focused exclusively upon powerful and famous personalities—not unlike the media in our culture. Our gospels, however, portray poor people as the true protagonists of history. The central characters in the Christmas story are a rural peasant couple displaced by political, economic and military Powers beyond their control and understanding. Maria and Jose are not pious super-heroes, but peasants of low estate. Their qualifications to bear the One Christians call Messiah had nothing to do with social stature, but rather with their sensitivity to dreams, as in Matthew's story, or to visions, as in Luke's; and with their courage to endure harsh conditions and to make hard choices.

This struggling couple is surrounded in the story by equally marginal folk: animal herdsman and elderly women and fellow refugees. Yet they are also accompanied by angels, who offer startling interpretations of these obscure events at the margins of history. These mysterious messengers assure the Holy Family and their companions not to be afraid, and furthermore suggest that somehow Maria's back-alley birthing will pose a sharp challenge to the rule of domination by Caesar (Lk) and Herod (Mt),

and that this humble family will bring up the greatest of prophets, who will remind his nation that God calls them to become a House for *all* peoples.

The Holy Family is indeed buffeted by the forces of empire. In Matthew's account, Maria and Jose are *pushed* out of their homeland by the national security policies of a paranoid king named Herod. Jesus thus begins life as an undocumented political refugee, as his parents flee across the border to save his life. In Luke's account, they are *pulled* from their home by the imperial demand for a census: "All the world should be registered" (Lk 2:1). Residents of colonially occupied Palestine were compelled to travel to the village of their ancestors to be counted, so that they could better be "managed" by the military government. Maria and Jose thus end up homeless and give birth to Jesus in the feed trough of a barn.

We forget that the very scenario we enact in the Posadas litany tells us a lot about the struggle of poor folk to survive the profound social disruption of empire. It would have been inconceivable that Jose's relatives would have denied him and his pregnant wife lodging in Bethlehem. This can mean only one thing: all the people they knew from their ancestral village had *also* been displaced by the push and pull of empire. Just like our sisters and brothers today from villages in Oaxaca or Zacatecas or Chihuahua; or from Chalatenango or Morazan; or from Jalapa or Coban.

Our churches need to recover these Christmas stories as real-world sagas, ones that are all too familiar to poor people forced to do what it takes to support their families in a world of violence and exclusion. We must rescue the Nativity from its trivialization by both pietism and commercialism. Similarly, we *cannot* grasp the issues of migration today—particularly here at the US-Mexico border—without also taking into account the push and pull of global economic and political forces, past and present. This is perhaps why Pope John Paul II, during the Church's Jubilee Year in 2000, suggested that amnesty for undocumented immigrants would represent a proper form of reparation for the historic wrongs done to Third and Fourth World peoples around the globe.

Yet unfortunately the opposite is happening. For example, Tuesday this week, on the Fiesta de Nuestra Senora de Guadalupe, Federal agents raided Swift & Co. meat processing plants in six states—Colo.; Neb.; Texas; Utah; Iowa; and Minn—a similar sweep was carried out at the Smithfield hog processing plant in Tar Heel, NC several weeks ago. In order to exonerate the company and instead to scapegoat these low wage workers, however, this time agents from the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agencies are charging undocumented workers with "identity-theft"—a new wrinkle in the war on immigrants. Yet the spirit of Posadas also survives: I received email from a friend in Nebraska this week who recounted how ordinary Nebraskans opened their homes and hearts to the children of workers taken into custody, and some police even refused to cooperate with the sweep.

To criminalize undocumented immigrant workers—already the most vulnerable among us from both an economic and human rights perspective—is to willfully

obscure the deeper and wider issues of justice, the push and pull of empire that forces people to leave their homes in order to survive. This is the Christmas story, then and now, and we Christians need to get it right. Identity theft indeed! It is *we* who have lost our identity as an immigrant nation, our identity as citizens of a nation that *used* to raise the lamp of Freedom beside the Golden Door, and most importantly, our identity as Christians who follow a refugee Messiah and call upon an utterly undocumented God.

As we U.S. citizens stand here on our side of this threshold, beside the not-so-Golden Door, taking on the role of the hard-hearted *casero* in the Posadas litany, let the words of inhospitality we must recite cut our hearts open as citizens and disciples. Then let the angels' assurances not to be afraid, and the power of this Posadas liturgy, give us courage to stand ever stronger with those who today retrace the footsteps of Jose and Maria. For only by offering solidarity and forging justice will the gospel be vindicated and our nation healed. Amen.

"The New Colossus," by Emma Lazarus (1849-1887)

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.

"Keep ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she
with silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"



Posadas Litany

| Outside Singers | Inside Response |
|---|---|
| In the name of Heaven I beg you for lodging, for she cannot walk my beloved wife. | This is not an inn so keep going I cannot open you may be a rogue. |

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|---|---|
| Don't be inhuman; Have mercy on us. The God of the heavens will reward you for it. | You can go on now and don't bother us, because if I become annoyed I'll give you a trashing. |
| We are worn out coming from Nazareth. I am a carpenter, Joseph by name. | I don't care about your name: Let me sleep, because I already told you we shall not open up. |
| I'm asking you for lodging dear man of the house Just for one night for the Queen of Heaven. | Well, if it's a queen who solicits it, why is it at night that she travels so alone? |
| My wife is Mary She's the Queen of Heaven and she's going to be the mother of the Divine Word. | Are you Joseph? Your wife is Mary? Enter, pilgrims; I did not recognize you. |
| May God pay, gentle folks, your charity, and thus heaven heap happiness upon you. | Blessed is the house that shelters this day the pure Virgin, the beautiful Mary. |
| Enter, holy pilgrims, receive this corner, for though this dwelling is poor, I offer it with all my heart. | |
| Oh, graced pilgrim, oh, most beautiful Mary. I offer you my soul so you may have lodging. | |
| Humble pilgrims, Jesus, Mary and Joseph, I give my soul for them And my heart as well. | |
| Let us sing with joy, all bearing in mind that Jesus, Joseph and Mary honor us by having come. | |