

Bridges, Number 12, 2005: Timeless Gifts

Prepared for the ECCB's American Working Group and PC(USA)'s Czech Mission Network by Joyce Michael

I hear that in the United States, the phrases "Merry Christmas" and "Happy Holidays" are being pitted against one another this year. Although it is hard to imagine this debate from a distance, I suspect that many of us have a limited sense of how, when, and where love may become incarnate in our world. Thus I want to tell you a 'Christmas story,' which unfolded on a crispy November evening when John and I went to a meeting at a church that we had only seen from the tram prior to that time.

Since darkness had already fallen when we arrived at St. Thomas Church, we could only partially see the tree-ringed courtyard that lies behind the massive walls which encircle that edifice. Yet, we shared a sense of anticipation and wonderment as we followed a series of signs down several dusky corridors, turning where directed until we reached a rather small room that was illumined by candle-light and peopled by a number of young adults seated along a wall and several other folks assembled around a long table. An aura of warmth permeated the greetings that we received as we took our place among the "Friends of Servitus" who had come to learn about a carefully-administered ecumenical organization, which both facilitates the activities of volunteers from other countries who want to spend ten to twelve months serving in the Czech Republic and sends Czech volunteers to participate in similar programs in other nations (including the United States).

If space permitted, I could tell you many interesting facts about Servitus' ecumenical roots, its process of recruiting, training, and supporting volunteers, its goals and resources, and so forth. However, for me, the most telling part of the evening occurred as a number of volunteers from Germany made their work palpable to us through music, pictures, and stories. Thus, I hope that the following verbal snap-shots will convey the mystery of love incarnate that came to life that evening.

"You are not alone" might be a meaningful way to speak of the work of a young woman whose commitment to her assignment of visiting folks who have limited opportunities to interact with others is evidenced by the fact that she has learned to hear and speak Czech well enough to respond to deep personal concerns in two short months.

"A compassionate presence" might typify the efforts of a young man who is working with autistic children. Photos of daily activities, such as eating lunch, exercising, and preparing for bed, illustrated this volunteer's patience with, and delight in, his youthful charges. Likewise, pictures shared by a group of volunteers involved with adults who have handicapping conditions reflected gracious acts of caring and genuine ways of relating.

"I will walk with you" might be a fitting caption for memorable photos taken by a volunteer who is working with elderly folks. The serenity which characterized a picture of an excursion along a forest path may provide a particularly graceful image of a gentle way to enter into the final years of life.

"A real celebration" might describe the endeavors of a young musician who directs community-based music and drama programs. As this enthusiastic artist led our group in a participatory singing and motion exercise designed to depict the word L-O-V-E, I could almost envision the joy that he regularly brings to the people who are privileged to attend the events which he organizes. It is likely that the volunteer who provides opportunities for his charges to engage in a variety of athletic activities is also a source of encouragement and delight to his 'clients.'

"A Reconciling Work" might be an apt way to characterize the focus of a volunteer located in the Bohemian town of Terezin, which was the site of a Nazi concentration camp during the Second World War. The lingering impact of that dark chapter of history and the possibility of reaching a plateau of graceful reconciliation were given powerful expression by a series of photographs symbolizing the irrepressibility of life.

May the Christmas mystery represented by these volunteers' gifts of their time, their talents, and their lives call each of us to deeper ways of embracing the possibility of peace and enacting the advent of love. Noel!