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Christian witness to violence and death in Mexico

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NCR Today

Only days ago, Benedictine Sr. Anne Shepard, prioress of Mount St. Scholastica in Atchison, Kan.*, returned from a four day visit to daughter-house, Monasterio Pan de Vida, in Torreon, Mexico. Moved by her experience and wanting to share it with friends and members of her community, she put her impressions to words.

What follows is her testimony to Christian witness in the midst of violent and unpredictable circumstances. The quiet, sometimes horrific witness, of women religious around the world is one of the most underreported stories of our times. Shepard's account represents a brief look into a window we seldom get to see. As such, it is an account worth reading and sharing with others.

I told many of you that I was headed to Monasterio Pan de Vida, Torreon, Mexico. I also asked you to keep the sisters in prayer because of the dangerous and serious situation they live in every day. Well, I am home from the trip, and I cannot let a day go by without giving you a description of the four days.

When I heard from the prioress about the recent landscape of the situation in her neighborhood, I decided that I needed help planning the retreat. I invited Sisters Loretta McGuire and Barbara McCracken to go with me. As we planned, we met with Sister Esther Fangman three times to think through how to approach the days with the sisters.

We arrived in Torreon on Friday night, at a time when there were still some celebrations going on to commemorate Mexico's Revolution. At night around 9 pm on the way home from the airport, we stopped to see some youth who were meeting at our sisters' center. They were having a party. Every Friday night the sisters host the youth to keep them from the drug trading and traffic in their neighborhoods. We danced briefly, greeted them all and then left to go to the monastery.

On Saturday we met with the seven sisters. I gave a brief introduction and shared with them how I believe that what they are experiencing is the paschal mystery. On our pilgrimage to Germany for the sesquicentennial celebration, we stopped at a Church, Wieskirche, where we saw an image of Christ I had never seen, an image of the Scourged Christ. People come from all over the world on pilgrimage there because miracles happen there all the time. That image of Christ stayed in my mind. I think that the people of Torreon are being scourged on the road to Calvary. We three from the Mount that went there were the Veronicas, called to give comfort, to wipe tears, to listen, to console. After a brief introduction and placing on the prayer table candles with the image from the Church of Wies, we asked the sisters to tell us what they were experiencing. The flood gates opened. One recalled a friend telling her that a group of young boys and their friends were outside her home one night enjoying each other's company. The cartel came and had her boy shoot their friends. Then they gathered them all, dismembered those who were shot, took them to a landfill and dumped them. The mother was alive and had to walk through the dismembered parts; she cried out to see if anyone else was alive. Her son, the one who was forced to kill his friends, is now in a mental institution and may never recover.

Another told a story of when she was walking home from teaching. She saw a car stop and saw a man who had been shot thrown from the car onto the pavement. Yet another told of how she witnessed the shooting of three people in the store directly across the street from them-- a woman and two customers. Evidently, the woman was a dealer and the customers were suspected of buying drugs. Another spoke about a family having a wake for their daughter. The cartel came by and shot the family members in front of the children in the house. One day on her way to a visiting parish on the bus, a sister was in the cross fire of the representatives of two cartels. With others, she fell to the floor. When she got up, she saw several bodies on the street and didn't even know if she was shot. Now she has nightmares and cannot sleep as she tries to recall what happened. She was so afraid. She has blocked that experience from her memory. Others talk about how bodies are hung from some overpasses for commuters' cars to see.

On Friday night we met an 11-year-old boy who was fairly new to the youth group. One week recently, he pulled one of the sisters aside and showed her a bag of high grade cocaine that he was handed that day on his way out of school. He wanted to give it to her for disposal. She told him that he was given the coke, and he had to decide what to do with it. After knowing the consequences of tasting it or keeping it, he decided to flush it down the toilet. Sister was vehement about having them make good decisions on their own and not having them made for them.

One sister lost a 19-year-old nephew because while driving one night to escape the cartel, he hit a cement underpass and was killed. Our translator's son who is the same age and very involved in alcoholic behavior, told his mother that he has lost eleven close childhood friends to alcoholism.

The sisters often go to lead the wake services for those killed, for a lack of priests who will go into the neighborhoods. One of the hardest realities for the prioress is that while she is undergoing chemotherapy treatment, she cannot visit the homes to pray and give comfort to neighbors, to families, to the grieving mothers.

And the stories went on and on and on... for hours.

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In the afternoon, our Sister Barbara McCracken gave them a checklist of symptoms of PTSD, one that was written by the US military for soldiers that come back from war. S. Loretta McGuire talked to them

about trauma and what that does to people, how it isolates them from God and one another. Both spoke to the sisters about coping mechanisms and how to take care of themselves. The day concluded with all of us writing a prayer and sharing it in the group. What a full and powerful day.

We began the next day with a liturgy presided by a good friend of the community, Father Ignacio. Breakfast and the conversation with him were leisurely and pleasant. For the rest of Sunday, for the most part, we viewed the PBS movie "Pray the Devil Back to Hell," a story of the women in Liberia who worked to end a seven year war in that country. This segment is one of a five part series on Women and War. We stopped the movie at strategic spots to talk about feelings and about similarities and differences of the Liberians to the women in Mexico. At the end of the movie, the sisters seemed hopeful. They were inspired because of the way the Liberians moved to action. Before the end of day, we decided how to work with the women in their center the next day.

Monday was a day I will never forget. In our four hour session, I gave an introduction as to why we were there, talked about the road to Calvary and the Church of the Scourging Christ, gave some examples of women who were peace initiators in the past century (including Wangari Maathai.) Barbara and Loretta went into greater detail than they did with the sisters, stressing also what to do and what to look for with children. We invited them to trust the God within, trust their personal strengths, stay in community and keep sharing their stories with one another.

Monday afternoon was free for us. We took a ride into town to see the sights. What we saw on three occasions were police trucks with masked men in the front and back of the trucks, armed with AK47's driving around. One police car had a single officer, masked, gun pointed straight ahead, going down a side street. Their proposed aim, to protect the people, seems to terrify more than safeguard. One doesn't know where the drug cartels end and the police begin. There seems to be complicity of some members from all the groups in the horror of the violence and terror. No one is safe.

At 6:30 Monday evening the sisters were at the center leading vespers. After praying psalms and listening to a reading, one of the sisters gave a synthesis of the morning and asked anyone there to share what touched them. Stories surfaced of the women leaving the meeting and reflecting on hope, on the radical call to forgiveness, on trusting the power of love within them, of needing now to reach out to their neighbors and of having some ways to help their children. The people of Torreon are so grateful for the presence of the Benedictine sisters in their neighborhood. They trust the sisters and feel safe with them, both physically and emotionally. They also were grateful that we from the "grandmother" house in Atchison came to be with them and to give them hope.

The sisters in Torreon wanted to do something special for us Monday night since it was a formal pilgrimage for Loretta and Barbara. We are celebrating our 150th anniversary in Atchison; they are at the end of their 20th one. They hired a female Mariachi band to play and invited us to dance and sing with the men and women at the center. Loretta knew why she didn't do much walking that day. She was up on her feet dancing and enjoying the music as were the other two of us. The only downside of the night was missing Patricia who could not mingle in the crowd.

Yesterday morning we had a late start and together reflected on the reading from St. Paul "When I think of you, I continually thank my God for you." Our eyes were not dry and our hearts were full. We are left with questions: what is our role as North American Benedictines? How can we help the monastery in Torreon? How can we get word out about the atrocities in the city? of the constant presence of armed forces on the streets? of the deserted neighborhoods? of the frequently self-imposed curfews? How do we alert people to what is happening in many parts of Mexico as the world news organizations go to Mexico City to witness the inauguration of the new president? (The cameras will probably not show how

the palace will be surrounded with a military blockade.) How do we help others realize that the violence worsens even as the official discourse tends to downplay it? How do we work for immigration reform so Mexicans can come to the states to visit their families who reside here? Our Mexican sisters do not know it they can get visas to come to Atchison for our 150th celebration in July when we have invited members of our daughter-houses.

I don't know where to go with this experience. A start is to share it with you. I promised the women in Torreon, both the sisters and the ones who came to the center, that I will contact the media about the need to get the stories out about the violence in Mexico. Many sections of the country are dominated by thugs that are armed by us and who get their money from us. Studies have projected of the multi-billion dollar drug industry that a large percentage of the profit stays up here in the States.

Do we as North Americans have any responsibility to these our neighbors? Again, how do we expose the atrocities?

While in Torreon, the three of us stayed calm and stayed composed. I have a hard time answering the individual questions about how the experience was for me. I guess I have to say we met people who are coping as best they can. We met beautiful people of faith who want their lives changed. They want their neighborhoods back. They want to know where the disappeared are. They want the outside world to know this is happening. Today, all I can say is that I'll try.

Anne Shepard

**An earlier version of this story incorrectly identified the state.*

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