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Happy Birthday to Me!

by Michael Sean Winters

Distinctly Catholic

Hmmm. What do I want for my birthday? Maybe a new pope! Actually, depending on how things turn out, I would probably have been content to keep the pope we have for only one more day!

There was a time when I dreaded birthdays. But, for the past eleven years I have come to Puerto Rico with friends and family to celebrate. At the most basic level, who is not ready for a week at the beach by the end of February? At a deeper level, it was through the ministry of my Puerto Rican friends that I came to see that shunning birthdays was contradictory to my faith. Here on this island, despite its problems and its poverty, the people are regularly cited as among the happiest in the world in public opinion surveys. Perhaps it is the proximity to beautiful beaches and luscious mountains. Perhaps it is the lechon asado - roast pork - or the mofongo - smashed, fried plantains with tons of garlic and pork mixed in and then filled with shellfish or skirt steak. Perhaps it is a culture that still values family and faith in ways our stateside culture no longer does.

An additional reason to come here is that my mother died seven years ago and this is a place where I feel very close to her. She and my Dad lived here when they were first married, back in 1953. I started coming when I was three years old. We have old family friends here. Most especially, however, when we would walk the beach at Luquillo, where we stay, she would say "This is as close to heaven as I am ever going to get." I think she was wrong about that and, even now, is enjoying the celestial choirs. But, watching the sunrise this morning, with huge storm clouds heading towards us, then veer off to the top of the nearby rain forest, well, I understand what she meant. The place is dripping in natural beauty.

Last night, we had Mass with the Archbishop of San Juan, which is another reason to come - and another time I feel close to my Mom. Archbishop Roberto has led the local church here with courage and

compassion since 1999, often dealing with difficult situations and hostile local governments. He is one of the most outstanding members of the hierarchy I know. Later this year, he will celebrate his 25th anniversary as a bishop, so I get to come down here for a short visit in October too.

But, the real reason to celebrate one's birthday and not to shun it is because it helps one focus on the great gift of life itself. Our culture celebrates youth but I find life gets better with each passing year. At least it has for me. Each year, I feel better informed and more judicious. Each year, I discover new friends who enliven my life and challenge my ideas. Each year, there are more blessings for which to be grateful. Each year, I find myself thinking more and more with the Church - *sentire cum ecclesiae* - and just so, discovering a new sense of freedom and liberation that I had not, and could not, find on my own. That, too, is a great blessing.

In these past few years, I have an additional blessing in my life, the National Catholic Reporter, which has given me a home and more than a home. My colleagues teach me and challenge me, they make me stretch, and they inspire me with their love for the Church on a very regular basis. And, not just me! You, dear readers, need to ask yourselves: Where would we be during a moment like this in the life of the Church without the analysis and the reporting and the commentary of NCR? The Church desperately needs an independent voice and also a voice that is far from univocal. You all make that possible by subscribing and giving generously to our fundraising drives. Thank you.

So, I am heading out to walk the beach. And I will carry with me the hope and the prayer that the coming year will bring blessings to us all. God is so good to us.

Note to Readers: I return to the states tomorrow so my usual posting schedule will be back on Friday.

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