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Evangelizing actors ignite mission flame

by Joseph R. Veneroso

Ossining, N.Y. — Maryknoll Missioners who watched a performance of "Living Water" April 8 by the Still Point Theatre Collective had a "Back to the Future" experience. As we so-called professional evangelizers contemplated our diminished role in spreading the good news to the world, even as we continue to bask in the fast fading glory of the golden age of mission, here was a vibrant and talented band of young people who capture the enthusiasm of the first group of Spirit-filled apostles from centuries past. In so doing, they reveal a clear vision of what mission might be like in the near future.

Like the early church, these actors communicate the transformative power of witnessing to a death and rebirth experience as a people of faith. Instead of ancient Jerusalem, this time the resurrection story takes place in modern-day New Orleans, as it undergoes its own passion and death caused by Hurricane Katrina.

St. Gabriel the Archangel Parish had already been marked for closure even before the storm hit. With the parish plant severely damaged, as were the homes of all the parishioners, what should have been the final nail in its coffin instead triggered a remarkable chain of events. The people rallied to seek and find the lost and scattered members of their faith community and to rebuild their neighborhood and parish.

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As news of St. Gabriel's struggle reached the outside, people from around the nation found inspiration, and many traveled to Louisiana explicitly to help that one church's efforts. As with the death and resurrection of Jesus, the narrative was too good, too profound and too holy to be contained by Americans' notoriously limited attention span.

Among those moved by this story was Lisa Wagner-Carollo, founding director of the Still Point

community. Like St. Luke the Evangelist, she starting interviewing eyewitnesses. She set down an orderly account in the form of a dramatization of what had taken place, then traveled around the country with the Still Point troupe to proclaim this latter-day Gospel.

And it worked. People, groups and communities who view "Living Water" are being inspired to confront and overcome their own issues that threaten the well-being, if not the existence, of their communities.

In one sense, Still Point performing here at Maryknoll "evangelized the evangelizers," as they say. We who contemplate a not-so-rosy future can take heart from the story of St. Gabriel.

What makes the "Living Water" performance particularly moving goes far beyond attending a play, with lines memorized and characters convincingly presented. These four actors became their roles and lived their message, so that we who watched were as inspired by the persons as by their performance. They successfully transmitted and ignited the flame to others like us, far removed from the original drama.

Isn't that what the first apostles and missionaries did? They didn't just transmit a message; the more dynamic and therefore successful ones became the message. Their lives inspired.

We at Maryknoll had the extra honor of hosting the troupe for several days as they performed at the Catholic Worker in Manhattan, N.Y. We got to know them as more than actors who put on their characters with their costumes. They are successful and inspiring precisely because they allowed themselves to be transformed by the story they were telling.

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Of late, some have argued that the age of mission is past. It's so last century, if not last millennium, they say. People question if there is a role for groups like Maryknoll, or the Salesians, Columbans and other mission-sending organizations. Then along comes Pope Francis to fan the ember of mission to flame anew as he calls us to focus our attentions, not on ourselves or our self-preservation, but on the plight of the poor.

People still long for a reason to hope, to believe, to live. To get up in the morning. The good news is that resurrection happens. This is the faith that motivated the parishioners of St. Gabriel. It was their faith response that inspired people, like the Still Point troupe, to retell this tale so others might be equally encouraged in their struggle.

I believe there is a place in the new evangelization for established mission organizations like Maryknoll, but even more so for mobile and agile groups like Still Point. Like a tree with solid roots in good earth, the solid trunk supplies strength and stability, but the growth and the life are at the margins. Working together, mission societies need to encourage and support groups of young people like those of Still Point to go out and share the good news.

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