

Posadas

- brother Daniel



A BEAUTIFUL LATIN-AMERICAN TRADITION, CELEBRATED during the last days of Advent into Christmas Eve, is the *Posadas* (literally, “the Inn”). The *Posadas* may vary a little from country to country, or from region to region, yet the common thread that runs through all the celebrations is one of neighbors getting together and offering hospitality to one another. They remember a poor homeless couple who were denied such hospitality in Bethlehem when their son was about to be born.

The Gospel of Matthew, on which the script for the *Posadas* is based, presents this young family not just as homeless, but also as displaced refugees in a foreign land. They had to flee in the middle of the night from the violence of a ruthless ruler.

As the people at the *Posadas* re-enact the plight of a poor family in a very desperate situation, they go asking for hospitality at every house in the neighborhood. The response from inside is always NO! Until at last a door is opened, a welcome is offered, and the singing and re-joining leads to sharing a festive meal where friendships and common hopes become strengthened.

Eventually, by Christmas Eve, everyone has had the opportunity to offer and receive hospitality from all of the neighbors, to open their homes, their tables and their hearts to each other.

A very powerful experience for us brothers was to celebrate the *Posadas* with Felipe, Elena and their children, a family in exile, away from their beloved Guatemala. We would gather outside the Casa Guadalupe, the guest house where they lived at Weston Priory. It was always very poignant to sing the traditional *Posada* song in which Joseph is desperately begging for hospitality, filled with anguish as he sees his wife about to give birth!

It was impossible not to think of Elena and Felipe fleeing their village with their little children in the middle of the night! They were escaping brutality and death, while Elena was pregnant with her youngest daughter who would be born in Mexico, across the border, as they fled north.

The *Posada* would begin with us brothers standing outside the house trying to keep our tapers lit, our bodies warm, and our guitars in tune in the



frigid Vermont winter night. Finally the door would open, and indigenous faces would be singing and smiling as they gently kissed the brothers, inviting us in—a much appreciated warm welcome into a warm house!

Once inside, while still singing, we would admire their Christmas Crèche. It was set against a dramatically colorful backdrop of Guatemalan variegated weavings; it included the traditional figurines familiar in the Gospel narrative, along with miniature replicas of Mayan Pyramids, scenes from Mayan villages, and tropical animals such as jaguars and quetzal birds. We would then listen to their stories as marimba music played in the background; and we would enjoy the delicious Christmas meal of tamales, cooked in the traditional style of the highlands of Guatemala. There would also be hot fruit “*ponche*” (punch), and above all, love and friendship.

Looking back, now that Felipe and Elena have returned to Guatemala, the lyrics of the *Posada* song that they sang every year as they opened the door still ring in our ears: “*Entren santos peregrinos, reciban este rincón, aunque es pobre la morada, os la doy de corazón!*” (Come in, holy pilgrims; we offer you this little nook; although our home is poor, we offer it from our heart!)

These lyrics express so clearly the value of hospitality which is central to our life as a Christian community of Benedictine Monks. The first lines of chapter 53 of Benedict’s Rule, on the reception of guests, state: “All guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ, for he himself will say: I was a stranger and you welcomed me (Matt. 25:35). Proper honor must be shown to all, especially those who share our faith (Gal. 6:10) and to pilgrims.”

True hospitality, as we experienced it with this refugee family, became a gift of presence, a gift of friendship and love. Our faith tradition reminds us: open hospitality breaks the roles of enemy, stranger, Greek or Jew, and enables us to become brothers and sisters to each other. We are able to intuit what Abraham and Sara recognized long ago at Mamre: “the other” is really God’s messenger, God’s gift (Gen. 18:1-15). This gift of God’s love is really the heart of the Christmas story, and that is reason enough to celebrate with joy and gratitude. ■