



The Chiapas Project

December, 2009

Dear Friends,

One would think that by 60-plus years I would be able to make some sense of the world that surrounds me.

Santiago has worked for Araceli and I for more than four years at the farm. He is not only able as a worker; he is also faithful to his church and loyal to those he considers friends. His sister Florinda, a widow of fifty-one died last night after a struggle with cancer.

Florinda's plight is not unusual, here where we live, amongst the poor and mostly indigenous. It is not unusual, but it is ever so sad and certainly not just.

On my return from the U.S. Santiago with a long face, told me that his sister was ill with several tumors but when he had taken her to the regional hospital for an examination they examined her and said they could do nothing. However if she had 6000 pesos (500 dollars) they might be able to do something at a private clinic. The surgeon at the clinic after taking her savings of 5000 pesos told her that the tumors were too advanced and sent her away with a bill for another 1000 pesos. Meanwhile the pain increased, and Florinda started retaining water making it difficult to even lie down in her bed.

When I discovered what had gone on I went to see the second surgeon who gave me a prescription for some strong pain relievers. Araceli and I gave Santiago another 600 dollars to get Florinda into a hospice care center where she spent three weeks free of pain with suitable nursing care. She died and today the arrangements are being made to inter her remains in a plot where Santiago had purchased three over the last couple of years (the other two being for himself and his wife.)

When I first knew of Florinda and gave Santiago the 600 dollars, I wrote to a few friends for the burial expenses. So we had another 600 dollars to defray the cost of the internment.

This last year in Chiapas I have worked with some non-profit groups and volunteers who have griped about my accounting skills. The first six hundred that I gave Santiago was from our building fund to build Araceli her house. The second six hundred was raised (obviously) for the burial expenses in mind. I did not itemize the expenses; I just gave them to Santiago. Should I fear a probe from the I.R.S. for following God's Law?

Is the Catholic Worker world of Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin clear on following the gospels? Do I dare, in good conscience, work again with the local non profits in accounting for each peso to satisfy bean counters involved with the government?

I am, as is readily apparent, confused. I want to help build a clinic for the poor. I don't however, want to spend my time with justifying the costs to an entity which justifies its existence to a national government (be it Mexico or the U.S.). *(continued on page 2)*

At any rate, I am back in Chiapas working on Araceli's house, pondering the ways of the world, reading Thomas Aquinas and Aristotle to see the world they created. Perhaps confusion is my natural state.

The gospels are clear on the subject of the fiscal relating to Church and State; "Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's" but the gospels are not clear on the personal vicissitudes of the Church.

Historically, in my varied employ as carpenter/builder, I suffered from two biases; that of making money was often a priority while reporting the money I made to the government was less so. Working for others, the concept of service, was my second bias, that is heeding the call to service did not require an accounting to anyone- only my account to God in service to others.

Should I choose to build a clinic with money from others what responsibility do I have to those who gave me the money? If some of the donors give freely, not asking or expecting an accounting what responsibility do I have for those others who expect an account? At what point does my view have value? What of the ultimate aim of building a working clinic for the poor?

Amongst all of this theoretical posturing where do the gospels become clear?

Perhaps I should not take money from those who require bookkeeping? For me, the anxiety of accounting keeps me in turmoil for days, while the work on the clinic gets slowed. Better to halt the work for lack of funds than go through the turmoil of bean counting for a governmental body. Ultimately, I do not want to be accountable to governments unless they can be accountable to me. Meanwhile I will continue reading the gospels to see if they can placate me.

I can take solace in working with the poor. Santiago never chides me for doing the works of Mercy.

Rest in peace Florinda, for once again the poor have taught me well.

Richard Flamer

Contributions to the Chiapas Project should be mailed to: Holy Family Church
c/o Chiapas Project
1715 Izard St
Omaha, NE 68102