



Juárez Inocentes

The power of faith and forgiveness

The year was 1958, I was still 18 years old, just a year out of high school, when I found myself wearing Army fatigues and going to a missile radar school. The Army had transported me from industrial Pennsylvania to the desert southwest city of El Paso Texas, and from the innocence of my adolescent youth to a socially undisciplined world of men and boys much like myself, off to see the world and serve our country.

The city of El Paso wore a serape of Hispanic culture, largely due to the border it shares with Ciudad Juárez, a city of a million souls, the largest city in Chihuahua, Mexico. It was a four-mile bus ride from my barracks at Fort bliss to St San Jacinto Plaza in downtown El Paso, and from there a short walk down Santa Fe Street to the border crossing. The crossing was a simple affair, two lanes for traffic, one in and one out, flanked by sidewalks staffed by border officials from each country. The only questions they asked were related to the traffic in guns.

Once across, you found yourself on Juárez Avenue, a teeming boulevard of shops, cafes, restaurants, bars, street vendors, shoeless begging children, hustlers, hawkers, pick-pockets, and a few ladies-of-the-night working the day shift. The only locals you saw were trade people there to take advantage of the constant flow of tourists, business traders, and at night and on weekends, soldiers from Fort Bliss and Airmen from Biggs Air Force Base. It was a playground for young men, base, crude, lawless, sinful, and potentially dangerous. Perfect for a coming of age, light-years from the repressing Pennsylvania Blue Laws of my youth.

It was here under the guidance and protection of older men that I would experience the socially-liberating anesthetic joys of cerveza, tequila, Mexican cognac, rum and cheap wine. It was here that I would meet hard men, sometimes dangerous men, desperate street vendors selling whatever they could, children, dirty and wild, old women selling less-than artistic handmade crafts, and young women selling the only thing they had to offer.

I gave a young boy, maybe six years old, a quarter one day. He said was hungry. A short time later came upon the same boy buying a lottery ticket. I said to him, “Hey, I thought you were hungry?”. He replied with a grin, that when he won the lottery, he could feed his whole family for a year. I had much to learn about this new world.

Prostitution was wide open and a significant element of commerce on Juárez Avenue. There were classical brothels, but more common were nightclubs where drinking and dancing were common. The club provided a less threatening environment for working girls to meet potential customers and usually included an “upstairs” where customers could be privately entertained. The going rate was three dollars, one of which went to the house, one to the girl’s “protector”, and third to the girl herself.

It was acceptable to go there with friends to drink and chat without seeking the company of a house consort. The women of such places were open and friendly, not above sharing your table for a drink, teasing and conversational, making you aware of what they had to offer, but in a playful way, no pressure to buy. Some of the older women – keep in mind that I was still a teenager – had a hard edge to them and a no-nonsense commercial frame of mind. They frankly scared the hell out of me, causing the voice of some long-ago Evangelical preacher to replay his “wages of sin” sermon in my mind. But the younger ones were more likely to be chatty and had a softer approach. I found them intriguing and willing to share personal stories about their youth, their family, and the place where they grew up.

To my surprise, one Saturday evening, a young woman from such a club asked me to escort her to a nearby Catholic church so that she could take confession. As we walked along the street, she kept up a non-stop monolog about her childhood, her native village, and her brothers, sisters and cousins. When we got to the church, she stepped eagerly into the confessional exchanging smiles and pleasantries with the priest. I sat alone in a near empty nave staring straight ahead at the chancel, lost in my own confused thoughts about sin, redemption, and forgiveness in the context of her visit. When she emerged, holding her rosary, she was all smiles and wore her happiness openly on her face.

As we walked back to the club, I was tense, conflicted, anguished about what I had seen and what it meant. I asked her how she could reconcile her Catholicism with her professional calling. “Don’t you see”, she answered me happily, “I couldn’t do what I do without the forgiveness of God”. But why do you do it, I asked her. “So that I can send money to my father to support the family. So that my parents can be respected in our village. So that my brothers and sisters can afford to go to school, so that my parents can care for my grandmother. My parents are very proud of what I do. They tell all their friends how successful I am in Juárez. There is no shame.”

I came to the realization that night that when I crossed the Rio Grande, I was not just crossing from the United States to Mexico, but that I had plunged into a world of functional values far different than I had ever encountered. There is a Plaza Benito Juárez in that city when stands a seven-foot statue of a woman, naked to her waste, her arms outstretched. The inscribed plaque reads “To the Prostitutes of our city in gratitude for their economic contribution to the people of Juárez”.

Gene Ziegler, Chandler Arizona December 2018