

## MY JOURNEY OF FAITH

July 1987

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Early in May of this year I had a conversation with my daughter, Sara, that struck a deep chord in my heart and produced a new insight as to God's presence in human life. Close to the midpoint of her life, Sara is a mother of five, assistant manager at a McDonald's store. She tries to keep a living relationship with God at home, at work, and in her family, faithfully participating in a Baptist church in **Fairfax**, Virginia.

She was sharing her spiritual journey with me, and in the midst of the conversation, I asked her, "Sara, how do you pray? How do you relate to God?"

Her answer ran something like this: "I don't read the Bible a lot, because I don't have much time. But I communicate with God regularly. I have a lot to do, but I think it is easy to relate to God. Basically, it isn't difficult. Many times I say words that come to me from the outside. God gives them to me. A power outside myself gave me words to teach kindergarten--while still a child--in the Colegio Bautista de Caguas. It is a power outside myself giving me words. It is not craftiness; it is not knowledge that I possess; it is a gift. I find the presence of God very strong. I find this strange, but I feel more committed to

what I do. God is there somewhere. Since I was a little child, God has been with me. God is part of me; every thought that I had was a thought of God. I have had bad experiences, but I never blamed God for them. I needed those experiences."

I further asked her, "What is the most important thing in your relationship to God?"

She answered, "God's mission for me at this moment is being a parent. I feel closest to God when I'm parenting. Parenting is like praying. God is present in a real way... My first five years of marriage were rough. I used to be very impatient with God. But I knew God was with me. I can't think of it not being that way. Faith is a natural state of being for me. It has been that way since I was a child. I feel very close to God... I'm a lot more relaxed than before. Now I'm struggling to teach myself that when you make a value judgment you have to be careful... For me praise and praying go together. When I drive the car, I hear a lot of choruses and hymns on cassettes and I join in the singing. To me singing is closer to praying than just saying words."

The conversation was longer, but when it ended, I was conscious that the ground on which we stood and the space between us was holy ground and holy space. God was present. I asked myself then, and I ask myself now: What does it

mean to always have a sense of God's presence? Here is a woman who is present to God, to herself, and to others in an unusual manner. If one were to characterize her life, an adequate statement would be that she is immersed in the mystery of being, and this mystery is goodness, love, truth, wisdom, strength, and meaning.

This experience with Sara has led me to ask myself how God has been present in my own life. It is a very different story, but I want to share it with you, since by doing so, I am sharing my faith-journey and my present commitments. You have a right to know who the speaker is and how he relates to God, to himself, to others, to the world and to the church.

In the midst of great natural beauty and dire poverty, I was born in 1925 in the hilly countryside of Barranquitas, Puerto Rico, into a practicing Roman Catholic home, the first son in a family of ten, five boys and five girls.

Father had a seventh-grade education and in my early childhood was a farmer. I used to help plant and harvest tobacco, corn, bananas, coffee, and other tropical products. Father was always a hard-working man, not only as a farmer, but later as a road-construction foreman. Besides, he had a small grocery store to serve community needs. Although strict in his discipline of children, he had a tender heart. Every evening he would bring home a piece of cake or some

candy to be shared by all the children. We all eagerly awaited his arrival with the evening's goodies.

One thing that always disturbed me was my father's drinking. When he came home drunk, he was not aggressive but foolishly sentimental. Fortunately, he stopped drinking after his first heart attack in 1952.

He was gifted with a sense of humor, which he kept until his death in 1977. As a person, he had deep respect for people and a hospitable heart. He was kind to strangers and to our farm-workers, as well as to animals, appreciating the creative forces of nature, being aware of the gifts of sun, air, rain, streams, animals, plants and mountains. His was a spirituality of compassion and total reponse within the limits of his cultural and social world.

My mother had only a third-grade education but was a very effective parent. While the children were growing up, she not only cooked and sewed for the ten of us, but also gave us a good example of love and affiramtion. Her fear of God was evident in her dealings at home. It was impossible to gossip about the neighbors and relatives. The rule was simple: "No idle talk about others; be hospitable and open to all persons; share what you have with others."

At 85, she lives in a small frame house behind her son's home in a suburb of San Juan. There she cooks for herself and others, keeps a garden, sews dresses for many of

her 40 grandchildren, 31 great-grandchildren, five daughters, and others. Daily she reads the newspaper, hears the news, studies her Bible lesson for the next Sunday, reads the Upper Room and prays. Although she lives alone, Mother is never lonely. She communes daily with her Lord and delights in making new friends and visiting new places.

I grew up in a religious environment. My family were practicing Roman Catholics. As a child, I used to lead the rosary and participate in special novenas that Father or Mother had promised to a saint, to the Virgin Mary, or to Jesus Christ. These novenas were chanted rosaries. An altar was set up in the living-room with flowers, pictures or sculptures of saints, and candles. Usually one of the leading men or women of the community would lead the singing of the rosary accompanied by guitars, other stringed instruments and gourds. The altar, the flowers, the saint-figure and the music had a great impact on me. I had the feeling that through all of this activity, we were addressing a mysterious reality, someone who was not ourselves, to whom prayer and songs were being offered. When there was a dry season in the area, the community leaders would organize a procession and walk through the fields chanting and saying the rosary. I knew that we were imploring a blessing from Someone who was not human and not part of nature.

**Holy** Week was a special occasion for attending church.

On Palm Sunday hundreds of people would go from the country to the Roman Catholic church in town, carrying palm branches. The priest would bless these branches and the people would keep them throughout the year as a token of God's blessing and, supposedly, a source of grace.

On Wednesday of Holy Week all work stopped. Every family had made preparations by gathering all food that was needed for the next four days, from Maundy Thursday to Easter Sunday. All activity ceased. No cutting down of trees or plants was permitted, since it was supposed that blood would come out of them. It was as if one were cutting the body of Christ. It seemed as if the whole of nature was experiencing Christ's death.

On Good Friday Christ's corpse was carried through the streets of the town on the shoulders of the leading citizens. An air of heaviness and darkness hung over the town. There was sadness in hearts and grayness in the garments in church.

All these activities created a sense of awe and mystery in me. However, I was puzzled by certain behavior. The chanted novenas would often end with heavy drinking and fights among neighbors. Sometimes people wounded each other. There was no Good Friday procession that did not end with fighting among the participants. The bar-restaurants were completely sold out of food, and of liquor and beer, as

well. Also, one could sense that when fights took place, the poor folks and the hillbillies were always on the losing end. They were heavily cudgelled by police, while their adversaries, usually townsmen of higher classes, got away with very oppressive behavior.

The balance of my upbringing was very positive. I was strongly affirmed as a person and I felt loved and accepted. Furthermore, as the eldest son, I was expected to set an example for the other children, to meet out punishment when Father was not available and to be responsible for their moral and educational development. It was a heavy responsibility, but I accepted it willingly and, on the whole, have been able to discharge it faithfully by helping all my brothers and sisters to get an education and by giving timely advice.

Religiously, the legacy of childhood was perplexing. Religious activities pointed to a reality beyond the human, to the Mysterious One, to Christ as the sacrificial Lamb of God. On the other hand, the community of faith that carried out the religious ceremonies seemed to be unaffected in much of its behavior by the faith it proclaimed in symbol and ritual. They did not appear to walk in the light. At that time I could not discern the contradictions as clearly as I do now. Yet I had the feeling that many negative forces were manifesting themselves in the community, creating fear,

hostility, class distinctions, and aggressive behavior that resulted in fights and sometimes murders. Somehow, amid the brightness of the Mysterious One, there were enclosures of darkness that threatened and invaded the structure of my being, as well as that of others.

### Elementary School

My elementary education took place in the public schools of my country community. I liked my teachers and never missed a day of classes, if I could help it. When I was in seventh grade, a new building was constructed to house the elementary school, which at that time included seventh and eighth grades. During those two years I was literally in love with my fellow-students, my teacher, even with the school building. At my own initiative, I would get to school early every day to sweep and mop the halls. This was volunteer work; no pay was involved. I thoroughly enjoyed the task. It brought a deep sense of satisfaction. To this day I remember with gratitude the opportunity I had of cleaning my school's corridors.

If elementary school years were enjoyable, much more so were my high school years. There was no public high school in Barranquitas at that time. But there was the Baptist Academy, established by American Baptist missionaries in 1926, and the **Monseñor** Willinger Academy, founded a few years later to prevent Catholic young people from enrolling



in the Protestant academy.

Private education meant payment of tuition and books. My father went to the Catholic priest and requested a scholarship for me (I had been valedictorian in eighth grade), but he was turned down. The only alternative left was to go to the "heretical school". In spite of vehement objections by my paternal grandmother and warnings from other family members, my father visited the principal. With great joy I received the news that I had been granted a **work-**scholarship to attend the Baptist Academy of Barranquitas, starting in August, 1939.

The four years in that high school were to be crucial for my educational and spiritual development.

#### Baptist Academy Years, 1939-1943

The four years spent at the Protestant school proved significant beyond expectation. I was strongly attracted by the ambiance of acceptance by teachers and students alike. Being a country boy, I was shy and apprehensive. There was no rejection of my person nor of my Catholic background. I was impressed by the quality of teaching and the emphasis on truth, moral values, and spiritual formation.

For the first time in my life, I became deeply acquainted ~~was~~ with the Bible. Bible classes were conducted weekly and chapel services were held daily. The total environment had a profound effect on my life. By the second year of

high school, I made profession of faith and was baptized on February 8, 1942, in the local Baptist church.

This turning-about was serious business for me. With a group of eight other young people, I was instructed in the Christian faith for about a year. I also learned to share the faith with others in the town and countryside. This witnessing was done on foot, since there were no funds to go by car or by horse.

Personally, I knew I had gained new meaning and direction for my life. I felt surrounded by light. In the third year of high school, I made my decision to prepare for the Christian ministry.

The decisions I made during high school years have shaped my life. First, I gained a respect and thirst for truth, beauty and moral values at all levels, that have stayed with me to this very moment. Second, I consciously and radically embraced the Christian faith. I had a conversion experience that reoriented my life totally toward the kingdom of God. The Lord Jesus Christ became very real to me, and the Bible became a book with great dimensions of mystery. Third, God's call through Christ was not only to discipleship, but also to be a pastor and teacher. Two years later, I became engaged to one of my teachers. Ours was a commitment not only to love, but also to Christian mission.

The Army Years: 1943-1946

In May, 1943, when I graduated from high school, the stage was set for the rest of my life. I was ready to enter the University of Puerto Rico to start my preparation for ministry.

Uncle Sam, however, had other plans. Immediately after graduation I received notice that I would be drafted into the Army on July 3. This made me uneasy and fearful. From reading Scripture, I had a firm conviction that killing in war was not acceptable to a Christian. Consequently, I went into the Armed Forces as a conscientious objector.

The Army years were significant in my formation. I learned at first-hand what military regimentation is all about and its dehumanizing effect on people. However, I also became aware of the importance of order and neatness. Yet while in the Army, I was not bitter toward anyone, nor did I become anxious or disoriented. I faithfully cultivated my life in Christ, my relationship to the church and to my **fiancée**. I also learned to repair hospital equipment and travelled widely. Entrance into the Army, which at first seemed detrimental and obstructive, in the end brought a series of experiences--both positive and negative--that aided my development as a person and strengthened my Christian faith. Furthermore, because of military service, I was eligible for the G.I. Bill of Rights, which provided for my

college and seminary education.

Discharged from the Army on March 23, **1946**, I was ready to pursue college and seminary studies as preparation for the ordained ministry.

#### Goshen College Years: 1946-1949

Full of energy and expectation, I entered **Goshen** College in Indiana, the summer of 1946. **Goshen** is a Mennonite college of high quality. I chose it intentionally, in order to explore Mennonite history and tradition in depth. During world War II many Mennonites went to Puerto Rico to serve terms as conscientious objectors. They gave their time and energy to very significant service projects for the island's health and economy.

While at **Goshen**, I was deeply immersed in Mennonite church life and history. Their emphasis on peace, discipleship, and simplicity are abiding contributions to the Christian community. Today, more than ever, these marks are needed in the Christian church.

My double major in college was American history and French. No major was then available in my intended field of psychology. However, the **history/French** major gave me a solid foundation for theological studies.

#### Seminary Experience: 1949-1952

I attended Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary from 1949 to 1952. Although it was an important experience, it

was less significant than that at **Goshen** College.

Eastern in those days was a conservative seminary, where I had to fight for my integrity as a man of faith. That was the heyday of Neo-orthodoxy, but Eastern was not in that vein. So it was by reading books of Neo-orthodox trend that I gained new insights into the Christian faith.

Of special importance was Emil Brunner's Revelation and Reason. I read it several times and wrote a long review on it. Brunner helped me to distinguish between the written text of Scripture and the witness of Scripture to the Word of God. This perspective liberated me from slavery to the literalistic view of inspiration and developed in me a creative view of the written text. I realized then that I cannot confuse the mystery of God and his revelation with man's apprehension of that mystery.

Another book that had a powerful impact on me was Donald Baillie's God Was in Christ. Baillie's christology is based on a creative synthesis of the New Testament witness to Jesus as a historical person and as revealer of the mystery of the Godhead. He helped me gain perspective for formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity.

While at Eastern Baptist I ministered during the summer to Puerto Rican workers on asparagus and tomato farms of southern New Jersey. I was also pastor of the First Hispanic Baptist Church in Philadelphia. I have met poverty and

filth in my life in other places, but nothing comparable to what I found in some of the Philadelphia houses where Hispanic families lived. To this day I am surprised by the fact that human beings could live in such dire conditions.

In the three years I spent at Eastern Baptist, I was also able to complete the requirements for a Master's degree in Latin American History at the University of Pennsylvania. This training was the counterpart of my college major in American History. My goal was to understand the history and culture of North, South and Central America and the Caribbean. This training in history has given me a broad understanding of issues confronting the Americas during the past four decades.

#### Pastorates in Barranquitas and Caguas

On completing seminary in 1952, I knew I had to return to Puerto Rico. I was offered the pastorate of the Baptist Church of Barranquitas, my home town. The pay was ~~low~~--\$80 a month plus parsonage; \$75 extra for teaching part-time at the Baptist Academy. My wife and I had four children at that time. In spite of financial limitations, I did not complain. I was not interested in staying in the United States, where salaries were higher, nor in teaching in a university in Puerto Rico, where my master's degree in history would open the door to a professor's career. My first love was the pastorate.

On February 11, 1953, an unexpected event happened in our family. My eldest son, Samuel, then 4-1/2 years old, died under anesthesia at the end of a minor operation on a finger. Only my wife had gone to San Juan to be with Samuel during surgery. I stayed teaching at the Baptist Academy and supervising the younger children.

Samuel's death made me aware of the limitations of modern science, the precariousness of life, and the mystery of death. Throughout the whole experience, God was present. However, it took me, my wife, and the other children a long time to process the emotional effect of his death.

#### Pastorate in Caguas, 1954-61

Without warning, the Pulpit Committee of the First Baptist Church of Caguas asked me to accept an invitation to be pastor of that large congregation. At first I said no, but I finally consented and became pastor in Caguas on July 1, 1954.

This church was established in 1903, the first Protestant church in town. Seventeen years later, in 1920, it declared itself a self-sustaining congregation, the first church in Puerto Rico to say no to missionary subsidy. Caguas is the largest town in the interior of the island, and from the first it was very receptive to the gospel of Protestant Christianity. In 1954 the First Baptist Church had close to 500 members, one of the largest Protestant

churches in Puerto Rico at that time.

My pastorate in Caguas had many dimensions, several of them especially significant. I grew up as a person and as a pastor. The congregation was responsive to my style of leadership and grew accordingly. A day school, which had started as a kindergarten, was developed until it became a full-fledged elementary school, accredited by the Puerto Rico Department of Education. Two new chapels were built in country areas. A large lot was acquired for the construction of a larger church building and new facilities for the day school.

Most of the members belonged to the lower classes, with a few from the middle class. The higher-class people in town called us "la **iglesia de la gentuza**"--that is, "the riffraff church." Actually, we of the congregation took it as a compliment, as well as a reflection of their insecurity, in view of what God was doing in our midst. In our eyes, we had been the object of God's special grace. Although we were poor, the Holy Spirit had composed a new song in our hearts, a song of hope and thanksgiving, a song of love and peace.

In the Caguas slums, many people were receptive to Christ's transforming power. There Christ was giving the poor people an opportunity to become protagonists of their own story, and not merely the victims of poverty, crime,



dereliction, and sin. In that local church the poor of Caguas formed a new community from the ruptured community of the slums; learned to handle their own affairs by being faithful tithers, preparing their budgets, calling their own pastor, sharing their faith with others, singing, always singing to the Lord of grace. That church has always had good music, and its choir is one of the best in Puerto Rico. It has also maintained a high-quality radio program for almost four decades.

While in Caguas, I constantly felt the urge to continue studying. I had a good grounding in theology and Bible, but I knew there was a lot more to be learned. I also realized that Puerto Rican society was becoming more sophisticated, and that every year the universities were sending hundreds of graduates into the mainstream of society. I saw intuitively that church leaders must get ready for social changes that were forthcoming. So in 1961 I resigned the pastorate and moved to the Boston area to pursue doctoral studies in New Testament.

#### Boston Years: 1961-1966

Boston, what an experience! Thirty-six years old; five children and slender financial resources. It was an adventure of faith. Yet there was no doubt that the Lord was leading the whole enterprise and that doors would be opened. And so it happened.

I approached President Herbert Gezork, when he was in Puerto Rico in the spring of 1961, exploring the possibility of spending a year at Andover Newton to brush up on my Greek and Hebrew and broaden my knowledge of the New Testament. The answer was, yes. I spent the year 1961-62 at Andover Newton Theological School, getting in touch again with formal theological studies.

During that year I cross-registered at Harvard Divinity School. I also applied for the doctoral program at Harvard Divinity School and also at Boston School of Theology.

I was pleasantly surprised when I was accepted as a doctoral candidate by Boston School of Theology. However, I was totally surprised when Harvard also accepted me in their New Testament doctoral program. I still remember the interview with Krister Stendahl in his office. He told me that there are many other excellent schools in the nation. Also, that the program at Harvard was tough. Was I willing to pay the price? he asked. With trepidation, I answered, yes.

A few days later I received the letter of ~~accept~~ptance. For the first time in my life, I was scared about an academic program. I suddenly realized what was ahead: learn more Hebrew and Greek; take Latin and Aramaic; pass exams in German and French. Compete with the best students in the nation. Produce high-quality papers. Get involved in a very pluralistic environment. It was a great challenge, the

greatest I had ever received in my life. In my mind and heart, before the Lord, I said, "Lord, there is no turning back. I shall forge ahead with you and my family on my side."

The years at Harvard Divinity School were tough but rewarding years. Tough because of the intensity of the studies and lack of financial resources. Rewarding because many learnings opened up and so much integration took place. All my life I had wanted to delve deeply into a field of knowledge. This happened when I began to explore the various dimensions of a doctoral program in New Testament: not only the languages, but also the cultural, religious, philosophical, theological, and literary issues involved. Everything began to expand, also many things began to make sense. Quality in writing and thinking was all-important. Comprehensiveness, as well as specificity, had to be taken into account. All of this took place in a climate of healthy competition among the students, guided by eminent scholars.

Once you go through Harvard, the outcome is clear. You are committed to excellence; second-class work is not satisfactory. I must say that I had to fight for my soul. In an environment where rational thinking and scientific method are pervasive, faith in God is a commodity constantly under assault. Fortunately, I had a strong faith, grounded in a first-hand knowledge of God.