



BELIEVING IN THE THROES OF THE DARK NIGHT

Testimonies

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Today we wish to speak about hope, about faith inspired with hope that many men and women succeeded in maintaining alive in their "dark nights", when everything seemed to work against hope. We will set out different testimonies, some home-made, others more structured. From a simple family mother beleaguered with problems of illness, joblessness and the death of her loved ones (many mothers would see themselves reflected in her case)... to fighters like Luther King or Rigoberta Menchú concerned about justice to their peoples. The common denominator of all these is their faith in the midst of despair. People who like John of the Cross knew how to say: "How well I know the fount..., although it be night!"

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1. FROM THE STANCE OF CANCER

MY BIG TEMPTATION: ASK GOD TO FREE ME FROM THE TEST

Jesús Burgaleta

It is not easy to uncover one's deep feelings before so many people. However, if it helps you, I will try in all simplicity to communicate to you my experience in the course of a long process of chemotherapy, which ended successfully with an autologous medula transplant.

The most gratifying experience that I had during the whole of this year and a half consisted in changing neither my experience, nor concept nor my relation with God.

The great temptation was to turn from faith to religion, from gratuitous trust to interest; from relating myself with God without expecting anything from Him and without needing anything - only for the sake of pure love - to approaching Him so that He could free me from the test or pull me out of the well.

I had to assume that if my health did not depend on God, neither did my illness. God had neither sent me nor wanted my illness. It was simply something that was happening in my life.

If I had not complained to God when everything was working well for me, why should I complain when everything was going wrong. If I had not asked anything from God in my life - except that His name be sanctified, working for His project which is to share bread and to love up to the point of being able to forgive - why should I ask Him for something now that I was ill?

So, in my relation with God, when I tried to verbalise in my heart a prayer, the only formula that I found was that of the Psalm which said, "*Lord, how admirable is your name in the whole world!*".

My experience of God brought me in the period of my illness:

- To have confidence in myself: to become aware of my own strength, to draw on my deepest resources, to connect with my unknown energies, to fight illness indefatigably, to keep heart, to value the gift of life and to receive it as a task.
- To intensify the fundamental orientation of my life, with love, dedication, donation. Illness has also served as an occasion to forget myself, not to be preoccupied about my person, to draw the focus away from myself.
- To assume weakness without fear, without traumas, without pusillanimous anxieties. We are made this way: we can also be ill!
- To live illness with normalcy, trying to avoid creating more exceptional situations than strictly required. Not to turn spoilt or impertinent or over-demanding of attention. I

did, however, take care with naturalness to allow myself to be looked after; I was lucky to be looked after simply by my dear ones.

- To free others from worry, attention, being always at my beck and call with respect to visits and telephone calls. I learnt to live at a distance the solidarity shown towards me by others, knowing that illness, as every way in life, is carried out alone and in one's interior although in rapport with others.
- To forget the bourgeois and élite spirit that in the case of oneself always looks for the best: the best doctor - wherever he is to be found - the best attention, the maximum safety. I chose to accept the normal doctor on duty as any other unprivileged person would have to. If he turned out to be good, my good luck!
- To have trust in my doctors. I put myself in their hands without hesitation, with docility, in silence, without asking unnecessary questions, allowing them to do their work and doing what they recommended. I tried to make their work easier.
- To have a feeling of *mercy* for others, putting myself in their place and trying to understand their situation. This I tried to do especially with respect to the sanitary staff that looked after me:
 - By renouncing hypersensitivity for one's own rights (for these one has to especially fight for before and after being sick).
 - By maintaining a relation of gratuity; receiving each service as a favour.
 - By not making a nuisance of myself or over-demanding.
 - By actively collaborating
 - By creating a relaxed welcoming atmosphere.
 - By understanding their work situation, overloaded with working hours, responsibility, fatigue and even lack of comprehension.
 - By forgiving the faults, when I had to suffer them, even though they were caused by incompetence or negligence and could imply serious risks. Forgiving from the heart.

And, above all, during the whole period of my illness, I tried to maintain a vital attitude even in the most difficult moments. This illness has only been a stage in my life that deserved to be lived through with intensity, depth, radicality, a certain enthusiasm and joy... Who could assure me that this was not going to be the last part of my life? And how was I not going to step on the accelerator to live it flat out?

I can say that unfortunately I had the good luck to be ill and to be able to live as a result of this, facets of life that normally go almost unperceived when one is healthy: weakness, limitation, the unremediable, the profoundly radical, sorrow, the relativity of things, what is important and what accidental, what necessary and what accessory, what superfluous, what is worthwhile and what useless, the assumption of one's own destiny, accepting oneself for what one is, the capacity of autocriticism, the perspective of change, the assumption of death, opening oneself up to the future, desperate hope ... How many times!¹

2. FROM THE STANCE OF NON-VIOLENT STRUGGLE.

Martin Luther King

Racial segregation in Birmingham was so well developed that the whites had not only *their* districts, *their* schools, *their* hospitals, but also *their* churches. Practically all the shops and bars belonged to whites, and in these too segregation was practised, but the men of white shops counted on sales to the blacks to enrich themselves. Besides, the whites used blacks to do the difficult and less gratifying jobs, something like how the Jews, in the times of Jesus, used publicans to do the dirty businesses. Let us point out too that in Birmingham, brutal treatment meted out to black people was an admitted fact: King reports: "The racists can threaten, ill-treat and even kill blacks with all impunity".

The city of Birmingham was chosen as the setting of a decisive non-violent battle against segregation in the United States. If it disappeared in Birmingham, other cities would also be obliged to put a stop to it. There was one man who symbolised segregation: E. Connor, chief of the local police at that time. His hatred for blacks was sadly legendary.

The events that took place in that city in the spring of 1963 could be summed up as follows: under the impulse of King, thousands of blacks participated in public manifestations that were continuously repeated. They wanted to go to the districts that they were banned from by law. They knew that each time they did so, they ran the danger of ending up in jail, of being given a beating and of suffering the arbitrariness of southern law-courts.

"When suddenly - comments King - a man who you have humbled for years with the threat of a cruel and unjust punishment turns to you and says clearly: Punish me! I don't merit it! (...). When a man speaks to you like this, you do not know what to do. You are disconcerted and secretly ashamed of yourselves, since you know that he has courage equal to yours and that he has been able to draw from a mysterious source the courage and conviction of opposing the strength of his soul to physical strength. And then, the fact of going to jail, instead of being a disgrace for the black, is converted on the contrary into an honour ... the blacks were attacking not only the *exterior* cause of their misery: their revolution revealed to them what they were themselves. The black person was *someone*. He discovered the meaning of his personality and that he needed to free himself *immediately*. During the two weeks that the protest marches were staged, blacks boycotted shops belonging to whites, trying in this way to cause them some economic loss."

After one of the first street manifestations, King was arrested and put in jail. From his cell he wrote a long letter that quickly spread through the United States. It begins like this: "My dear brethren in the ministry". King was of the opinion, in this article addressed to the heads of churches, that blacks should "create in society by non-violent means a tension that would help men to get out of the deep shadows of racial prejudice to reach the august peaks of fraternal comprehension". And he asked parsons and priests: "Isn't segregation the existential expression of that tragic separation that constitutes at the same time the atrocious alienation and the terrible sin of man?" Later, King affirmed: "In the face of the overwhelming outrages that blacks suffer, I have seen white parsons preaching

anachronisms in the old language of Chanaan. In the heart of the gigantic combat that we have been waging to free the country from social and economic injustice, I have heard them exclaim: These are social problems, and the Gospel has nothing to do with them, (...). Deeply disappointed, I have wept then over the negligence of the Church. But take note that my tears were really tears of love. Because a deep disappointment can only proceed from a great love (...). Indeed, the Church for me represents the body of Christ. But how wounded is that body!" The eight religious heads of Alabama, the State in which Birmingham is located, never ever replied to the letter of Martin Luther King.

The black leader came out of jail a week later. What happened in the days following caused the black movement to enter history. However, at the start the situation showed no signs of optimism. The non-violent manifestations had lost strength whilst King had been in jail. The repression exercised by Connor had been implacable. No black person had succeeded in entering a district reserved for the whites. The jails had been full. Many blacks had been wounded by the fangs of police dogs and by fire-fighter hoses aimed at the marchers. The pressure of the water was such that the spurts of the same even tore off the barks of some trees. Connor had triumphed. The blacks were totally disheartened.

Hundreds of school children attended the training sessions for non-violent action. They wanted to participate in the marches and go to jail like the grown-ups. Children and adolescents succeeded in convincing King and his friends. Would not the spectacle of school children marching to conquer their freedom be able to move the whole country? On May 2, more than a thousand youths, surrounded by a hundred adults, walked in twos towards the centre of the city, singing hymns and applauding.

The fire hoses and police dogs were more powerful than the marchers. That day 900 youths were arrested. Connor had to resort to school buses to carry them off to jail. Once more he had triumphed.

Without waiting further, new volunteers came forward to join King's companions. The next day, a new march was organised, with not one thousand but two thousand five hundred youths. At the boundary of the white district, Connor ordered the marchers to turn back. When they refused, he shouted: "They have asked for it!" Then, "before the eyes of thousands of journalists and TV reporters, the fire-fighters put their hoses in action: with the cracking sound of automatic weapons, the water under pressure hit the children and adults, knocking them down, snatching off their clothes, hurling them against building walls, throwing them bleeding to the ground. Then Connor let loose the snarling dogs. Children and adults ran to take refuge in a church: "See how these blacks run", mocked Connor. His cynicism was so great that he did not notice the growing discomfort among the fire fighters and policemen.

The reports and photographs of that day of horror in Birmingham featured the following day on the front pages of American and many foreign newspapers. A wind of shame blew across the United States. Can one say one is living in a democratic country and still tolerate segregation?, many Americans were asking themselves at that moment.

The following Sunday, May 5, a third march was staged, this time with three thousand participants. Despite the fact that they were expecting the same rough treatment at the hands of the police, the marchers kept singing hymns and chants of love, justice and

freedom. Connor had declared a little before that manifestation: "I am going to smash those devils, sons of a bitch. That is what I am going to do!"

The marchers drew near the banned district. Connor threatened them. They kept marching on. A black leader, Billups, shouted to the police: "We are not going to turn back. We have done nothing evil. All that we are asking for is our freedom... What do you feel when acting like this? (...) Let loose your dogs. Hit us. We are not going to recede". Connor turned then to his men and shouted: "To hell with them, turn on the hoses!" Everybody remained still. Some marchers had put a knee on the ground and were praying. Mad with anger, Connor repeated the order to turn on the fire-fighting hoses. None of his men moved. The marchers continued their march. The fire fighters then got down from their trucks; some of them had taken off their helmets making it clear that they were refusing to obey; many were crying. The policemen with their dogs retreated and allowed the multitude to pass. "There I saw - says King - all the dignity and the *strength* of non-violence".

All entered the banned district. No riots were caused. A few days later negotiations were initiated in Birmingham to derogate several segregationist laws. Police violence had been condemned without appeal by the court of public opinion, and the economy of Birmingham had suffered too much for this disaster to be perpetuated.

The strategy of non-violent action which was employed in Birmingham was flawless in many aspects. Firstly, blacks lost fear of whites. Besides, the marchers showed no hatred towards the police, even when they were being led to jail: all wanted to be there! Their stay in jail - and in no place such a stay is pleasant - was for them an honour, not a punishment as the police and judges had imagined.

The protest marches were equally free from blame for the police and fire-fighters. In the face of the violence they suffered at the hands of the forces of law and order, the blacks had on their lips nothing other than songs that spoke of brotherhood and freedom. The only violence showed by the blacks during the fortnight of protest was having thrown from a building an object of plaster against the police.

If during the last march the fire fighters and later the police refused to obey the order of Connor, the reason is to be sought in the conscience of those men. It is true that they did delay in doing justice to the blacks but they ended up acting justly because the conditions in which the marchers had put them in those two weeks made that attitude possible. The blacks had acted not in the spirit of vengeance; they did not demand from the police the payment of any debt....

But it would be fallacious to imagine that non-violent action consists in forgiving. It would be overlooking the fact that the first moment is one of conflict and struggle. When Jesus found the Samaritan woman, He disobeyed social customs. When He got Himself invited to the house of Zaccheus, He scandalised the whole world. When the blacks of Birmingham invited the whites to reconciliation, this happened not before the time of struggle but during their protest marches. In a non-violent action, the adversary is not

someone one has to bow one's head to but a creator of justice and freedom in whom one has to arouse these feelings.ⁱⁱ

3. FROM THE STANCE OF INTERNAL CHAOS LEADING TO FAITH.

FRAGMENTS OF LETTERS

Carmen

It happens that while before I felt I had every right to do what I pleased, now I feel I have no right to do so and have no wish to give others trouble with my person - I mean in what refers solely to me - because if there are other elements that come into play, I could not care less about worrying others; what is more: although I know, as you do, that I am often unjust, I have come now not to care if what is at stake is suffering, the life of others and even so, I cannot help being surprised by the welcome and affection some people show me...

I need to enter with increasing urgency in their lives; I am afraid to think that everything remains in beautiful books, strong feelings, words.... I took so long to feel myself within the church and now I would like to be outside it.

Do you think it is possible to be a Christian in Europe? Yes, I know it is possible but I find it too difficult; my incoherence hurts me...

* * *

Look: I left Spain at the age of 22 on account of - as you already know - political troubles. I set out with 100 pesetas in my pocket and without the help of those who up to then had been my comrades. I got away and admittedly did things rather badly.

For some time my parents thought I was dead. In France I learnt to live in the street, jobless, without money. The first time I had to sleep in Marseilles - can I ever forget it? - alone, in an old abandoned house in the red-light district with some newspapers to serve as an overcoat... something began to break inside me. I suffered extreme cold, I could not bear it, I left the house and began to walk along those streets... pimps, prostitutes, thieves... behaved themselves well; they made me take something warm, found a place where I could eat something. I had before in Spain, for fear of the police and quite irresponsibly, slept in the street, with people of that style, begging to eat, stealing... but that for a short time as I immediately set out for France. From those people I learnt a lot and from others too who I came to know later; among other things I learnt that only a poor person knows how to give because he alone knows how to receive, and since he possesses nothing, he cannot give things, only himself. I learnt too the joy of gratuity, of sharing a new form.

For this reason, it annoys me when people say - referring to me - things like "she works with the marginalised" or "she dedicates herself to welcoming people into her house", because, apart from this not being exactly correct, I am at loggerheads to understand how among Christians there can be such a separation between the relation: life-faith...

* * *

Even as a child, I had really nothing to do with church or religion but associated myself with those of the 68s about whom you speak on occasions, people who tried looking for something up to the point of self-destruction ... some of us did break down.... Now that I have been able to recover my life with joy, I enjoy it and I enjoy those 37 years lived intensely day to day, with love and hate, but *lived* in the full sense of the word...

Do you know? I broke down, I fell to pieces; only anger, hate, desperation, I thought hell existed because I was immersed in it; I believed I had fathomed the limits of pain, but it is always possible to go further. Suddenly - gradually - I found myself pulled out literally from that black and deep well, light started to dawn.

The first priest that I knew at that time - a Franciscan monk to whom I am truly grateful - insisted on demonstrating to me my sin. If I had not been so down and out, I think I would have burst out laughing, because that man only knew a very small part of my life - the better part - and that he thought absolutely scandalous; for them, I was Mary Magdalene and I do not know how many Confessions of St. Augustine they gave me as a present... but broken down though I was, I could not reject my whole life; there was beauty in the midst of sorrow, friends with whom I had shared so much: fear, laughter, hunger... love, struggle and hope. I saw, which left me scared, all the suffering I had provoked, all the violence that I had been capable of letting loose.

Now, with life recovered from another place, everything seems to fit and I can smile again, but believe me, those were hard years groping to find a little light...

I was fed up of being hard hit by life; I was afraid of my pride; I had not received any religious education; I had only (?) my experience of feeling myself saved, called to be; and when I say new, I really mean new - the mass, etc. etc. etc. ... I even needed to ask how to pray!...

* * *

One thing worried me night and day: there was so much sorrow in the world, so much suffering...

A crucified man stood raised in front of me. That crucified man tore me to pieces, that cross, that man hanging from the wood amid the world, so many men, so many women, so many children... so much pain, so much injustice...

I could be wrong, it was absurd to believe in the gospel so literally; by chance, my first book on Theology fell into my hands (...); Jesus fascinated me, He really hit me, filled me with joy, I cried and jumped with joy, it was true, there was another way to try.

I look at the world and see such great sorrow, such enormous injustice... and, nevertheless, for some time now, there is something within me like a small light that always remains. In moments when I see nothing, understand nothing and am just one atrocious suffering that

at times I wish I were not alive, well, even in that situation that little light is there, and something pushes me ahead I know not where.

One thing I have learnt, and that has been to trust fully in what you term the weak strength of love and that no one should expect - however much one desires it - big and spectacular changes. One must keep on discovering in the midst of so much suffering signs of hope that are there for the person who throws himself wholeheartedly in the search and construction of a more just world. And it appears to me that only there, in the midst of life, those signs appear...

* * *

But how can it not be possible to be a Christian here, to show solidarity here, *to be a person* here? Is it not necessary perhaps to reply to so much suffering from here itself, from where people create, draw profit and live at the cost of that suffering? It will be so, as you tell me, by asking forgiveness and thanking the existence of all those brothers who die each day and in truth sustain our life. But not only that: I am thoroughly ashamed before so much suffering of those around me.

For this reason I look for someone who will help me not to take things lying down, someone who will help me not to forget so much suffering, so much injustice, just in case I am so deaf that I do not hear, so blind that I do not see... but is it possible not to hear, not to see? Is it perhaps possible to forget...?

* * *

I too owe a lot to the people of this church where I have found what has given meaning to my life, and I tell you that those who by just thinking of them sustain me in my worst moments are within the church. I suppose that all this carries a lot of weight in my life. Keep in mind that I had never been a Christian before and that my first experience was the Gospel: now I know that this has been possible, thanks to the church. I mean to say by this that I have never felt as something very personal the question of the Pope and the hierarchy or that they are more church than the rest. For me there is one Lord and a community of brothers, although some forget it - or we forget it.

I seem to be excessively critical and decidedly the Gospel is not of the rightists which would sound blasphemous. But neither do I see the issue from the angle of the leftists (perhaps I could seem to you a little fascist) although supposedly that would be nearer reality. But to me the Gospel seems to be something else and so it makes no difference if the right wingers - whom I really do not relate to - presuppose for me not a God but an idol or devil: I am likewise critical (although it is clear in another form and with more affection and more pain) of the left-wingers.

Is the meeting with the God of Jesus not beautiful in the highest degree? Does it not have something new to say? Is not this meeting the only source for the following of Him? Is not everything given integrated in Jesus?

Does there not exist a Christian prayer that needs not be Buddhist or Zen...? And this really signifies no disrespect towards others; on the contrary. This said, however, does not the Christian have something specific to say, a life to live, a new life, received continuously?

4. FROM THE STANCE OF OPPRESSION IN THE THIRD WORLD.

MY CONSCIENCE WAS BORN THIS WAY

Rigoberta Menchúⁱⁱⁱ

THE CHALICE

Then they called me. The food they gave me was a few beans with some very dry "tortillas". They had a dog at home. A very fat, beautiful white dog. I saw the servant giving food to the dog - chunks of meat, rice, things that decent people eat. And what was I given: a few beans and some very dry tortillas. It hurt me very, very, very much to see that the dog ate very well and that I did not deserve the food the dog did...

Right from the start, they tied my hands behind, and they propelled me forward roughly pushing my bottoms. My brother fell and wasn't able to protect his face. Immediately the face of my little brother started bleeding. They took him through the mountains where there were stones and tree trunks. He walked some two kilometres by force of pushes and blows. When they finally abandoned him, his appearance was no longer that of a person. His face was completely disfigured on account of the blows, the stones and the tree trunks. My brother was totally undone. He had been subjected to terrible tortures and blows to force him to tell them where the guerrillas were. They immediately accused the Bible as a subversive element and accused priests and nuns as guerrillas. My brother was lying with many corpses in the hole where he could not stand the stench of all the dead. Many people there had been tortured. There where he was, he recognised many catechists who had also been kidnapped in other villages and who were suffering acutely as he was. My brother was more than 16 days in torture. There was also a woman. They had first raped and then tortured her. My mother immediately communicated through other means and I was able to return home. When I got back, my brother had already been three days missing. More than anything else I kept consoling my mother, because we were aware how criminal the enemies were and that we could do nothing. Since if we made a claim, we would be immediately kidnapped. She went once the first few days but they threatened that if she returned a second time, she would meet the same fate as her son. And they told my mother that her son was being tortured and this being the case, she should not worry.

We reached there. There were already many people in that place from early morning. Men, women, children. Minutes later, the army was surrounding the people who were witnessing this scene. There were tanks, jeeps, all sorts of arms.

Then my mother approached a truck to see if she could see her son. Each of the tortured had blows on their faces which made them look different. My mother kept looking for my little brother, her son that was among all of them. They put them in lines. Some were half-dead or almost agonising and others appeared very well. In the case of my little brother, he had been tortured a lot and could hardly stand. All the tortured had some things in common: they had no nails, parts of the soles of their feet had been cut off and they were barefooted.

I don't know but every time I relate this story, I cannot hold back my tears because it is something I cannot forget and neither is it easy for me to relate this. My mother was crying. She kept looking at her son. My little brother hardly recognised us. Or perhaps... My mother says he did give her a smile, but I did not see it. They were like monsters, fat, all of them fat, inflated, wounded. And I saw when I approached them more closely, that their clothes were stiff, stiff with the water that was coming out of their bodies.

In the case of my brother, he was cut in different parts of his body. They had shaved his head and you could see cuts in his head. He had no nails. There were no soles on his feet. The first wounded were letting out water from the infection their bodies had contracted. And there was the case of the woman companion who I happened to recognise. She was from a neighbouring village. They had cut off her genitals. The tip of one of her breasts was missing and the other breast was cut off. She showed teeth marks of bites in different parts of her body. This woman companion was bitten all over. She had no ears. Everyone had part of their tongue missing or had their tongues cut in different places. I could not concentrate when I saw what was happening. Being human beings, what pain those bodies must have suffered to reach such an unrecognisable state. The whole town cried, including the children. I kept watching the children.

And the captain said that this was not the last of the punishments, there was one more to be carried out. And this was what they had done to all the subversive people they had caught. They put them to death by blows. And that if this did not teach them anything, then we would have to live through all of this. He said that we native Indians allowed ourselves to be handled by the communists, that since nobody had told us anything we Indians went with the communists. At the same time the captain wanted to convince the town but he did not treat it well in his discourse. Then they put them in ranks and doused them with petrol. The army was ordered to set fire to each one of them. Many shouted for help. They seemed to be half dead when they were placed there but as their bodies began to burn, they began to shout for help.

When the fire was over, when nobody knew what to do, at times one was frightened to see the burnt tortured bodies, at times one was encouraged to go ahead. My mother almost died on account of so much sorrow. She embraced her son, talked to him though dead and tortured. She kissed him burnt though he was. I kept on saying to mama: Come, let's go home. We could not bear to see... We could not carry on seeing the dead. Due not to cowardice but to anger. It was something unbearable. Then everybody promised to give a Christian burial to all those tortured and burnt...

My mother was kidnapped and in the first days after her kidnapping she was raped by the top military commanding officers of the town. And I would like to make it known beforehand that I have proofs in hand of all the rapes and tortures my mother was submitted to. I do not wish to clarify many things because that would involve the life of companions who still work very well at their jobs. My mother was raped by her kidnapers. After that, they took her down to the camp called Chajup that means below the ravine. Later, my mother was savagely tortured. From the first day they shaved her, dressed her in uniform, and asked her that if she was a guerrilla, why she did not fight them there. And my mother said nothing. They asked my mother with blows to tell them where we were. And if she declared that, they would set her free. But my mother knew very well that they said that to torture her other children and that they would never set her free. My

mother gave no declaration. She defended to the last each one of her children. And, on her third day of torture, they cut off her ears. They cut her whole body, part by part. They began with small tortures, with small blows to end up with the biggest blows. The first wounds she received from torture got infected. Unfortunately, she had to go through all the pains that her son had suffered too. They tortured her constantly. They denied her food for many days. My mother totally disfigured with the pains, the tortures she suffered all over her body, with no food, began to lose consciousness, began to be in agony. They left her like this for a long time and she was in agony. For me it was painful to accept that my mother was being tortured and that she knew nothing about the rest of her family. None of us went near her. Much less my brothers. I was able to contact one of my brothers and he told me that I should not expose my life. Whatever happened they would kill my mother as they would kill us too. Those pains we had to keep to ourselves as a testimony of them who despite never exposing themselves were made to undergo those pains. It was in this way that we had to accept that my mother had to die at any rate.

It was evident that we suffered a lot when we knew that my mother was at the height of her agony but later when she was already dead, we were not content since no human being could be content on seeing all that. However, we were satisfied because we knew that the body of my mother would not have to suffer any longer, because she had passed through all her pains and what was left for us to desire was that they killed her quickly, that she should no longer be alive.

FAITH

I began to travel from one side to the other. Consulting all things. And one of the things was not so much to reject, because the priests had also done much for us. It was not to devalue the good that they also taught us, but there were many things that they taught in order to make us feel comfortable, to soothe us as a people. For example, religion told us that to kill was a sin. However, they were killing us. And they used to tell us that God was there above and that God had a kingdom for His poor. This confused me because I was a catechist since my childhood. At that time I had already many ideas in my head...

We began to study the Bible as a main document. The Bible has many relations like the ones we have with our ancestors and with ancestors who lived a life very similar to our own. The important thing was that we began to integrate that reality into our own. This is how we began to study the Bible. It is not something to memorise, nor something to talk about or to pray and nothing else. Putting aside the image we had as Catholics or Christians that God is there above and that God has a big kingdom for us the poor; we were not thinking of our reality as a reality we were serving. This was the situation when we began to study the main texts. We took the case of the "Exodus", that is something we had studied; we analysed it. It is about the life of Moses who tried to deliver his people from oppression, he tried to do all he could to obtain the liberation of his people. We compared the Moses of those times with the "Moseses" of now who are ourselves. It is about the life of a man, the life of Moses.

We discovered that God did not agree to the suffering we were going through; that this was not the destiny that God had given us, but it was the men themselves of the world that had given us this destination of suffering, of poverty, of misery, of discrimination. We even

drew ideas from the Bible to perfect our popular weapons; that was the only solution that we were left with. I am Christian and participate in the struggle as a Christian. For me, as a Christian, there is one thing. It is the life of Christ. A life that involved a process in which Christ was humble. He was born in a small ranch, as history narrates. He was persecuted but, nevertheless, chose to form a small group so that His seed would not disappear. They were His disciples, His apostles.

The duty of a Christian is to think how to bring about the existence of the kingdom of God on earth with our brothers. The kingdom will exist only when all of us have sufficient to eat. When our children, our brothers and sisters, our parents do not have to die of hunger and malnutrition.

It is true, many priests call themselves Christians, yet defend their small interests. So as not to hurt those small interests, they isolate themselves from the people. So much the better for us, because we know that we do not need a king who resides in a palace but we need a brother who lives with us. We believe that there is a God but that God is father of all and at the same time does not agree to any one of His children dying or being unhappy or not having a single joy. We began to use the Bible and study it in accordance with our reality because we found in it a document that guided us.

Ever since what took place in the Embassy of Spain the Christian revolutionaries decided to form an organisation and name it after my father^{iv}: it was called *Cristianos Revolucionarios "Vicente Menchú"*. The Christians took the name of my father as a national hero of the Christians who, despite his tough experiences, never lost his faith. He never mixed up what was heaven with what was earth. He opted to fight for a people, a people who needed from the perspective of their faith to denounce all the secrets of risks and exploitation. He fought against that as a Christian.

Then I opted in favour of my Christian reflection, in favour of *Cristianos Revolucionarios "Vicente Menchú"*. It was not because it carried the name of my father, but because it was the task that corresponded to me as a Christian, to work with the masses. My task was the Christian formation of the Christian companions that because of their faith are in the organisation. It is a little bit what I had narrated before, that I was a Catechist. Then my work was the same as that of being a Catechist, the only difference being that I am a Catechist who walks with her feet on the ground and not a Catechist who thinks of the kingdom of God only after death. And this is how I am, with all my experience, with all I have seen, with the very many pains and sufferings I have gone through, I have learnt to know what is the role of a Christian on earth. Reflecting on the Bible, we have reached big conclusions with our companions. We found that the Bible had been used as a means to make people comfortable and not to carry light to the poor people. The work of revolutionary Christians is, more than anything else, the condemnation, the denunciation of injustices that are committed against people. The movement is not clandestine. It is secret because we are masses of people and we cannot hide ourselves completely.

THE PRICES

In Mexico I met some people who had helped us before from Europe when my parents had been living. We met the same people. They offered us help for us to come and live in Europe. They told us that it was not possible for a human being to bear so much. And

those good-hearted people told us that we should go there. There they would give us a house, all we needed. There would even be the opportunity for my little sisters to study. I could not decide for my sisters, since I considered that they were women capable of having an opinion and of deciding for themselves about their lives. Then they spoke to my sisters and immediately they rejected the proposal. They said that if they wished to help us, they should send the help not for ourselves but for all the orphans that were left. Then those good people did not understand why in spite of everything that had happened to us, we still wanted to live in Guatemala. Despite all the risks we had to face.

Then when I began with my revolutionary experience, I had to decide between two things: the struggle or my boyfriend. I debated a lot in my mind because I loved my companion and saw the sacrifices he was making for me. I was between two things: either him or opt in favour of the fight for my people. I decided on the latter and, well, I had to abandon with pain and feeling my boyfriend whom I told I had much to do for my people and that I did not need a beautiful house when my people were living in horrible conditions such as those I was born and grew up in. And at this point I went one way and he the other.

At that time I could not feel happy looking for a companion and giving myself up to him when many of the people forgetting their personal joy were not having even a moment of rest. This gave me much food for thought. I am human and a woman and it is not that I reject matrimony but my principal task, I think, should be first my people and then my personal joy. It can be said that many companions have dedicated themselves to the struggle, regardless of limits and oblivious of their personal joy. I have known many friends in the struggle who respect me as I am, as the woman I am. Companions who have bitter moments, tribulations and worries and, nevertheless, are in the struggle and forge ahead. And it could be said that I perhaps renounce this because of the hard experience I have had of seeing so many friends fall in the fight. This makes me not just afraid but even panicky because I do not wish to be a widow neither have I any desire to be a tortured mother.

THE FIGHT

My task is more than anything else transporting papers to the interior or within the city and organising the people, practising with them our faith in the light of the Gospel. I do not own my life as I have decided to offer it to a cause. They can kill me at any moment but it should be in a task where I know that my blood will not be something in vain but another example for my companions. The world in which I live is so criminal, so bloodthirsty that at any moment they could take my life away. For this reason the only alternative I have left is the fight, violence of the just type, this is what I have learnt in the Bible. This is what I tried to make a Marxist woman companion of mine see who asked me how I, as a Christian, could think of carrying out a revolution. I told her that the full truth was not in the Bible but neither in Marxism was the full truth.

I know that nobody can ever take away from me my Christian faith. Neither the regime, nor fear, nor weapons. And this is what I have to teach my people too: that together we can make the popular Church, what is truly the church, not as a hierarchy or a building, but as a change for us as people.^v

5. FROM THE STANCE OF AIDS

TESTIMONY OF ONE AFFECTED WITH AIDS

Joan Ferrer i Sisquella^{vi}

I wish we could all live together these words, these minutes, as brothers gathered around the table of the Father. And then one of the brothers, as when one is among friends, speaks to you of his things, of what he is going through and how he is going through these.

AN INTERNAL SHAKE-UP

I am Joan and one *fine day* (I think one can say a fine day because what happened that day and the days following has been very fine), well, that fine day I began to feel bad. Very high fevers and a whole range of anomalies that caused me to be admitted to hospital. After several days in there and after many tests, the doctors confirmed what I feared. I learnt that I had Aids.

This, as you can imagine, provoked in me a very powerful and important *internal shake-up*. I think that when you know a thing like this, it is as if you were dying. Your life - at least the life you have been leading up to this moment - has ended and, for all matters, a new life begins, with new horizons and scales of completely different values. Possibly this new life could be shorter or longer, better or worse, but it would be a new life.

A PRECIOUS MEETING

This internal shake-up that I have been speaking to you about, drew me to make, among other things, a *precious meeting* with religion, with the Church. I think I cannot speak of a meeting with God because I had always felt God near. By my side, within me; I do not know, but near. However, I had drawn myself away from religion, from religious practice. Perhaps it was because I thought there was no place for me within the Church due to my personal circumstances or because I felt I was not understood. What is certain is I turned my back on religion. But God, it appears, wanted me to turn round again to face Him and He touched me gently on the shoulder with His finger. Clearly, since God is so big, by just moving a finger He can do you much, much harm. But it should remain clear too that if you listen to Him, if you are attentive to what He wishes to say, if you speak to Him and ask Him what He wants of you with all this that is happening to you, you will surely find that He can also do you much, much good. On the other hand, it would be very difficult to imagine a Father who loves you as He does and who gratuitously does harm to one of his children.

Very slowly I learnt that I could use my situation, my illness, as a *working instrument*, of growth and that curiously I could attain happiness, even greater happiness than before.

LISTENING TO ONE'S OWN INTERIOR ONE CAN GROW

It is this precisely that I want to make quite clear and to tell you that if there is someone in the same or a similar situation as myself (there are so many illnesses that place you so close to death that it would seem you could touch it by just stretching out an arm!), well, whoever is going through something like this or who has a dear one in these circumstances, he should bear in mind that *listening to one's interior*, looking for what God wants to say, one can realise that *one can grow*, one can mature extraordinarily.

We should especially not fall into the *temptation* of saying: if God exists, if God is good, if God loves me, why does He permit these things?

I will tell you by way of an example:

It is as if we were going on an excursion and the bigger, and perhaps more experienced, companion goes ahead of the group and climbing, clinging on to the rocks, gets into a narrow pass that seems almost impossible to reach to those that are following him. He too thinks he will not make it. He tries, he looks for a place where he can put his foot on, he makes sure with his hands, and, suddenly, he turns round and says to the rest: "Come on, climb up because it is possible, yes, it is possible!"

I can only tell you this: it is possible, I have been able, IT IS POSSIBLE!

DEATH, ONE STEP TOWARDS THE FATHER

When I was able to overcome all those initial problems (certainly not few), and I began feeling well, I started to check out this new life. I saw that death no longer inspired so much fear or respect. It became evident to me that it was a *step towards the Father* and this could only be an outburst of happiness. But I also realised that I still remained very afraid (perhaps because I already knew what it was) of being sick, of being in hospitals, of being down and out physically, of feeling alone. When you suffer, you always feel very alone... You get the feeling that those around you are somehow unable to reach you, as though there was a glass wall between you and them. It seems to you that nobody understands what you feel. Perhaps on account of this, communication with God in these moments comes so well and easily.

It is when you discover that physical and moral suffering still frightens you that you become conscious of those that suffer near you. Especially those who, besides being sick, are marginalised. I have lots of friends; people around me who love me, who I know will never abandon me. Many of the marginalised, especially those that come from the world of drugs, have lost ties completely with their families, even with their mothers.

Let us try to be attentive and alive and *not turn our shoulders on these brothers*. They are having a very important experience of God, perhaps without their realising it, but it is so, and they give us especially an opportunity to listen to them, to listen to their lives which is the voice of Christ. And listening to what they say, we too will be able to make our own experience of God. I know that at times this is difficult. Since a person even without necessarily having a terrible appearance, if only he does not follow our current trends of dressing and speaking, puts us on our guard.

OVERCOMING FALSE FEARS AND PREVENTION MEASURES

Look, I would like to explain to you something that happened to me a few days ago. It is something that *makes me quite ashamed to explain*, but as we are among friends...

I was walking to work one morning and while I was waiting to cross the road, I noticed a blind man next to me. His appearance was quite unpleasant: unshaven, badly dressed, quite dirty, he was talking to himself and making strange signs. I thought to myself: perhaps the man wants to cross and cannot; you should help him. But then I thought: he doesn't seem to be all right in the head or maybe he is drunk. If you say something to him, he might stick to you and you may not be able to shrug him off. While I was thinking all this, an old woman (one of those small thin old women who appear to be incapable of doing anything but later show you that they can do almost everything), asked him if he wanted to cross the road, the man said yes, that he had just got out of the underground, that he had lost his bearings, and that he didn't know where he was.

The old woman explained to him where he was, caught him by the arm and crossed the road. They passed by the side of me, talking quite naturally. The man had nothing wrong in his head, neither was he drunk. I felt ashamed of myself. Nobody had noticed what had happened. The people around me moved about, up and down, without seeing me. But the gaze of God that I felt focussed on me filled me with shame.

In the morning after waking, I sat down to chat a little with the Father and I asked Him: "Lord, help me to bring joy to those around me, do not ever permit me to sadden anyone of those who approach me, help me to convey your Love to all..." And I set out in the street. Christ approaches me and I move aside because I decide that he must be drunk. You would never wish to feel the shame that I felt within me for hours and days on end.

Fortunately, over and above my shame and faults, I found *the love of the Father* who knows so well our weaknesses, our miseries, our littleness. This Father who loves us so much and who consequently always forgives us.

LET US MAKE THE LOVE OF THE FATHER REACH ALL

When within a few moments we will have the good fortune *to receive the body of Christ*, that is to say, all the Love, let us try to do it with the full awareness of being loved, of being forgiven. Those are very special moments, will you remember that? When the tabernacle door opens and a brighter light appears, Love is made palpable and can be raised with one's hands. Let us collect what of the Love we can, but... let us not be greedy. *Let us make it reach all.*

Let us act as in that beautiful miracle of the *loaves of bread and fish*. I have always thought that this miracle was the fruit of generosity. If Jesus and His disciples had kept those few loaves of bread and fish to themselves, probably they would not have been able to satisfy their hunger or tiredness. But Jesus, with that simplicity and sweetness, with that discretion with which He worked the big miracles, made everybody sit down on the grass,

took those things, gave thanks to the Father and began to serve round.. and there was sufficient for everybody. For that whole crowd that followed Him. And with what was left over, they were still able to fill many baskets.

Let us act in the same way today. When we set out in the squares and streets of the world, as the song says, *let us make this LOVE reach all*: friends, acquaintances, family members, those we love most, those that love us most. But above all, let us make it reach those who we do not love, and those nobody has ever loved, those who naturally do not love us. These are those who need love most, those who would appreciate it most, those who will return us most love. And for the love that they will return to us, I assure you, we will not find sufficient baskets to hold it.

*And all this ... all,
as all that exists,
as all we live,
from the smallest and most marvellous ant, to the most terrible and sophisticated of
wars,
from the smallest flower to the most cruel of illnesses, all...
all will be for the glory of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.*

6. FROM THE STANCE OF "THE ROOFLESS"

LIFE AND DEATH IN THE STREET

ARRELS (Barcelona)

Arrels is one of the service groups of the Foundation St. Pere Claver. It offers a personalised accompaniment of people in the situation of "Roofless", understanding by this term, not just the lack of a physical roof, but also the lack of other types of roof: de-structuring in different degrees, lack of personal ties, social and labour deficiencies, lack of physical health, etc. These people keep on increasing from day to day the size of the "Fourth World" in our city.

Accompaniment consists in stimulating the personal motivation for recovery and the subsequent process leading up to the attainment of a level of equilibrium, different in each case. However accompaniment may be reduced to other processes in which some roofless will only accept the contact that has been offered to them and in such cases nothing else appears feasible.

This work is carried out basically with the participation of volunteer workers who have the double function of contact and direct attention with those that have been welcomed in. Since its beginning in 1987, Arrels has been widening its activities and currently it works in four spheres: An open centre, Refuge, Work in the Street and Work in Hospitals.

AN EXPERIENCE OF VOLUNTEER WORK

Josep M^a Agustí

The population of people we call "Roofless" is very varied in age, health, nationality and mental deterioration. From *Arrels* it is impossible to reach all even if we were to reduce to a single pattern lives that differ so greatly from each other. But if we limit ourselves to what the population usually is whom we help from *Arrels* in a more natural way, we can indeed indicate different stages or situations in which the people we visit find themselves. However, we will not reflect in these lines on the social or political causes nor on the lack of resources that these people who live in the street suffer from.

When we approach for the first time somebody whose case history we do not know, it is very possible that this person will not admit the state of rupture and abandonment that he finds himself in. He will say that he is waiting for a friend, who owns one or two flats but who is having a few problems with the inheritance, or that he is on the streets only for a few days since he does not wish to waste the little that he has earned working to pay for a bed. Probably the truth is quite different but we have to respect this **stage of negation**, when he still does not have the strength to recognise and accept the situation of him being on the street. Without further investigation, we must try to get home to him the message that when he is ready and wishes to let us know, we are there to help him and we will not

be afraid nor will we run away, but we will appreciate him all the same and will stand by his side.

Surprisingly at times we are received with ill-humour and anger by some homeless who criticise us for doing this work since they suppose that thanks to them those who visit them receive a good salary and so they tell us to leave them alone... We have sometimes to try to put ourselves in their place: how unjust and exasperating they must regard the situation of loneliness and rejection they find themselves in. It is normal that they be angry and show their irritation against those that have power, against the others, against God, against themselves. This reaction is called the **stage of fury, of anger**. Before this outburst of disgust and resentment, it is logical that the volunteer thinks that he should forever keep away. But it is worth the trouble to try another day. One must understand that behind these insults there is nothing personal; it is only a manifestation of the surprise they feel in their interior. There is always the risk of overlooking a homeless man or woman of this nature, and it is very probable that this person is precisely the one who is lonelier than all we have ever met. Probably these volunteers are the only people that he or she can complain to.

Sometimes this phase of anger, of fury and rejection of everything ends up in a sort of **stage of pact**. We will come to see you but at the time you wish. We will not give you money, but we will bring you the tobacco you like. If you come to the Open Centre we will take a taxi and you will not be forced to have a shower.

A phase through which all have passed, however hardened life in the street has made them, is the phase of depression. Although many do not show it, they are invaded by a feeling of failure. They know that they have not responded to many hopes - their own, those of their parents, perhaps those of their children - and now they have lost everything, now nobody expects anything of them. They do not count for anything. When they cease to exist, everything would go on as if nothing had happened, nobody would remember them and none would miss them. It is a long way of sadness, it is an experience of death, it is what we call the **stage of depression**. Probably the need to anaesthetise this pain, to choke it off in the unconscious would explain their taking refuge in alcoholism in the case of almost the totality of the excluded people of society. It is clear that the action of the volunteer cannot be reduced to taking him a sandwich or a blanket, or even finding a bed for him in a hostel. These deep wounds need much time to heal. At times it is more a question of giving silent but frequent company than much advice. Naturally all accompaniment in "emergencies" and all help to recover "roles" would indicate that we still believe in him, that we still have hope in him. If at any time for some inexplicable reason his wounds get healed and he believes once again in the possibility of his life, it would seem to us that we are witnessing a miracle since that man or that woman is capable of rising and walking firmly and of allowing himself to be helped.

But perhaps the majority of people that have been living on the street for years have reached a **stage of acceptance**. They complain, they lament, but apparently live resigned to their fate. It is not easy for them to accept other proposals: to go to a Refuge, or to re-do their documents so as to hold a right to receiving some payment, to gain access to a pension. Frequently there are frustrated experiences in some Social Centre or perhaps in some Public Shelters that weigh negatively in their minds. One has to understand the reasons behind these reactions, and how this is largely an attitude of defence. Perhaps the

only possibility we have is that of maintaining the relationship, of strengthening sincere appreciation and friendship. After some time they will see that they do not need to defend themselves from people who they have come to like speaking to since they have not come to seek or to demand anything from them. Perhaps when their health fails, they will accept being taken care of in a hospital. And if their health recovers, they will no longer feel like going back to the bad weather of the street.

Of all those we have known over the last three and a half years, more than 20 have already died. Some in the night Refuge, others in Hospital del Mar or in Hospital Clínico, three in the same street where they lived. Others have disappeared without leaving a trace behind. But the part of the road we have taken with them has shown us that the stages they encountered in their lives are the stages preceding death: *negation, anger, pact, depression, acceptance*. One is tempted to say that the life lived by people on the streets is a good teaching, a long preparation for death. The street volunteer should be grateful for this apprenticeship and with humility be capable of offering them the possibility of recovering life. Perhaps this is the deepest mystery we have approached, that which Paul went through when he wrote to his Corinthian friends:

"Because we, yet in life, are led to death for the cause of Jesus. So death acts in us and life, in you".

THEY CALLED AT THE DOOR...

These are the personal experiences of people who one day called at the door of Arrels. They have today taken the opportunity of writing in Arrels Informa, to express publicly what they harbour inside.

Living together meeting place with oneself

My name is Arturo. I am 70 years old and approximately 20 years ago, on account of family problems and character defects, I lost my job, family and income. To forget all these sorrows I indulged in drinking without moderation that led me to moral, physical and psychological ruin.

Why did a person with education, culture, work, family and absolutely everything in this life, end up eating the leftovers from garbage cans in the square of Cataluña, sleeping on the stairs of Underground stations, on the benches of the square of Cataluña, Goya, Universidad, Castilla, etc.etc. dirty, unshaven, stinking, etc.? But always with a carton of wine or a bottle of Magno brandy in my hand trying to escape from all the terrible things I had done (or so I had imagined).

One day, some years ago, a companion of our drinking sessions told me that he knew of a centre called *Centre Obert Arrels*. There indeed I found not only water to have a shower and clean clothes but also people who with their kindness, understanding and love restored my faith and self-confidence which helped me to re-discover myself. It was not easy to accept, understand and assimilate this. This Centre gave this not only to me but to many other street companions too: a place called a *refuge* where there was food for lunch and dinner and also a roof under which to sleep, a hall to chat and even to quarrel, all of which furnished us what is most important in life: *living together*.

Today, totally recovered and happy, I try by all means to live happy and to be once again what I was always, *Arthur* without rancour, without envies, and above all, *without alcohol*.

I am very thankful to all the people of *Centre Arrels*, *Foundation Sant Pere Claver*, who disinterestedly and led only by the heart, by good feelings, humanity, faith in God and the desire to get the poor, marginalised, and sick not feel all alone, have got us, moreover, to feel true human beings who should live and be as happy as possible and the day we die, be buried happily.

I repeat, thanks to all and one favour: carry on developing this immense task for all the children of God.

Arturo

Happy meeting

A sketch of the life of an ex-alcoholic

I write this small sketch of my hazardous life, in the hope that those who read it, may see the causes and the motives for which I fell into the precipice of addiction to drink.

My name is Pablo and I was born in a city of Murcia called Cartagena, the son of a working class and Catholic family. On account of my age - I am 64 - the Spanish Civil War broke out when I was a kid.

My mother was a widow and without any sort of income, my studies were little since schools were closed during the war. After the war, we suffered a lot: misery, hunger, lack of support... My mother, in order to feed me, got me admitted into a juvenile court.

When I grew up into a man I came to Barcelona. Here I got to know a wayside girl and we married. I worked as a waiter, an errand boy, a shoe-black and I carried bags to the station. I did whatever I could to eat. Those were difficult years. My wife died and I remained alone, with no family or children. Desperate and depressed, I turned to drink, to physical and human degradation. I slept on benches in the squares, in the Underground, in gardens, in all imaginable places.

I turned to begging, pestered good-hearted people for alms. Until one fine day two nuns came up to me and persuasively asked me if I wanted to accompany them to a Centre where I could have a shower and receive clean clothes and food. To tell the truth, I was a little drunk but I went with them and they took me to the place where they gave me a shower, new clothes and food; then, they found me a hostel where I could sleep and they fixed the papers for my documentation. All this occurred on the 12th of October 1989. Since that meeting, a happy and marvellous day for me, I swore I would give up drinking forever. And today as I write these personal experiences, I give thanks to those good religious nuns and to all the staff of this Centre who with their tenacity and help have made my integration in society possible.

I give thanks to all the volunteers of *Centre Obert Arrels* and *Fundación Sant Pere Claver*, thanking them and wishing them long life and health in their daily duties for the welfare of the needy and afflicted.

Thanks for reading me, gentle readers.

Pablo Sánchez Bueno^{vii}

They evangelise us too

I feel that from the time I have been working there, I have come to know better the God I believed in before. I began to work led by a moralist feeling, a feeling that I was better, because it seemed to me that God was asking this of me and that it was "an obligation" (something like going for Mass). My mother and I had to bear not only a certain "repulsion" but also criticism from acquaintances: some called you a bloody fool or a frustrated person, or a communist ... or even started moralising saying that it was our obligation to dedicate more time to the family... At the beginning it was not easy. Till one day, during Sunday Mass, the gospel was read of how the Pharisees accused Jesus of casting out devils by the art of Belcebu; and Jesus replied: "If I cast out the devils in the name of God, it is a sign that the Kingdom of God has arrived". Those words that I had already known changed my way of seeing things. From that time onwards I seem to know God better because although He is incomprehensible, I can feel tangibly something of His Kingdom that is a reflection of Him. Mass has now become less boring to me since I look at it from the hidden and eternal angle of what is happening in Centro Arrels. And I consider the work in the receiving centre as a celebration of the Eucharist in the middle of the street.

A volunteer

7. FROM THE STANCE OF THE DAILY OBSCURITY OF A FAMILY MOTHER

TO TRUST DESPITE EVERYTHING. A HAPPY LIFE

Felisa

My name is Felisa. I was born in a small mining centre in the province of Huelva. I am 58 years old and have been a widow for the last 4 years. I have three children (two boys and a girl) aged 33, 31 and 29 respectively. When thinking back on my life, I have to differentiate two parts: the first, from the time I can remember up to the time my children reached adolescence; the second, the rest up to today.

The first stage of my life was wonderful, I was a happy little girl and young lady. I had wonderful parents and despite living in the post-war period, I did not lack anything necessary, thanks be to God, since my father was a mine technician, he always had work and I had the opportunity of receiving an education that was quite acceptable for the time and place we lived.

At 19 I came to know the person who would later be my husband and I lived happily with him, with the typical family problems. When the two sons were born, seeing that in that place there was no future for them, since the mine was drawing to an end, advised by my parents, we decided to come to Barcelona and I have been living here since the end of 1962 till today.

Of the three children I have, with the elder boy and the girl I have had nothing serious to grieve about, but with the second boy I have had no end of problems.

This second son was the naughtiest of the three; he fractured his arm, leg, etc., but these things are normal with children; however, when he started approaching adolescence, we noted his behaviour towards us, his studies, friends, etc were no longer the same, and that was when our worries started.

It was a nasty surprise when we discovered he had succumbed to the world of drugs. That was the year 1979 and at that time we had no information or places to go to obtain the same, so the problem got bigger everyday. From early 1979 to May 82 - when I succeeded in getting him admitted into a rehabilitation centre of *El Patriarca* (it was the only thing I could find and had to pay a monthly fee of Ptas. 35,000) - we kept going in and out of hospitals, police stations (consumption of drugs was a crime then) Generalitat, Social Assistance centres, etc.

In *El Patriarca* he was three years between Belgium, France and Spain. When he returned rehabilitated, he was accompanied by his sentimental companion. Although they were not married, we accepted them in our house; the following month he was called to do Military Service which he had not done at the required age on account of the drug problem (while he was being rehabilitated, I had to go to the Recruit Office every month with a medical

certificate), and his companion remained in our house as one more member of the family, none of us knowing how she would behave; we managed to live as best as possible.

Meanwhile, the eldest of my children got married and when his first daughter arrived we suffered a hard blow: she died a few hours after birth; later he had two healthy and happy daughters, thanks be to God.

When my second son returned from military service, we looked out for a flat for the couple; they got married and went to live independently. Fortunately my son had maintained his job (with sick leave) and was reincorporated, working in the same place (the old M.T.M.) till today. Two years after the marriage, they had twins. One of the boys, just 14 days old, suffered a serious stroke of meningitis which left him blind and with cerebral paralysis.

A few months before the twins were born, we learnt that my husband had lung cancer and was given 12 months of life; this cancer was confirmed just one month before the daughter was married. My husband did not wish to admit what he had and so had to live an apparently normal life, showing during the preparations and later at the wedding a joy that I could not feel within me: too many things had coincided over a period of time and if my faith in God and in His infinite goodness had not accompanied me, I would not have been able to bear all this with the fortitude with which I did.

My husband died in February 1990 and that same summer the blindness of my grandson Victor was confirmed.

In November of that 1990, the mother of the twins abandoned the family home and my son was left with the two 14-month old boys one of whom, Victor, was blind. I, a widow now and living close to my son, looked after the house and its chores, and have been doing so for the last three years.

Despite all I have said, I am happy. I feel good inside. When night falls I realise how tired I am but the next day I begin with fresh enthusiasm. I firmly believe that I am being helped by Someone superior to me; I alone would not be able to manage everything.

So, when recalling my life, I see that my faith, instead of crumbling down, is maturing. I have always been a believer, attending Catechism classes in my youth, going often to Mass... but I had not valued my faith as now. My daily life is centred on offering to God everything I do, household chores, sufferings, joy, prayers... and when I ask God for help, I do so with complete trust that as Father He will grant me all that is most convenient for me to be happy with Him some day.

Moreover, this faith needs food. I find it in the gospels, the Revision-of-life group (with whom I meet periodically), Catechesis (I am a Catechism teacher in the parish), the Eucharist and *in the dedication of myself to others*, since all that I can offer to my brothers is a gift that *I have received from my Father*, in a gratuitous way; I must place it at the service of those who need it.

Some ask me how I feel so well after all that I have been through. I see it quite clearly: I find my strength in that nourished faith, whose centre is the Eucharist, the motor of my

life. I believe that a true Christian is never alone and if he firmly believes that by serving others he pleases God most, he has to feel the happiness that I feel. I always think: there can be no better help since if they close me a door, He is there to open me a window.

So I feel full of life and am happy and content, with an immense desire to do new things every day.

NOTES

¹ Taken from AA.VV, *The poor evangelise us*, Ed. Nueva Utopía, Madrid 1992, pg. 239-241

¹ Taken from François VAILLANT, *La no violencia en el evangelio*, pp. 84-92. Ed. Sal Terrae 1993.

¹ Rigoberta's father died during the sit-in of the peasants in the Spanish Embassy of Guatemala in 1980.

¹ Taken from E. BURGOS, *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú, y así me nació la conciencia*, pg 118-259 (extracts). Editorial Seix Barral, 1992. Subtitles of *Cristianisme i Justícia*.

¹ *This Chapter 7, up to this point, is taken from Arrels Informa, n.25 - December 1993.*

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ⁱ Taken from AA.VV, *The poor evangelise us*, Ed. Nueva Utopía, Madrid 1992, pg. 239-241

ⁱⁱ Taken from François VAILLANT, *La no violencia en el evangelio*, pp. 84-92. Ed. Sal Terrae 1993.

^{iv} Rigoberta's father died during the sit-in of the peasants in the Spanish Embassy of Guatemala in 1980.

^v Taken from E. BURGOS, *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú, y así me nació la conciencia*, pg 118-259 (extracts). Editorial Seix Barral, 1992. Subtitles of *Cristianisme i Justícia*.

^{vi} Taken from AA.VV, *The poor evangelise us*, Ed. Nueva Utopía, Madrid 1992, pg. 239-241

^{vii} *This Chapter 7, up to this point, is taken from Arrels Informa, n.25 - December 1993.*