

Argentina - Eight years after

Argentina is a country slowly awakening from a Nightmare experience. Its people seem like a recently released high security prisoner who is coming back to life. ~~They are~~ trying to discover once again what a normal life is ^{all about}. It was one of the ~~symbolic~~ companions I found myself making after meeting old friends, and seeing the changes during my recent visit to the country.

It will not be easy as it has had so many years of anomaly between military coups and unstable governments only to look back on. But people are searching, painfully ~~and~~ but mustering hope for the long road ahead.

Externally the place particularly Buenos Aires has not changed very much. There is a new international section to the Ezeiza Airport, an incomplete new motorway system in Buenos Aires which will probably never be finished and a sparklingly new park with all types of Play Games which the military Junta built to keep up the 'Circus' for the 'plebe' when the World Cup ended in 1978.

The rest is the same except 8 years older and considerably deteriorated just as the income of the people. It is a city which has frozen in time, I went to visit

a house we had rented in the colourful 'Boca' area of the city. The Timber Building is still standing, they are people still living there but it is literally falling to pieces. ~~Now~~ The return to Democracy however seems this time to stay if one is to judge by the extensions been built on to the National Congress which seem almost a copy of the New Senate Office Building in Washington.

I found it a strange sensation to walking the Streets of Buenos Aires once again: ~~standing~~ ~~there~~ There was a time when I never did think I would see them again. Suddenly I found myself recalling so many friends and experiences which I feel I lived in Argentina before my own arrest etc. which I had pushed back into my own subconsciousness. It was good to get back. It was good to be alive.

But it was also sad. It is really when one returns that the question of the 'disappeared' slides home. The last time I was in the bus station was with Carlos and Pablo. They are 'disappeared' several years now, ~~now~~. Both are priests one was picked up by the Navy & the other by Army. The fact they are no more changes one's perception of Buenos Aires. Buenos Aires has indeed changed in these years. So many friends that made Buenos Aires a home for me in the seventies are gone - 'disappeared' by the military junta.

But one meets others who have survived the 'Nightmare'. My God, what are you doing

here' is the usual ^{first} expression. Slowly they
 begin to realize ^{that} the situation has ^{indeed} changed and
 after a short time of conversion ^{the military} years
 of the military dictatorship with its terror moves into
 the background. It was afterwards I began to realize
 that most people had pushed into their subconscious
 so many things that these type of occasions do
 really jolt people. People have become used to
 living in terror so it really traumatic to begin to
 live normally once again. It's like climbing out of the
 trenches when the war is over.

I decided to take a walk to the
 shanty town where I used work in. There I
 got the real surprise. The entire area had
 been cleared of houses and there was a
 big wire fence around the 40 odd acres where
 the shanty town used be. The place was overgrown
 with weeds and one could see some foundations.
 Even the chapel which had been built with
 so much sacrifice by the people had disappeared
 beneath the weeds. I began to feel anger
 the thousands of people who used live in
 the area had been moved out of the city and
 there was no-one around even to ask where.
 At least the Military were clear about one thing.
 Get rid of the Poor. Don't have them messing
 up Buenos Aires. In fact afterwards I discovered
 that the 30 odd shanties in B.A. had been
 evicted from B.A. - almost 1 million people
 and pushed onto the Poverty Belt some 10
 miles from the city.

One cannot help but reflect on so much illusions
and hopes, ~~and~~ which ~~one~~ shared, all gone up not
in literal smoke. The poor really don't have any
part in this type of society nor will they, it seems.
The question haunted that morning as I walked
along side the High fence 2 1/2 really our struggle
for justice, for peace, for the Gospel, a waste
of time?

When the powers to be want to it can be
quashed out just like an orange and thrown
in the rubbish bin. The only answer is
faith the 'I believe' of Abraham.

What then of the Church. What has happened
to the Church these years in Argentina? How has
it fared. I began to float the question
around in the different circles human rights
workers, Church colleagues, ^{mothers of disappeared} young people. First
of all they began to comment their experiences -
cloaks barged on them, complicity with the repression,
church property used as concentration camp in Tucumán,
military chaplains celebrating mass in these camps
to channel 'disappeared' prisoners, ~~with the exception~~
defending known torturers etc etc. Those ^{few} who dared to
defend the people harassed & controlled by the
Church itself. Those facts which are ^{real} ^{things} ^{unquestioning}

took place are indeed difficult to stomach but
then that is not the first time such a sinister
alliance between religious, political & military
powers has taken place. By this example the
~~the~~ Church in Argentina had come to alienate people

from ~~over~~ the source of hope at least as Christine
which is the faith. The worst crime any
Church leader can commit.