

Dignity

Genesis 22:1-2, 9a, 10-13, 15-18; Romans 8:31b-34; Mark 9:2-10
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Dyed-in-the-wool sociologists usually say that migrants “lose” the dignity given them by their places of origin. Back at home they are known as Mr. Smith and Mrs. Jones... but once they enter the migrant stream, their dignity disappears. First the “coyotes” treat them with no respect, then in the eyes of contractors and farmers they are just cheap hand labor. Service agencies consider them ignorant, because they don’t speak English and because they have skin of a different color. The law itself tries to turn them into felons for the crime of being undocumented...

But what is happening here isn’t so much the loss of identity as its distortion. Certain social contexts in which people live and act cloud over their true faces.

In Christian tradition we understand that Jesus lived under this bitter contradiction. The populace of his country was awaiting a politically powerful Messiah. Even Jesus’ own community of disciples saw and understood him according to that image— for it seems that only by being politically powerful could you receive your “legal documents” as a Messiah! The Gospel of Mark is very clear about this. For in it Jesus constantly insists that no publicity be given to himself or to his actions. He wants no part of the identity that they attribute to him.

In this context, the Transfiguration obliges us to be guided by the suspicion that the majority of us, in questions of faith, might be mistaken in the way we see these matters. And if this is so, then the community has to understand that Christ’s true face is not reflected in the Messiah of majesty and political might, but in the Messiah who confronts the cross. “This is my beloved Son, listen to him.” The brilliantly white clothing that speaks already of faith in the resurrection speaks also of how believers become so blinded by that light that they wish the path of commitment could be free of contradictions, and even that God could intervene in a more visibly effective way in our lives and societies.

As Bishop Oscar Romero liked to say, in his adaptation of Irenaeus: “La gloria de Dios es que los pobres vivan”— “The poor are those who, being alive, are the glory of God.” Every migrant man and woman embraces in him or herself this divinely-given dignity. Yet this “glory” doesn’t shine but is distorted constantly. Migrant believers without documents know what it means to live under suspicion...but they discover that contradiction brings you to value your own dignity more intensely and not to give it up for lost. And when there is the possibility of finding a place, a community that allows you to welcome with honesty what is happening in your person... an experience that disposes you to discover the light of the living God who battles to become embodied in you...,— then you regain your spirit and you live a transfiguration.

I have met wayfarers (migrant men and women) with the strength to live and transform this contradictory world and their own deficiencies, amazed by their own dignity and ready to honor their responsibilities, to support their families, and to proclaim their testimony of hope.