

“Tres Teresitas”

After my ordination in 1992, Bishop McGann assigned me to St. Peter of Alcantara in Port Washington. It was a wonderful first parish with a thriving school. I learned much there from the Pastor, Msgr. Simmons, the other Associate, Fr. Bill O'Rourke, the School Principal, Sr. Agnes Shaw, and the other IHM Sisters. I knew the deepest joys of priestly ministry in a faithful and generous community.

There was only one real problem for me at St. Peter's, Bishop McGann sent me to replace the priest who ministered to the large Spanish-speaking community in the parish. The Bishop gave me that task because I had good grades in Spanish class. Let me be clear, I had never actually spoken Spanish, I only knew the classroom lessons. The Bishop's strategy, it seems, was to throw me in the deep end of the pool in order to teach me to swim!

The whole idea terrified me. I was still figuring out how to be a priest and found myself responsible for the souls of Catholics with whom I could say little more than “hello” and “how are you?”

When I should have trusted, I panicked. Despite my panic, God was good to me, the Lord sent me life-guards to help me in that deep end of the pool. The community, far from being upset that their new priest sounded like a kindergartner, organized tutors. Hard working women, some with two jobs, made time to tutor me each day for months. They brought me to every meeting, invited me to their homes and prayer gatherings, they corrected and encouraged me. And by God's grace and their generous hearts, I began to truly speak and understand. Chelo and Dora, Juanita and Teresita opened my eyes and heart to another culture and perspective. And as I sat in the back of those meetings and began to understand, I found myself amazed at the life stories and abiding faith of my brothers and sisters. More than language, I learned about faith, hope, and love.

Teresita, in particular, became a lifelong friend and mentor. Child-like in size, Teresita was a giant in matters of faith. She left her war-torn country as a very young woman. Her farming family could no longer farm in the midst of the battles and she became their lifeline – working as a domestic in the US and supporting them through those brutal years. She sacrificed her own ambitions to care for her loved ones – she lived in other people's homes with no family of her own. I imagine that she must have been tempted to complain of the injustice of her fate, but if so, she never gave any indication of anything but a joyful, generous heart.

She spoke often of her love for the Teresitas for whom she had been named – Therese the Little Flower and Theresa of Calcutta. They were her “dos Teresitas.” And like them, she lived for others. In her parish community, she became an organizer, a leader of prayer, and the first to go the side of the sick or bereaved. And she was always singing songs of faith. Over the years, she taught a generation the foundations of the faith and encouraged lonely dislocated and poor immigrants to

come together in the Church. In fact, the woman with no family of her own became mother and grandmother to a parish family of faith. When she herself grew weak with cancer they came forward to care for her. At her funeral they turned out to revere their spiritual mother. And now each year on the anniversary of her passing, they gather to pray and sing as she taught them. For all of us who knew her, there are now “tres Teresitas” to recall and to imitate.

As we gather here this evening, I cannot but think of the many people who have loved, taught, and shaped me. I am grateful to my parents, family and friends, to colleagues and educators and mentors, and to brother priests and deacons and religious. But permit me on this night to express my deepest gratitude to the people with whom I have walked in priestly ministry. They help me to love and to be loved, to believe and to proclaim.

And on this night, I would like to express my special gratitude to our Hispanic brothers and sisters here on Long Island. I have shared memories of my friend Teresita for two reasons. First, I want us to recall Bishop Barres’s prophetic call to Dramatic Missionary Growth. When the Bishop calls to us, we sometimes wonder how such growth is possible, well it is already happening! Teresita, little noticed and with few resources, brought hundreds to a deeper practice of our life-giving faith. She is proof positive that the growth is real and that it is dramatic!

I have also shared my memory of Teresita because I am deeply aware that I address my Hispanic brothers and sisters as a spiritual immigrant to your world of faith. It is not my language or culture. I have no genetic or cultural claim to belong to your number or expect that you would hear me. But I recall how the Hispanics of Port Washington welcomed me to communion with them and I now hope for the same as a new Bishop. I come before you in the hope that our shared faith will unite us in the mission before us. I come before you and ask in all humility that you see in me a spiritual son of Teresita, a poor woman rich in faith and love, one of three Teresitas who have guided my own path of faith.

Thanks be to God for His grace and blessings, and many thanks to each of you for your presence here this evening. I will count on your prayers to give me strength. Saint Teresita of the Little Flower, pray for us! Teresita of Calcutta, pray for us! Our Lady of Guadalupe, Pray for us! Praised be the name of Jesus Christ! Now and forever!