

CHAPTER TWELVE

DOLORES MEDINA AND THE CROSS

“You are very welcome in our community and in our parish for giving us the opportunity to let the rest of the world know about our history, about our situation, and about our dreams for the future. Because of our life situation here, we do not have many opportunities to let people know about our work.”

We walked along a path toward the *carpintería* with a ravine below and a heavily farmed hill opposite. And rising in the distance, Guazapa volcano. The woodworking shop turned out to be a large, one-room building with a concrete floor and cinderblock walls.

“The people here are independent,” said Blanchard as we stood outside. “They buy their houses, and this is the difference between an organized community and a disorganized community.”

Inside the smell of cut wood filled the air. Several workers, young men and women, had assembled to meet with us, and scraps of lumber lay scattered everywhere, along with pieces of furniture in varying degrees of completion. Work benches held table saws, lathes, planes, vices, hand saws, drills, and hammers.

“The shop produces wooden craft items, furniture, and construction pieces, and sells them through a regional marketing cooperative,” Blanchard explained. “Profits from the shop are reinvested in purchasing machines and equipment, and the

remainder of the monies is used to help support the other services of the community, including a daycare center.” The workers, he added, took full responsibility for all decisions of planning, production, and wages.

In one corner of the building was the paint shop, the area where “Gazoo” had worked, where designs were hand-painted on the crosses and boxes, readying them for market. In another section, cupboards and bureaus lay stacked on one another, along with a wooden bench with arm rests and a storage compartment under the seat.

“You could put a body in there,” someone said.

A worker demonstrated how the bench opened into a bed.

“Members of the *carpintería* designed and built the piece of furniture by themselves,” Blanchard said.

After touring the building, we sat on stools and chairs, and Blanchard asked the workers to talk about their jobs.

Rick Jones, who accompanied us from Carlota’s house, translated.

“My name is Javier,” said a young man in dungarees and a white, long-sleeved shirt. “I am the coordinator of the project here. We have three areas in which we work. The first one is furniture, and you can see a couple of pieces here in the shop. The second area that we have is carpentry. And the other is construction work that we do. We build windows and doors in buildings and homes whenever it is needed.”

Another young man stepped forward. “I am responsible for the wood shop,” he said. “We make crosses, wooden boxes for tourists, and furniture. Forty percent of our profit goes to the health clinic and to the daycare center. We know that someday we will have children, or that we will get sick, so we must support both of these programs. There are seventeen students working in the woodshop. The youngest is eight years old, and I am the oldest. I am twenty-one years old.”

“My name is Oscar,” said another. “I’m from LaPaz. I’m the secretary of the cooperative. This means that I’m in charge of the purchasing and I make sure of all the billing and receipts. We have three people who work mainly in building furniture. Most of the

rest work in the woodworking and the artisanry or in the painting of it. And three people work doing construction. We are also part of a larger coordination of activities of other groups of carpentry shops and artisanries of various sorts that work in coordination with San Salvador, and we have two representatives who work with that coordination in terms of buying and selling to send stuff to the States. The coordination serves us so that we can have a market to sell what we produce here in the shop, whether it's furniture or artisanry. Through the coordination we have been able to sell our products to churches and to foreign markets, as well as to the delegations that come. You'll see there's going to be representatives from the various areas up in the *Ranchon* by the church later this morning."

"Where did you get the equipment?"

"Some of the things were purchased through grants from the refugee services."

"This is a planer," said Jones, pointing to one of the machines. "We were able to purchase that ourselves. We are still paying it off right now. Several of the other machines, the radial arm saw and the jig saws, were donated through a sister parish."

The workers wanted us to know about the amount of time they spent on the job, and explained it was not easy to become a member of the shop. A person had to apply for a position, and all the members of the *carpintería* voted on the applicant.

Also, to protect the shop from thieves they took turns sleeping on the premises at night. The community of Dolores Medina, they said, was not immune from crime because of the many ex-army people and death squad members living in the larger settlement of Calle Real.

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Leaving the *carpintería* we walked back along the side of the main road, then turned up a dirt road that angled uphill to the right and was marked by ruts and small ravines. A large white building with two towers capped by large crosses sat on top of the hill. Half a dozen young girls clambered up and down ladders on an outside

wall, painting a huge mural of white, black, and green two-foot tall houses with red roofs; trees with dark brown trunks and bulbous green canopies; huge tropical plants with multi-colored leaves; a rabbit with a white head, large green ears, a red torso; a man and a woman holding hands; and – arms outstretched over the scene – a twenty foot high Christ figure.

Blanchard was talking about finding places to sell items from the carpentry shop. “All we need is an outlet.”

“We could sell them from the glass cases across from the language offices,” Torriera offered. “I’m sure it is something that *La Hispanidad* would be interested in doing.”

“When we get up here and you see the craft items,” Blanchard said, approaching a building with an attached outdoor pavilion, “please don’t think you are obligated to buy anything. These crafts are all made by the people in the community, and they are for sale, but they know you are not under any obligation to purchase anything.”

The *Ranchon de Epifanía* was painted white, and the pavilion with its tiled roof supported by lengths of tree trunks housed several long picnic tables. A plant bed with red and yellow flowers ran its length, and to the left in the kitchen area a woman baked tortillas on an iron grill.

The tables overflowed with stuffed animals, hand-painted boxes, crosses, stacks of cards, handbags, tote bags, and men’s and women’s apparel.

“Would you believe this?” Bertsch asked. “The prices on these things?” She was holding a bunch of colorfully painted crosses and was so excited the crosses kept slipping out of her hands. “These will make wonderful presents.”

McAllister picked out a blue short-sleeved shirt with “Oscar Rudolpho Romero” stitched over the pocket, and Kempton was busy stuffing a bag full of items.

While sitting on a ledge at the rear of the pavilion, I noticed a tall, thin man holding several letter size envelopes. We started talking and he said he was a Franciscan working for the summer in El Salvador.

“I taught at a Franciscan college back in the states,” I said.

“Which one?”

“Siena. I taught there for five years.”

“That’s a different Franciscan province. How long will you be here in El Salvador?”

“Ten days.”

“Could I ask a big favor of you? These letters. I wonder if you could mail them for me. The mails here are notoriously slow and inefficient. But if you could take them with you, and mail them when you get back to the U.S., that would be a big help.”

He handed me the letters, and I placed them in my camera bag for safe keeping.

Members of our group, excited by the bargains, were purchasing armfuls of gifts when Blanchard interrupted, saying it was time to visit the health clinic.

“While we’re inside, the women will prepare lunch for you. It’s a surprise!”

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In the health clinic we sat on benches in a small room, listening to three women health providers. Torriera interpreted.

“I am fifteen years old,” said Marta, the youngest of the three, with long dark hair, dressed in jeans and a white T-shirt. “My job here at the clinic is to go to people’s houses when they get sick. I am part of the diagnostic team. When people get sick I go to their home and take a sample of their feces. I look at the feces under a microscope and determine what is wrong with them, what type of bacteria they have. This way we will know if they need herbs, antibiotics, or something else. I learned this when I was in a refugee camp in Honduras.”

Barker took notice of what Marta was saying, impressed especially with the door-to-door testing, and that she returned to treat patients until the parasites were eliminated. “There is much to learn and emulate from this simple, yet effective model of community healthcare,” she said.

After the three women explained their roles, Blanchard turned to others in the hallway. Each said her name and briefly mentioned her responsibilities. As they gave their presentations, they reminded me of students talking in front of a class, wishing for all the world they were elsewhere. He had set them up, telling them we were university professors, and what they had to say was important for us to hear.

When the three women finished, Blanchard announced that the tables outside had been cleared for lunch.

“You won’t believe what the women have prepared for you,” he said. Now he was laughing. “They wanted to make something special for you, so they asked me what *Norteamericanos* like, and I said cook them whatever you want. Then they said, ‘Do *Norteamericanos* eat pizza?’ I said, ‘They’ll love it.’ And you haven’t tasted pizza till you’ve tried what these Salvadoran women cook up!”

Outside in the pavilion the women carried out large rectangular cooking tins filled with newly baked pizzas. Two of the women, dressed in aprons and white chefs hats, stood nearby, watching the proceedings, beaming. The trays were placed on the table, and we cut into the pizzas, thinking we’ll have to make a fuss over this because these women tried so hard to serve us something that would remind us of home. Some of us were saying to ourselves, Salvadoran pizza couldn’t possibly compare with Pepe’s pizza in New Haven. Then we started eating. We were dumbfounded. The pizzas were delicious.

Blanchard got up. “Let me introduce the most extraordinary mother-daughter team in the world,” he announced.

Torriera translated.

“Once again I want to give you greetings from the heart,” Virginia, the mother, said. “You are very welcome in our community and in our parish for giving us the opportunity to let the rest of the world know about our history, about our situation, and about our dreams for the future. Because of our life situation here, we do not have many opportunities to let people know about our work. I speak basically from the point of view of the parish, but the dreams of the parish are also the dreams of the whole country. They are national dreams. In our parish, we have our projects that have been organized to work in the promotion of the community.

We were following the road, and we finally decided that the solution for us was not only to be found in the Bible, but also we had to find solutions to feed ourselves, from the point of view of the parish.”

“From the parish,” Torriera explained, “means everything is in the parish. OK? Whenever she talks, she is not talking about herself, but about the parish.”

“In the parish they began to dream about different projects that would help make solutions for the life of the whole community,” Virginia added, mentioning the carpentry shop as an example. She also talked about a sewing project making dresses for women.

“What we want,” she said, “is to form a cooperative that will involve the idea of *mystica*, the dreams and spirituality of the whole community. We have other projects. The healthcare clinic, the daycare. But these projects don’t bring in income. All the projects help the people to learn about a way of life that is good for the community. We hope that one day the people will be able to realize all their hopes and dreams, so their future will be secure. The people know that that is a difficult task, but we believe we will be successful. I’m part of the directive of one of the communities in the parish. A very important job of mine is to promote work inside the communities. I work with the other parishes of the archdiocese for CARITAS.”

“People are helped to develop themselves in any way they want to develop,” said Blanchard. “But the hope is to teach the person that their education is of great value to the whole community. Even as early as the Daycare Center, they try to include this idea because they realize that in their own lives this was not the case. So children are taught that it is much better to live as part of a community than it is to live alone.”

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Then Blanchard surprised us.

“The workers in the carpentry shop have a special gift for Sacred Heart University,” he announced, “and they would like to present it to the group at this time.”

Javiar, the *carpintería* coordinator, surrounded by several fellow workers, held a large, multi-colored wooden cross in his hands and presented it to Reid. Caught by surprise, Reid looked down at the cross, holding it waist-high with his left hand. The gift was totally unexpected. The rest of us, speechless, pulled out our cameras to record the moment.

“The workers hope that in the future,” Javiar said, with Blanchard translating, “when the cross hangs back at the university, it will remind the Sacred Heart community of their connection with Dolores Medina.”

Roughly three feet tall, the cross was covered with brightly painted symbols that, according to Blanchard, presented an overview of El Salvador’s past, present, and hopes for the future. Javier pointed to two figures at the top, one dark-skinned, the other Caucasian, and explained, again with Blanchard translating, that the figures represented the sense of community that the people of Dolores Medina felt with the larger community of El Salvador and the world. At its base, stalks of maize, the life-giving plant of the Salvadoran people, grew out of four seeds symbolizing community, solidarity, peace, and justice.

Writing later in the *Sacred Heart University Review* about the symbols on the cross, Reid explained:

At the intersection of the stem and arms of the crucifix is their rendering of the Sacred Heart. The left arm of the crucifix depicts their experience in the recently ended civil war: planes fly overhead, shooting, bombing, and destroying the people and the land below. The right arm contrasts the grim past with the people today – they are smiling, happy, and alive.⁹

Bertsch said it best. “They shared their bread and their lives with us, and they gave us the gift of love in the form of a cross.”