

FR TOMMY GREENAN - TALES FROM EL SALVADOR

Fr Tommy, whose funeral took place on Friday 5 June, spent over twenty years working in El Salvador and Guatemala. In his early days in Salvador, he wrote many powerful short prose poems. We select three to give a flavour of his life in a rural parish in the Chalatenango region – in the midst of a Civil War between a Military-led Junta and the FMLN (a coalition of left wing groups) that lasted from 1979 to 1982.

BEES

28 August 1989

I sat at the table of the altar, reading my novel. Three little girls were playing with a ripped playing card, seated on the tiled church floor. I looked at them and they beamed smiles. The door and windows opened and the fresh air ventilated through the building, but the breeze also carried the stale, unwashed smell of the children. I twitched my nose like a rabbit, affected by the stench. And the children's chatter was ruining my concentration.

Five minutes later I heard the children scream outside. I thought it might be a family squabble or the chastisement of a naughty child. What I saw shocked me. Bees were swarming around the children's heads, sticking to their hair, stinging their faces. Impulsively, I rushed towards them (feeling a bit like Clark Kent), madly swiping at the bees and plucking them from the hair of six year old Emerita and three year old Consuelo. My sense of poetic license didn't desert me and I shouted out challengingly, 'Bastard Bees!' Even Sir Lawrence Olivier would have been proud of my swashbuckling diction.

Unfortunately, the bees turned on my quixotic self and stung my head, face, ears, back and hands. In life I've shared a lot of things with children, but never bee stings.

Chris a Belgian Education Promoter visiting the Parish, retreated down the braise, keeping safe distance from this angry swarm of bees. Old Don Chemita did likewise. The children stood panic-stricken and screaming. I clasped one in each arm and ran towards the village tap. The bees clung to our hair and faces, stinging and swirling angrily around us. I tripped, stumbled and fell, hitting the skull of one of the little girls on the concrete tub. Heedless, I turned on the tap and put the children's heads under the gushing water and crushed with my bare fingers those bees that had settled in their hair and on their faces. One of them flew into my mouth and stung the back of my throat. I coughed the blighter out. At last, we had them beaten. 'We've killed them. It's alright now', I whispered softly to the screaming Consuelo.

Later, the mathematical Chris removed more than thirty bee stings from my scalp. The villagers reckon the offending bees to have been a hybrid of the Castilian and African. Regardless of the species, its sting hurts.

When the ordeal was over, I rested against the concrete washing tub, soaked, exhausted, breathing heavily. I held back the tears in my eyes.

'HI HO, HI HO!'

18 February 1989

It was off to work we went. Climbing high, up the pathway, up the rock-face, through the pine forests and down the slope to where the village water-pipe lay damaged, gushing out water.

'I'm only here to pray', I told them. But, despite my words, I soiled my hands with the manual labour and enjoyed the three hours as part of the 'Z' team. It was a good feeling, tugging away at the rope attached to an unstable tree which had been hatched to the point of capsizing. We pulled the tree in the opposite direction of the water pipe and it fell with a crash.

One of the men was breaking cement which had hardened inside a ringed pipe-joint. He was hitting out the cement with a three-foot spanner when the joint jumped into the air and spun down the steep embankment. He watched where it fell; silent, patient, not speaking any word, not even a curse. Unfrowned faces watched

it fall and, without fuss or fanfare, one of them hitched a rope around his waist, tied the end tight to a tree-trunk and lowered himself down the steep descent to retrieve the pipe-joint.

‘This is a new Russian model. It’s the real thing’, jested Chico, holding the red, three-foot spanner as if it were a rifle. We all laughed.

Work was slow, but we succeeded in repairing the damage and in refitting the pipe. Then we toasted tortillas over the fire. The air was fresh. Chico poured the sauce from a tin of sardines over my maize pancakes. Appetized by hunger it was one of the most delicious meals I’d ever tasted. Everybody shared what they had and gave ungrudgingly to those, like me, who had brought nothing. ‘The loaves were multiplied’, we all ate; and all were satisfied.

‘SONYA’

23 September 1989

‘How was the slope, then?’ she asked with a broad smile. I looked at her, this small, girl guerrilla, chubby without being fat, brown hair, and brown, sparkling eyes which met mine. ‘The slope was pretty serious business’, I panted, my head nodding exaggeratedly. Her smile burst into a good-natured chuckle. The first hill had been climbed and sweat tricked down my face and soaked my tee-shirt.

Our conversation turned to the latest political happenings in the country, namely the dialogue and negotiation which had begun between the Government and the Guerrilla. We spoke of the unilateral cease-fire declared by the Guerrilla and the People’s Independence Day March for Peace to take place in the capital.

The clapping of a mule’s hooves descending from among the pine trees and heading in our direction made me feel a little uncomfortable. It is not advisable for the Priest to be seen by Civilian Population fraternizing with the Guerrilla, even if these three guerrillas had been the ones who had suddenly appeared from the trees and stopped us in our tracks and initiated conversation. An elderly man rode the beast, leading by the reins another mule saddled but riderless. At the rear of this single-file procession was a woman labouring under a heavy white sack of corn which was balanced on her head.

‘Hey’, Sonya shouted to the woman, ‘why don’t you put that sack on the saddle?’ The rider made himself deaf to this suggestion and sauntered on. ‘Do you hear what I’m saying?’ repeated the armed maiden. Let her put that sack on the mule’s back.’ But the rider paid her no heed and continued his journeying. We watched them proceed into the distance.

‘That bundle can damage the woman’s neck muscles’, I remarked. ‘Such is the fate of the Salvadorean woman’. She agreed with me.

Sonya spoke with revolutionary pride about the recent spate of activities conducted by the urban Guerrilla in San Salvador. I paused, looked at her with a smile and said, ‘You’re a hard wee soul.’ She found this comment funny and chuckled with great glee, trying to deny her combative toughness.

‘Well, I don’t want to hold you back any longer’, she said. I fished a bag of bread out of my net bag and offered it to them. ‘No, you eat it’, she said, refusing my offer. ‘I’ve got two bags of bread with me’, I coaxed. ‘Okay, then’, she said, accepting the bread. Our unorthodox Communion Service completed, we bade farewell with warm friendliness and took to the trail once more.

‘Do take care’, I reminded them.

Four days after this encounter with Sonya, she was shot dead by soldiers’ bullets while convening a political meeting with the people of Los Sitios, Dulce Nombre de Marfa. Later, on discovering that they had killed a rebel authority figure, the troops disinterred her mortal remains from the grave the people had given her and snapped their macabre propaganda photographs.

Today the rain falls tearfully to the earth. A purple flower lies trampled in the mud, its soft petals severed and broken. But another will surely bloom and take its place in the ebb and flow of life. And, one day, the people will be free.