

Dispatches from the Cono Sur: Río de la Plata

Young Adults in Global Mission Newsletter Vol. 01, No. 03

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Recently I was walking some blocks to the bus stop with an educator from the youth center where I work. His name is Daniel. Unlike most Uruguayans, Daniel does not drink *maté*, does not enjoy staying up into the faint hours of night, nor does he care too much for playing soccer. The sun was beating down on our already scorched faces—we had just come from a day-long field trip with the youth center—as I carried a tupperware full of “*arroz con leche*” (a common dessert made with creamy milk and rice), which was dripping condensation down my hands.

We began talking about differences in holiday celebrations. Daniel proceeded to tell me his childhood version of “*Día de Reyes Magos*” (Day of the Three Wise Men). In Uruguay, as in many countries in Latin and Central America, the night of January 5th into the 6th—the last night of the Christmas season into Epiphany—is one of similar cultural importance as Christmas Eve in North America. Tradition has it that the Three Wise men stop by everyone’s house at night, leaving gifts for the children at the stairway of their house as they did for Jesus. Likewise, it’s common for children to leave out items for the wise men’s journey, such as shoes and water, and even grass for their camels. However, as Daniel remembers it, many times his parents would forget to remove these drinks and plates of food when they left out their gifts at night. So on those special mornings, Daniel often remembers waking up with



Left: In November, both youth centers with Juventud Para Cristo gathered to promote the Claves campaign of “*Buentrato*,” giving figurative vaccinations” against violence and abuse.

Right: Youth from the Flor de Maroñas youth center get a chance to relax and swim at the end of the year *paseo* (field trip)
Photo: Melva Gonzalez



a certain confusion at the sight of both the gifts and the seeming absence of the Wise Men’s passing.

All to say—there’s an air of disregard and skepticism to Daniel, setting him apart from his Uruguayan colleagues. Yet, take the instance of the youth center’s soccer league games: you’ll find Daniel always in the middle of the pre-game and half-time huddles with the team. This spring, he’s never missed the weekly pick-up game we hold. He’s normally even first to volunteer to play in goal.

Oddly enough this Advent and Christmas, stories of the post-resurrection body of Jesus have drawn my attention more than anything. Perhaps it’s the feelings of displacement by spending Christmas among a new community, the inversion of seasons, a mixture of isolation and joy. For purpose of liturgy and seasonal continuity, we acknowledge Advent as a time for preparation of Jesus’ body incarnate. At the same time, we also recognize the reality of witness to this same resurrected body—an awareness, like the Wise Men, of its final mortality and life beyond, to seek what it ultimately means to animate this body, what it means when its presence has departed. This year, I’ve been wondering if Advent might not also call for us to be vigilant in those parts of us that are “unbecoming.”

For me, the Gospel of John’s post-resurrection

(Cont. below)

Along with the common embrace of our sending and inviting communities around the United States, the world, the ELCA at large, and the whole of Christ’s body: Thank you again for your continued support. The intention of this newsletter is to inform and to create dialogue, and you may feel free to email me anytime at jperkins16@gmail.com

account of Thomas appears the closest encounter to this mystery. However, it seems our discussion of Thomas is frequently limited to an ethics of doubt within our system of belief and superficial apologetics on faith and sight. We often neglect Thomas' role in the death and resurrection of Lazarus. Faced with a return to Judea to see Lazarus, the disciples reject Jesus' proposal, saying "a short while ago the Jews tried to stone you, and yet you are going back there?" But Thomas is the lone voice imploring the disciples to the side of Lazarus, saying, "Let us also go, that we may die with him" (John 11:8-16).

It's by Thomas that Jesus returns a second time to the disciples—not only to stand among them, but to reveal his body in a most human way: by the gentle touch of a hand. For Thomas, perhaps an act of faith indeed means challenging those

things beyond sight by the intangible transformation of human touch, where—just as for the Wise Men—illuminations and representations of Christ's body were not sufficient; it was a close encounter for which they sought the journey, a revered mode of revelation.

Jean-Luc Nancy speculates on the mystery of the Incarnation by the idea of a presence "coming." For Nancy, the body beckons a crossing of thresholds, an arrival of the transitory, those moments of interruption and uncertainty in the interplay of bodies. He says, "But the body is a coming into presence... its coming, thus will never be finished; it goes as it comes; it is coming-and-going; it is the rhythm of bodies born, bodies dying, bodies that are open, closed, bodies in pleasure, bodies in pain, bodies touching one another, distancing themselves." (Nancy, *Corpus*, 54-55). Through Jesus,

God brings to us a touching of the untouchable, a body marked by death and now animate among us, a touch beyond the subjective substitution of the human self upon the other: a confrontation with the distinct being of another body, where the witness of the cross and the promise of God's creation meet and are reconfigured, calling us to "reach out your hand" to touch those marks, bringing us intimately ever closer.

Here, I'd like to return to a memory of Daniel playing in goal, raising his arms high to block a shot. It deflects. His goalkeeping skills have developed impressively. Later, we are picking up everything—jerseys, soccer balls, water bottles—to put in our backpack we've carried along, and the youth have all gone ahead of us, he's back there slinging the backpack over his shoulders, angling up the field's embankment, rubbing a jammed thumb interminably.



EL CIPO

Nació sobre la copa del árbol corpulento,
Sin que ninguno acierte cómo ha brotado allí,
Aquel airón que ondula cuando solloza el viento
Y plegan los crepúsculos sus alas de rubí.

Los troncos de sus ramas con lentitud descienden
Nutridos por los jugos del árbol montaraz,
Y cuando al suelo llegan, como raíces prenden,
Cubriendo a todo el árbol con su festón vivaz.

¡Uniendo sus encajes con maña traicionera
Como una red, en torno del árbol nutridor,
Al árbol estrangula la fuerte enredadera.
Al árbol en que el vuelo detuvo el picaflores!

Engaño de los ojos, semeja su verdura
Lo verde del ramaje de un árbol tropical,
Y son aquellas mallas como una fosa oscura
En donde el tronco duerme su sueño sepulcral.

En vano es que renazca la dulce primavera,
Tiñendo al horizonte de nácar y punzó;
¡Ya el tronco ni verduras ni céfiros espera!
¡Le cubren para siempre los ramos del cipó!

Señor, que de las dudas el malezaje rudo
Tejiste sobre el árbol altivo de mi fe,
Si ya está todo el árbol decrepito y desnudo,
¿Por qué mandas al tronco que permanezca en pie?

--Carlos Roxlo, poeta, periodista, y político
uruguayo, 1861-1926



Image of a Cipo plant from Brazil



EL CIPO

Born at the crest of the corpulent tree,
Without anyone being sure how it sprouted there,
This plume that ripples when the wind sobs,
And folds the twilights by its ruby wings.

The trunks of its branches descend slowly
Nourished by the nectar of its rove tree,
And when they touch the ground, take like roots,
Covering the tree with its lively garland.

Uniting its fabric with treacherous skill
Like a network, lacing the mother tree,
That strangled the tree by its strong vine,
That caught the flight of the hummingbird!

Deception to the eyes, resembling vegetation
The green from the branch of a tropical tree,
And in whose netting a dark chasm
Sleeps the trunk in its sepulchral dream.

In vain the sweet spring is reborn
Staining the horizon pearl and blood-red
Already its greenless, breathless trunk awaits!
Forever covered by the branches of the Cipó!

Reader, you who doubt this rugged undergrowth
You weaved over the haughty tree of my faith
If already lays this tree is decrepit and nude,
Why instruct the trunk that remains standing?

--Carlos Roxlo, Uruguayan poet, journalist, and
politician, 1826-1916

Above: To commemorate the 20th anniversary of the youth center in Flor,
educators and youth designed and painted a new mural at the entrance.
Photo: Melva Gonzalez

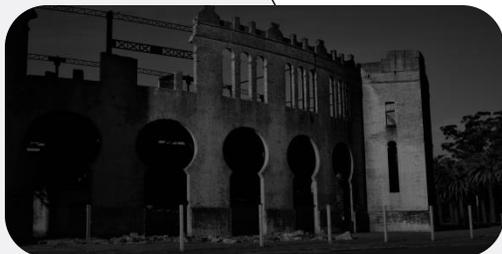
“Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.”

Thomas said to him, “My Lord and my God!” (John 20: 27-28)

“Essentially, excellently, it is this immediate, infinite, spiritual touch that would teach us to think what touching means to say, in truth, and call on us to do so. Isn't it solely by analogy with this *mutuus contactus* that we interpret human or finite touching, and then forget the interval and give in to illusion? Immediacy is the absolute truth of divine touching.”

(Jacques Derrida, *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy*, 254)

“A *corpus* is not a discourse, and it is not a narrative.” (Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, 46)



Accounts from the Sidelines

YO-YO

--These sweet cookies come straight from a recipe book used at the youth center for cooking classes. They also make a great winter treat:

Ingredients:

2 ½ cups flour

2 tsp. baking powder

½ cup sugar

10 oz. butter

3 eggs

2 tbsp. honey

1 cup milk

Vanilla

5 oz. liquid chocolate (optional)

10 oz. Dulce de Leche**

**dulce de leche is an ingredient special to this region. You may substitute caramel, chocolate, or any other desired filling



--Preheat oven to 350°F

Prep:

1. Beat together milk, eggs, vanilla, and honey (you can microwave the honey beforehand to incorporate it more smoothly). Let sit.
2. In a mixing bowl, mix together the flour and baking powder.
3. Form a crown in the flour mix. Add butter and sugar to the center, and incorporate until the flour is supple.
4. Slowly incorporate the milk composition to the flour, beating smoothly until you obtain a smooth dough (add flour or water if necessary).
5. On a papered or oiled pan, form cookies of about 1 inch in diameter. Bake for 8-10 min.
6. Bind two cookies together using your desired filling, coating one side with chocolate. Bake for 2-3 minutes more to firm. Let cool.

Pepo turns to me and shows me the marks on his knees and legs. He shows me the newly red lines on his shin from the cleats that have scraped against it, the dirt and dry grass smeared nearby, the larger abrasions from falls challenging an open ball and other players forcefully, each of these formed over fainter, more subtler marks and scars.

We've come to a break in the game—we've been playing soccer with youth from both of Juventud Para Cristo's youth centers in the Flor de Maroñas neighborhood in Montevideo. Each Friday we gather to play this pick-up game dubbed as *practica*. Our team has just been scored on, and we march slowly back to center field, tired from the game and the heat. With a word, Pepo turns to me and shows me his legs: “Mira,” he says; “Look.” It's with a half-chuckle, mixture of wonder and pride for having played a tough game, discovering its impact. Without another word he jogs to the wide point on the field for kick-off and we're back in play.

Indeed one can hardly walk away from this field without some kind of mark. The field is flat and the grass is well cut. Yet among the grass grows several types of small bur plants—common with the soil composition this close to the sea—and between these, open patches of dirt with a grainy, sandy texture unfavorable to a hard fall. Surrounding the field is parts uncultivated land, tree lines, another field for rugby, and a few nearby houses; retrieving loose balls often means finding your way through rough grass, muddy divots, thorny plants, loose trash, and rocks. Yet with headlong speed players will run into these no-areas, simply to get the ball back in play faster. Even after games, we can be seen picking burs out of our shoes and socks, rubbing the lacerations on our hands and legs, our sore knees, jammed fingers.

This afterwards is quite a distinct time. We make our way to nearby shade beneath a collection of trees and sit on dead stumps and dried leaves, hearts beating exertion, the relief of cool water and lungs dilated. Post-game analysis is made: minor debates arise over certain plays, certain calls, there are jokes about mishaps and missteps—but mainly there is a type of exhausted silence. The type of silence different from the wordless coordination and dialogue of the game, as if in the wearing down of our bodies we've arrived to a different attentiveness... as if some unarticulated touch has been felt. Our minds turning and reviewing unconsciously the touches of the game, the vacillations of sight and bodies in touch along with the flow and movement of the ball, this tactual pivot, apprehension whose witness afterwards remains transitory, unable to be made sense of—the kind peace not quite had any other moment of the week.

Perhaps, though, of the more graceful and enigmatic moments every Friday is the short time before we go on the field. Here, we greet each other and proceed to leave behind whatever extra things we have—sweatshirts, backpacks, bicycles—those things not favorable to the movement of the game. With the events of the week, it seems as if

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we shuffle between any number of mediated identities, as teenagers do, negotiating one's development in the world.

But with the teams named and divided, these accumulated images no longer seem immediate or relevant. The field allows for a new simplicity. Our interaction becomes direct coordination with our bodies exposed alongside the distinct bodies of others. Not that we can displace ourselves fully in character or being—but walking on the field changes it. We no longer distance ourselves in words or by space, by loyalties or social stratification; there becomes no need to obscure ourselves by concealing emotions or projecting modified images of ourselves. We are forced to recognize the bodily force of one another, to become aware of their immediate presence in our vicinity, to come to the limits of our own bodies tangentially with others. Certainly, seeing-oneself involves any number of roles; it's easy to imagine oneself in the spotlight as their idolized *fútbol*er, the glory of scoring a goal. Yet even these projections shatter when one contacts the movement of bodies and the corporal junction of the ball. In each moment a confrontation to be had. Inevitably an examination of one's own body at play binds the reality that their own body is being marked by the game—of an imminent interruption in the middle of contact for which no limitation of vision or substitute of illusion can embody.

Often I can't help but think of what else might be cast off when we walk onto this field; what becomes lifted away, even if momentarily.

If anyone has borne the marks of this world, certainly many of the youth at the Centro Juvenil have been among them. It's a privileged position I've been granted to not only form day-to-day relationships with many of the youth, but to learn of the challenges in their life and the backgrounds personal to them. Having only come to know part of the many stories so far, I continually admire the simple and profound act it is for many just to cross the entrance and be present.

As in any human relationship, opening a place for these encounters doesn't mean things go for the better: that trust won't be broken, that violence won't be inflicted, that relationships won't be broken. At times these emotions and conflicts make their way onto the field or in the other activities we do—it's not that a space like *la practica*, or the youth center erases these complex human circumstances of anger, resentment, the pain of loss, separation. But there is a certain grace given by a space like this game: where things may find new formulations by the equity of bodies at play, their spontaneous interaction, a chance to encounter the unmediated, autonomous, conscious existence of another person.

It seems a simple, profound act for the youth center to continue to open their gates in the middle of the neighborhood where they've always been; continually willing to exposing themselves to the frictions of the world, to offer human touch by the faith of encounter. Reaching out to those marks that come from living in a neighborhood where the rest of the city seems to distance itself from you. Where in a city that has built 5 massive new shopping malls, only one supermarket serves the neighborhood; where in a city of 1.3 million people it's been decided that only one bus route is needed to give routine access outside the neighborhood. The marks of those who feel disillusioned from the world and disconnected from friends, caught between the divisions of parents and situations of violence, exposed to addiction and abuse, who the church and other social institutions have estranged, who no longer find value in continuing their education, who are forced to support themselves where their parents and caretakers have neglected. Those who have been abandoned by the people supposed to care the most for

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In November, Claves held its "Bicicleada por Buentrato." Participants across the city rode their bikes to several government buildings, speaking with government officials and raising public awareness to drive political action to denounce systems of violence and abuse in the country. Photo: Claves



Celebration at the 20th Anniversary party. A group of youth demonstrate their Salsa skills. Photo: Ana Guillen



This Spring (Oct-Nov) the JPC's Sebastopol youth center hosted a series of days for youth across the city to play soccer and showcase talents like percussion and salsa dance. Five different youth centers participated (Flor de Maroñas even won the soccer championship!) Photo: Centro Juvenil Sebastopol



Left: Youth prepare before the end of the year *paseo*. Photo: Melva Gonzalez

Right: With Michael Borges. Photo: Michael Borges

them, who face the choice between living with a relative whose house is far away from their friends and the school they now attend, or moving to the house of their mother's partner who has shown more interest in alcohol than in their lives; those who've encountered deep isolation and bleakness in their life after the death of a parent, after witnessing the death of a sibling. Those who feel caught in seemingly insurmountable situations of poverty and instability, who have seen friends hospitalized and jailed, who have confronted things unknown...

And so we step onto the field. We step on, these marks and scars accompanying us, youth, educators, and volunteers alike, the marks and scars that accompany all of us who have lived. It's these marks that show the place that was once the absence of "flesh." Each a revelation to our intimate interiority; a proclamation through absence. These marks as distinct from one another as our dreams in the world. Whether known or unknown spaces like the *practica* likewise bring us gently alongside those marks in the lives of others—of isolation, abandonment, the deep pain of loss—those parts of us that can never be reduced to analogy, exploited for gain by others. We bring our misshaped, marked up, worn-down bodies and subject them to the collisions and bruising of other bodies and selves in motion, in encounter. Perhaps in the places prayer and reflection has not done otherwise.

As any shared practice or common tradition, of course playing soccer isn't virtuous in and of itself. The game has likewise been co-opted for the profits of various clubs, corporations, and brands (such as the two major rivals in Uruguay, Peñarol and Nacional), where through marketing and promotion, the people are submitted to choices of identity and manufactured division. While they give a grand platform to the game, such also reinforce

systems of patriarchy, violence, and chauvinism. But when gathered to play, it's easy to see that such only exaggerate their importance with contrived egotism. Ride the bus through any neighborhood like Flor de Maroñas, away from the distant and carefully crafted images of the game, away from the bustling centers of business and commerce in the city, away from the neatly manicured and sheltered plots of the city's protected class—away: a much more vivacious spirit played out in the open spaces of streets, parks, the bare dirt fields, and beaches. Of youth like Pepo where it doesn't matter if there's freshly painted boundary lines on the field, a net behind the goalpost, or a simple pair of shoes marking the perimeter—it's that they've come to play fútbol on their own terms: the dimensions, the look of the game, these things become means of self-determination among the gathered, a place of shared power pushing back the surrounding coercive forces, the shallow meaning placed on their lives. It's a different act of faith, not always with the promise of something beautiful, of vindication and redemption. When all else seems beyond the hope of giving doubt, it becomes a rare hope to touch the body of another, a catalyzing doubt touching the distinct incarnation of each; a mysterious threshold. It seems enough else has borne unyielding promise.



Through this newsletter, by witness and testimony, I ask that you would likewise consider this an exercise in accompanying our neighbors around the globe.

If you would like to send mail, here's the address:

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