

BRANCHES – BILL LONNEMAN



Branches: 1986-2001

The 15 years after Richard left in 1986, till the split in the community in 2001 are filled with lots of emotions for me. Lyrics from the “Celebration Song” summarize them: “for the joys and for the sorrows, yesterday, today, tomorrow, we celebrate”! So much to be grateful for through it all:

The joy of the first leadership team, with Ron Auer and Lorraine Arata, both of whom I consider saints. I remember one meeting we had with the Archbishop when he said: “New Jerusalem is part of the Catholic umbrella; it’s just on the fringe of the umbrella!” Too soon there came the sorrow of the breakup of a leadership team when Bob Gervasi and Patsy and I could not find a way to resolve the issue of Patsy’s continuing in leadership after her divorce from John. The pain of having to take a stand and live with the consequences.

I remember all of the work that we did in those years for peacemaking: the nuclear arms education teams going out to parishes to promote the American Bishops’ pastoral letter on peace (and getting called “Marxist-Leninist stooges”!); the Friday noon prayer at the Federal Building (where one day someone driving by laid a load of expletives on us. I turned to Gary Robbins and said, “Friend of yours?” and Gary looked back with those smiling eyes and said, “Not yet!”). All the work of La Amistad, transporting people to Canada and welcoming others to the neighborhood. Our relationship with our sister community in Nicaragua and our work with Franciscans International, sheltering people who were fleeing for their lives: Marcello and Brother Rodrigo from Brazil and others. And so much good work in Winton Place: leading recycling efforts in the city, battling corporations over air pollution, learning vegetarianism together, literally rebuilding entire streets through the Development Corporation: the Servizzis, Cafferkyys, Perrys, Schomakers...

And of course, many of us were raising our children together during these years. So much effort went into CLOW (Children’s Liturgy of the Word), the All Saints celebrations, baptisms, first communions, confirmations, the children’s musicals (Gina Robbins!)...

And so many fine liturgies, guided always by Diane and with the Port decorated so lovingly by Mary Glynn and Julie. We developed what we called lay presiders, community members trained and skilled in liturgy who stood at the altar consistently throughout a liturgical season, alongside our rotating cadre of priests (or alongside our wonderful deacon, Elmer). I remember especially the emergence of Kate Ploucha as one of our main lay presiders; she was such a natural. And what to say about our beloved priests over those 15 years: Joe Peschel (my god, what a sweet man he was! “If anybody asks me who I am, who I am, who I am...tell them I’m a child of God”), dear Frank Oppenheim, John Ferrone, and our stalwart Franciscan, Fred Link. The Easter Vigils and Christmas Masses: Frank Oppenheim down on the floor with the children retelling the stories. And the sorrow of Roberta’s illness: the anointing that we did for her when, trembling, I laid the oil on her, from the top of her head to the soles of her feet. How much we learned about God’s mercy through how she lived her illness and death.

And finally, there came the pain, confusion, and sorrow of the final years together, struggling over our identity, not wanting to let go of something essential but not being able to see our way forward together. We do indeed see now “through a glass darkly”. Part of true gratitude is also acknowledging the suffering we’ve experienced and that we’ve caused others.

People still look at me with awe if I tell them that I was part of New Jerusalem for 35 years, that Richard married Julie and I, that we raised our children there. I am still in awe and gratitude for it and for the relationships Julie and I still have, especially with our circle: Diane, Roger and Mary, and Anne and Rob. "O how good, how wonderful, is the love we're bound to share!"