Advent in the squatters’ camp

As a human rights worker during Argentina’s Dirty War, I learned to read the signs.

by Heidi Neumark in the December 2024 issue
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(Century illustration)

The most formative time for me before becoming a pastor took place in a squatters’ area outside of Buenos Aires. I was in Argentina to study at the Instituto Superior Evangélico de Estudios Teológicos, a seminary that is now closed. During my first

semester, I attended a retreat with the human rights group I volunteered with. It was there that I met two young Roman Catholic laywomen living in a squatters' area organized in base communities. Isabel and Perla invited me to spend Christmas with them and then to live with them for my second semester. I was thrilled, as this would give me the chance to experience the actual life of base communities rather than just reading about them. I could commute to the seminary by bus.

The squatters' area was populated by people who had moved from rural areas in northern Argentina to find better work in the capital city. The lack of affordable housing in Buenos Aires forced many to settle on vacant land outside the city, constructing simple homes from scraps of metal and lumber.

Approximately 20 base communities were organized in the area, small groups of laypeople who gathered to pray, sing, read the Bible, and relate this religious practice to their context—which included developing strategies on how to get electricity, water, and land rights. Isabel and Perla assisted the priest in training first-time lay leaders for the communities. I was accustomed to a model in which lay leaders had to prove themselves before being entrusted with more important leadership roles. Padre Raúl did the opposite. His way was to offer any willing person some training and support and bless them to try leading others and see how it went.

One community of adults was capably led by a young teenager. I could not imagine that happening in my previous church experience. Sure, a teen might serve on a committee or on the church council, but as the chair or president? Not likely. When I became a pastor in the South Bronx, one in five people in our zip code were HIV positive, in a time before medication was available. Blessing people to take on leadership in any way possible, without waiting for a time that might never come, was liberating and fruitful. It didn't always work out, but it often did—and I would never have experienced that without Padre Raúl's example.

The home I shared with Isabel and Perla consisted of a single room with a tin roof, and I loved the timpani concerts when it rained. If it sprang an occasional leak in the middle of the night, we laughed and moved our beds around to avoid the drips. Like everyone else in the area, we had no running water or electricity. This was during Argentina's military dictatorship and Dirty War. I knew the government had a file on me because of my work with the human rights group and likely the seminary as well. Nonetheless, I was surprised to return home one day and find our home ransacked. Nothing remained as we left it. The neighbors told us they had seen military police

enter our unlocked door.

We spent the rest of the day cleaning up. We found nothing missing. Even the wrinkled pages of my now crumpled poems kept their lines in place, unwavering in the wreckage. Our yellow plastic bucket was slightly bruised but still useful, an emblem for me of both privilege and mercy. The first time I did my laundry, scrubbing jeans by hand with harsh soap, my housemates watched with distress as my thin-skinned knuckles bled into the suds. They insisted that they would do my laundry. This was terribly embarrassing, but they pointed out that we shared the laundry water for other things and they didn't want to use the bloodied water. We agreed that they would do my laundry and, in exchange, I would pump and carry all the water we needed each day to bathe, cook, and clean. I quickly discovered what most of the world knows: water is heavy and definitely not to be wasted. My muscles grew strong. My skin stayed thin.

Bedding was another matter. Our visitors took knives to the mattress where I had fallen in love with my future husband. He had come to repair some new holes in our roof, and I pretended to sleep when he entered the room and brushed a piece of wild grass across my face. This was my first hint of his feelings. Our hand-copied worship song sheets were balled up and spread around the room. Along with tea leaves—what did they expect to find in the tin that had held the yerba leaves harvested by the surviving Indigenous Guaraní people on their stolen land? The teakettle, now dented, would never disclose a word spoken among friends as we passed around the maté gourd and metal straw to share the traditional Argentine communal drink. Our wooden table and chairs with newly destroyed pleather backs were easily righted, unlike other things.

The Advent and Christmas readings tell us to look for signs. These might come in apocalyptic upheavals that shake the earth with terror and glory, but also in ordinary places—a fig tree sprouting leaves, a baby, a swaddling cloth, a manger. Small things, easily overlooked. Our unwelcome visitors were seeking signs as well. Looking for telltale markers of subversion and revolution, they missed them all—poems, bucket, songs, soap, kettle, table, bed. I am ever thankful for those days that revolutionized my life and future ministry, and I continue to be grateful for the ordinary places and things where God comes and subverts the brute order of the day. I pray to stay alert and recognize those signs, to magnify them, and even—on good days—to be one.

This is Heidi Neumark’s final Voices piece. We’re grateful for her work as a columnist in our pages. —Eds.