



"Have you got anything to eat?": Living Jesus in Venezuela

"Have you got anything to eat?" (Jn. 21, 5): Fernanda Vacas, who arrived in Venezuela in 1993 and is celebrating 30 years of living there, describes her experience of Jesus in Venezuela, and why this has made her want to stay.

Wow, impressive. Jesus is in history, in reality, TODAY, in everyday life. He is walking the streets and living.

He is not the Jesus who calls me to account before communion. He is not the one who always watches over me, even my "thoughts and omissions". Nor is He the one who dies for my sins or bears my guilt. No, that is not my Jesus.

He is a natural and vital Jesus. He is by my side, with different names and accents from many places: HE IS. And He is part of this story, of this reality, of this life. He counts on me. He counts on you. He asks questions, makes suggestions, asks for help, laughs and cries.

I first met Him between "the *mariguncio* and Harry Belafonte" in my mother's kitchen. That is to say, between music and pouting, between humor and love for the everyday. I also found it in the community of Mata de Alcántara: a small village in Extremadura, two sisters of the Sacred Heart, with so much love to give. And between Moratalaz and Aluche, with Feli and a community of sisters in "greater love".

At what point did I forget Him? When did I enclose His naturalness within the walls of institutions? How did I convince myself that learning to love with Him was to comply with religion? Why did I distance myself, become structured, become someone that conforms?

... and that is when Jesus asks me, "Have you got anything to eat?"

This year marks the 30th anniversary of that moment. I was about 24 years old and I was coming to Venezuela and He said to me: "Do you have anything to eat? And immediately you start looking around and you get scared. "Do we have anything to eat? Well, "let us cast our nets to the other side" (Jn 21:6). Because if we really do not have something to eat for the children who die of hunger, if we do not have the will to avoid wars, if we lack the open hand for those in need and the commitment to the wounded along the way, if we do not know how to value differences and care for the Earth that gives us life, then we must cast our nets in another way and learn to live with other rules: those that find bread and fish for all, shelter, work, land, life for all, for the whole universe we are a part of.



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This return to the Jesus of my childhood made me feel alive and offered me a beautiful commitment to people, to life and reality, to history. It was not that I was going to save the world from hunger, war or injustice. Nor that we sisters of the Sacred Heart were doing great projects that would turn history around. The proposal was simply to look around and let ourselves be challenged by small stories, to organize ourselves with people to create small experiences where we could learn to grow and live, where we could learn to "cast our nets" in a different way, where we could make everyday life a banquet. Yes, a banquet like that of Jesus. Without Mass or sacraments, there is no honor or recognition. It is the everyday table, the table of the people, the most normal, small, half-empty table. The one that holds love in its hands and breaks without us realizing it.

In those days - and it is 30 years ago now - another question took me out of all the models and proposals that I thought were part of this decision of "becoming a nun". I was entering the novitiate of the Sisters of the Sacred Heart.

It happened in El Peñón, a fishing village in eastern Venezuela. Emilmar, who was in the formation community with Chiri and Jacquelín at the time, looked me in the eye and said: "Aha, but what is your experience of God?"

Can you imagine my astonishment? "Mom, I don't think we had talked about this before. About Jesus, about the miracles, about that very human sensitivity towards those who suffer the most, the poor, the excluded...we had talked about this and, with your grace and simplicity, we learned every day to act accordingly."

But this experience of God seemed great and unknown to me. I had looked for it, yes: in long and deep prayer, in the spiritual exercises, in self-denial and fulfillment, in the sacraments, in the trappings of religion. That was *the* experience of God.

"Ah, but what is *your* experience of God?".

I don't know if I managed to answer the question at the right time. I do know that this search has stayed with me. And that today, in this historical juncture that is so complex and so difficult in Venezuela, we continue to ask ourselves: What is our experience of God? Where do we find life and meaning? What kind of coexistence can offer us greater happiness?

The big information companies are still determined to show a dying Venezuela and a surrendered people, finished, without an illusion or path, with no way out, without life: without God. And yet, the responses of the people continue to be as vital and as human as my experience of God, who does not renounce His dream of dignity and justice for all, nor does He ever renounce the outstretched hand (not because it is full, but because it is extended), with whom we can continue to grow in love, only existing if in this history and in this heaven - which is the earth - we recognize and rebuild life in abundance for all, for everyone, for everything.



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Again, it is everyday life, reality with its challenges and miracles, that gives us back *the* experience of God. And I recognize that one day, like that woman in the Gospel, I squandered a bottle of perfume and gave all I had to anoint a sister I saw suffering (Mk. 14:3). I also denied Him three times. Or perhaps I surpassed Peter (Mt. 26:75), in my despair at seeing that ambition and selfishness - individual and structural - is robbing us of life, dignity, and happiness. I denied it more than I can confess. And like the bleeding woman, I ran after Jesus's clothes (Mk. 5:28). I knew that by touching just a little corner of our most human goodness, a force would emerge capable of healing this crazy world that is denying itself the beautiful opportunity to live together.

And if there is something that the reality of today's world is calling for, it is the shared table and the life given. It may sound utopian and out of place, but it is, in fact, a very real and everyday experience. And yes, it takes place in so many homes and villages, in so many small manglers without rules or models. Will we manage to turn it into a political and economic strategy, into a peaceful and caring coexistence?

Everyday experiences, close, real and possible. I like to think about how to prepare open tables, where each person can put down what he or she has in hand and share it. The joys and the difficulties, the achievements and the mistakes, the daily food and sometimes the scarcity. A table where one can offer one's own body and receive others. To do so with the pride of being part of something bigger than oneself, and with the humility of those who know that their contribution is important and essential.

It was never about "being perfect, as your Father is perfect" - and I believe that the community of Matthew (Mt. 5:48) will not be angry - when "life is full of little things that give it meaning" (JA Valderrama). It is about looking around ("do you have something to eat?"), sitting at the same table, with the same dream, with the same strategy for living and for living together. Again, it is the love in our hands, which breaks without our realizing it.

A Eucharist without exclusion of race, sins or norms. Communion every day. Because the encounter with the deepest and most sacred part of ourselves is when together we are bread and food, wine and enthusiasm, table and tenderness, invitation and commitment.

Jesus stood up and said: How I longed to prepare this table with you! To fill it with peace, with justice, with love for all. This story is my own body and whoever joins it will have life and life in abundance.

I end with another fascinating question. With it I celebrate life with each and every one of you. With it we can walk together another 30 years.



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Where does Jesus live?

By Iris María Landrón Bau

*Where does the Living Jesus live?
In what town, in what village, in what city?
Who is going to tell me where He lives,
sleeps and wakes up?*

*What beach does He contemplate
when the sun is absent on the horizon?
What tavern does He frequent when He feels thirsty?
What bread does He knead when He is hungry,
what paths does He walk?*

*With whom does He sit and talk
when loneliness seizes Him
on all four sides?
Who does He long for and seek?*

*Who is going to tell me where Christ lives?
In whose eyes have they seen His wounded gaze?*

*Who is going to tell me how to love Him?
How to live Him 24 hours a day and more?*

*Who is going to free Him from the cardboard box
where an outdated and false doctrine keeps Him?*

*Who is going to explain to me how to follow Him TRULY
and enter with Him into the streets of the poor and the marginalized?*

*Who will stand up for Him
when the Pharisees have to be removed from the temple,
to kiss Magdalene and break bread?*

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