

The choice to forgive

The following story of Paulo, who migrated to Sao Paulo in the 1970s from the northeast of Brazil in search of work, is told by Maryknoll lay missionary Joanne Blaney, who's worked in Brazil for over 10 years. Like many others, Paulo was fleeing drought, unproductive soil, and unemployment. He found work as a bricklayer in the mega-city of Sao Paulo and settled in a slum area on the periphery of the city.

In a recent 20-year span, 28 million people left the rural areas of Brazil and moved to large cities, a majority to São Paulo. The "rings of misery" are evident in neighborhoods that lack adequate housing, jobs, transportation, basic health and educational services. Coupled with the negative impacts of globalization and a growing culture of individualism, the socially excluded fend for themselves and are most likely to be victims of violent crime, as well.

With great sacrifice and hard work, Paulo raised five children. He participated in the local Catholic church's base Christian community and with many others struggled to get a health post, a local school, and day care center in the region. He and his church members took seriously that "action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world is a constitutive dimension of preaching the Gospel" (Justice in the World, Synod of Bishops, 1971). They actively worked for respect for human rights and denounced injustices.

In urban areas, fighting over scarce resources accompanied the huge growth in population over such a short time. Violence and unemployment dramatically increased. Mario, Paulo's youngest son, spent years looking for a job. One day, he arrived home, badly beaten by the local police, having been caught in a conflict between the police and a group of youth accused of dealing drugs.

After years of growing despair at the violence in the neighborhood as well as police involvement in drug trafficking, Paulo had reached his limit. He raged with anger at the sight of his son and, at the same time, became consumed by wanting the "justice of vengeance" on the police officer who had beaten Mario. In Paulo's words, "I couldn't seem to control the anger and desire for vengeance in my heart, not just against the police officer but all those who had destroyed the peace in our neighborhood. I wanted punishment and retaliation. Over and over again, I saw how our community had become filled with fear, not just of the violence but fear of speaking out against it."

This fear and anger were destroying the fabric of his family as well as the society around them. Paulo felt guilty that he couldn't seem to live out the gospel values of forgiveness and reconciliation that seemed so disconnected from the pain and horror of daily life. Like the disciples locked in the upper room, Paulo felt locked in himself and a fearful, silent community where the world was divided into "us" and "them."

Paulo became ill and lost his job. He volunteered at the local day center, of which his wife was the director. He remembers the day clearly when Cassio came to volunteer at the day care. Paulo recognized him from the neighborhood. He got to know Cassio as a man, a father like himself who worried about his family and the violence and who also wanted to do something to make the world a better place. Only later did he learn that Cassio was the

father of the police officer who had beaten his son some years before.

Through his relationship with Cassio, Paulo was able to see a bigger picture – not just a world of “us, the victims” and “them, the aggressors” but rather one, in which, in many ways, we are all victims and offenders. Paulo was able to see the world with different eyes and saw how, in nurturing his feelings of anger, fear, and desire for revenge; he had lost some of his courage and energy to work for justice.

Paulo was at Cassio’s side when Cassio received the news that his son, the police officer, had been assassinated. In the faith community at the funeral, Paulo experienced the spirit at work like the violent, rushing powerful wind of Pentecost. It was there that he made a conscious choice to forgive: not to excuse the violence, but to develop another narrative to live by – a narrative of solidarity that recognizes that we are all truly brothers and sisters in Christ. A narrative that helps him to face the suffering and violence be outraged by it, work to change it and, at the same time, to keep a compassionate heart. Paulo today actively works in his community and is a witness to these gospel values.

Nonviolent conflict resolution is something that a new president and congress can begin to invest in as a means toward world peace. Read more in [Loving our neighbor in a shrinking world](#), a resource developed by Maryknoll missionaries who witness the global impact of U.S. political and economic decisions. Through this resource, Maryknoll missionaries encourage voters in the 2008 elections to scrutinize candidates’ policy proposals through the lens of those who, both in the U.S. and overseas, lack basic necessities, endure the source of racism, live with gender-based discrimination or feel the immediate impact of climate change.

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