

**November 30, 2014 – First Sunday of Advent**  
***Prepared by Larry Rich, former Maryknoll lay missionary, Peru***

Isaiah 63:16-17, 19; Psalm 80:2-3, 15-16, 18-19; First Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:33-37

*The following reflection, written by former lay missionary Larry Rich, was published in [A Maryknoll Liturgical Year: Reflections on the Readings for Year B](#), available from Orbis Books.*

On the one hand, today's readings articulate the hope that God will enter human history directly to save us in our time of great trouble—even if it is to save us from ourselves. On the other hand, there is the caution that when such an event should occur, we had better be prepared for the moment of “apocalypse”—from the Greek for “the lifting of the veil”—the moment of truth. Hope and getting ready: two elements we have long associated with Advent.

Despite the fact that popular culture and our own sometimes childlike religious mindset may tend to imagine divine intervention as something occurring at the end of time and perhaps in a very fantastic way, there are less spectacular instances of revelation in the here-and-now. These tend to happen in the midst of genuine crises; and we will understand them only if we are prepared to see them. However, as many missionaries would attest after serving in places where it can feel like instability is the norm, our vision remains obscured by the veil unless we are open to truth appearing in unlikely places. In times of crisis, they have learned, it is the poor who help us to open our eyes.

In 1992 in Lima, Peru, I witnessed what I would say qualifies as such a moment. I worked at a church human rights center during the harsh years of an unconventional war between the Shining Path, a group given to terrorist tactics, and the de facto government dictatorship with death squads. We used to talk about being caught between “two devils.” As Peru's Truth and Reconciliation Commission later confirmed, each side killed some 30,000 people. By 1992, there was a pervasive sense of desperation over whether the violence would ever end. We heard stories daily of brutality by both the military and the Shining Path. It did not seem totally inconceivable that Lima would eventually end falling like Phnom Penh—with the Shining Path taking on the role of the Khmer Rouge. After over a decade in which many good people had died, we spoke about having way too many more martyrs.

Despite death threats and assassinations, many community leaders in the poorest barrios, especially the women, carried on with efforts to improve the lives of their neighbors. One of these was Maria Elena Moyano, who led an association of comedores populares—communal kitchens where people could gather to get a nutritious meal and children could get milk. These comedores were sometimes the target of terrorist bombings, and Maria Elena criticized the hypocrisy of the Shining Path's alleged people's revolution. On February 15, 1992, Maria Elena herself was assassinated by the Shining Path, her body blown to pieces by dynamite.

What happened next was as clear a breakthrough of hope in the midst of darkness as I have ever seen. At Maria Elena's open-air funeral Mass in her poor part of town, there was great tension—soldiers ringed the area. Everyone feared reprisal from the Shining Path for what was seen as an act of defiance. As a result, many of the few hundred people present were human rights and aid workers from outside the barrio.

It was said at the Mass that they tried to scatter her remains to the four winds with explosives, but instead they sowed seeds of life.

When the funeral procession began the two-mile or so march by foot to the local cemetery. As it passed homes and side streets, people began to pour out to swell the ranks until by the time it arrived at the burial spot it numbered some 30,000 people and stretched as far down the road as one could see. Courage was being shown to the rest of Peruvian society by the marchers, mostly people without means and vulnerable in plain sight to the “thousand eyes” with which the Shining Path claimed to menacingly watch.

There followed a public outcry in Peru that had not been heard in all those years. The news media had as guests and interviewees on many of its programs community leaders, especially the women from the barrio organizations. It was a rare moment in which the secular media seemed to have become the voice of the voiceless. It was as if middle and upper class Peruvians had perhaps begun to learn wisdom from those never considered important. Maybe the strength that kept the country from dissolving into chaos was found in the previously ignored efforts in poor communities to sustain life.

Within the same year, the leader of the Shining Path was captured, and remains in prison to this day. His cult-like revolutionary organization fell apart. The government minister responsible for the death squads joined him in the same jail some years later. The dictatorial president has been imprisoned since 2007 for human rights violations.

The barrio organizations continue to this day, resilient in the face of challenges in affirming the dignity of all. Women’s voices are heard more clearly now as Peruvians chart their future—for those who have ears to hear.

As we pass through our own kind of unending Advent of widespread unemployment and unprecedented economic inequality, are we prepared to see hope and the Spirit’s truth in people and places where we have never looked before?

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