

Bearing Witness, Panning for Justice – A Reflection

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In the midst of a multitude of words, maps and statistics surrounding the two weeks of the United Nations Forum on Indigenous Issues, where can one find an oasis for quiet reflection on the deeper reality that the words, maps and statistics represent? None other than an interfaith chapel on the corner across the street from the UN where a day-long experience of sight, sound and ritual focused on the results of extractive abuses and the worldwide witness of those who have been disappeared or killed resisting this exploitation of Earth and human life.

Those of us entering this sacred space were invited to join in a sequence of experiences as our time and interest would permit: a visual journey through the consequences of the 15th century “Doctrine of Discovery”; documentary stories of personal witness; proclamations of interdenominational church statements; and a concluding ritual commemorating those who have borne witness with their lives.

Much to the shame of Christians, the 16th century “Doctrine of Discovery” endowed European explorers with the “right” to “discover” lands, to lay claim to them and the resources therein, and to subdue and enslave the non-Christian inhabitants in the name of propagating Christianity. In the serenity of the chapel space, the visual leap from then until now exposed images and stories of land and people raped, hereditary natural resources stolen, and air polluted by industrial detonations and toxic haze. It seems that the Doctrine is alive and well today.

Interspersed among these images we heard shocking testimony of witnesses – both indigenous peoples and investigative reporters – who brought the reality of these travesties into chilling focus. We saw children wading in poisonous muck to pan for bits of gold left in mine waste. We heard an elder speak of his contamination from mercury exposure. We watched as a family attempted to visit the tiny cemetery of their ancestors located on a mountaintop and dwarfed and surrounded by an encroaching strip mine. And we listened aghast to a woman describe her beating and gang rape by mine security guards.

Proclamations of several church groups’ documents – the World Council of Churches, the Ecumenical Conference on Mining, the international alliance of Catholic development agencies – offered glimmers of hope that Christians can indeed speak out in solidarity with indigenous peoples. These statements denounce the Doctrine of Discovery, challenge churches to engage in theological reflection upon our complicity in supporting concepts of dominion and ownership, and call upon governments to ensure that their policies and laws are consonant with the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and to require accountability and transparency from extractive industries operating within their national borders.

In a moving conclusion to the day, we participated in a solemn commemoration naming those who have been disappeared or killed because they sought to raise awareness and accountability of mining abuses in their communities. Julia Esquivel's poem "I Am No Longer Afraid of Death" provided a somber yet sacred accompaniment to the photos displayed on the altar and the names flashed upon the screen of those who have given all for the life of their communities:

*I am no longer afraid of death,
I know well its dark and cold corridors
Leading to life. ...
I am afraid of my fear
And even more of the fear of others,
Who do not know where they are going,
Who continue clinging
To what they think is life
Which we know to be death!
I live each day to kill death;
I die each day to give birth to life,
And in this death of death,
I die a thousand times
And am reborn another thousand
Through that love
From my People,
Which nourishes hope!*

The ritual closed with an invitation to write in the book on the altar our personal stories or a reflection on what we have seen and heard – an opportunity for each of us to first bear witness with our words and then, as Jesus insisted, to “go and do likewise.”