

The Egg Man, Missionary

In 1988 when I left the U.S. to go to Mexico, there was a “missioning” ceremony for those of us who were going. In the homily, we were referred to as “missionaries.” There was something I didn’t like then about being called a missionary, and that dislike has only deepened over the years. The reason is that I receive much more than I give and have been “missioned to” by those very people I set out to help. The real missionaries are the people I meet.

Recently, I have been fortunate to be “missioned to” by those I have met in India. One of those people, in particular, is someone for whom I would like to say a few things. It is because his story is inspiring and puts more clarity on the world situation than any statistic. His story speaks to what is important in life. It speaks to missioning.

I met Santosh about eight years ago while teaching English. He had a knack for picking it up quickly. Since then, I have talked with him innumerable times, visited his home often, gone on short trips with him and enjoyed his company immensely. He is now in his late 20’s.

There are five people in his family. They live on a crowded, busy street in a small house with two rooms and a stairwell to the roof. The bedrooms are multi-purpose: kitchen and dining room. There is not enough room for each person to have their own bed, so they share beds.

There is no air-conditioning and no window in the house. Santosh partly supports his family by tutoring younger students for 10 hours daily. He sometimes rises early in the morning to start his tutoring classes before 7 a.m., and he continues tutoring throughout the day until about 6 p.m. when he opens his egg stand on a main thoroughfare. Often he does not have time to eat during the day. He closes his egg stand around 9:30 p.m., goes home to eat a simple meal and then goes to bed. I’ve visited his egg stand on several occasions. One can have a hard-boiled egg or an omelet. If someone, who has no money, comes for an egg, one is provided free of charge.

Santosh’s brother and father also work to support the family. His sister will get married in a few months, and he, as the older brother, is responsible for the dowry, a heavy burden for a poor family.

In his comings and goings, he often meets people poorer than himself: those who sleep on the pathways; children who scavenge for plastic, metal, and other marketable items. As often as he can, he buys something for them, arranging for a bigger celebration on days that call for it. He buys them fruit, cookies, blankets and other items.

For years Santosh has been coming to talk once a week. We talk about “the trials and tribulations” of being poor. People take advantage of the poor; the poor get sick more often than those with money, and there’s never enough money for the necessities of life, like food. We talk, mostly I listen, and there is a common thread: this is my lot in life; I’m making the best of it because I have no other option.

He has taught me a lot over the years. In addition to feeling sad because of Santosh’s “lot” in life, I feel proud to know such a man. Our backgrounds have little in common; I have much more education than he does. I am “wealthy” in comparison to him and his family. After talking and listening, I sometimes become angry because of the inequities and injustices he and many others like him have to suffer, yet he never seems angry; he just resigned.

He and his family have been helped, but it is never “enough,” and there is always the next crisis: a sickness, a debt, an accident or something that breaks down.

The “developed” countries...the underdeveloped countries; the rich...the poor; the healthy...the sick; those who have...those who don’t. The starkness between the two sides is shocking; the chasm growing daily.

This is Santosh’s lot; he has no other option.

He shares his most precious gift with me: his friendship, and this is why I am not the real missionary; it is Santosh.

He is a natural teacher. His students don’t know what a treasure they have in him. He educates them for a pittance, but it supports him and his family.

When he was 12, the thatched roof of his mud-brick house gave way and was leaking. He awoke to his mother’s tears. She didn’t know what to do to stop the water from coming into the house. At that time, there was no bathroom in the house. At that moment, Santosh decided it was up to him to do something.

Now the family has a “better” house, yet it would not be called such by American standards. Since that rainy night, Santosh hasn’t stopped making things better: for

himself, his family, his students and me. From the days when he went to work at the age of eight with his mother in the fields earning twenty rupees a day picking vegetables, he is now tutoring children who attend some of the best schools in Patna. It is his mission. He is happy educating. Is he appreciated by all he helps? I doubt it.

But Santosh, the Egg Man, is a man with a mission – a missionary.