

*Sympathy is offered to Pastor Brian upon the death of his mother, Gladys Rude. Gladys was a strong supporter of world mission for many years.*

*Gifts of financial support to compensate Pastor Brian for his unscheduled trip back to Canada to say farewell to his mother and to attend her funeral, may be forwarded to the Synod, with a note designating the gift as "Rude – emergency compassionate travel".*

## MERRY . . . ???

Thursday night I made it to the last of the *Coro Nacional* Christmas concerts, at the *Teatro Nacional*. I had hoped to go earlier, with the option of repeating, if I found it worthy of such a repeat performance. Alas, real life kept interrupting, and that didn't happen.

My friend Jesús had dropped by my house that afternoon, so I had invited him to join me. He declined, declaring forthrightly that he doesn't like Christmas carols. "Even if they were to sing 'Happy Birthday' to you?", I queried, tongue-in-cheek (well--and don't be surprised--his birthday *is* on Dec. 24 . . . so a bit early, still). I went alone, which was probably best. I'm often able to absorb and reflect at a more satisfying level if I'm alone (no offense, Jesús!).

Getting there was at least as much of a challenge as I'd feared. Snarled, snarling traffic, aggravated by major road construction, came close to breaking my resolve more than once. Two ambulance teams carrying off an unfortunate former motor-cyclist didn't help. Once "downtown", my attitude shifted to Christmas mode. Whether I made it to the concert late--or not at all--no longer mattered. These chaotic streets smothered me with the Christmas spirit of *El Salvador*, "The Saviour". Three vehicles desperate to fit into the space required by a single vehicle is the norm on these streets. Squeezing through these plugged streets ensured that my dirty vehicle got a thorough cleaning by the intimate crowd of pedestrians--shoppers and bus commuters--scrunching past me (do you have to be able to move to be considered a pedestrian?). These anarchic streets, where one can expect to be assaulted and robbed, or worse, at any moment, should be avoided at all costs, conventional wisdom keeps reminding us (actually, it was a good friend who got robbed that day, while enjoying lunch at a less-risky diner).

I did make it to the concert, about 20 minutes late. I got a plushly-furnished "box" all to myself, in fact; indeed I had an ample selection of "boxes". I made it just in time for most of Rutter's Requiem Mass. Indeed, the concert *was* worth a repeat. There was much that was challenging (a bit too much so for Rutter's tenors, at times, I fear), much that was charming, much that was compelling, much that was cheering, much that was celestial. Much of the music was in my blood, in my bones, in my vocal chords. Much of it was not. Much was new and fresh, especially the creative arrangements of the familiar. This National Choir has improved remarkably over the years, from what I recall from my earlier years here. I don't believe it's simply a matter of lowered expectations. Their musicality now impresses--musical polish, musical interpretation, musical energy. I wondered if I should check into joining them.

The time came to leave this ethereal elegance (choral and architectural), to throw myself back into the unholy Christmas streets of San Salvador, where the vendors' chorus urgently serenaded the shoppers--not for an hour or two, but incessantly, all day and most of the night. It didn't take much to reach--to immerse myself in--the mayhem. Within two steps of the *Teatro Nacional* in a direct line

toward my parked car, I could snatch up remarkable deals: Gucci underwear at \$1 or 2 each, an enthralling selection of Revlon cosmetics at rock-bottom prices; tomatoes, onions, peppers, papaya . . . With a bit of a detour, and considerable hustle and bustle among the hyper merchants and the desperate shoppers, I could find anything I wanted. The streetlights blinked off, but the crowd didn't bat an eye, foraging, forging ahead instinctively in the darkness. A gentle, diffuse tropical breeze soothed us all, producing a calming effect in spite of the rabble.

It hit me that I had almost been tricked--seduced--into assuming that Christmas had been happening--that Jesus (the Bethlehem one) had been--inside that elegant, celestial National Theatre, where, as reverent, awe-filled, silent listeners, we had been transported to heavenly heights by three dozen angelic voices.

Back on the street--back to earth--I was brought back to my theological senses. Here, on the streets, is where Jesus was wandering ("incarnate", we like to call it--sounds more sophisticated in theological circles). The "Little Town of Bethlehem" we had heard about--meditated upon--in that nativity-scene aura inside the theatre, was not lying still, in a deep and dreamless sleep (especially not during census-taking in Bethlehem, and certainly not during Christmas shopping season in downtown San Salvador). If you have ever hosted Salvadorans for Christmas, you may now understand why "Silent Night, Holy Night", tucked away in someone's peaceful home, surrounded merely by family, singing carols dreamily beside a cozy hearth, under the delightful tree lights, hardly fills their nostalgic longings for some Christmas spirit. Not even a folksy Bruce Cockburn Christmas will satisfy.

A couple years ago, I proposed in my Christmas musings--not very convincingly, evidently--that "Christmas" be changed, not to "holidays", but to "Jesus-mas", focusing on the humanity of God incarnate. This year, as everyone is offending each other with their Christmas greetings, I'd like to be even more offensive, offering another shift--not Jesus-Mass (which might make us think, with the Latins, that we are referring to the "missa", i.e., Wikipedia: "The term "Mass" is derived from the [Late Latin](#) word *missa* (dismissal), a word used in the concluding formula of Mass in Latin: "[Ite, missa est](#)" ("Go; it is the dismissal")), As Pope Francis intuits, "church"--the body of Christ--happens not in the cathedral, nor even in the chapel, but on the street, among the masses. So perhaps "mass" should be changed to "horde", to avoid any confusion . . . thus, no longer "Jesus-mass", but "Jesus-horde".

I wandered those chaotic downtown streets of our Saviour, *El Salvador*, for some time, absorbing the Christmas--no, the Jesus-horde--spirit, pondering all these things in my heart.

From my horde-congested street to yours, I wish you all a very merry "Jesus-horde".

Hoping you don't get trampled,  
Brian

Rev. Brian Rude, DD, pastor/missionary of the ABT Synod, "*En Misión con El Salvador* / "In Mission with El Salvador"