

Neerology

Ramiro Trejo
1938 - 2009



Ramiro Trejo was born in Crystal City, Texas on 18 March 1938. Ramiro was the second of seven children born to Juan Trejo and Adelaida Ramon Trejo. In the early years of Ramiro's life, the Trejo family was sustained by migrant work in southern Texas. His memories of those early years were a collection of vague memories of camps with large, grey buildings, endless rows of green plants and large canvas trucks; also a poverty that he didn't realize, because what the family lacked in material possessions was clearly compensated for by love and familial closeness.

His first memory of a real home was that of his grandmother's house in Eagle Pass, Texas on Medina Street. Eagle Pass was directly across the border from Piedras Negras, Mexico. He vividly described the fenced property, the large front porch and the flowers dotting the parched landscape of her home. He shared stories of children running to play on a nearby hill that overlooked the Rio Grande and bringing back live treasures to the dismay of their mother. His world was Spanish-speaking, culturally uniform and, until attending classes in a local school, neither English, nor non-Mexican Americans were known to him.

In the mid-nineteen forties, Juan, at the invitation of his brother, took his family to Archibald, Ohio. It was a chance for a better and more stable life for the entire family; but in Ohio there was no Spanish spoken among Ramiro's school chums, culture was more diversified and it was snow and winter sledding in place of climbing barefoot up the hill overlooking the Rio Grande. His growing years in Ohio were characterized by opportunity, mixed with change and adaptation and early experiences of coping with harsh discrimination because of nationality. Thus, the only place Spanish was spoken was at home. Ramiro began to feel bitterness and resentment toward those who treated him and his family with disdain and thus, held little loyalty to the school he attended, nor the community he was reared in: becoming a victim of the very prejudice that placed him and his family on the margin of society.

Prompted in part by his bitterness and wishing to explore beyond the horizon of his small town, Ramiro entered the Air Force in 1960. Basic training brought Ramiro back to Texas and mixed him with a variety of young men of similar age but varied experience. He spoke often of his two friends from New York, Bob and Leigh. Both were Catholics and it was through them that he became loosely associated with Catholicism. While Ramiro was baptized and culturally Catholic, his religious education was a smattering of piety, mixed with a stern Mennonite evangelizing in his youth. His motivation for attending Catholic Church services was not too lofty. He said, "It was either pull K.P. or attend Sunday service of one's faith. I was more anti-K.P. than anti-Church, so I went to Mass."

He vividly recalled the witness of his friend Leigh, leading the Catholic boys through the Our Father and the Hail Mary every night during basic training. He admired his friend, who even though

ridiculed, would witness to his faith through public prayer. In the darkened barracks, while praying, he knew that something was missing in his life.

Ramiro's life-long love of Judaism began with his befriending of a young Jewish boy named Michael. He would attend services as an observer, fascinated by the Jewish chants, the color of Hanukkah and the expectation of Passover. In all of the ritual, he forged ties with the Christ whom he knew somehow fitted in his life. Inside himself he felt so much unrest and upheaval. He took long walks alone and prayed to know the truth. On one such walk, he realized that all he was doing was thinking and expecting God to drop a ton of faith upon him. On that night, he took his first step on his walk with Jesus: he decided to become an active seeker. He sought out the base Chaplain, Fr. Shannon, and began pouring over Catholic literature and was confirmed in the Holy Spirit on 21 May 1963. He fully embraced the faith that was seeded in his person through Baptism on 26 August 1938.

After being honorably discharged from the service, the next step in his faith journey was a discerned desire for discipleship and service through the priesthood. In the fall of 1965, Ramiro was admitted to St. Lawrence College at Mt. Calvary, Wisconsin. Adaptation and change was still the order of the day for him. He was 27 years of age and a veteran, and it was back to basic training once again! Werner Wolf, the dean of St. Francis Hall, likes to recall how he would laugh when he told one nearly his same age to go to bed while he went over to the friary for a beer. While Ramiro did well in studies, it was still another adjustment and challenge for him. He described his two years at Calvary, however, as the happiest years of his life. He used to say that it was not that he was unhappy elsewhere; but on the Hill he found a God-infused outlook and direction to life, and a special way of loving. It was at Calvary where our two paths converged and we became fast friends. My life was immeasurably enriched by his personal faith-journey and the newly found freedom in and with Christ.

In his inaugural speech as the first black president of South Africa, Nelson Mandela, said:

It is our light not our darkness that frightens us...As we let our light shine we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.

In a uniquely beautiful way, Ramiro, like Jesus, called others to greater freedom. He seemed to stand in contradistinction to a queried "Why?" to a position of "Why not?" Ramiro never drew his knowledge of the world and people from dogmas and laws, but from an intuitive feeling for others, from compassion, from "being with." He found this in his personal walk with Jesus the Lord.

Ramiro entered the Capuchin Community in August of 1967 and professed his first vows on 18 August 1968. He confided to me that novitiate was worse than basic training because at least in basic training there were fixed hours; in novitiate, it was 24/7! He told me that he was glad that I did not enter with him because my big mouth would have gotten us both thrown out. Politely, I asked him how he managed to get through the year. He said, "By the skin of my teeth." "That's a lot of tongue-biting," I retorted.

During the years after the Second Vatican Council, the sweeping changes ushered in by the request for *aggiornamento* caused a great deal of turmoil and confusion within the church, and certainly within the order. Into this milieu, Ramiro was sent to Crown Point, Indiana to continue his studies for priestly ministry. He quickly caught himself up in clamor for change and the restlessness within resurfaced and led him to take his walk with the Lord into the Vice Province of Central Canada. He requested a transfer and was accepted in and was approved to remain there by the General Definitory on 13 October 1970.

So began his six year walk with our brothers from Central Canada. During this sojourn, Ramiro pronounced perpetual vows on 14 September 1974, and was ordained a deacon on 27 September 1975. In January of 1976, Ramiro requested and was approved for transfer back to the Province of St. Joseph. In their permission for the transfer, the General Minister noted that this was the second time for a transfer and hoped that “Brother Ramiro will settle down in the province.” He was ordained to the priesthood on 20 August 1977. But settling down for this itinerant was never meant to be.

In the transfer communications, Ramiro is described by then-vice provincial, John Corriveau, as generous, and very person-oriented, a man of faith and a pleasure to live with, in the community. He also adds that he is flighty. He further asserts, somewhat prophetically, that “Ramiro will be loved by his people, enjoyed by his brothers, and be the death of those ministers who like order and efficiency.”

This will describe the ensuing years of his presence with us in the Province of St. Joseph. His ministerial assignments seldom lasted for more than two years and when they did, it was only after a few changes of location within that assignment. There were requests for incardination and even an attempt to transfer to the Congregation of the Holy Redeemer! But it would be remiss, not to remind ourselves of the incredible joy he brought to our lives with his zany sense of humor; and the inexhaustible depth he brought to us in his preaching and conversation. Few preachers can match his graphic simplicity and simultaneous profundity and depth. “Every brother is a gift of God” the Constitutions remind us, and it is always true.

In listing his long list of assignments for the provincial files, he wrote a little note: “P.S. If this information is ever used for a funeral homily, please tell the truth about me.” What is the truth? Perhaps it is as simple as knowing that you were migrant-born and migratory ever thereafter. That gives insight but doesn’t touch the complexity of the total truth. Perhaps it is the wonderful mystery at the heart of all of us. Remembering an instance back at Calvary helps me to know a little of his truth: he took me by the arm and led me down to the basement of St. Francis Hall to our student recreation room, called the “Sharp Shack”. He went to the record player and while scratching some of the surface of the record, he finally alighted on a piece called, “The Fire Bell Polka.” He interlocked our arms and swung us both around like whirling dervishes to the music of the polka. We laughed in joy-filled abandon. To have known Ramiro’s truth is to have heard the music of his heart and entered the dance of his joy. He once said, so beautifully that “explaining the Hill, faith, God, happiness, and the Capuchins is something beyond me — it is as difficult as explaining love.” I might want to add his name to the list of unexplainable....it’s as difficult as explaining love.

In his beautiful funeral homily, provincial minister, John Celichowski, said: “There are many worse ways to leave this world than how our brother Ramiro did. A little more than a week ago, he was suffering with diabetes, kidney failure and an infected aortic valve. The heart surgery he was willing to risk in order to get a shot of a little more life on this earth had been called off because it was too risky. Ramiro was looking at spending the remainder of his days in hospice care. Then he decided to walk. With several nurses in the room, he swung his feet over the side of his bed and announced, ‘I want to walk with Jesus!’ The nurses rushed over to him and eased him back in bed. With that, Ramiro died.”

Ramiro’s walk with Jesus began so many years ago. We were blessed that he took that walk in our company. I know he will be waiting for me at heaven’s gate and I am certain we will interlock our arms and in dervish-like abandon find joy ever after.

— Daniel J. Fox