

In the fall of 1989, I was assigned to a small parish in East Los Angeles. It was my first real assignment as a priest. It was also the peak of the violence among youth gangs in L.A. Within the boundaries of this urban parish there were ten active gangs: Clarence Street Locos, the Mob Crew, Pico Gardens, Primera Flats, Cuatro Flats. Even today, as I say those names, I feel a chill and a small voice in the back of my mind wonders if it is safe to say those names aloud. During the day the many different police entities controlled the city, but from 9 pm to 4 am, the gangs owned the streets. Or more accurately each gang controlled the two or three blocks of its “hood,” short for neighborhood. From time to time one or another of the gangs would sell drugs—usually crack cocaine, which was popular and cheap in those days. But they didn’t like to sell because, as they would say, it made them feel dirty. So they would only sell when they needed to buy weapons—pistols, shot guns, even automatic rifles. In those days a pistol illegally bought would cost about \$500.

Who were these youths that made up the gangs? Well, mostly they were the 14 to 17-year-old sons of our parishioners. Sometimes girls, but mostly boys. Sociologists could describe the family, community and national dynamics that give rise to

youth gangs, but simply they were the generation that got caught between two cultures when their parents immigrated and practically locked out of both societies. Their first language was English, and though they could understand most of what they parents—usually just mothers—said, though they could not write Spanish; it was a foreign language to them. And pathways into U.S. society were mostly closed to them. In the parish office was a high school girl Susana, who answered the phone on Saturday and Sunday. She was quick and very smart and charming, and she had managed to stay distant from the gangs. I asked her about her plans after high school. She had none. I was shocked because she was perhaps the brightest young person in the parish. “What about college?” I asked. She looked at me puzzled, and said simply and without emotion, “That’s for white people.”

Looking at the gang kids you could not tell one group from another, except for the tattoos that covered their arms, necks and faces: TMC, CUATRO, CLS, PRIMERA, PICO. All these kids had grown up with a few hundred yards of each other, played sports together and gone to the same elementary school. But when they turned thirteen or fourteen, both the attraction and the threat of the gang was so strong that few could resist. Suddenly

childhood playmates turned into mortal enemies. Their ideology, the myth of their existence, is that they were protecting their “hood” their neighborhood. The enigma for us outsiders was that they were protecting it from other young people who looked just like them, talked like them, ate the same food, and attended the same parish church as children. Then suddenly they were mortal enemies and actively carried out “missions” to protect their neighborhood or to expand it by another block.

In the two years I served in that parish, we buried fifteen young people who had died in gang violence. And it made no sense. It was as though the best youth of our families chose sides as though they were playing a softball game, but then fired away at one another with guns. Of course, with each death, the loyalty to one’s own gang deepened and so did the hatred of the others.

When Jesus speak of neighbors and enemies, and of the urgency for His followers to love their enemies, I think He was questioning this whole crazy and sinful human dynamic of dividing up into neighbors and enemies. We see it everywhere. Political parties, national boundaries, rival economic systems,

racial differences, religious disputes, and on and on. Many of them make little more sense than the gang divisions of East LA, and the labels always generalize away the particular individual differences that make us more human. You might describe yourself as a dedicated free-trade capitalist and faithful Republican, but that doesn't explain why you serve breakfast to the homeless at Blanchet House three mornings each week. Our real identities can only be obscured by the rival labels we use. I think this is coming close to the real presence of original sin.

It must not be this way for my followers, says the Lord, and there are some heroic examples of love of enemies.

In 2007, a man who made milk deliveries within the Amish community of Pennsylvania, he was not Amish himself, entered a one-room, Amish schoolhouse and shot ten little girls, killing five. He then killed himself. Their grief, as you can imagine, was enormous; continues still to this day. But what they didn't do was make an enemy of the killer. Rather they collected money to help the widow of the shooter and her three children. Others attended the funeral of the shooter and tried to console his wife and children, hugging them at the burial.

In the mid 1990's Algeria was in the midst of a civil war. Some characterized the fighting as a religious war, but it had more to do with the long history of colonization that had so affected that nation. In the midst of the war, in the mountains outside of Algiers was a monastery, The Cistercian Monastery of Our Lady of Atlas. The monks' life was a simple one of prayer and ordinary work in their garden. Their outreach to the local community was to provide a simple clinic where neighbors could come for primary care. The rival sides in the war pushed the monks to align with one or the other group, but they declined. They would continue to offer first aid to whomever came to their clinic and would not participate in any way in the fighting. Neither would leave, because their whole point in being there was to be a peaceful, prayerful presence, and to universally treat all as their brothers. The threats and pressure from the rival groups increased, and then on March 27, 1996, they were abducted. Their bodies were discovered that May.

Father de Charge, one of the monks who was killed, wrote in his diary, "When the time comes, I would like to be able to have that lucidity which would permit me to ask forgiveness of God and of my brothers in humanity, forgiving wholeheartedly, at the same time, whoever my killer might be... And you, too,

my last-minute friend, who would not have known what you were doing; yes, for you too I say this thank-you and this adieu—to commend you to the God in whose face I see yours. And may he grant to us to find each other, happy thieves, in Paradise, if it please God, the Father of us both.

In the Talmud, a traditional commentary on Jewish scripture, the flight from the Egyptians through the Red Sea is recounted:

“The Israelites were able to cross safely, but when the Egyptians follow with their soldiers and heavy chariots, they become stuck in the mud and as the waters com rolling back over them, they drown in the sea. At that point the angels break out into song, they are so happy, so relieved that the Israelites are finally safe. All that God had done for the Israelites has finally paid off, the Israelites are free at last. God see the angels rejoicing, but God is not pleased. “My creatures are drowning in the sea,” says God, “and you sing a song! The Egyptians too are my children.”

Let us pray that we might come to see the world more and more as God does, without the divisions imposed by our sinfulness.