

# Along the Canal

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## Homily: The Land Divided, The World United

Someday soon a gifted scientist will invent a car that can drive up and over buildings. I know this because we struggle to provide our innermost desires... a faster, simpler, more innovative solution to the inconveniences of life. I am thinking of how much easier it might be to simply float over the structures that block the way to Pacific Avenue when taking Country Club across town from the freeway. Think of the minutes we could save, think of the mileage, and the gas.

Maybe that is not the best argument for a floating car. But what if an expedient perpendicular line, what if traveling as the crow flies, could save almost 8,000 miles on a journey? How big of an investment might we make to spare ourselves a long, arduous, and above all else dangerous route? That question was posed when Panama was still a republic of Colombia, long before separating itself in 1903 through rebellion. At first it was the French who wanted the shortcut which required cutting a land mass in half. Imagine the hubris in the late 1800s of deciding to carve a byway for ships along the isthmus that later became the Republic of Panama.

As Tyler Jones has written in *The Panama Canal: a Brief History*, "Very few human endeavors have ever conceded to change the face of the planet on which we live as did the successful completion of the interoceanic Panama Canal in 1914 by the United States. Such projects before this time had only managed to build up or tear down existing geographical features - the pyramids of Egypt, the Great Wall of China, the trans-continental railroads - but none had ever even aspired to accomplish something so incredulous as splitting the continents. This the United States did and more - the Panama Canal was soon to become a vital link for the entire world."

Columbia finally gave their permission in 1878 and in 1882 the work began. The first attempt failed due to the three M's: mosquitoes, malaria, and mismanagement. Our first attempt at a canal through Nicaragua also failed due to financial woes, and here is where the story gets interesting. The French had a lease on the land in Panama through 1903, which coincidentally is the year that the Panamanians rebelled and won their independence from Columbia. The French needed a buyer for their failed project and found one in the United States. We did begin by trying to sign an agreement with the Colombian government, but our interests were never met and soon we took an alternate approach.

"What happened next is described by Theodore Roosevelt in *History of the Panama Canal* by Ira Bennett as: Panama wanted to sell the land to America, but Colombia refused. Panama planned a revolution, and Roosevelt sent a battleship, the Nashville to protect "American lives in Panama", which meant that no other country was going to land on the isthmus (invasion by land was impossible because of the impenetrable

Panamanian jungle). Panama declared its independence from Colombia, and America recognized their declaration, else Colombia would have reconquered the area, endangering American interests. Philippe Bunau-Varilla was made American ambassador for Panama by telegram after the independence, and consequently wrote up a treaty between Panama and America with Senator John Hay - the Hay-Bunau-Varilla treaty - which was ratified by the new Panamanian Government in 1903, and by the American Senate in early 1904."

A faster, simpler, more innovative solution.

And there began our complex relationship with the Republic of Panama.

### **Homily: The Relief of McDonald's**

Whenever I return to Panama to visit my family I am always struck by the ongoing tension between brash Western materialism and the relentless rainforest. I remember my first visit after the invasion - meaning the U.S. Military action to remove Manuel Noriega in 1989. My aunt was driving me through Panama City, showing me buildings that had been attacked and abandoned... already succumbing to the surging growth of the land. The newly growing trees were mightier than the gun shocked walls. I had faith that the forest, in time, would persevere.

On this journey, as always, I was struck by the rows of garish billboards all along the highways - staccato interruptions of the lush landscape, flashing by at high speeds. I joked that our companies didn't even bother with the usual insinuating advertising, worrying its way into unspoken fears and desires. Most of these boards were simply brand names, larger than life. No pictures, fancy fonts, or gimmicks required.

I sat easy in my judgment of yet one more American invasion - a cultural, economic, materialistic invasion... worming our own excesses and greed into the lives of those whom we had already done so much to oppress. I was comfortable in my righteousness; comfortable in my disdain for PriceClub (which is CostCo's Panamanian arm), for Citibank, and for Kentucky Fried Chicken. I, of course, wanted nothing to do with these things. There is nothing quite so comfortable as being on vacation in a place that you sort of know, and dearly miss, and wanting nothing more than the things you love best to be present in your day to day experience.

I of course went to Panama looking for mangos, guineps, patacones, and the rhythms of Salsa. And when the opportunity arose to take an afternoon jaunt to Isla Grande, I jumped at the chance. You see, I had told Christopher about this particular kind of drink that is served to you in a young coconut, mixed in its own milk. He of course convinced my aunt that he had to try one, and, well, there is only one place in Panama to get this particular drink. So off we went. Three hours in the car to Colon, on a road that consisted at times of 80% potholes, and another twenty minutes in a cayuko - a tiny motorized boat - to cross the Atlantic to a little island with a certain restaurant bearing its unpublished recipe for an "Easy Touch." We ordered three immediately upon arrival, before even changing into our bathing suits to enter the deep, liquid green of the sea.

But by this time, an amazing thing had happened, a logical thing really, impossible to avoid on any long car ride. It came just as my aunt was sharing stories with us about

Eco Tourists getting lost in the jungle and being found the next morning bearing the marks of a long, dark evening full of tropical bugs. She particularly enjoyed telling us about the large groups of tarantulas scattered through the verdant green.

Of course, I had to go to the bathroom. And where do you go to the bathroom, if you are a pampered American, who enjoys camping to be sure, but has been regaled for the past hour about the many crawling and uncomfortable creatures in the wilds? I did what anyone accustomed to the easy comforts of life might do. I told myself that it was all in my mind, that we would be there soon... knowing that we had at least another hour in the car ahead of us.

We had been driving through nothing but breathtaking expanses of Palm trees and Hibiscus, and deep forest as far as the eye could see. Not a rest stop in sight. I finally admitted my dilemma, to a now concerned aunt, telling her I wanted her to know just in case we passed a bathroom... to be sure to stop.

Not ten minutes later we came to an intersection of highways and there, in the middle of nowhere, loomed a glowing pair of golden arches.

Never have I been so happy to see a McDonald's in all my life. I didn't think about mangoes, or coconut milk, or even my protestations about the errors of globalization. I did order some Chicken McNuggets, and gave thanks for clean bathrooms.

And I promised myself that I would tell you this story, and admit that these issues are never as clear cut as we might like them to be.

### **Homily: From Empire to Empire**

This summer I listened while a scholar whom I deeply respect called the United States the Roman Empire of our time. This was a particularly biting commentary coming from John Dominic Crossan who is a biblical scholar about to publish his latest work, much of which is based on Roman Imperial Theology. Crossan is a premier theologian, focusing on the historical Jesus. He stated his belief of Jesus' perspective that "God is in a collision course with civilization, it just happened to be the Roman Empire at the time." Regardless of your belief or dismissal of the existence of such a personified God, the crux of the message remains the same. There has been lifted for us an alternative vision of justice and right relations than the military, economic, political, and ideological control of power that is found in the Empire.

Are we, as Virgil's Aeneid said of the Romans, "rulers to hold the sea and all lands beneath their sway?" Is there a U.S. manifest destiny such as the one prophesied by Virgil in the same work when he writes, "where the circling sun looks on each ocean, the whole world [shall] roll obediently beneath their feet?"

Can you imagine the effects of our national mindset that would aid or foment a foreign rebellion, creating a new country in its entirety - with the new government taken under our wing of course for its own betterment and democratization - just for the protection of our economic interests? As a document from the Library of Congress, Panama - A Country Study states, "President Theodore Roosevelt... proudly claimed the role of midwife at the birth of the Republic of Panama."

We are seeing this mindset to this very moment when our addiction to oil and petroleum fuels has led us into conflict upon conflict, war following war. And all too often the delicate balance spins out of control.

*~pause~*

I can imagine the Panama Canal as a great aqueduct, as the physical manifestation of infrastructure, order, and progress. The canal remains the economic core of Panama to this day. Infrastructure, order, and progress were the unique strengths of Rome. They brought ease with them when they invaded, and often a betterment of life. As Crossan said, "remember that there are worse things than the Empire."

There is also great responsibility.

The story of Panama lives in my bones. Its tragedies lie like the bullets lodged into a cousin's arms during the last invasion, its beauty like the tan still gracing my skin. I know that Panama's stability is increased because its currency - the U.S. dollar - is strong. I know that Panama's stability is decreased because of Noriega's legacy... a man who we trained in the School of the Americas and then had to forcibly remove when he turned our own tactics upon us, striving for complete independence and control.

I know it is not mine to decide what kinds of progress are brought to developing countries or when. There are amenities much more important to the easing of life than clean bathrooms on a road trip. Yet I cannot let the warning go. We are trifling with the world as if it were our own personal piggy bank. And we are congratulating ourselves as we go.

The least we can do as responsible citizens is educate ourselves about our own country's foreign policies, its history, and its power.

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Today marks the 90th Anniversary of the journey of the SS Ancon crossing the Panama Canal as the official inaugural voyage on August 15, 1914. May we remember all that we have wrought. May we call upon our government to take their leadership seriously and approach the world through a humanitarian lens. And when else fails, may we never miss the opportunity to vote our consciences, and speak for the America that we would most like to see.

May it be so.  
Amen, Ashe, and Blessed Be.