

PABLO AND ESTRELLA
RUTH L. WEISS HOHBERG

Christmas Eve on board a cruise ship.

An expectant crowd is gathered in the theater awaiting Mass.

A portly, elderly, broad-shouldered man with a round face and bushy beard is making his way down the aisle of the ship's theater. Something in his posture and gait exudes unusual self-confidence and purpose. He is wearing a t-shirt and blue jeans, hardly the dress du jour on this important holiday in the Christian calendar. Everybody else in the place is dressed up tonight. He is carrying a box under his arm and walking like a man with a mission. At the base of the darkened stage he stops, pulls a large white piece of fabric out of the box, fumbles with it for a moment till he finds the opening in it to pull over his head - his priestly garment. Candles and other paraphernalia appear out of the box as he readies for the ritual to come. He is the celebrant of the midnight mass.

“Good evening and Merry Christmas. I'm Msg. Pablo from Texas, here to celebrate tonight's mass with you. Let's get started.” He begins in a deep, mellow, voice, matching his solid appearance. My husband Bob offers to be his lector/acolyte and sweeper of the floor, all rolled into one. He accepts.

At the conclusion everyone thanks him, wishes him a Merry Christmas and files out. He gathers up his portable altar, doffs his robes, and leaves.

Two days later Pablo joins Bob and me for lunch. He enthusiastically consumes a large heap of the ship's excellent spicy zitti arabiata, punctuated with sips of wine. I'm thinking he looks like Santa Claus and doesn't even need a pillow to pad his belly. The

conversation is friendly, casual, and wide-ranging in subject matter. He has traveled to and lived in several countries, particularly Ecuador and Mexico, and appears to know much about things Spanish and Central American.

Between forkfuls of the ziti and sips of wine he reveals the following tale, which I would like to share:

The only child of an Italian couple he attended church regularly as a boy. One Sunday when he was still quite young, a visiting priest delivered a sermon expressing the hope that the boys in the parish will join the priesthood as their life's work. This talk imprinted strongly on Pablo, and changed the direction of his life. As he was growing up that priest's words continued to resonate with him leading him to become a seminarian at fourteen. He accomplished all the necessary schooling and training, and was ordained into the priesthood.

His interest in things Spanish took him to the University of Mexico, and then on travels to South America, where he spent a good deal of time teaching and learning in Ecuador. While stationed there, he befriended and eventually fell in love with Estrella, a nun in the parish where he worked.

She was cocooned in the white habit commonly worn by Ecuadorian sisters, although there was a movement on the part of some of them to modernize their style of dress. Some of the priests were encouraging the girls in the convent to adopt western street clothing, and to everyone's surprise they appeared in skirts and sweaters the following week. All except Estrella. She was the holdout. The others teased and urged her to abandon the habit too. She was reluctant, until one day she asked Pablo:

“What do you think? I’ll change to regular street clothes if you go shopping with me.”

“I’ll buy you a whole outfit if you promise to wear it” he enthused, “and what’s more I’ll get you some slacks too. Will you wear them?” The young nun and the priest scoured the open-air market in Quito for the appropriate cut, color, and fit. Estrella was concerned about the prices, but finally found something that was just right, and Pablo was delighted to treat her to it.

It was clear that these two young clerics were drawn to each other in a way other than is acceptable to the Catholic Church for its clergy. Having taken the vows of chastity, they were excluded from the larger world of carnal love, marriage, and the creation of their own nuclear family unit.

All the feelings of longing for each other were kept secret, but sooner or later, they had to be confessed to one another and dealt with.

At one time Pablo’s mother was traveling with him and a group of clergy, when she commented: “I don’t like the way she looks at you.” He had to do a lot of fast-talking to convince her that he was not thinking about leaving the priesthood or re-thinking his commitment to the celibate life.

In much soul-searching and long discussions Estrella and Pablo came to the conclusion that each will stay the course they had chosen before they met.

Forty years have passed. They are both in their seventies. Estrella is in Ecuador in a convent; Pablo is a Monsignor in a parish in Texas. They continue to be in touch. The Texas parish has adopted and supports the one in Ecuador with money and goods. Pablo’s recently planned visit to South America had to be cancelled because of his ill

health. He is very disappointed. On the cruise ship I see Pablo in the gift shop picking up little gifts for his beloved, and looking forward to his next trip to Ecuador.

I hope he will have the opportunity to return one more time.

Postscript: Msgr. Pablo died Aug. 24, 2009