

To Argentina ... With Love

As a non-Latino foreigner I find Argentina "complicated," as Argentines like to say. I enjoy cultures and try to understand them -- and participate, insofar as possible. I like to read from and about a culture. I seek out cultural "ambassadors" to interpret customs and values. (I try to describe and respond to Argentine culture in various blogs on this site.) And so, I attempt to comprehend Argentina, but in the end I find this nation (and often the evangelical church of which I am a part): "a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma." In fact, I refer to the impregnable aspect of Argentine culture as "Fortress Argentina."

I have thought to myself, "perhaps I would understand this people better if I had": mastered the language, learned 100 *lunfardo* terms and expressions, learned to dance the tango, ate much more meat and fewer vegetables, enjoyed eating late at night, preferred to stay up very late and sleep all morning, became a soccer fanatic of a local team, learned all the nuances of comparison between Messi and Maradona, read more Argentine literature or watched more film, learned to like Fernet and Coke, laughed and cried about all the funny and painful nuances in *Somos de acá* or *Soñando por cantar*, learned more Argentine body language, enjoyed all night wedding receptions, forgot punctuality and learned to be more spontaneous, felt devotion to Evita, understood better the passions associated with Cristina or Macri, felt deeply the indignation and pain about the "Dirty War" or the economic disaster of 2001, empathized more with Argentine pride, or understood better the national shame expressed as -- "What a disaster, this country!"

In other words, if only I could become more like you! But, I cannot.

Yet, in reality I love Argentina. (I even married one!)

For example: I drink *mate* every day -- without sugar (though sometimes I add honey). I love *dulce de leche* (ice cream especially). I enjoy an *asado*. (I even try to impersonate a true *asador* with my *parrilla* -- with mixed success.) I am mesmerized watching the national team play soccer. (Messi, in particular, is an art form to me.) Your ice cream and pizza are excellent (much better than my country, though our beer, cheese, and bread are better). You produced three of the most famous people on earth: Pope Francis, Messi, and Che Guevara. I admire your entrepreneurial spirit, such as, the street vendors and small business owners. I laugh at the way people provide directions when I am lost: very helpful but very verbose! I marvel at the resourceful, adaptive, and patient character of the Argentine people. There is so much to admire and learn from!

But, I find many people here are not open or vulnerable, especially with a foreigner. I especially miss deep conceptual or theological discussion, especially with Christians. I struggle with the insularity of the Argentine worldview and culture. There is sometimes an unwillingness to learn from others, especially North American *Yankees* and Brits (even in the church). There is a national hubris toward the rest of Latin America. There is an overwrought sentiment of victimization and entitlement. And, the *chanta* phenomenon is quite problematic. (Truthfulness in word and deed is a weakness. Lack of follow-up or follow-through is troublesome.)

To my Christian friends I ask: Where is the intellectual passion and discipline to love God with the mind? (There are so many distractions.) And, where is the aggravation that Paul felt in Athens, when "his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols" (Acts 17:16)?

So, I write to Argentina -- with love. But, I do feel occasionally a little like Paul, who wrote to the Corinthians: "We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians, and opened wide our hearts to you. We are not withholding our affection from you, but you are withholding yours from us." (2 Cor 6:11-12, NIV)