

## The Penguin Is Real

Years ago, I took part in a study trip to Peru. It was my first encounter with mass poverty, the institutions that generate and manage it, and the serious efforts in progress to resist those evils, especially by people of faith. One morning that summer, while bumping through a coastal desert city in a crowded bus, I spotted a penguin waddling down the street! I could hardly believe my eyes. As we hurtled on, the penguin vanished from sight.

When I reported this vision to our group that evening, they laughed up a storm. A penguin *here*? No way! I began to think they must be right. After all, how could I be sure the black and white creature I had seen for only a few seconds was a penguin, especially here, in one of the world's driest deserts and not far from the equator?

The next day, having buried the memory of the penguin, I talked to Michael, who had been away the previous night. Michael informed me that he, too, had seen the penguin during the day. Was he kidding? No, he was not. Two of us had seen it. The penguin was real.

Ever since then, Michael and I have continued to remind each other, sometimes across vast continents and oceans, of the penguin of Chimbote, which became a symbol for us of that eye-opening, life-changing summer. In Peru we discovered fundamental truths about the world, about its suffering, and about hope that we will never forget. The penguin bonds us. It also reminds us that we need others in order to stick by our vision in a sometimes cynical world that smothers dreams and expects few surprises. Yes, a penguin in the desert. Yes, love is possible. A different world is possible.

If we were to trust the nightly news and the sitcoms, we might conclude that we are just lonely, violent creatures destined to spend our lives getting, spending, and bed-hopping. In this book, we have considered an alternative: On the one hand, things are far worse than they seem. On the other, they are far better. Sin abounds—but grace abounds even more. Whatever terrible things we have done, however

cruel the world may be, healing and new beginnings are possible. We are not condemned to live behind cinder block and razor wire. If deep in our hearts we believe that justice will triumph some day, that is because it will. We are not alone in the universe. Something — Some One — is at work, transforming reality.

However, the world will change only if there are new human beings to change it, people who are free to love, to resist the lure of wealth, and to stand with the poor. That is the way of Jesus of Nazareth, whose Spirit guides us forward via consolation, teaches us to pray, fortifies us for trial, and discloses the divine goodness that shines forth in every thing and everyone. A new world is not only possible, it has already begun. The penguin is real.

Unfortunately, commitments once made with enthusiasm often stall out and even reverse direction over time. To “hang in there” requires discipline, and plenty of support. As I have said, love is like a delicate flower. It requires proper conditions to thrive. Over the years I have tried to cull from wise veterans what they think is necessary in order to persevere and produce lasting fruit over the long haul. The following checklist summarizes what I have learned:

- First, we need community. As Michael and I learned from the penguin, we need companions who share our vision. We need a community that can support and challenge us to stay faithful, that can nourish and deepen our alternative vision and praxis. That is what church should be.
- We need regular contact with poor and suffering people.
- We need daily prayer and contemplation.
- We need regular community worship.
- We need spiritual accompaniment, that is, regular recourse to someone to whom we can unburden ourselves and who can help us to avoid traps and make wise choices.
- We need a simple lifestyle.
- We need physical exercise and a moderate concern for our health.
- We need regular rest and recreation.

- We need study, especially of social reality.
- We need a sense of humor.

Honoring these needs can keep us responding to the Spirit, strong in the conviction that . . . the penguin is real! Despite setbacks and failings, a different world – of freedom, community, abundant life – is in the making.