I’m a “Shanty Catholic”

By Joe Boland

There is a derogatory term from last century that refers to poor Irish Americans who after settling this country found themselves on the lower end of the socio-economic spectrum. The “Shanty Irish,” they were called. However, some decedents of the Irish—of which I am one—have embraced this term, to recall the proud, scrappy and aspirational roots of their ancestors.

In that spirit, I would like to suggest that I’m a “Shanty Catholic,” as a nod to all the poor Catholic faith communities in this country we serve at Catholic Extension, who have extraordinarily inspiring origin stories.

As an organization whose mission is to work in solidarity with people in America’s poorest regions to build up vibrant and transformative Catholic faith communities, the *shanty* is a sort of spiritual metaphor for us. The shanty represents all the seemingly God-forsaken places we encounter in our work that are made holy by the faith of the poor. These proverbial and literal “shanties,” are places of worship and of gathering that are not much to look at, but where so much good and promise arise.

Shanties are born out of necessity. Oftentimes, Catholic communities in poor regions have no churches or adequate facilities. But their fervor and their families are strong, so they gather anywhere they can as a community of faith.

I’ve been to trailer churches, crowded living rooms, porches, apartment buildings, storefronts, warehouses, sheds, huts, tents, and garages. People convert these lowly places into incredibly sacred spaces, much like the holy family converted the “shanty” of a manger in Bethlehem into a place that welcomed God’s own Son.

There is a palpable energy in these shanties that one might miss in the great cathedrals, grandiose basilicas or well-funded parishes that dot this land.

For example, one of my favorite “shanties” is a tiny wooden hut in the mountains of eastern Tennessee, where Mass is celebrated each week for migrant farm workers, before they start a long day’s work of tomato picking.

Another revered ‘shanty’ is a shed in southern Alabama, where Catholics with no parish, set up chairs and a small devotional altar next to a tractor and ATV, so that they can pray together.

The shanty is also represented by a group of indigenous women in Southern California’s desert, who gather under the shade of a car port in the scorching heat to recite devotions and organize community members to advocate for social change.

The “shanty” is part of our origin story as American Catholics.

Catholic Extension’s founder, Fr. Francis Clement Kelley, wrote an article in June 1905 that began, “I know an old shanty in the West,” where he described a run-down mission in a poor town on the prairie. He depicts, “a shaky, once white building, surmounted by a cross, the only sign of its high mission…The steps shake when you mount them. The floor trembles at your tread.” The article gained national acclaim and became the impetus for creating Catholic Extension, with the goal of generating a network of support for all the poor (shanty) faith communities in this country.

Pope Francis also understands the unique sacredness and potential of a shanty. The recent Oscar-nominated film, “The Two Popes,” captured his urban pastoral work in poor neighborhoods of Buenos Aires. It is well documented that as archbishop, he frequently visited little shrines and small faith communities in very humble places, affirming that God was distinctly present in these ramshackle localities.

I’d like to suggest that all Catholics need to come into contact with a “shanty” faith community at some point. While our vision is not that the poor remain forever in these shanties (Catholic Extension has built and repaired 12,600 church structures in its history!), the experience of the shanty, nonetheless, has so much to teach us.

The teaching power of “the Shanty experience” was abundantly evident during a recent dedication ceremony at a new migrant center opened by the Kino Border Initiative, located a stone’s throw from the U.S. – Mexico border—the most recently completed project supported by Catholic Extension. Across the street from the new, spacious building, was the old migrant center, which was described by our hosts in Spanish as a “rinconcito,” a little corner. The old building was a dark, cramped space, with a concrete floor, and a kitchen no bigger than a small bathroom. Yet, something amazing happened there.

One of the sisters who served migrants in that small ‘shanty’ since it opened in 2010, said that out of their little “rinconcito” they served more than 750,000 migrants—giving these marginalized peoples more than just a meal, but also hope, dignity and faith. As she spoke, she held up a small pot of soil with a flower, to demonstrate that out of a tiny, insignificant pile of dirt, something very beautiful blossomed. The visual metaphor needed no further elaboration.

It is good for all of us to be in touch with the struggle and the pride that comes with being a “Shanty Catholic,” so that perhaps we too can capture some of that same passionate spirit that these shanties spark in the hearts of those who inhabit these humble yet transformative places.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

*Joe Boland is Vice President of Mission for Catholic Extension, a Chicago-based organization that works in solidarity with people in America’s poorest regions to build up vibrant and transformative Catholic faith communities. Since its founding in 1905, Catholic Extension has distributed more than $1.2 billion in today’s dollars to dioceses and parishes that cannot support themselves. For more information, please visit*[*www.catholicextension.org*](http://www.catholicextension.org/)*.*