

The Good News

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June 11, 2008

Our Experience in El Salvador

Each evening our team participated in a session of spiritual renewal and debriefing. At the onset each member was asked to signify his or her state of mind based on the events of the day with a “thumbs up” or “thumbs down.” The same approach is employed in this commentary about our trip to El Salvador. The negatives, which are frequently based on anecdotal evidence, are highlighted by the economy and demographics of the country; its crime rate; its ravaged lands and environment; its military-aligned political and power structure; and the role of the Roman Catholic Church. The overwhelming positives experienced by our team center on the role of the Episcopal Church, most notably our sister parish Santa Maria Virgen and its engaging pastor, Father Julio Rivera; the unrelenting spirit of the people; and the genuinely happy children.

THUMBS DOWN:

The Economy: El Salvador is an oligopoly with a vast majority of the assets of the country owned by six families, through a consortium of shell companies. A group of global corporations and international banks account for the next tier of ownership. As a result, most of the revenue generated by the national economy flows either to the oligarchs or out of the country. Little is left for investment in the country's infrastructure or to address the overwhelming, deeply embedded poverty. Nearly 40 percent of the country is below the poverty line.

The largest population of Salvadoran expatriates lives in Los Angeles. Monies sent back home by Salvadoran citizens and aliens (documented and undocumented) in the U.S. approximate \$3.0 billion annually and account for some 18 percent of El Salvador's GNP. Salvadoran banks frequently charge 17 percent for processing these remittances, further exploiting the poor. Attempts in the U.S. to limit immigration and deport illegal immigrants would obviously jeopardize this flow of repatriations to poor relatives back home. It is estimated that hundreds flee to the U.S. each month in search of a better life.

The under-employment rate averages 70-75 percent. Actual unemployment is believed to be in double digits and includes poor vendors who operate roadside stands as employed. The minimum wage is \$160.00 per month, although many earn \$4.00-\$5.00 per day. Gasoline costs \$4.50 per gallon, so most rural people rely on a rudimentary bus system, the scene of frequent gang violence (described below.)

In the capital city of San Salvador, there is evidence of a burgeoning, albeit still fledgling, middle class. Since his last visit to El Salvador 15 years ago, Peter noticed, in particular, the advent of upscale shopping malls and fast food chains.

The Crime Rate: El Salvador is purported to have the highest homicide rate of any place in the world. Among the first impressions one has upon arriving in San Salvador is the fact that there are armed guards everywhere, including outside the church-owned compound where we stayed, and every building has barred windows. Frequently, there is concertina razor wire on the rooftops.

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Annual Church Picnic and Recognition of Acolytes on Sunday, June 15

We plan to recognize our wonderful, dedicated team of acolytes during the 10:00 a.m. service. *All acolytes are asked to attend. Following the service, St. Mary's annual picnic will be held in the churchyard. All are invited to attend; guests are encouraged. This is a wonderful opportunity for newcomers to be welcomed into our parish community.* A sign up sheet is posted in the parish hall

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The crime rate has been exacerbated by the fact that U.S. immigration authorities have deported Los Angeles gang members, when identified, thereby exporting violent crime to a country ill-equipped to handle it. Moreover, the same repatriation of monies from immigrants in the U.S. occurs with the gangs. The gangs show no respect for human life. A frequent tactic is to commandeer a public bus and shake down the passengers. If a passenger resists, he is simply shot. The average “take” for such a crime is \$7.00.

Because of the code of silence that exists among gang members, we were told that a mere hundred homicides every year are even investigated and fewer than five are prosecuted. Some of our group witnessed from a considerable distance a homicide being committed, and we passed a cordoned-off site on the highway where a slaying had recently taken place.

Two meetings with Episcopal Church officials were allaying. One cleric seemed unduly guarded in answering our questions. Later we learned that he had recently been in hiding because of threats made on him and his family. In a second meeting with a human rights advocate for the Episcopal Diocese, he never stopped looking over his shoulder, as if expecting an attacker at any time.

El Salvador’s Lands and Environment: The oligarchs have largely deforested the country. Nine out of 10 rivers are so polluted that the surrounding water table is polluted, making clean up a near uncertainty. In one town in the eastern region of the country where Episcopal missionaries are active, we were told, almost every male dies of kidney failure before middle age.

The Military-Aligned Power Structure and the Role of the Roman Catholic Church: El Salvador’s two-party political system comprises the National Republican Party (NRP) and the Farabundo Marti para la Liberacion Nacional (FMLN). The NRP, which is closely aligned with the six controlling families, the military and the Roman Catholic Church, is the party in power. The FMLN is the party of the majority, i.e., the poor, and has traditionally been the party of the nation’s liberators, including Archbishop Oscar Romero. (See *The Good News* of March 3, 2008 for a discussion of the Archbishop and his practice of liberation theology.) Upcoming elections have the potential of strengthening the FMLN’s standing. As a result, the NRP has waged a propaganda campaign alleging that the FMLN is run by Communists and that if it gains control, all Salvadoran aliens in the U.S. will be deported.

Among the most moving of our group experiences occurred when we visited the church where Archbishop Romero was assassinated while performing mass. Touching the altar and seeing the Spartan quarters where he resided (a single bed in a one room apartment, where all of his clothes including vestments hung in one armoire) brought us closer to this great man. Our next stop was the cathedral where Romero’s funeral was held and he was interred, and where throngs of demonstrators were gunned down by the military on May 8, 1999 at the start of the country’s civil war. Among those slain on the cathedral steps as they sought sanctuary were the father and aunt of our driver, Arcelio (Arcy), who accompanied us. Needless to say, every visit to the cathedral is emotional for him.

We sought to visit Romero’s crypt, which has been moved from the nave to the basement of the cathedral, only to learn that the Church has limited the visiting hours in an effort to extinguish memory of, any celebration of, Romero as a martyr. On Sundays mass is held in the nave for the affluent; the poor attend a separate mass in the basement in respect of the memory of Romero. There are in practicality two Roman Catholic Churches, one that is aligned with the military and the powerful; the other, which ministers to the poor.

On our final day, Arcy took us to a cemetery. Cemeteries in El Salvador are rather festive with tombstones painted bright colors. This cemetery ended with a wall two stories high, divided into little brightly colored squares suggestive of a Mondrian painting. Arcy explained that it was a wall of mausoleums, for the victims of the civil war. (While the country normally charges \$7.00 cemetery rent

per year, it was waived for those buried at the wall.) He then pointed to the two square markers for his father and aunt. Eerily, those markers, and most adjoining, bore the same date, May 8, 1999.

THUMBS UP:

As a mission trip, our activities centered on participation in five Eucharists and the manual construction of a road in San Marcos, a rural community of 32 families developed by Emergency Relief and Development, the disaster relief and economic relief arm of the Episcopal Church in the U.S. Three of the Eucharists were celebrated by Father Julio, a fourth by the village priest in San Marcos and the fifth being part of a convocation of the Diocese of El Salvador. Each activity brought with it an intimate exposure to Salvadorans, who by the way they conduct their daily lives gave us so much instruction about that which is important.

As Peter Chase wrote in a recent sermon, “It isn’t that the poor are happy with what they have because they don’t know any better; it is because they know so much more. They live in “the now.” What we found in El Salvador was a church that did not attribute happiness to the accumulation of more merchandise, but by living each moment by the grace of God.”

If one were forced to describe Father Julio in one word, it would be “passionate.” This effusive, robust, teddy bear of a man, whose persona fills a church, is both a comedic actor and a gifted communicator whose oratory and spiritual message transcend language differences and resonated with congregants ranging from local laborers to English speaking members of our team. Father Julio’s delivery is decidedly upbeat and often punctuated by wildly expressive gestures. Following one Eucharist, while still in the nave of a humble church, he started waltzing with one of our team members and then donned a furry mask to the delight of the nearby children.

The welcome we received from each congregation could not have been warmer or more genuine. On our first Sunday, Mother’s Day was observed; the second Sunday was Trinity Sunday. Both Eucharists at Santa Maria Virgen were followed by lively celebrations in the courtyard behind the church. In both instances, the women—including our team members—were honored. Instinctively, children served everyone cake before taking any themselves. Entertainment included lively games as simple as musical chairs, after which the winner presented her prize to our senior team member.

Our relationship to local Salvadorans took on another dimension in San Marcos, when we began our road construction project. Of the monies we raised for the trip, \$1,800 purchased and delivered to the worksite the requisite sand, rocks and cement. We were viewed warily at first. By the second day, it was established that the locals were in charge of the project and we were there to support them.

The level of participation by the villagers was extraordinary, starting with the young man who unloaded the cement from the truck by hoisting two ninety pound bags on his shoulders. The work crew changed each day based on who was available and who had to go into town to work. On the last day, one mother shoveled sand in her bare feet, challenging us to keep up with her.

One seeming constant was the children, who seemed fascinated by our project. Without provocation, they sought to participate. Children, seemingly as young as five or seven or older, carried rocks, shoveled sand and grouted. At one moment they were young adults; then they became children again, climbing trees for fruit or running barefoot through an area with beehives, gaming to stir up the bees without getting stung. To a one, they were enamored with having their pictures taken with a digital camera and seeing the result. Several clasped my wrist to look at my wristwatch, leaving me to wonder whether they had never seen one before. Juan Carlos was especially interested in Peter’s iPhone. Ricardo quietly went about his tasks of grouting stones and posing for photos. These were happy, untroubled children.

Women carried water in jugs balanced on their heads from the well at the ERD-constructed church

villagers boil their clothes and hang them out to dry, taking advantage of the bleaching quality of the sun. Frequently we saw locals wearing clothes—probably manufacturers’ overruns—with U.S. labels. Our driver Arcy wore a Brown University baseball cap for much of the week, having no idea what the logo meant.

As a team, we have much on which to reflect. It was truly a magical experience, engendered by superb chemistry between those from St. Mary’s and St. Paul’s, and enriched by Ariel Acuna’s facility as a translator. We left, spiritually nourished, proud of the activities of the Episcopal Church in El Salvador, with grateful hearts and a revised outlook on life, and the desire to return.

—Tim Green

Bishop Shaw Visits Zimbabwe

St. Mary’s second longstanding sister parish, in addition to Santa Maria Virgen and for whom we also pray each week, is St. Luke’s in Harare, Zimbabwe.

Bishop M. Thomas Shaw, SSJE, returned June 3 from a week in the Anglican Diocese of Harare, Zimbabwe, where he had gone at the request of Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori to demonstrate the Episcopal Church’s solidarity with Anglicans there. Jefferts Schori had been invited to send a representative by the Rt. Rev. Sebastian Bakare, bishop of the Diocese of Harare. Bakare is a longtime friend of Peter Chase’s; they attended seminary together.

During the week-long trip, which was not publicized in advance because of security concerns, Shaw met with 50 priests, lay people and human rights activists to hear their stories and to spread the presiding bishop’s message of solidarity. He also preached in a parishioner’s back yard to 400 members of a congregation that had been locked out of their church. “I can report that the situation in Zimbabwe is indeed grave,” wrote Shaw in a statement to the Massachusetts Congressional delegation and to the House Foreign Relations Committee. “There are widespread violations of human rights, daily reports of murder and torture and an economic and humanitarian crisis of enormous proportions.”

Harare has recently been the site of church lockouts and assaults on Anglicans by local police. On May 16, *The New York Times* reported that over the previous three Sundays, police had interrogated Anglican priests and lay leaders, arrested and beaten parishioners and locked thousands of worshipers out of dozens of churches, particularly those who did not follow then-Bishop Nolbert Kunonga, an active supporter of Zimbabwe President Robert Mugabe.

On May 12, Kunonga was excommunicated from the Harare diocese and replaced by Bishop Bakare. Mugabe, who has controlled Zimbabwe for 28 years, has been accused of rigging the March 29 elections for president. The violent crackdowns and growing humanitarian crisis come as tensions rise before the June 27 run-off election against opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai. Bakare has been placed under surveillance.

The “Ask-It Basket”:

Q: At St. Mary’s we celebrate Pentecost by having a birthday cake for each month of the year. Why?

A: Pentecost is the birthday of the church. We celebrate the birthday of St. Mary’s with cakes.

Q: On a recent Sunday, the Propers included two psalms and two Old Testament readings, designated respectively, as “Track A” or “Track B.” Why?

A: There is a new lectionary being developed. Where changed, we are using the revised edition.

Editor: Tim Green