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Reflections on El Salvador

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Reflections on El Salvador

In the latter part of June 1996, the fifth delegation from Sacred Heart University traveled to El Salvador to witness the current social and political realities of the country four years after the signing of the peace accords that ended a bloody civil war.

On the last day of his visit to El Salvador this year, President Anthony Cerera charged the members of this most recent delegation to think about our experiences and then write a personal reflection on what we learned. The idea was to share our thoughts on the visit with the university community, much the same as the members of first group did when they published "Notes on El Salvador" in Volume XII of the Sacred Heart University Review.

The reflections and impressions in prose and poetry that follow are personal, often based on a particular incident, and frequently reflect an understanding the writer came to, or even may record a personal transformation that resulted from the trip. The hope is that these notes will help to accomplish several goals: to assist the university community to better understand the current historical moment in El Salvador, to attempt to show what happens to the people who participate in these visits, and to help explain why our University should remain committed to sending future delegations to El Salvador.

It is not easy to find words to describe the compelling nature of these trips and the strength of conviction that can arise out of a visit to El Salvador. But perhaps the reflections that follow – including those of our two guides from the Ecumenical Program on Central America and the Caribbean (EPICA), Ann Butwell and Scott Wright, and Scott's wife, Jean Stokan – in some small measure will help to define these realities.

Ralph Corrigan

**Faculty and Administrators in El Salvador:
Fulfilling the University's Mission in the World**

by Anthony J. Cernera

At the end of its four-day visit to Sacred Heart University, the accreditation team from the New England Association of Schools and Colleges captured something of our ongoing efforts to embody our mission as a comprehensive Catholic university in the world when it stated: "A university that sends a dozen faculty members to El Salvador for several weeks to better understand that country's problems and to seek a way of assisting its people is taking its mission very seriously."

This University community started its relationship with El Salvador as a response to the assassination of the rector and priest-professors of the Jesuit university in San Salvador and their housekeepers on November 17, 1989. As an act of solidarity with that university community as well as with the Church in El Salvador, Sacred Heart University conferred the degree of Doctor of Humane Letters, *honoris causa*, upon Archbishop Rivera Damas of San Salvador at a special academic convocation on May 17, 1990. During that convocation we committed ourselves to a long-term process of learning about and responding to the needs of the Salvadoran people.

Since that special convocation, five groups of faculty, administrators, and students have gone to El Salvador. Usually traveling in delegations of twelve to fourteen members, they have had the opportunity to see firsthand and to discuss the challenges and opportunities facing the people of the poorest country in Central America. Through meetings with peasants and labor union leaders, with officials of the Salvadoran and United States governments, with bishops, pastors, and lay leaders as well as with military officers and with professors and students at the universities, our faculty and administrators have engaged in a process of learning that has put them in direct contact with the economic, political, social, and cultural facts of the country that bears the name of the Savior.

How do such "study tours" express the mission of a Catholic university in the contemporary world? Why do we commit the resources that this program of faculty development requires? I think

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that there are at least four reasons why our colleagues from the New England Association of Schools and Colleges recognized these trips as expressions of the mission of Sacred Heart University.

First, we affirm in our mission statement that the University's primary mission is to prepare "men and women to live in and make their contributions to the human community." In order for this to happen, the faculty and those who work with students outside the classroom must understand the world as it is. What kind of a world is it that our students will engage as leaders and citizens? El Salvador provides an important way of understanding the larger world. Because of its history and strategic location, it is a microcosm of the difficulties facing developing countries around the world. If we understand this reality, we will be better able to understand the reality of other poor nations, the efforts of their people to secure a better future, and the role that the United States can play in assisting in their development.

Second, the five delegations of faculty, administrators, and students that have "studied" in El Salvador have forged links with specific people, local communities of Christian faith, and particular professors and students at institutions of higher education in that country. The theoretical knowledge that our professors and educators have had of particular aspects of Salvadoran life has acquired a concrete face in the people we have met with and by whom we have been challenged. These human relationships have broadened our world view, deepened our appreciation of a rich culture, and provided opportunities to understand better the dynamic relationship of faith and culture.

Third, as do other colleges and universities, Sacred Heart University exists for the pursuit of truth. It seeks to expand human knowledge and deepen human understanding through the encouragement and support of faculty research. For our professors, direct contact with rural development and community health projects as well as with Christian communities and parishes has provided unique opportunities for scholarly research and professional development. For the professor of nursing engaged in community health programs in the Greater Bridgeport area or the theologian studying models of the Church's involvement in cultural development, participation in our program in El Salvador has broadened significantly their learning and greatly expanded and enriched the material that they are able to use in

their classes at the University.

Fourth, engagement in the life of the Salvadoran people and exposure to their institutions of higher learning have assisted us as an academic community in the Catholic intellectual tradition to develop more fully the University's commitment to "share its resources and its special gifts and talents for the betterment of the human community." Out of the University's continuing reflection on its involvement in El Salvador has emerged a major commitment to incorporating in its curriculum a service learning component. Last year there were nineteen such courses being taught by thirteen different faculty members. In addition, when the University community celebrated its thirtieth anniversary during the 1993-94 academic year, it committed itself to 30,000 hours of community service. From this effort numerous projects of community involvement have flourished. For example, last March a group of students spent their spring semester break in San Hilario, El Salvador to help in the reconstruction of salt works.

Furthermore, in the 1995-96 academic year two groups of faculty members and administrators spent a weekend living in one of the poorest communities in Bridgeport, beginning to try to do in this city what has been done in El Salvador. What will come from this new endeavor will certainly deepen and strengthen Sacred Heart University's understanding of and commitment to its mission as a comprehensive Catholic university in the contemporary world.

Finally, behind all that I have just written about our El Salvador project is a way of conceiving the educational enterprise that is the compelling reason for Sacred Heart University's existence. Catholic scholars and educators have been involved in creating and leading colleges and universities because of what they believe about human existence — namely, that our most fundamental responsibility as human beings is to become who we are. Our humanity is not fully given us at birth. Becoming fully human is a lifelong task that requires the total engagement of each of us. A human being becomes a fully authentic person through a lifetime of self-transcendence in the context of a community of authentic persons. We must move beyond ourselves in order to find ourselves.

According to the Canadian philosopher Bernard Lonergan, this kind of self-transcendence expresses itself as intellectual, moral, and religious conversion. Such conversions involve moving beyond where

we are through a vertical exercise of freedom that opens up new horizons of being for us. Put another way, self-transcendence occurs when people's hearts are changed. Alexis de Tocqueville speculated that in democratic societies there is a danger that people may end up as the kind of individuals who are "enclosed in their own hearts." Education within Catholic colleges and universities ought to provide opportunities for the members of its communities to have their hearts opened and thus transformed. The opening of our hearts will, more often than not, involve a process of having our hearts being broken by the pain and suffering of others. For many of us who have been touched by the people of El Salvador through our study tours, our hearts have been broken and transformed.

El Salvador, 1996: Were Not Our Hearts Burning for Justice?

by Scott Wright

We have a friend in El Salvador who never fails to tell delegations who visit: "El Salvador will break your heart." It's difficult these days to find any good news about El Salvador. It's difficult to find any news since the war ended four years ago and ushered in an era of peace, or so it seems. Then why is El Salvador still good news to those who choose to come and have their hearts broken?

This past June, the organization for which I work, the Ecumenical Program on Central America and the Caribbean (EPICA), was privileged to facilitate a delegation of Sacred Heart faculty on a two-week trip to El Salvador. This was the fourth delegation which we have collaborated on in as many years, but it was my first experience with Sacred Heart and also the first experience in El Salvador for all but one of the Sacred Heart participants.

It was not, however, my first experience in El Salvador. I lived there during most of the war years (1981-91), and worked with the church in various settings among those who were direct victims of the war – refugees, displaced people – and direct victims of the desperate poverty that caused the war – the landless poor living on the most

unproductive lands and the homeless poor crowded into the shacks along the ravines and marginal areas of San Salvador.

Why does El Salvador continue to break hearts? And why is El Salvador still good news to those who come to visit?

Broken Hearts, Broken Dreams and Solidarity

The first question is a little easier to answer than the second. The post-war conditions in El Salvador have not been bright ones. The war ended, and that was and is positive. The U.N. Peace Accords have restructured some institutions, most notably the Salvadoran army and security forces, and created a new civilian police, and that too, despite problems, is positive. The struggle to create democratic institutions, fair elections, a judicial system that functions has been more difficult, and is on shakier ground.

People are insecure. More than 9,000 people were killed in El Salvador last year, making it second only to Medellín, Colombia as the leader in per capita crime in Latin America. The economic crisis, the proliferation of weapons, the scattering of families and a culture of violence have created a climate of insecurity resulting in as many deaths last year as during the worst years of the war. How can that be?

The answers do not come easy. Much of the violence is directed against women and children, and we heard differing views as to whether such violence has economic roots or cultural and social ones in *el machismo* and post-war trauma. Clearly, however, a culture of poverty produces a culture of violence, much as it does in our own inner-cities in the United States.

What breaks your heart, however, is to see the effects of that poverty and violence on people you know, people you meet along the way, children growing up in a culture of poverty and violence. The temptation is to turn away from it, to block it out; it is too painful to see, and yet what keeps our hearts open and broken is the spirit of a people that refuses to be broken by violence, poverty, and injustice.

We heard a lot about the success of the land transfer program to ex-combatants on both sides of the conflict, and to their families in the former conflict zones. True, the program has transferred a few acres of land to nearly all of the 35,000 people to whom land is due: a total of about 12% of the agricultural lands available. But it's difficult to see

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what future that provides for a poor family – especially without easy access to credit and inputs – and a market that competes with the lower prices of imported grain now that the tariffs and trade barriers have been removed. Since the beginning of the year, the price of corn has doubled and the price of beans has quadrupled.

And what is true of the small farmer is even more true of the cooperatives which were created in the 1980s and transferred 20% of the agricultural land to the peasants. These reforms, however, had been set up by the government as part of a strategy to divide the peasant population and were condemned by Archbishop Romero before his death as “reforms with repression.” Today, fifteen years later, most of the cooperatives are saddled with a debt which they cannot pay and are in danger of collapsing completely unless that debt is restructured and the law changed to protect instead of to break up the cooperative use of land.

The impression which all this gives you – and we spent several days with small farmers and cooperatives in the rural areas of El Salvador – is of a conscious effort on the part of the government, the World Bank, and the IMF to restructure the Salvadoran economy by abandoning the agricultural sector and production for domestic needs, and investing in more lucrative enterprises like assembly plants in free trade zones springing up around the periphery of San Salvador. Young women are paid 38 *colones* a day (about \$4.50), work long hours, and have virtually no job security or protection from harassment and the dangers of an unhealthy working environment.

Those who are “lucky” end up in these sweat shops. Those who are not so lucky join the majority of the people in the informal sector of the economy, selling whatever they can lay their hands on – chiclets, vegetables, miracle cures – on the streets and buses of the city. Many imagine that life is better further north and try their luck immigrating to the United States. People are being pushed off the land and into the slums of the city, and when they do not find work, they migrate north to an insecure life in the United States.

So, El Salvador continues to break hearts. Not the analysis, not the statistics, but the stories of the people like Francisca and her six surviving children who we met one afternoon in her shack along the railroad tracks in a poor parish of San Salvador, Mary Mother of the Poor. One of her children had died in the streets, struck down by a

car; another baby had died from malnutrition and disease. The temptation is to turn away, not to see their pain or hear another painful story. That's what powerlessness does. But it's the beauty of the children, the endurance of their parents, the dignity of the poor and their gracious hospitality which keeps our hearts open, and broken, and calls us to a deeper solidarity.

Good News: The Poor Refuse to Give Up or to Give In

What about the other question? Why is El Salvador still good news? That, as I said, is a more difficult question. Before answering it, I want to say something about Sacred Heart University. I have met many people who came to El Salvador – myself included – who might describe what happened to them there as a kind of conversion experience. Our eyes were opened, our faith was deepened, our hearts were broken.

Eyes open to the way our U.S. dollars were fueling the war effort and bringing great suffering on the people we met. Faith deepened by the faith of the poor who continued to believe and thank God and work for life in the midst of a precarious and violent situation of death. Hearts broken, by the suffering, but also by the openness of the people who took us into their homes, told us their stories, and asked us to return home and tell our government to stop funding the war because it is killing their children. Our hearts were broken, humbled by our own inaction and complicity with the suffering of the poor, on fire with anger at the actions of our government.

What is unique about Sacred Heart University is that you have taken this experience back with you now for five years and – as a university community and institution – planted a seed of hope among the poor in the city of Bridgeport that surrounds you, offering 30,000 hours of community service and institutional support for projects of empowerment in a single year's time. Not only individuals but institutions are changed by their encounter with the poor in El Salvador. And your response of solidarity embraces the poor both in El Salvador and at home.

That, it seems to me, is good news: that the poor of El Salvador still have the power to inspire change, commitment, compassion, solidarity and justice; that the poor of El Salvador have not given up or

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given in to the post-war violence or to the neo-liberal economic plan that threatens to impoverish them even further and tie them to an international economic order that favors the wealthy and First World above the poor and the Third World.

It's difficult to see any real alternative to the current violence and poverty in El Salvador, just as it's difficult to see any real alternative to the violence and poverty in our own inner cities. But the seeds of an alternative are there, and they begin with the refusal and the resistance of the poor to be further excluded or impoverished.

Sometimes that refusal is found simply in the dignified response of the poor not to give up or to give in. But it also has an organized expression in community projects in local communities – the health promoters and popular teachers, the communal bakeries or sewing shops – and in popular organizations of the poor – the peasant unions and cooperatives which organized against the laws designed to break up the cooperatives or to tax the poor even more.

Historically, the experience and culture of democracy is weak in Latin America, and it must take root in civil society before it can find a truly representative expression in political parties. But the dissatisfaction with the status quo is evident, and the dream for an alternative is there.

A University Experience in the World of the Poor

Finally, I would like to say a few words about what I learned from Sacred Heart University. This delegation was unusual primarily because it grew out of the commitment of a university community and institution to the people of El Salvador. True, there are institutional relationships with the National University and the University of Central America in San Salvador, as well as sister relationships with the parish of Tierra Blanca in Usulután. But each of those specific relationships is a microcosm of a deeper commitment to the poor of El Salvador.

Jon Sobrino, S.J., the Jesuit theologian at the University of Central America, has this to say about the mission of a Christian University, words I think that are relevant to and express the vision and commitment of Sacred Heart University:

It is unreal to think a university must be located physically in

the world of the poor, but it is imperative that the university see the world from the point of view of the poor – and the world of the poor enters the university's mind and heart.

That, it seems to me, is what has happened over the years, as a result of these delegations of faculty and students to El Salvador. The poor – and not only the poor of El Salvador, but the poor closer to home, the poor of Bridgeport – have entered the university's mind and heart. Sobrino continues:

From a faith perspective, the place for incarnation is the world of the poor. . . . What this means is that the world of the poor has entered the university, that its real problems are being taken into account as something central, that social reality is being dealt with by the university and that the legitimate interests of the poor are being defended because they are those of the poor.

What does this all mean? What happens next? Those are questions, I think, that we all grapple with, individually and institutionally, but surely the seed is planted, and if we are faithful to that seed the plant will grow. That seed is the real life and the real needs of the poor in our midst. For Sobrino, again:

I want to propose to you . . . that the university make the Third World [at home and abroad] a fundamental perspective of its work; that it place itself at the service of the Third World; that it work, struggle, and outdo itself for the Third World's salvation.

That is the challenge, and the task at hand. But that is not all:

The only thing that I should like to add is that the Third World is offering not only urgent ethical and practical demands to the universities, but that it is offering light, hope, *mística*, and meaning, too. To

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serve the Third World . . . is to recover the dignity of simply being a human person; it is to make reparation for the centuries-long sins of oppression and to experience pardon; it is to receive encouragement, hope, and grace.

Thank you, Sacred Heart, and each of the wonderful people who shared with us your lives this past year, for your example and witness of faithfulness to the poor.

I would like to conclude with the memory of a Mass which we celebrated together in the chapel where Archbishop Romero was killed. There were only a few others in attendance, in addition to our delegation. It was truly a graced experience to lift up the memory of one so revered and loved by the poor as Oscar Romero in El Salvador, and with him to gather the sufferings and hopes of a crucified humanity into the loving and sacred heart of Jesus.

Were not our hearts burning, broken with the pain of the poor, and filled with the gladness of communion with the martyrs? Were not our broken hearts filled with compassion for the poor and a burning desire to see justice done? May we be worthy of that moment, and faithful to its call to bring forth a fruitful and effective witness of justice and solidarity with the crucified peoples of the world – the poor in our midst, our sister, our brother.

Touched by the People of El Salvador

by Cathy Raynis

I. The smiling faces

In your countryside
 smiling faces,
 warm brown eyes,
 welcoming us,
 glimmering with
 love
 warmth

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and hope.
Love felt through compassionate embraces,
warmth and friendliness woven in happy laughter,
and hopes in stories of survival.

El Salvador,
in your countryside
you welcomed us
with open arms
and glowing pride.
Pride in smiles
pride in the sparkle of warm brown eyes
pride in the beautiful, bright, colorful gardens –
rays of sunshine in the smallest of huts.

The campesinos glowed with pride –
pride in the land,
pride in their ability to work the land,
pride in surviving the death and despair of war:
death squads,
losing land, family, and homes,
weekly massacres . . .
Archbishop Romero,
the Jesuits and the two women,
the Maryknoll Sisters,
thousands of your friends, family, and countrymen.
And through it all
you love –
warm brown eyes sparkling,
smiling,
welcoming,
with pride –
pride in God
pride in self,
pride in the *compañeros*,
pride in survival,
pride in El Salvador.

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II. Out of your comfort zone

You have beautiful places to live.

You are free to speak
and free to roam.

You are free to learn, to grow,
and to be just about anything you want to be —
yet you yell and complain to get what you want
because what you have isn't quite enough.
As you yell and complain about something trivial
I hold my tongue, but I'd love to ask you —
do you ever travel out of your comfort zone?

Do you ever visit those who must stay poor
to guarantee you your lifestyle?
Your position in this world entitles you to luxuries.

But what about the poor?

Do you ever think about them?

If you did, I think you'd be embarrassed
that you are yelling and complaining about the trivial
when you have so much to be grateful for.

Do you ever stop to give thanks for your blessings?
Do you ever stop and think of those less fortunate than you?
Do you ever try to make a difference in the lives of the poor?
Do you ever travel out of your comfort zone?

Let me take you there.

In between railroad tracks
is a river contaminated with solid and running sewage —
and a wall of garbage
between which they struggle to live
in tiny dark huts made of mud,
with no bathrooms,
no running water,
no windows,
no floor.
They struggle to live
in filth
with disease and

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no access to doctors.
Their children are dying
from so many things you take for granted.
Your child will survive, but theirs will die.
Do you ever travel out of your comfort zone?
The children are barefoot
sick and hungry
full of life and dreams yet barely eking out survival —
the fittest struggling to survive,
the weak dying before your eyes
on beds of cardboard, on clay,
four or five to a bed.
No privacy for mom and dad.
Survival and death,
pride and despair.
Taken out of your comfort zone . . .
will you be grateful for all you have?
Will you stop yelling for more?
Will you turn your heart to help?

III. Be touched by El Salvador

May you wake in their home
in the dark mud shack that seems like a cave
holding a family of nine
where children have died,
where children are smiling,
where children are dying from lack of food and dirty water,
where children are at the top of their class,
and others are bloated, sick and dying.
Despair, pain, hope, dreams —
all rolled into one tiny home.
May it pull at your heart.
May it make you question your soul.
May it tug at your conscience.
May you scream, cry, and wail
for the pain and injustice in El Salvador.
May you be motivated by their hope and determination.

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May you visit the poor of El Salvador,
and be blessed with their love and compassion.
May you be touched by their pride and their durability.
May you realize you will really live and love
when you are touched by the poor.

IV. Learning Community

Community is
openness to others,
gracious and welcoming,
loving and compassionate,
welcoming without limits.
It is pride amidst desolation,
providing services for each other,
leaning on each other to rebuild
schools for the young and the college bound,
medical facilities,
health and sanitation courses,
sex education,
women's services,
domestic violence hot lines and counseling,
self-esteem,
spiritual education and out reach,
homes,
water supplies,
food supplies,
churches,
community finances,
working together to survive in community.

We, the more developed –
welcoming, if on our terms,
on our time,
not just any time;
surround ourselves with a chaotic pace of life:
minimal time for welcoming,
minimal time for connecting,

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minimal time for new friends,
minimal time for family,
while our communities are unraveling.

We surround ourselves with stuff,
with chaos that seems so important,
that makes us look important,
or feel important,
stuff and chaos that keeps us busy,
so busy and protected by it all.

Walls of busyness protect us from the world around us,
so we stay safe in our world of chaos.

We know not our neighbors
and have fine-tuned the art of quick congenialities.

We keep everyone at a distance,
we control who we welcome into our world,
we box our family into an hour of ``quality time,"
and send our dearest friends
that once a year holiday family newsletter.

In these latest of times
we connect with our closest friends and colleagues with e-mail
and phone.

But are we truly connecting?
Limiting our connections to others . . .
limiting a free flowing warmth . . .
an uncontrolled compassion and laughter . . .
welcoming all visitors at any time . . .
caring about neighbors . . .
working together for survival?
For community?

V. Opportunities

We have a lot to learn from El Salvador,
from the struggles of a land
we never anticipated,
heartache like we had never known,
poverty like we have never experienced.

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Priorities change after witnessing
the crying eyes of children in pain,
the frustration of families trying to maintain their land,
a country trying to rebuild
after brutal death squads and war ravaged their land.

We connected to each other in El Salvador
as we had never dreamed.
We leaned on each other during our experience,
building friendships and community in El Salvador,
bringing that supportive community home,
connecting with each other
across campus like never before,
taking what we learned about community in El Salvador home,
touched by the people of El Salvador
as we never dreamed possible.

A Change in Perspective

by Ann Butwell

Coming to Archbishop Romero's house and the Divina Providencia hospital chapel where he was killed on March 24, 1980 always affects me deeply. It doesn't matter how many times I come. The stories of his life rush through my mind. Today I'm reminded of the stories of his conversion from a conservative hierarch who persecuted Jesuits to someone who inspired those same Jesuits. I realize the humility it took to live here when he could have gone to the fanciest place in town. And when we enter the chapel and see a woman kneeling in deep concentration, what is present to me is his commitment to justice, founded on hours and hours of prayer.

We enter the chapel solemnly, in reverence to the great honor that Salvadorans pay him. What never ceases to amaze me is that Romero's life touched so many people, and his death touched even more. Yesterday when I came with Michael to inquire if he could celebrate mass with us this morning, a kind sister showed us Romero's living quarters. She'd patiently waited as our eyes took in everything: his

blood-stained vestments with one tiny hole in the center, his modest room, and the tape recorder he'd used to journal. When we began to study the black and white photos taken of Romero after he'd been shot, she brought our attention to the woman beside him. ``That's my sister right there," she informed us. ``My biological sister," she added when it seemed we didn't know how to ask our next question. *Her sister* was present when they crucified Romero. What an honor and what a curse. When we encouraged her to share more about the photos, she pointed out her father. *He* was there, too? Her life and her family's life were inextricably woven into Monseñor Romero's. No matter who you meet, eventually there is a story: ``He baptized me," or, ``I was present at the massacre that took place during his funeral." ``We are cousins." ``I witnessed his first miracle."

I hear this litany as I take my seat in the light-filled chapel. Michael is already vested and ready to begin the liturgy. Before the gospel, the kneeling woman starts to sing a Salvadoran alleluia. Her voice is joined by our voices, and the beauty spills up into the high spaces between the mahogany rafters. We are transfixed as Michael pronounces the Word: a seed must die or it will not bear fruit. I begin to get dizzy. Is it the typhoid fever I've just been diagnosed with or is it the Spirit?

It must be the typhoid because Michael looks worried about me as we stand to form a eucharistic circle. ``You sit during this part," he instructs me, seating me on one side of the altar and a pale Ann Louise on the other. I am fine as long as I am praying, but when I look up, everything spins. For the first time, I see the open front doors from his point of view. They open to the drive from where the single exploding bullet came. I feel vulnerable, exposed. The space between the doors seems too wide from this perspective.

I look back down. But I am ambushed by the distinctive pattern on the marble floor. It's been engraved in my memory ever since the first time I saw those photos. I imagine the chalice falling on the floor. And bleeding. I see Romero fall. NOOOOOO! I want to scream.

It is hard to take seeing things from his perspective, sitting in his position. It's a position of leadership. A position of vulnerability. Is that what martyrdom means? To become completely vulnerable? The Bible passage Monseñor quoted so often comes into my head: ``There is no greater love than to lay down your life for your friends." Would I be brave enough? Would I pass that test?

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Is my love great enough?
I think of Romero and of so many Salvadorans who have gone
after him, and the immensity of their love overwhelms me.

El Hospitalito

by Rev. Thomas Michael McLernon

At that same altar where he offered
not the bread and wine changed, but his own blood shed,
as was his Master's,
to give life to others.
His name still spoken as if he were yet in the *casita*,
alive among them, and he is.
His promise that if he were to die, in the people he would rise,
a reality,
encountered daily in the reverent mention of his name.

He is Martyr.
Just one among many:
old and young, children, women, men,
catechists, priests, fathers of families, mothers to be,
nuns, lay missionaries, parish workers, martyred all.
Names spoken as a prayer reminiscent of those listed of old:
Clement, Cletus, Agatha, Lucy,
Cornelius, Lawrence, Cecilia.
Now, María, José, Roberto, Hernán, Ida, Oscar:
All witnesses together to the larger dream
where the wolf and the lamb can lie down together;
to the time when there will be no harm, no violence
on all God's holy Mountain.

El Salvador, Holy Mountain,
holy place.
Made holy by the blood of martyrs
who lived and died dreaming a dream
as old and powerful as life itself.

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The now-living and the former-living
bonded together in a present rich with spilled blood.
Blood poured out so that others may live,
so that others may dream,
so that others may walk in dignity and freedom.
Blood poured out so that neither principalities nor powers,
drunken soldiers nor death squads would be victorious.
Blood poured out so that those who can kill both body and spirit
would not win the day and determine the future —
which, after all, belongs only to God,
and to those who are God's friends.
What a privilege to have climbed that holy mountain,
to have walked that sacred ground,
moist with the blood of many martyrs.

At that same altar, I began to understand
a future that belongs to those believers
willing to die to gain it.
I caught a glimpse, a fleeting scent,
of the Kingdom yet-to-come,
but-already-here:
Ciudad Romero, Nueva Esperanza, Tierra Blanca,
and more.

The Hammock

by Anne-Louise Nadeau, S.N.D. de N.

Suspended between life and death . . . is stretched a sagging
hammock. It is tattered with age, yet encrusted with remains of your
afterbirth, rotted with that sour, slimy smell of cloth that has never had
a chance to dry, and at intervals is spattered with what little remains of
your bodily functions. It is on this precarious tightrope of thread and
holes that you were born, Little One, and on which you lay dying on
this sweltering June afternoon.

Your bloated, fluid-retaining body is quiet while your
fever-cracked lips are a heart-breaking testimony of a torment you
should never have to endure. You try to open your eyes at the sound

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of our shuffling feet, but you are too weak in body to keep them open and too far away in mind to make them focus. You are dying, Little One, like your brother and sister before you, only you have never had a chance to live.

I no longer sense the others. The stagnant, burning smells in the room are but background . . . the dirt floor tiled with feces and food droppings seems to vanish . . . and all I see are the ever so small skin breaks on your body, sensing all too clearly that fleas and lice have mistaken your flesh for food. You are dying, Little One, and you are only five-and-a-half-months old.

I want to pick you up, to hold you, to rub your curved back, to give you one moment of comfort in your struggle on the tightrope to another world, but too many admonitions of "be careful, you don't want to get sick" hamper the freedom to cuddle you. I settle on an ancient soothing gesture, stroking tenderly and ever so gently, the side of your face. You are calling to me, Little One, and I have no words.

Your home is a hovel built on a dump site and bordering on railroad tracks leading to nowhere. Your parents are believing people, hoping that at least a few of their remaining six children will have a life that is easier than theirs, and possibly a future too. But your home is also in the eyes of the woman who stands next to the hammock. She is the one who bore and birthed you, and her withering breasts are drying up. Soon, Little One, there will be nothing to swallow.

You manage a weak, tiny smile, which, to me, is the best and the broadest. Your response to my touch is your gift to me . . . and perhaps . . . for one brief moment . . . you know the unconditionality of my love for you flowing through fingers that will always remember the feel of your face. Your name, Little One, was Magali Guadalupe.

Like the hammock on which you lived and died, your tiny life spanned an eternity in the heart of one whose only Little One was you.

Privilege

by Christel Manning

It was a hot Monday afternoon and we were visiting María Madre de los Pobres, one of the poorest communities in San Salvador. The

local woman who was guiding us led us inside one of the shacks to meet a family who lived there. The "house" we entered was about the size of my office, which I had always considered to be quite small. Patched together from corrugated metal and pieces of cardboard and plastic, it was built off a narrow dirt path to the side of the mountain, using the earth itself as one of its four walls. It was dark inside and crowded, a long narrow room with low ceilings, no windows, dirt floor. Near the entrance was a wood-burning stove, some food cooking on an open fire, filling the air with smoke that mixed with the putrid odor of sweat and decaying food. A large wooden cross leaned against the wall near the stove. Old, dirty mattresses were pushed up against all of the other walls; food and clothing were hanging from the ceiling. Half-naked children, ranging in age from one to about eight years old, seemed to be everywhere. Their mother, Francisca, a small thin woman with big sunken dark eyes sat on one of the mattresses rocking her youngest child in a hammock. The child was pale, almost gray, its eyes feverish. Francisca told us that two of her other children had died from disease, most recently the twin of the toddler playing on the bed behind her.

"What are we doing here?" I wondered as I looked at our delegation, white and clean, crowded into the middle of the room, not sitting down because all the beds were so dirty, trying not to breathe deeply to avoid the stench of smoke and rotting garbage, asking questions of this woman so we could "listen to her story" and "feel solidarity with the poor." Just then I heard a little voice behind me ask in Spanish: "Who are you and what are you doing here?" I turned to look at a beautiful, bright-eyed girl and a mischievous looking boy, perhaps seven or eight years old. I explained to them that we were Americans visiting El Salvador to learn about the people here. The girl said her name was Marisol and that she lived here with six brothers and sisters. She stated matter-of-factly that her little brother had just died, and then proudly told me that she went to school and was doing really well. When our guide turned and praised her for her high grades, she got excited and started crawling under the bed to search for her school books. She finally came out and stood on the bed with her brother, holding some honorary plaque she had received, posing for a picture. The cameras flashed, we asked some more questions, we turned to leave. As I walked by Francisca, she began speaking in

Spanish, quickly, urgently, but I couldn't understand what she was saying. After the last American ducked through the low door of her house, blinking in the bright sunshine, she came out and stood by the door, her dark eyes following us as we trudged further up the hill.

I was still thinking of her that night, just before dawn, as I lay in my bed, clammy with sweat and shivering with fever, exhausted from hours of diarrhea and vomiting. I felt like I was dying of thirst, but I couldn't even keep a glass of water down. I wanted to take a shower to cool off and started heading for the bathroom across the hall. It was only ten feet away, but halfway there I felt my knees give out. I crawled the rest of the way to the bathroom – and passed out. When I came to, I had no idea where I was. Ann was there asking if I hit my head on the toilet. I didn't know. Leaning on Ann, I slowly walked back towards my bedroom. I blacked out again – and woke up lying on the floor. My pants were wet. There was shit on the ground. I felt so weak I couldn't get up again. Ann called an ambulance and, with the help of another woman, carried me back to my bed. I felt humiliated, helpless, and deeply grateful for their assistance.

Humiliation, helplessness, and dependence on assistance – these are conditions the poor must face most of the time. For me, the experience was temporary: within an hour of the events just described, I was in the hospital (the best of El Salvador), washed, dressed in a clean gown, lying on a freshly made bed in a private, air-conditioned room. My head ached and there were tubes sticking out of my arm, but I felt safe. I knew eventually everything would be alright. Francisca will probably never feel this way. Whatever she was trying to tell me, it did not express confidence but fear and desperation. The doctor told me I may have got sick from touching her child or something else in her home. Her baby will die, and I will live – just because I am not poor.

Yet Francisca and her children also exhibited a dignity and resilience that most of us have never developed. In the midst of poverty and degradation, Marisol studies her school books and looks to the future with excitement and hope. Francisca sells tamales to feed her family, makes sure her children go to school, and works with the church to improve the community. Despite the death of her children, she has not given up. I wonder if I would have the strength to live her life. I am privileged because I am not poor. I also feel privileged to

have met Francisca and her family.

The Spirit of the Children

by Sandra Weingart

The spirit of El Salvador is seen most clearly in the lives of her children. Bright eyes and flashing smiles in an overcrowded, unlit aluminum hut that serves as a schoolroom speak of faith in a better future. It is for that future that their parents fought a ten-year civil war and faced down the brutality of people who valued these lives only for the labor that they might someday supply. It is the hope in these small faces that keeps people struggling to survive in an economy and an environment that are shattered into worse disarray than before the war. This is why salvadoreños look at the overwhelming challenge to provide even the most basic needs of life for their families and say, "Yes, it is hard. But we haven't come this far to give up now."

This chorus of hope and faith needs nurturing. The quiet whimpers of a two-month old child too severely ill even to cry threaten to overwhelm the animated voice of her older sister, eager to share with the gringo visitors her pride in achieving excellent marks and a certificate of merit in school. I met many children in El Salvador, but this is the story that resonates most strongly. Eight-year old Marisol, the proud scholar, is the eldest child of a family that lives in desperate poverty in the parish of María Madre de los Pobres in San Salvador. Her mother has given birth to eight children and already lost two, one to a motor vehicle accident and one to dehydration due to diarrhea. Marisol lives in a two-room hut that clings to the side of a ravine in an overcrowded parish in the capital city. There were no sanitary facilities and no running water. The water that was hauled in jars from a faucet several streets away came from a river that is used as a garbage dump, with pigs rooting in it.

Despair speaks very loudly in this little *champa*, but Marisol will not be silenced. She graciously invited us into her home and bustled around finding seats for everyone, in itself not an easy task. She introduced herself and her siblings and comforted the little ones frightened by this group of strangers. Shortly afterward we were urged

to look at her outstanding report card and her merit certificate. A brilliant smile illuminates the photographs for which she happily posed. Such a remarkable little girl living in surrealistic conditions.

For Marisol's radiance shines even brighter because hers is not simply the glow of happy, carefree childhood. She is on intimate terms with hunger and disease, squalor and fear. By second grade she had already lost two siblings, and the ailing baby sister she soothed on a hot Sunday afternoon late in June has almost certainly died by the Saturday morning at the end of August when I record these thoughts. In a neighborhood where no one has anything even approaching the basic necessities of life, walls are topped with broken glass to prevent even what little is contained within them from being stolen. But Marisol does not give in. It was of such indomitable faith in better things that St. Paul wrote in his letter to the Corinthians, "[love] always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres" (1 Cor. 13:7, NIV). Faced with conditions that would dishearten many an older, more educated, more worldly person, this little girl loves life.

Such love must be cultivated in the strong ones like Marisol, and transplanted and nurtured in the more fragile ones. Everyone has a right to hope for a brighter future, and each of us has the responsibility to contribute to making that hope a reality. Some will accomplish this in the manner of delegation leader Scott Wright, who spent many years doing pastoral work among displaced people in El Salvador. Others will find their opportunities right here in our own neighborhood. We have only to open our eyes and our hearts to see the need.

Hope and despair often live in the same house. We must value hope as our most honored guest and leave no room for despair.

Poems on El Salvador

by Jean Stokan

Something Sacred Happened, or Lorena's Song

Written amidst the tears and testimony of Lorena, tortured in April

1989 with other leadership of CRIPDES (Christian Committee for the Displaced)

I will rock my empty heart
sing songs of Lorena's tears
wade in them
as memories of pain and torture scars
pull strength forward.

In this fertile land
drenched in blood
I thought my roots were planted deep
but somehow deeper still
your wounds drew me in
far more.

Something sacred happens
when you hold up the body of Christ
when you hold the body of Christ
and remember.

Something sacred happens
when you share your pain
when we touch the open wound.

Strike a woman
and you do strike a rock.
Strike a people
and you've built a movement.

And now, though the mountains of work
grow faster than we,
we will not be consumed
but draw from this well
buckets of strength
renewal.

Lorena

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something sacred happened
and we must hold it up
and hold each other
lay gentle kisses and rock each other

until the spring
of hope
bubbles
through concrete

until children's stomachs are fed
the blind have glasses
the barefoot wear shoes.

Crippled and tired
let us remember
these sacred moments.

Beckoning

*December 9, 1995, El Salvador, after the four U.S. Churchwomen's
fifteenth anniversary*

One more time on holy ground
I beckon the martyrs
this time
to stir up my hope
and the hope of all
the tired ones
the discouraged
the disillusioned
the broken.

If anyone could do it
it would be they.

Yet martyrs beckon us too
to live for them

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and dance
to feel joy
and laugh
to rest
and start again.

So that not one drop of their blood
be shed in vain
let us dance
and laugh
and rest.

Let us stop
and go way down
below the blood-stained ground
below the ashes
to where embers glow.

Like the women at the tomb
let stones be rolled away.

Hope awaits us there.

We can start again.

Poverty

*December 21, 1995, on the plane leaving El Salvador, remembering
María Madre de los Pobres*

Poverty
poverty pushes people
presses people down
then together tight in cramped spaces.
Poverty crushes
crushes people
old women's legs bowed out at the knees

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from the weight of heavy loads
carrying every drop of water they've ever used
and their 10 children
and then some.

Poverty makes some desperate
others clear.

Poverty robs one
of energy
of life itself

Poverty cries in the night
in hungry children's stomachs
in the beaten bodies of women
in the silence of infants' stares
too weak to cry.

Poverty makes some crazy
drives street kids to sniffing glue to transcend the stench
of seeming hopelessness.

Poverty meets you on the roads
in cupped hands
at intersections where the crippled straddle the lanes
and crawl up to your car window
with those wanting eyes
where 5-year-olds beg you to buy a chiclet

Why do we tell ourselves our few *centavos* won't make the
difference
when the poorest Salvadorans lay theirs
in the cupped hands?

The desperation tears at my soul
pulls me in like a tornado in reverse.
I know there's hope somewhere
but it's moving so fast
and it feels like we're going backward so fast

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with every passing second
passing second
and the kids are dying so fast
with every passing second
and the young are giving up so fast, so fast.

What can we do?
I know there's hope somewhere
somewhere.

Who Are the Terrorists?

March 21, 1995, one month after spring came

I too grieve
I grieve for victims
of the Oklahoma City bombing
My tears are real
the weight on my chest heavy

Yet multiply this by 100 more bombs, maybe thousands
and glimpse what we did in just one day of the Gulf War
to other day care centers
and hospitals
200,000 persons dead by bombs and their aftermath
women and children.

Reporters were banned
pictures forbidden
they learned from Vietnam that body bags each night on
the TV news
stirs up the U.S. public
so we only saw fireworks
and played clean stealth computer games.
Iraqi children are children too.

Who are the terrorists?

It calls to mind the space shuttle accident

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a teacher died
 a nation mourned
 and I grieved too
 But I had just been to El Salvador
 and met teachers who were tortured
 not by accident, but by design
 tens of thousands of them and workers, catechists,
 Jesuits, children
 killed
 by a military to whom *we* gave over one million dollars
 a day
 And I stood in a home in Corral de Piedra ten days after it
 was bombed
 they were still scraping from the walls
 parts of children's brains, embedded deep from the force
 and I saw a tuft of hair on the floor
 and in the yard bullet casings made in Illinois
 and I ask, who are the terrorists?

And if El Salvador was bad,
 in Guatemala, a genocide – 200,000 indigenous people
 killed
 since our 1954 CIA-backed coup to help United Fruit
 keep land that peasants need
 and in the early 80s – 440 villages wiped off the map
 in only 3 years
 And who do you think funded death squads in Haiti?
 And in Vietnam, U.S. mines left there are still exploding,
 tearing children apart.

How long will we relegate ``terrorism" to acts of a few
 individuals
 not nations, who wage war.
 And if we want to concern ourselves with terrorist
 prevention
 why do we focus only on fancy security devices, tighter
 borders, more FBI
 infiltration

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. . . instead of
an examination of conscience.

What about our infiltration of borders
foreign policies to protect U.S. business interests abroad
at the expense of millions of Third World poor
who die in silence
from hunger, or as victims of torture, repression
and war.

How long will we deny the blood on our hands
the self-centered plundering of all the resources
we can get
for us alone
at any cost.

Why are we surprised
terrorism has hit home.

Oklahoma City
an evil so great on this soil, some think it's a sign of the
Last Days.

Well what do you think its been like living
in Iraq, or El Salvador, or Guatemala?
for those who are poor? for children?

Hiroshima city
what did that look like with every building destroyed
children burned alive, vaporized
and then Nagasaki
and we can't even take the first step
and say we are sorry?

I grieve
I too grieve for victims
of the Oklahoma City bombing
My tears are real
the weight on my chest heavy.

It's not the first time
I grieve so.

Messages from El Salvador

by Ralph Corrigan

Several messages leap out of *la realidad nacional* of El Salvador: the numbing horrors of a civil war that ripped apart families; the short-lived ecstasy of the Salvadoran people after the signing of the peace accords; the oppression of a third-world nation that provides slave labor in the *maquilas* for the emerging global economy; the ecological disaster of a small country embracing "consumerism" with few safeguards for ensuring the survival of limited land, water and air resources; the growing displacement of campesino war refugees, forced off their lands by payments on loans they cannot make; the inability of the new Civilian National Police to contain the criminal activities of gangs; the unconscionable number of violent deaths in the last couple of years; and the currently escalating terror-tactics of the right-wing death squads.

All negative messages from El Salvador.

But other messages, made clear during my three visits to this country, radiate from the hearts of the Salvadoran people. The first was what Dean Brackley from the University of Central America referred to as the "broken heart" experience — a Salvadoran experience that serves as a wake-up call for visiting international delegations. "Unless you are some kind of stone," he said, "these people, this reality has the capacity, I think, to blow your world apart — to blow it way." In a talk to our second delegation, subsequently published in the pages of the *Sacred Heart University Review* (Volume XIII), he said:

It is extremely important in the course of our university studies that we encounter the poor. It requires, I'm convinced, an experience like El Salvador. Maybe an experience in Bridgeport. . . . You come here to El Salvador, and you're apprehensive. . . . But you find

these people accept you. . . . They tell you these unbelievable horror stories. You cry. They break your heart. You feel your world crumbling around you. But you're glad you came. . . . Because we begin to discover that there's a revolution going on here from the ground up. And that the power of love is real. We have people here willing to give their lives four or five times over for the sake of community, which is something we don't find that often in the States.

Yes, the voices, the stories, the people of El Salvador and the palpable strength of their faith in God coupled with their hopes for a better future, drove a wedge in my heart. I found that these people, on the edge of starvation and death, could be so gracious, so kind, so loving, so giving to our delegations of what meager supplies they had, and beyond that they embraced a radiant hope for the future in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds. As Brackley says, "the power of love is real." It is an all-enveloping warmth, and it has to be experienced to be believed.

My last trip this past summer opened my eyes even more. First, I couldn't believe how welcome we were made to feel at the places our university delegations previously visited and where commitments of assistance were proffered in the past and honored. Perhaps the huge, multi-colored welcoming sign across the front of the church at Tierra Blanca when we arrived said it all: "*Bienvenidos miembros de la Universidad del Sagrado Corazón.*" The people were telling us: we know that you are with us, that you are not just passing through, and we appreciate the efforts you have made on our behalf back in the States.

This last visit again placed me in the presence of people who have assumed the role of wisdom figures in my life: Soledad, a charismatic, visionary, and tireless leader of a thriving community of war refugees in Nueva Esperanza (recently honored at the United Nations for her heroic community-building efforts); Sister Elena, a humble, caring, saint of a woman from Oregon who devotes her life to serving the poor in the town of Tierra Blanca in the Province of Usulután; Dave Blanchard, a Carmelite priest, who has worked tirelessly for years

building a more self-sufficient community with displaced war refugees in Calle Real on the outskirts of the capital of San Salvador; and Dean Brackley, a teacher at the UCA and advocate for working with the poor, who was quick to respond to the world-wide call for new teachers when his fellow-Jesuits were assassinated in 1989.

On this last trip I was fortunate to spend time with our guides from EPICA – Ann Butwell, a gracious, compassionate woman with a deep love for the Salvadoran people, and Scott Wright and his wife, Jean Stokan, both of whom lend new meaning to the notion of “walking with the people.” For example, after working for two years as a catechist and literacy teacher in refugee camps in Honduras, Scott felt compelled to move into the center of the war for its duration. He tells it this way in his book *The Promised Land: Death and Life in El Salvador*:

In March of 1983 a new wave of refugees reached the refugee camps in Mesa Grande. Each story the refugees told planted a seed in my heart and challenged me to draw closer to the suffering of the people. It was difficult for me to imagine the suffering that they had experienced. I longed to see for myself the villages they had left behind and to share more of the life of these people who had become my friends. In June of 1983 I responded to an invitation to accompany the civilian population in the conflictive areas of Chalatenango. As a result of the “scorched earth” policy carried out by the Salvadoran military against the civilian population in conflictive areas like Chalatenango, tens of thousands of people were displaced from their homes.

Scott's life among the Salvadorans during their civil war and after the signing of the peace accords has been a song of commitment and hope, a light in the darkness, a startling testimony to the Gospel teaching of living and working with God's people – the poor and oppressed.

Here's how Dean Brackley put it: “What we are all becoming aware of, here as well as in the States, is that the necessary revolution –

using the language of Paul VI, the 'radical transformation' — has to take place from the ground up. From Bridgeport up, from the South Bronx up, from the suburbs up. And it's got to be grassroots work." So the message from Scott and Dean Brackley and all those who live and work in solidarity with the people in El Salvador is clear: Be with the people. Learn how to be quiet. Listen to them. Learn from them. Be a witness to their struggle. And try to be of some small service.

How can we be of some small service? First, our University must continue its efforts to support peace and justice in El Salvador. Secondly, we can take the lessons we learned in El Salvador and put them to good use in our own campus community and in the larger community of Bridgeport. I am reminded of the words of Jorge Jaiman, Crime Prevention Director for the City of Bridgeport, when he spoke to faculty and administrators during the first Operation Bridgeport weekend. He said simply, "We need people who are willing to give of their time," he said. "We need your expertise."