

EL SALVADOR AT A CROSSROADS

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SALVADORANS SPEAK OUT ABOUT THE WAR, REPATRIATION, AND THEIR HOPES FOR THE FUTURE

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P R E F A C E

In June of 1992, a group of faculty and administrators from Sacred Heart University in Fairfield, Connecticut, traveled to El Salvador six months after the signing of the peace accords that signaled the close of that country's brutal twelve year civil war. We met with *campesino* farmers, clergy, academics, women's rights activists, members of leadership councils, a high-ranking general in the Salvadoran Army, FMLN (*Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front*) combatants, rural healthcare workers, and workers in *cooperativa* projects, among others. Their stories form the core of this book.

Largely funded by more than four billion dollars from the U.S. Government, the war left the Salvadoran population raped and mutilated, with 75,000 dead, and villages obliterated under the "scorched earth" policies of the Salvadoran military operating under the High Command's directive to leave no witnesses. "I saw the shattered aftermath of such killing sprees: catatonic survivors, screaming orphans, the broken dead and dying," wrote James LeMoyne in the *New York Times Magazine* (February 9, 1992). "In a land named for 'The Saviour,' God seemed unusually cruel at times. The memory of such horror is likely to remain seared on the survivors for a generation or more."¹

The peace treaty, signed in Mexico City in January 1992, ushered in an uneasy transition from open warfare to a hoped-for spirit of cooperation between government forces and FMLN guerrillas, but both sides recognized that serious obstacles to resolving their differences remained. These included the redistribution of contested lands in rebel-held zones, the dismantling of the rebel military apparatus, purging officer ranks of the army for war crimes, restructuring existing police forces, curtailing the

activities of the right-wing death squads, and integrating the guerrillas and their leaders into a new political reality.

Observers believed that the army, facing the removal of officers from their ranks, might stage a coup, while the rebels, realizing that their armaments constituted a bargaining chip, refused to lay down their weapons. That was the reality upon our arrival in June of 1992. So why, given the fragility of the peace process at the time, did the administration at a Catholic university in New England decide to fund a delegation's trip to this war-ravaged nation?

To begin to answer that question requires visiting the campus back in the early 1980s, when a series of lectures sponsored by the university's Institute for Religion and Society honored Oscar Arnulfo Romero, the much-beloved Archbishop of El Salvador, assassinated March 24, 1980, while saying Mass at the Chapel of the Divine Providence in San Salvador. The lectures, including presentations by the poet Carolyn Forché and the peace activist Fr. Dan Berrigan, kept the university community informed of on-going atrocities in the country. Then, in November 1989, the assassination of six Jesuit professors at the University of Central America in San Salvador and their housekeeper and her daughter, shocked faith communities, campuses, and governments around the globe, igniting a firestorm of outrage and worldwide appeals to stop the civil war's horrific violence.

Sparked by this international call to action, a newly-revised mission statement promoting social activism, and the urge to support the efforts of Arturo Rivera y Damas, Romero's successor, the president of the university, Anthony J. Cernera, invited the archbishop to the campus to receive an honorary doctorate. It was during that convocation that the president committed the university to "a long term process of learning about and responding to the needs of the Salvadoran people." By the fall of 1991, the director of the university's Center for Ethic Studies, professor Gerald Reid, had drawn up a proposal for a faculty trip to El Salvador and forwarded it to the president.

Intended as a faculty development activity, it was hoped that the trip would provide colleagues with the opportunity to study,

firsthand, Salvadoran educational and health-related systems, as well as emerging governing structures in a postwar Third World country. Another objective included laying the groundwork for faculty and student exchanges with a sister institution. And finally, the hope was that participants, listening to the stories of the Salvadoran people, would have their hearts opened and transformed and return home as ambassadors of social change.

With the president pledging support, twelve faculty and administrators came together to consider committing to the trip, and once the decision had been made to sign on we met weekly during the fall and spring semesters, reading accounts of the conflict between the American-backed ARENA (National Republican Alliance Party) forces and the five groups of FMLN rebels, and handouts on the social and political history of the country. We studied Spanish, were briefed by Minor Sinclair, our guide during our visit to El Salvador and the director of the Ecumenical Program on Central America and the Caribbean (EPICA), and by Fr. David Blanchard, a Carmelite priest, who spoke about his ministry with the repatriated *campesinos* of Calle Real outside the capital city of San Salvador.

“You will be amazed at the spirit of these people,” Blanchard told us. “They have nothing. They don’t even know where their next meal will come from. But they will greet you with open arms, and will go without food to prepare feasts for you. They are a warm, loving people. Nobody returns from a trip to El Salvador without experiencing life changes. The spirit of the people will affect you in ways you would never expect.”

Our group which cut across colleges and disciplines, included Robin McAllister, a professor of English with a scholarly interest in Latin American literature; Maria Teresa Torriera, the founder and chair of the Spanish Department and advisor to the club *La Hispanidad*; Charlotte Gradie, a Latin American historian with a specialty in Colonial Mexico; Jose Ventura, a business management professor, interested in studying financial dependency issues in Third World countries; Gerald Reid, an

anthropologist who worked with a Mohawk tribe in Montreal, and well-versed in the study of native history and cultures; Scott Willison, a professor of education, concerned about the welfare and schooling of children; Anne Barker, a professor in the nursing program, who hoped to study rural community health care practices; Dominick Sacco, a professor of criminal justice and a retired NYPD lieutenant, intent on discovering the progress on restructuring the Salvadoran police forces; Lauren Kempton, an adjunct instructor of education, who looked forward to studying the role of religious beliefs in the lives of the people; Eilene Bertsch, Assistant Vice-President for Academic Affairs, a trained sociologist and advocate of community service initiatives; Thomas Trebon, Academic Vice-President, charged with looking into developing student and faculty exchanges with a Salvadoran sister institution; Louise Spence, a film historian, who hoped to study the political and cultural dimensions of identity-formations; and myself, a professor of English.

What follows is a day-by-day account of the places we visited, the people we met, and the stories they shared with us, providing a glimpse of a moment in time when Salvadorans began to reclaim their lives, rebuild their communities, and look to the future. "Listen to their stories," Sinclair charged us, "observe as much as you can, then construct your own version of what happened here in El Salvador, so when you return to the U.S. you can bear witness to the struggles of these people."

In daily journals we jotted down personal reflections, bits of remembered dialogue, and descriptions of memorable events and scenes. And aware that we were listening to an oral history of events that took place during and after the civil war, we tape recorded the Salvadoran testimonies, spoken in Spanish and translated on the spot by Sinclair or Torriera, both experts in the language.

Latin American historians talk about the need to preserve first-hand accounts of Salvadorans who suffered the ravages of their civil war, and my hope is that this volume offers a partial response to that need. At the very least, after reading the testimonies, a person is free

to make up her or his own mind about some of what transpired during and immediately after the conflict in the “Land of the Saviour.” The appended glossary provides basic information about key terms, organizations, events, and people.

On a more personal note, what follows offers an overview of the actions and reactions of our group as we came face to face with a Salvadoran reality that spoke to our hearts. Fr. Dean Brackley, the Jesuit who traveled to San Salvador to take up the cause of his slain brothers at the University of Central America, said it best: “Just imagine what happens to you on a trip like this. Unless you are some kind of stone, these people, this reality, has the capacity, I think, to blow your world apart – to blow it away.”²

I owe a sizable debt of gratitude to the folks who helped sustain my sporadic efforts over the past twenty years or so to guide this book toward publication.

First, thanks must go to colleagues who traveled to El Salvador in June of 1992, at a time when the country was in the throes of post-civil war turmoil. Special thanks go to Gerald Reid who proposed the trip and guided the rest of us through that first visit.

Much thanks to Minor Sinclair, our patient, knowledgeable guide, who made sure of our safety, supplied us with much-needed commentary along the way, and herded us through a crowded schedule of interviews and visits to rural and urban communities.

Thanks also go to professors Charlotte Gradie and Gary Rose for reading the final manuscript and encouraging its publication. And I’m grateful to professors Robin McAllister and Joe Myers for their help translating Spanish passages on wall murals and etched over the entrances to buildings.

I am grateful to Deborah Dutko for her expert work on the cover design, using photographs taken by Eilene Bertsch, Robin McAllister, Gerald Reid, and Thomas Trebon.

A load of thanks must also go to Eilene Bertsch, for her support during our first trip to El Salvador, and for her prodding and unflinching encouragement to see this book in print. She’s a “treasure.”

To my colleague and longtime friend, Sid Gottlieb, I can truthfully say this volume would not exist without his encouragement and expert editorial advice. His eye for detail, his gentle suggestions, and his enthusiastic support made working with him a joy.

And last but not least, my gratitude goes to Judith, my artist wife, who makes all things possible.

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