

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE PASTORAL LOURDES RETREAT HOUSE

‘It’s the spirit of the Salvadorans. They know how to survive with hope. It’s an issue of faith that lives and breathes in the face of every kind of devastation.’

When we started the drive back to San Salvador, the women in one van, the men in the other, the topic of Perquín was off limits. But by the time we reached the gas station where we stopped for sodas the day before, it had dawned on all of us that returning to the Alameda Hotel meant a good night’s sleep and a free morning before meeting for our wrap-up session.

Later that night we sat at a long table in a Chinese restaurant with Sinclair working on the schedule for the next afternoon. “We’ll need a planning committee to structure the meeting,” he said. “It’s important. It’ll give everybody a chance to come together one last time for reflection and sharing. You need time to put the whole trip into some kind of perspective. And you need to make plans for what will happen when you arrived back in the States.”

— 2 —

The next morning, the bazaar, an enormous in-door complex covering a city block, turned out to be a madhouse of frenetic activity with shopkeepers calling out to bargain hunters jamming the aisles between stalls, booths, and tables laden with leather shoes, boots, belts, handbags, piles of shirts, dresses, pants, jackets, coats,

straw hats, pins, buckles, tote bags, machetes, knives, beads, watches, and all kinds of souvenirs.

In stall after stall, vendors gestured for passersby to look at their goods, promising the best prices. If you stopped, the vendor would smile broadly, walk over and touch your arm, and beckon you to enter.

Sinclair had warned us that prices were to be considered starting points. Haggling was expected. The final price depended on how much the buyer wanted the item and was willing to pay. Prices for the same item, guaranteed always as “the lowest available,” could be purchased, you discovered, for considerably less in another shop an aisle or two away.

One table was piled high with leather goods, and an old woman dressed head to toe in black, picked up a belt, motioning for me to hold it.

“*Quánto cuesta?*” [“How much?”]

The woman muttered a price and added a comment.

“She says one hundred and thirty colones,” said Sacco, “and how wonderful the belt is.”

I said I did not need so fine a belt.

The woman placed the belt in my hands. It was an alligator belt.

“No,” I said, handing it back.

“How much did I want to pay for the belt?” she asked.

“No,” I said again, feeling guilty.

She begged me to reconsider.

I walked away, Wickwire’s comment about the importance of purchasing items from vendors again ringing in my ears.

At one point Barker walked by sporting a smart-looking multi-colored jacket draped over her arm.

“That looks like a work of art,” I said.

“A present to myself,” she announced, smiling. “I know it’s a lot of money, but I really like it.”

Later, back from Mass, a beaming Torreira joined us carrying four machetes, the blades pointing in different directions. “I’ll hide them in my luggage,” she said, laughing.

“I need to look for a pair of shoes,” said Sacco. “I can’t pass up these bargains. I could never buy anything at home for these prices.”

Outside the bazaar, we crossed the street to another block of stalls where Sacco purchased a straw hat. After setting the brim at a rakish angle, with his gray mustache, tanned skin, and wearing sun glasses, I had to admit, he cut a dashing figure.

“I want to go to the police headquarters,” he announced.

“I’ve read too much about Central America,” Gradie commented. “I’m not going anywhere near a police station.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I just don’t think you can ever trust them. So if you’re going, just be careful.”

Her comment reminded me of the sketches I’d seen of prisoners hung upside down with ropes, legs spread, beaten bloody and senseless in underground dungeons.

“Do you mind if we go?” Sacco asked.

“Go ahead,” she said. “I’m returning to the hotel.”

I was certain we were asking for trouble. But already Sacco was leaning into the open window of a parked cab, asking for directions, and the cabbie pointed down the street.

We waved goodbye to our group and started walking. And I’m thinking, this is crazy.

“You’re too apprehensive,” he said. “We’ll be fine.”

Soon we came to a park surrounded by walls where a National Police guard in pressed olive army fatigues was talking to a young woman. Sacco asked him for directions to the police station, and the guard, impatient with the interruption, waved us down the street.

The station, where men in uniforms lounged under trees while others bustled in and out the front door, was a massive stone fortress-like building complete with barred windows. It occupied an entire city block, its front protected by concrete barriers.

Sacco approached a guard to explain about the caps and how he hoped to make some trades. The officer seemed to understand and motioned us toward the front door.

At the door another officer stopped us, asking what we wanted. Sacco pulled out his wallet, flashed his New York "*Teniente*" [Lieutenant] badge, then held out his NYPD caps and again tried to explain his mission. The officer nodded and held open the door.

Inside the cavernous lobby, spinning off in different directions, were stone hallways which I imagined led to subterranean cells where tortured FMLN insurgents rotted away. To our left two officers sat behind desks. One was slightly heavy, clean shaven, and looked to be in his thirties; the other was an older powerfully-built man with three gold bars on his shoulder.

"He's probably a major and the platoon commander," Sacco whispered. "The man in charge."

He stared at us.

"*Soy de la policía de Nueva York, pero estoy retirado ahora.*" ["I was in the New York police, but I've retired now."]

The two officers looked at him and said nothing. Quickly Sacco pulled out his wallet, again flipped to his NYPD Lieutenant badge, and held it toward the officers.

"*Fui teniente y ahora mi hijo es policía en Nueva York. El quiere cambiar este sombrero y parches por suyos.*" ["I was a lieutenant, and my son is a policeman in New York, and he wants to exchange this hat and patches for yours."]

The older one scowled.

"*Si, comprendo. Esperate*" ["Wait a second. I understand"], the other said, and called over an orderly, spoke to him, and the orderly walked off.

"I told him to check upstairs for patches or caps to be exchanged," the officer said in English.

Meanwhile the officer in command turned back to his paper work, acting as if we were an unwanted distraction. His face appeared menacing, and as I stood in front of the desk I had the uncanny feeling that this man was capable of torturing and killing prisoners, and had more than likely done so.

While I'm standing there thinking these thoughts, the orderly returned. We would be taken to where the caps and patches could be swapped. The commanding officer did not bother to look at us.

We followed the orderly out the front door, me breathing a sigh of relief to be out of the building. We turned right, walked along the front of the building, then turned again at the corner and started down the block. Half-way down, a loud shout stopped us in our tracks. An officer was running toward us, waving a cap in his hand. I didn't know what to think. When he caught up to us, he explained he wanted to exchange his cap for one of Sacco's NYPD caps before anyone else got the chance.

After swapping caps, the two of them embraced, now the best of friends. Sacco was delighted.

Several police cars and utility trucks were parked around the rear of the building, and the officer accompanying us crossed the street and disappeared into another building. Minutes later he reappeared with two new patches and handed them to Sacco.

Our excursion had met with more success than Sacco had hoped for, so we said goodbye and walked back up the block where Sacco asked two officers in a parked police car where we could find a cab. When he told them why we had visited the station, the officers said they would be happy to drive us back to the hotel in the squad car.

"I don't know," said Sacco, grinning at me. "What do you think the ladies would say if we arrived in a police car with these guys and their guns?"

He relished the idea, but then thought better of it. "I don't think they would appreciate it," he said. "I better tell these guys that we appreciate the offer, but we'll take a cab."

Later that afternoon under threatening skies we drove in taxis to the Pastoral Lourdes Retreat House, and the moment we arrived the heavens unleashed a torrential rain, dousing us as we raced for cover under trees by the entrance.

A nun welcomed us at the door, led us into a cafeteria-meeting room, explained when supper would be served, told us to make ourselves comfortable, and wished us a productive retreat.

"There's a revival meeting going on in the chapel," she said. "We hope the singing won't disturb your meeting."

With that, she left.

"There are three objectives," Sinclair said, introducing the afternoon's schedule. "First, you need time for reflection. Then we'll share responses to the Salvadoran experience. And finally, you'll need to work up plans for related activities for when you return to the university."

Earlier, Kempton, Willison, and Reid had agreed to serve on the ad hoc steering committee to work out the details.

"We'll talk over the parameters of the meeting," he said. "While we're doing that, why don't the rest of you use the time for reflection."

After a short while the planning committee broke up and we moved the chairs in a circle. Then Ventura started the meeting with a reading in Spanish of the Gospel of Mark, Chapter 4, Verses 35 to 40. Sinclair translated the verses:

The Storm on the Lake

And he said to them on that day, when evening had come, "Let us cross over to the other side."

And sending away the crowd, they took him just as he was, in the boat; and there were other boats with him.

And there arose a great squall, and the waves were beating into the boat, so that the boat was now filling.

And he himself was in the stern of the boat, on the cushion, asleep. And they woke him and said to him, "Master, does it not concern thee that we are perishing?"

Then rising up, he rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace, be still!" And the wind fell and there came a

great calm. And he said to them, “Why are you fearful? Are you still without faith?” And they feared exceedingly and said to one another, “Who, then, is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”

As Sinclair translated the passage, I wondered if the message of the gospel wasn't connected somehow to our Salvadoran experience. Could the “great squall” represent the Salvadoran civil war? And the “great calm” the promise of the peace accords? Was Christ in the gospel rebuking Salvadorans, saying, “Have faith, and all will be well”?

After Sinclair finished, he spoke a few moments about EPICA publications he thought might be of interest to the group, then Kempton and Willison filled us in on the structure for the afternoon. First, we'd try to recall a meaningful moment or experience during the trip, one that resonated for us, and share it with the group. Next, we'd discuss the larger meanings gleaned from our experiences. Then the group would draw up a list of related activities to take place after we returned to the university. Lastly we'd open the floor to discuss individual agendas.

— 5 —

Sitting in the circle, memories of what we had seen and heard flashed by in our minds as we tried our best to select an experience that held a special meaning for us.

“The moment I remember most,” Reid began, “is when the young men from the Dolores Medina *carpenteria* presented with us the cross. I was surprised to know that they had been preparing for us. That one moment crystallized the entire Salvadoran experience for me.”

“For me,” Bertsch said, “it's the spirit of the Salvadorans. They know how to survive with hope. It's an issue of faith that lives and breathes in the face of every kind of devastation. I never knew before what it meant to live under state terror. I can feel the strong presence of the spirit moving in these people.”

Then Ventura's spoke up. "The behavior of Apolo moved me tremendously," he said. "He is a young man in a hurry, driven to do something for his people." Then he recalled the meeting with General Vargas. "He was really an orator, using phrases that would show his high level of training, education, and love of his country."

"He was the embodiment of the military," Gradie added, a note of irony in her voice. "A living and breathing example of the military mind."

Sacco reminisced about his meetings with Deimas during the celebrations for the war-wounded in the Central Plaza, and later at Morazán. "As we hugged, the reality of the peace accords struck me," he said.

Barker talked about the visits to the healthcare clinics. "These clinics did not resemble clinics that I had ever seen before," she said, reserving high praise for the efforts of the healthcare providers. "They are laboring under the most primitive conditions, risking their lives to care for the people."

For Willison it was the children. "Their strength and heroism under the most trying of circumstances amazes me," he said. "These children have been wounded, orphaned, and traumatized by the war. And we rarely saw any young men. They were either in the army or with the guerrillas, or they were dead."

Kempton talked about her efforts to define the term *mística*. "I began to see the term as referring to the living church," she said, "as a sense of the Christian-based community, a sense of hope, a sense of life."

"This is a country where the truth is systematically lied about and distorted," McAllister said. "But I'm impressed with the spirit of repatriated Salvadorans. Maybe, because of that spirit, there is hope for the peace accords to succeed."

Torriera spoke about the women and children of El Salvador, and how she was excited about the Spanish Club back at school adopting the elementary school at La California. "I hope we can do something for them," she said.

For Spence, the trip to El Salvador was a chance to experience a different reality "in order to better learn one's own identity."

At the Retreat House, the “larger meanings” to be gleaned from our experiences were left unspoken – and for good reason. It would take months and even years for us to process those meanings.

For the time being, since from the beginnings of the trip it had been made clear that it would be our responsibility to return to campus and share the Salvadoran experience in whatever ways might benefit the school and the larger community, we agreed to come up with a list of activities to work on back at the university.

Reid started the ball rolling. “We could host a series of speakers during the coming academic year. The speakers could talk about issues raised during our visit in El Salvador.”

“We could write essays on some aspect of the trip and publish them in an upcoming issue of the *Sacred Heart University Review*,” I suggested. “Not academic pieces, but more along the lines of personal responses to a place, or event, or person. The idea would be to share our experiences with the readers.”

Reid, Gradie, and Barker pointed out that much of what we had learned could be integrated into our teaching to enrich the content of existing courses.

“And there is Hispanic Week at school,” Torriera reminded us. “Maybe we could have a panel presentation during that week.”

Then the discussion turned to finding an appropriate time to present the cross from Calle Real to the university community.

“Why not present it at the opening faculty meeting?” I asked. “You could ask for five minutes of that meeting, Jerry, describe what we did, then present the cross to Dr. Cernera.”

Kempton offered another idea. “We need to develop a speaker series for our education programs,” she said. “We could meet with people from local disadvantaged communities and ask them to come to SHU to speak.”

Other suggestions included interviews with local community newspapers; setting up a display of enlarged photos taken during the trip to illustrate the reality of daily life in a Third World country; working on the transfer of the language lab to the National

University; forwarding books and journals to the UES; and borrowing videos from the UES to show at school.

All told, some twenty-two ideas for related activities were listed at the Retreat House.

Next it was time for “personal agendas,” which meant addressing the *panadería* project for Nueva Esperanza. After a brief presentation, to my surprise, no one raised objections to the proposal, and several people donated monies on the spot. Others agreed to contribute later that evening.

While jotting down names and amounts donated in my journal, Bertsch walked over.

“How is it going?” she asked.

“We’re doing fine.”

“Let me know if you need more. OK?”

Finally it was time to thank Sinclair for his extraordinary efforts on our behalf. Earlier that morning after Mass, Bertsch, Ventura, and Torriera, had picked out a gift – an embroidered white cotton tunic.

“We took turns modeling the shirt to decide if it was big enough,” Bertsch had said earlier. “Finally we held it up against Jose, saying, ‘If it’s big enough to fit Jose, it will fit Minor.’”

She handed Sinclair the shirt, and he pulled it over his head, emerging with a huge grin.

“That’s really nice of you all,” he said. “I really appreciate this.”

“You look a little like a priest.”

The rain stopped, and with the nuns setting up for our supper, we walked outside and filed along a path past the chapel to a large flagstone patio. In its center a giant Medusa rubber tree appeared to be standing upside down with thousands of roots shooting toward the sky, its branches curling and springing out in all directions.

Lawn chairs circled the massive trunk, a two-foot high stone wall guarded the rim of the patio, and beyond the land dropped gradually, covered by dense jungle-like vegetation with large deep russet leaves. To the right a path angled down to a terraced tropical garden and in the distance was a breathtaking view of the city.

We stood talking quietly under the branches of the tree and took in the scene, all of us coming to the realization that our trip was almost over. It was a bittersweet moment. Sinclair was right. Time was needed to digest what we had seen and heard in El Salvador. Our hearts had been broken by the testimonies we had listened to and the scenes we had witnessed, yet we also knew we had been privileged to take part in what was potentially a life-changing experience. The questions nagging all of us? Were we up to making that change? And if so, how? What form would it take? How would the lessons learned in El Salvador work themselves out in our daily lives? For example, taking Brackley's charge to us at face value: would we be willing to live up to the challenges of getting involved in social action activities with our neighbors, the poor in Bridgeport?

Sobering questions.

Back inside a long table had been set up along the rear wall and at either end smaller tables covered with blue checkerboard oilcloths, brimmed over with tortillas, plantinos, bottles of Fanta and Coke, and containers of coffee.

"The cab drivers said they would return for us at 7 o'clock," Sinclair announced, standing up. "But I don't think that's going to happen. So I have to make a few calls."

When he returned, he said he couldn't reach the cab company. "I made arrangements with the groundskeeper to drive a few of us back to the hotel. Then I'll place a call to hire cabs to drive up here to pick up the rest of you. The groundskeeper will take his wife and three passengers. So who wants to go back with me now?"

Bertsch and Torriera decided to return with Sinclair, while the rest of us would stay at the convent and wait for the cabs.

As we dined together for the last time, a mood of celebration overtook the group. We had shared a momentous experience, had

resolved to participate in a series of Salvadoran-related activities back home, and had forged relationships with each other that we believed would withstand the test of time.

Someone joked about being stranded in the convent with the nuns all night. Another recalled McAllister's singing.

"Robin, it sounded really good. Could you sing it again?"

"What was I singing? I don't remember what it was."

"Frankie Lane!"

"'Ghost Riders in the Sky!'"

"'The Ballad of Sam Magee!'"

He thought for a moment, then sang several verses of the "Grey Goose" ballad. Everyone clapped and demanded more. He followed up with "The Ballad of Sam Magee."

The impromptu performance over, cards were produced and a raucous game of "Crazy 8s," punctuated with laughter and shouting, got underway.

"The nuns will be coming to tell us to shut up."

"No, they're going to throw us out of the place!"

Meanwhile, Ventura and Gradie sat off to the side, reading.

"C'mon, Charlotte," said Willison. "Let your hair down."

"No, I don't know how to play," she said. "I'll just sit here and read."

"It's easy!"

"C'mon, Jose."

"No. I don't play games."

"Charlotte, nobody knows how to play this game. It's fun."

"I'll watch," she said, putting her book down and moving over to the table.

With more coaxing, she took a seat.

"Just like one of the guys," she said, laughing.

A couple of hours later Sinclair arrived with the taxis and our time in El Salvador came to a close. And so began the start of our personal journeys . . .