

Suffering Together at Valle Nuevo

BY YVONNE DILLING

In a little Salvadoran hamlet, the memory of villagers' suffering during a long and terrible war becomes a celebration of the Christ who suffers with them at each Station of the Cross. They remind us there are many "crucified peoples," and we need to ask "Who put them on the cross?"

I encourage first-time visitors to El Salvador to go to the rural village of Santa Marta where folks are willing to talk about their past. In this village where mother and grandmother still cook delicious thick white corn tortillas from scratch on a clay griddle over a wood fire, all you need to do is give people a leading sentence—such as "They say the people suffered a lot before they fled through the hills to Honduras"—and some personal or family experience rolls right out, as though the mother awoke that morning thinking about it. And maybe she did.

When I think back over all I have heard during more than twenty years of accompanying the Salvadoran people, the words "terrible suffering" do not come anywhere near to the reality. If I began to recite the worst of what I have heard, no reader would continue to the end of this article. Perhaps the gory details are not necessary; any parent, whose child has died prematurely, especially through some injustice, would agree that the word "suffering" is not sufficient to describe what they live with.

HEARING ROSARIO'S STORY

Recently this lesson came to me unexpectedly and poignantly when I made the mistake of referring to the historic military operation at the

Lempa River as simply “the Lempa River crossing.” Rosario, a native of Santa Marta with whom I had never talked about the event, even though we are neighbors in a village some six hours from Santa Marta, looked at me quickly, her normally amicable and joking features suddenly frozen, her jaw almost locked. Out came the words as though she were holding back the force of an avalanche.

“*Massacre*; it was a *massacre*, not a *crossing*.” We were referring to a U.S.-financed military operation in March, 1981. It was part of a newly launched “scorched earth policy” modeled on the one used in Vietnam more than a decade earlier—terrorizing, dispersing, and even destroying civilian populations without mercy if it was suspected that rebel fighters might be hiding in their midst, or even that the civilians might sympathize with the then-small group that had abandoned civilian protest.

Rosario, like most rural women here, began childbearing so young that I should not have been surprised that at eighteen she had been a mother. Though my own cultural context led me to think she was too young to have children in 1981, I had the presence of mind quickly to say, “You lost loved ones there,” and to ask, “Were you there yourself?”

We were traveling at the time in a four-wheel-drive pick-up truck over a rough dirt road through the mountains. Though the bumpy ride was bruising to our tail bones, it was worth it for the views of the lush green hills meeting lovely blue sky.

Rosario looked out over the hills, but I knew she was not seeing the cultivated corn as she said, “They shot my baby in my arms and wanted me to fall into the river and be swept away in the current just like those five-hundred who were swept away at the Sumpul River massacre. I carried my baby all the long hike to Los Hernandez. All the while I was thinking, ‘I can’t bear this.’ The women there had to forcibly take her out of my arms that night and I watched them bury her just as she was, wrapped in a cloth.” Other details emerged as she recalled how that night changed her life. A few months later soldiers killed her husband. After several more months, Rosario gave her remaining child to her mother and joined the emerging guerilla group. They fought for seven years until the armed forces, unable to defeat the rebels, finally accepted a U.N.-sponsored opportunity to negotiate peace.

When Rosario finished her remembering, I cautiously ventured: “Visitors from other countries often wonder how you could still believe in God after all the unjust suffering you have endured. Why aren’t there more atheists here?”

“The suffering did not produce atheists; what did was the church’s failure to defend the people in the face of the injustice, and the outright collusion of the bishops when they blessed the army,” she responded. “Not even that, really,” she continued on a new train of thought, “it produced folks who will not participate in that church but who still believe in God.”

"I felt that God was always with me," Rosario said, repeating a view I've heard frequently from Salvadorans. "If I hadn't felt that, I could not have born the suffering." And she named women from Scripture and tradition who are saints for her: "*Santa Maria* was always with me, Veronica was with me just as she was with Jesus, and we suffered together and gave each other strength to go on."

Then a litany of thanksgiving overflowed from her: "God didn't abandon me. God gave me another *compañero* to console me, and babies who are grown now and give me joy. Thanks be to God! In the seven years of fighting after the Lempa river massacre, I was never captured, never raped or tortured. I did not die. Thanks be to God!"

"We know that God didn't cause the suffering; God didn't wish it on us," she urged, making a final important point. "Political and economic policies caused it; the structural sins of society caused it. It is some consolation to know that I didn't perpetuate those sins by sitting back and doing nothing, or just running to save my life. I confronted them. I am consoled in my own faithfulness." Many of the poor and oppressed in El Salvador reached the same conclusion during their decade of suffering: "To recognize a structural sin but not resist it is also a sin."

Having expressed her sorrow, Rosario quickly changed the subject and found something to joke about. I have come to see this indomitable sense of humor and accompanying optimism among Salvadorans as a blessing of God, a sign of special grace. They have not abandoned their culture and their communities, even when millions of others have opted for the precarious flight to the U.S. in search of a job that will put food on the table. They have been known to say "when we can no longer laugh, then God has lost the battle."

LEARNING TO HOPE

El Salvador has been described as a place that exports more hope and optimism than coffee. In spite of all the stress and outright suffering caused by the less visible war that is being waged today—an economic war on the poor fueled by neo-liberal economic policies—there are still little pockets where hope can be found. I am reminded of an interview with Ignacio Martín-Baró, a Jesuit priest and university professor, shortly before he was slaughtered in 1989 along with five of his brother priests and their cook and her daughter. Giving an overview of the economics of a war fueled by rigid U.S. ideologies, the priest painted a very pessimistic view of the future. After a poignant silence, someone in our group asked him, "Is there any hope?" With a small, but triumphal smile, he raised a hand with one finger pointing upwards to emphasize his soft reply: "I'm not optimistic, but I am hopeful."

Martín-Baró understood that Christ did not come to suffer and die, but to announce a project of life—the building of a kingdom of love, a project

in which we are invited to participate. This glorious project has many enemies and its construction workers inevitably experience suffering just as Jesus did. Indeed, they can bear their pain better if they understand the structural aspects of their suffering and its relation to the work of building the kingdom of God. Because they know that God does not will their suffering, in a spirit of gratitude they remain open to the comfort God provides in times of suffering, to the hope of a radically different future, and to God's continuing invitation to be involved in the kingdom.

It has taken me many years to understand that this combination of gratitude, hope, and humor is not accidental. I have learned a simple truth: grateful people are most often happy people.

HEALING MEMORIES

Next to Santa Marta is a little hamlet called Valle Nuevo that I visit every year for the commemoration of the Lempa River crossing. (I call it a "crossing" because, even though fifty people were slaughtered by the army, five thousand others survived. In contrast, the year before, five hundred people were killed when they tried to cross the Sumpul River. There, the few survivors say that babies were thrown into the air and speared on U.S.-provided bayonets.)

Originally the commemoration consisted of a circuitous trek to the river, following the same path the folks had used as they fled the pursuing soldiers. At the river we observed a Mass, enjoyed a picnic, and swam in the river. By our swimming we were taking back the river that produced death and pronouncing it a river of life. Over the years, however, the long hike became too difficult for the older folks, and unsupervised youth played in the river instead of participating in the Mass. To the adults it was sacrilegious that the kids would play in the water while a Mass was being held to honor those who had died there. So, in a community assembly the decision was made to no longer go to the river, but to commemorate in the village with a re-enactment of the Stations of the Cross and a Mass in the church.

With this new arrangement, something amazing happened. Women and men who had *never* gone to

the river because their memories were too painful began to participate in the long procession of the Stations of the Cross. At each station, they reflected on how Christ suffered there again with the Salvadoran people during the war. These villagers who could not bear the memories of the crossing were blessed with some mental healing as they recalled that God was with them in Christ through those long and terrible years.

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SEEING CLEARLY

By keeping alive *la memoria histórica* (the historical memory) with the people at Valle Nuevo, I've realized that my North American addiction to ease—to obtaining material things for my physical comfort—can be a spiritual block. For instance, among these suffering friends I have learned to fast, which is an understanding blocked for years by my penchant for comfortableness. Simply offering up slight physical discomfort to God in El Salvador has led me to new spiritual insights about risk-taking, sensitivity to the poor, and examining political and bureaucratic policies from the perspective of their affect on the disadvantaged.

Now I see that these are biblical teachings. Many laws in the Old Testament are based on sensitivity to the poor, and the parable of the Good Samaritan calls us to “cross the road,” to risk suffering in order to help persons in need, even when we know that a robber could return at any moment to confront us. Indeed, our biblical mandate is two-fold: to respond immediately to alleviate the suffering of others, and to work to change policies that cause suffering. Our works of mercy are important, but so is political advocacy. To *not* take action to transform political structures that cause suffering is to side with the oppressor.

In El Salvador I have learned the difference between victims and martyrs. Victims are people who are caught in the world's cross fire, who are unfortunate to be at the wrong place at the wrong time, like the pedestrian who crosses the road in front of a drunken driver. Martyrs are those who act out of faithfulness, even though they know their actions could bring them suffering and death.

There are many “crucified peoples,” and we need to ask “Who put them on the cross?” That is, we have to do political analysis. This will lead us to the question, “As a follower of Jesus, what am I going to do to help get them down from the cross?”

**YVONNE DILLING**

lives in rural El Salvador where she assists with community organizing, rural women's development, and non-formal education.