

Called To Witness: El Salvador

By Patrick Sprinkle

Special to the Review

I was in the Catholic Relief Services' Called to Witness delegation that traveled to El Salvador in May. It was only then that we discovered we would be there for the beatification of Archbishop Oscar Romero. One cannot ignore the fact that this beautiful country with incredible people has the highest per capita murder rate in the world; May's 635 murders marked its deadliest month in two decades. And one cannot overlook the fact that this country is struggling with poverty - of education, security, opportunity, pride and resources.

And yet, in *Evangelii Gaudium* (#198), Pope Francis challenges:

"... I want a Church which is poor and for the poor. They have much to teach us. ... We need to let ourselves be evangelized by them. ... We are called to find Christ in them, to lend our voice to their causes, but also to be their friends, to listen to them, to speak for them and to embrace the mysterious wisdom which God wishes to share with us through them."

When Pope Francis wrote that he hopes for a poor church for the poor, one where we can find Jesus, listen to his voice and be his voice for them, I was challenged to ask, "How?" How can I best listen to our brothers and sisters in El Salvador and perhaps lend my voice for the voiceless?

While in El Salvador with Called to Witness, which "provides parish, diocesan and national youth ministers with a global experience to help them call and empower young people to an active commitment to working for solidarity, peace and justice," we witnessed grace upon grace and hope-filled moments with people such as Christian, a 15-year-old involved in the CRS Jóvenes Constructores (Youth Builders), who started a company making piñatas in his tiny home.

We met Tamara, an inmate participating in Yo Cambio (I Change), where she engaged in music and drama to inspire others. We also encountered the staff of

COFAMIDE (Committee of Families of Missing and Disappeared Migrants), searching for fellow Salvadorans who have disappeared on a dangerous trek to the United States to flee violence.

We gathered with youth ministers who find creative ways to bring the good news to young people and shared in Familias Fuertes (Strong Families), a joint CRS/Caritas El Salvador program which offers life skills on raising children. Finally, we encountered Jose Antonio, helping farmers grow cacao through the largest agriculture program in CRS' history.

The spirit of Oscar Romero was present everywhere. As we gathered for the May 22 vigil and the May 23 beatification Mass, the enthusiasm and hope of the people was electric. A torrential downpour did nothing to dampen the spirit of the vigil. Several people declared that this was Romero's rain washing over a people like relief in a drought. During the beatification Mass, a rainbow completely encircled the plaza, where 250,000 people witnessed a halo sent by God to remind people that his servant, Oscar, was present.

If I am to be truly in solidarity with my brothers and sisters around the world, as the Gospel calls us, I must take a serious look at my personal life and how I can make a greater difference. As a nation, we can ask the tough questions concerning our compassion and care for those who are vulnerable, those who do not have freedoms, lifestyles and laws that directly impact our family of faith.

Please join with me in praying for the people of El Salvador and all of our sisters and brothers, both globally and locally.

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