

## **Reflections on a Pilgrimage/Retreat to Central America**

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Thirty years ago this year, during a retreat taken less than a month before he was assassinated on March 24, 1980, Archbishop Oscar Romero wrote: “Thus do I express my consecration to the heart of Jesus, who was ever a source of inspiration and joy in my life. Thus also I place under His loving providence all my life, and I accept with faith in Him my death, however hard it be.”

A “martyr” is literally a witness who gives testimony to their faith by suffering and even shedding their blood. Few of us have had the opportunity or interest to reflect on what it might mean for us personally to be a martyr for our faith and for most of us there are not many such serious challenges to our faith beliefs. However, during January 11-22, 2010, I had the opportunity to participate in a pilgrimage/retreat sponsored by the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers. The pilgrimage group visited the sites of many modern day martyrs in Guatemala and El Salvador and the trip gave us a chance to meet and talk with persons who had known these martyrs and many others who had been their friends, collaborators, and even family members.

The pilgrimage challenged us 20 priest and deacon pilgrims to reflect on what it would mean for us to be a martyr today in our own lives. The retreat also taught us how the blood of these martyrs has led to a flourishing growth in faith among the people of today. Many of these men and women whose martyrdom sites we visited were unknown to us and probably to most people, but the pilgrimage took us to the places where these courageous people had lived and died for the faith in a heroic way and thus creating truly ‘holy ground’ which we were privileged to see and experience.

Having seen an advertisement in *America* magazine, and viewed the presentation on the Maryknoll website, I personally was intrigued with the chance to visit and learn more about some of those men and women whose story indirectly had been part of my priesthood from early on. While serving in parishes in the 1980s in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas I had met many

immigrants from Central America who were constantly coming across to the U.S. to escape from civil wars and violence in their home countries. Their stories were difficult and tragic.

The first segment of the trip took place in El Salvador. Here we walked in the footsteps of Archbishop Oscar Romero, the 4 Church women from the U.S. (Jean Donovan, Sr. Dorothy Kazel, OSU, Sr. Maura Clarke, MM and Sr. Ita Ford, MM) as well as the 6 Jesuit priests at Central American University, their housekeeper and her daughter. We heard the stories of the suffering and death of many other priests, religious and lay catechists throughout the country as well.

On our first full day in San Salvador, we visited a museum in the simple apartment of Archbishop Romero at the Hospital Divina Providencia in San Salvador where he often stayed. In one of the most moving parts of the pilgrimage, we celebrated Mass at the same altar where he was shot and killed on March 24, 1980. We listened to a tape recording of his final Sunday homily as our preparation to celebrate the Eucharist that day. We later visited and touched the holy ground where he is buried at the Cathedral in San Salvador, a pilgrimage site of many people, including several while we were there.

We next traveled the isolated Salvadoran country road near Santiago Nanualco where four church women from the USA were taken one night in December, 1980 after having been kidnapped, raped and tortured. We celebrated Mass in a chapel built by the diocese of Cleveland, on the holy ground where they were finally killed and their bodies left by the side of the road. Testimonies were given by those who had been there that day, especially by Sr. Teri Alexander, MM, who had worked shoulder to shoulder with them in the mission and who spoke of these women's courageous lives, despite hardships and danger, in which they sought to bring hope to the hopeless.

Our next stop was at the Jesuit Central American University in San Salvador where we stood in a rose garden planted in the same courtyard where the 6 Jesuit priests were brutally executed in the middle of the night in 1989, as well as their housekeeper and her daughter who had taken refuge in the house that frightful evening. Fr. Ignacio Ellacuria, President of the University, and the other Jesuits were killed for speaking out about the injustices to the poor as they tried to give the

poor a voice. Later we visited a martyrs' memorial wall in a park in San Salvador where the names of 30,000 men, women, youth and children, who were killed during the violent war in El Salvador. All together around 70,000 priests, religious, catechists and lay religious workers died in El Salvador during these years. Like the Vietnam Memorial in Washington DC, the memorial wall is a revered site of prayer and remembrance for the families and friends of those people who died in El Salvador during the civil war.

In Guatemala we traveled to the beautiful region where the Mayan peoples' descendants live today around Lake Atitlan and the volcanoes and mountains which surround it. Many indigenous people were the subject of violence by the Guatemalan Army during the almost 35 year long civil war. We visited a parish in the village of San Lucas Tolliman which has been a mission parish of the diocese of New Ulm, Minnesota where the pastoral team has worked to improve the lives of the people. There an indigenous woman told us the story of her husband who had been a catechist and assistant to the priest at the parish in San Lucas and was taken away and killed with several other men in the village. The woman herself adopted 6 orphan children from another village who she raised along with her own 5 children. The orphan children's parents had died in one of the massacres of the indigenous peoples' villages.

In this same region we visited the parish in Santiago Atitlan where an Oklahoman diocesan priest, Stanley 'Francisco' Rother, had worked for 13 years in the archdiocese of Oklahoma City's mission parish. In his ministry Fr. Stan had adapted himself to the culture of the Tzutzhuil people, learning their language and their customs which he adapted into their parish celebrations. Because he had taken a public stand on behalf of the indigenous peoples who were being mistreated and even massacred by the Guatemalan Army, he himself eventually was killed by unknown assailants in the parish rectory. Though his body was returned for burial in Oklahoma, the people asked that his heart stay in Santiago, for they said that he had become one of their own. A beautiful reliquary memorial with his heart has been constructed in the church in Fr. Francisco's memory. The archdiocese of Oklahoma City continues to have a strong connection to this parish and officially is proposing Fr. Rother for canonization as a martyr.

From the Maryknoll missionaries we also heard the story of Fr. Bill Woods, a Maryknoll priest from Houston, who came to work in Guatemala among the indigenous peoples in 1958 until his

death when his plane mysteriously crashed in 1976. Fr. Bill Woods became a pilot in order to help the Mayan peoples establish farming and craft cooperatives in the jungle and helped them to own and settle lands where they could freely live and support themselves. The Guatemalan Army is accused of shooting down his plane in the mountains in a remote area.

Finally, we visited the martyrdom site of auxiliary Bishop Juan Gerardi in Guatemala City who was killed in his garage in 1998, only a couple of days after his public presentation of the report by the Human Rights commission of the Archdiocese of Guatemala entitled, "Guatemala Never Again". For many years Bishop Gerardi had worked in solidarity with the indigenous peoples of Guatemala as priest and later bishop. He and the human rights commission interviewed many of the Guatemalan people, especially the indigenous people, who had been witnesses of massacres, rapes, and torture of tens of thousands of people during the Guatemalan civil war. The report carefully documented these testimonies as an historical memory, and named the Guatemalan Army as responsible for over 90% of the violent slaughter. All together around 250,000 people were killed during the violent civil war in Guatemala.

Along the course of the journey we also met many contemporary missionaries in Guatemala and El Salvador who continue to reach out to those most in need. These projects included such works as an AIDS clinic, a soy milk distribution center, a farming cooperative, and a Catholic Worker house for youth trying to escape gangs, among others. The testimony of the martyrs gives new vision and focus to these efforts of current missionaries.

The lives of martyred Christians of the distant past, as well as these of the present time, speak to us loudly of their faith in Jesus and the power of His love over violence, hate and death itself. The Central American pilgrimage invited us to consider how we can make the world a more peaceful place to be today and how we can be more conscious of the plight of the poor and abandoned in our society. While we were impressed by the number of mission-minded men and women from the United States who came to the assistance of the people in Central America, we were chastened by the fact that our own US government had supported the Guatemalan and Salvadoran governments in wars in which many innocent people had suffered and died, including courageous men and women of faith who worked in solidarity with the poor and indigenous people. And, knowing that the world is still far from perfect, we were inspired to

become more perfect witnesses of the faith and Christ's love each day and to encourage our communities to be more conscious of the poor and indigenous peoples. It has been said by Tertullian in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century that the blood of martyrs is the seed of Christians. Truly we can say that our faith today lives on because of the sacrifices of those who have come before us.

As one of the veteran missionaries shared with us, "You have to take your martyrs and saints where you find them." They are not up on some beautiful pedestal, they are found in the dust and ordinariness of life where the true measure of faith and compassion is found, shared and treasured.