

In the Land of the Savior, 1985

John Dear | Aug. 26, 2008 | On the Road to Peace

[**Note:** More excerpts from my autobiography, *A Persistent Peace*, just published by Loyola Press. Here, I tell about my 1985 experience in El Salvador. It was at the height of the U.S.-backed war there. Archbishop Oscar Romero and four church women had been assassinated already. I went to work with Jesuit Refugee Service.]

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The highlight of our first week was our visit to the Jesuit University of Central America, a graceful campus of palm trees, preened lawns, stucco buildings crowned with red-tile roofs, vast clusters of flowers -- a plot of Southern California dropped from heaven. There we met the renowned philosopher and theologian Fr. Ignacio Ellacuria, the university president.

He was in his 50s, a hairline in recess, piercing dark eyes under a brow that bespoke intelligence. It was a good face, but stern, serious, and urgent. He welcomed us into his office and started the introductions. Then he settled into his chair and stated his manifesto, "The purpose of the Jesuit university in San Salvador is to promote the reign of God." Every course, he said, every paper and department, was aimed at liberating the poor and oppressed." Education here was geared toward a new peaceful El Salvador with justice and human rights for all its people. If a course or course work didn't confront what he called "the national reality," if it didn't promote political, social and economic transformation, it wasn't education, he said. I marveled at his compelling vision and couldn't help noting the contrast between this university and the ones back in the States.

"We have learned in El Salvador," Ellacuria said, "that to be for the reign of God means we have to be against the anti-reign." The world has changed so much, he said, that we can no longer promote peace unless we actively and publicly resist war. We can no longer do good without taking pains to resist systemic, institutionalized evil. We can no longer stand abstractly for justice. We must concretely and conspicuously fight injustice. His was a new take on Gandhi's maxim: "Non-cooperation with evil is as much a duty as cooperation with good."

And so, he said, we oppose the war -- the death squads, the ruling junta, U.S. military aid, bombing raids, poverty, disease and every form of systemic violence that plows Salvadorans under. We oppose the violence of the rebels. This work brings danger, but it's what Jesuits are supposed to do, he said flatly. This is what it means to follow Jesus -- to defend the poor, "to accompany Jesus as he carries his cross in the world," to practice "the faith that does justice," to offer God's reign in the midst of the anti-reign.

Ellacuria's moral authority rang like a tower bell. His vision both inspired and frightened me. Fearless, outspoken, daring and challenging -- I'd never met his like, except perhaps Philip Berrigan. Everywhere Ellacuria went, he spoke the truth. He was constantly in the papers and on TV. He denounced government honchos, military brass and cosseted landlords. In the late 1970s, he had written speeches and pastoral letters for Romero. Now, he seemed the heir apparent. The poor knew and respected him, and in turn, all the Jesuits. Ellacuria was a modern-day prophet, and like every prophet before him, he flouted the makers of war, raised the hope of the despairing, and took little account of personal danger. He would give his life as Romero had, as Jesus had, if necessary, for God's reign of justice, not in some far-off heaven, but here and now, in the "land of the Savior." Being with him challenged me to take a strong public stand for peace.

After the meeting with Ellacuria, we had enough to take home and reflect on for years. But come afternoon, we were granted an audience with liberation theologian Jesuit Fr. Jon Sobrino. He was a mirror image of Ellacuria -- gentle, charming and quietly inspiring, but equally prophetic. He urged us to give ourselves for justice and to reflect on the meaning of our Christianity -- our humanity -- while in El Salvador. Life in the camps, he said, will teach you how to be human.

"The Jesuit task is to risk our lives, to be on the frontiers of history," he said. That's what God wants of us. God wants the poor to be liberated from poverty and death. That's the work we're given to do -- to liberate the poor from poverty and death.

"You'll be in the refugee camps," he said, "and feel profound shame. You'll say to yourself, 'I am ashamed to be a human being.' But you'll experience profound joy as well. You'll think, 'Life makes sense if I share in their suffering. At last, I'm part of the human race!'" My throat tightened. "For the rest of your lives," he added, "you'll have a basic reference point." How right he was.

Properly oriented and shown the ropes, I headed off to the camp at Calle Real, along with a Jesuit scholastic, Tom Forsthoefel. The camp had no plumbing, no electricity, and no phones. Together, with the displaced people, we cooked around a fire, and for a while, slept under the stars. We awoke at four, stretched our aching sacroiliacs and trudged two miles to a creek for water, bringing it back in jugs on sore shoulders. After coffee and little else for breakfast, off we went, machetes in hand, to clear the fields of low-lying weeds. The day wore on, the sun beat down, and the war raged around us.

After weeks of clearing, we made ready to loosen the soil and plant corn -- backbreaking work, the work of the *campesino*. We scratched the soil as U.S. jets bombed the volcano and military aircraft crisscrossed the sky. Now and then, death squads paid us a visit. "*Hola*," I would say, my passport in hand. They would throw me a grudging look and turn on their heels. I looked calm and self-assured, but my belly churned with fear.

For good measure, we rid ourselves of "subversive materials"--biblical literature and photos of Oscar Romero. We made our byword *vigilance*. Remember, the Jesuits had cautioned us on our first day -- you are in a war zone.

In the evening, after working the fields, we sat under the mango trees--at the beginning of my stay there were about a hundred of us--quietly eating our dinner prepared by a few of the women with contributions from Catholic Relief Services. During the day, the campesinos told us their life stories, and this continued into the

night, as we sat in hammocks around a fire, singing songs.

One hot day, after a month of arduous work and quiet accompaniment, Tom and I took a walk after lunch, strolling in the shade of a grove of trees, talking about the Christian response to war as bombs rumbled in the distance. Salvadorans store their machetes high up in tree branches, out of the reach of children--but not quite high enough for me. Tom and I were deep in conversation, reflecting on the life of St. Francis, the meaning of nonviolence, and the connections between poverty and war, when I walked right into the handle of a three-foot machete, hanging from a branch. I knocked it loose, bringing it down in one swift slice on my outstretched right hand. Pain seared through me, and I looked down to see a gaping wound, the skin ripped off. An anatomy lesson for both of us -- bleached metacarpals bared and visible to anyone with stomach to look. Then the blood flowed heavily, and panic set in. We were in the wilderness with no vehicle, no phone, no way to get help. Would I lose my hand?

The nuns who worked with us came to my rescue. My friend's sister Margaret-Jane Kling produced a first-aid kit, poured some torturous alcoholic cleanser over the wound, scrubbed it with something like steel wool, applied pressure and a bandage, then sent me off with Tom through the woods to the road, where a bus eventually came along to carry us to the hospital. I clutched my bloody hand, and arrived at nightfall at the ER -- the very emergency room to which Oscar Romero had been brought. The medical staff brought me in, cleaned the wound again, and stitched up my hand.

Days later I returned to the camp. The men rushed over to see my wound. "Now you are one of us!" they exclaimed. They showed me their own collection of scars--one or two on every limb of every man; some with missing fingers. But unlike me, they never had access to an emergency room. They mended their bodies as best they could and bore ever after the marks of their wounds. An old man took my arm and said, "Someday, when you raise your hands in the air with the bread and wine, you will look up and see El Salvador."

What jaw-dropping, heartbreaking poetry. He was so childlike as he said this, his eyes sparkling with wonder. He'd summed up everything: the Eucharist, the scarred Savior present in the bread and wine, and my own scar, a road map of El Salvador across my right hand. To this day, the scar reminds me of those suffering, faith-filled Salvadorans. As the old man prophesied, I remember them every time I offer the Eucharist.

John Dear's autobiography, *A Persistent Peace* (440 pages, with a foreword by Martin Sheen, published by Loyola Press) is now available at www.amazon.com [1]. For information about the book and his upcoming national book tour, see: www.persistentpeace.com [2] and www.johndear.org [3].

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