

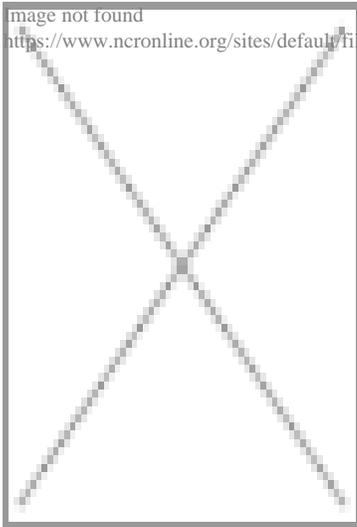
## Darkness will have its hour

Pat Marrin | Mar. 31, 2010 NCR Today

### Holy Week: Accompanying El Salvador

Jesus and his disciples have slipped back into the city after two days of rest in Bethany. The city is jammed with a quarter of a million pilgrims who have come home out of the diaspora to observe Passover. The Romans are nervous and soldiers are everywhere in full gear, leather body armor and helmets, with swords, metal tipped spears and truncheons at the ready.

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Intelligence operative in local dress mingle with the crowds, relying on a network of

paid informants for rumors about any surprise protests in the Temple area or real trouble from guerilla factions that are ubiquitous and that have dogged the imperial occupation from the start, murderous fanatics, saboteurs and assassins willing to commit suicide to take out a few good Romans. The undercover teams listen especially for Galilean accents, hill country people from the north, a hotbed of insurrection. The city of Sepphoris, located not far from Nazareth, was notorious for its Roman garrison, where locals were brought to be interrogated and tortured.

Passover was for ancient Israel the equivalent of the Fourth of July for Americans. As such, it was a dangerous annual reminder of independence for a nation that, even generations after being subjugated, still refused to forget its proud past and promised future. Rome had built cities like Caesarea, coastal ports and fortresses the length of the country to give its presence a sense of permanence and to draw the country into the orbit of imperial culture, commerce and civic collaboration expected of all client states. Tiny Palestine was strategic as a land bridge between Europe, Africa and Asia for trade routes and as a port of entry from the Mediterranean for troop ships. It was also a nightmare for the diplomatic corps and military governors because of its religious fanaticism. Imperial service there was either punishment or a school for advancement, if you were ready to use brutal force when necessary to keep order.

Jesus sends his disciples ahead of him to prepare for Passover. Judas had already made arrangements to betray him. This Seder will be their last together, remembered for Jesus' startling gesture of washing everyone's feet,

for the sense that a familiar meal of lamb, bitter herbs, bread and wine was being given fresh significance. In less than 48 hours, Jesus will have been arrested, tortured and executed.

In its fifth day, our SHARE delegation was moving through an intense series of presentations on the history, economics and legal challenges facing El Salvador 30 years after Romero, almost 20 years after the peace accords that ended the civil war, and just months into the six-year term of the new leftist presidency of Mauricio Funes. At one of our stops, a petite grandmotherly figure named Guadalupe Mejia stood before us to share her story. Her words, translated from Spanish to English, unfolded the horror of the pre-war repression and civil war in a way no book or second-hand account could have conveyed.

She told of the death of her husband, detained, tortured and then decapitated for his role as a catechist and community organizer. Archbishop Romero told of the murder during one of his Sunday homilies, broadcast over the archdiocesan radio station. He then came to her village, where death squads were active, made up of other campesinos desperate for the money doled out to them by rich landowners. Whole families were being found slaughtered on the roads or in their homes. A group called the "White Warriors" left a white hand print on the door of any house belonging to someone who was speaking out, a warning to leave the area immediately or be killed.

Señora Mejia would later help found a group called "Mothers of the Disappeared." Romero met with them and gave them his blessing. Their determination was to visit the big penitentiary and the 11 jails in San Salvador to glean information about who was being detained, whether they were still alive. The guards would say, "The mothers are coming." The term madre was used to refer to religious sisters, so the guards would mock them with the question, "What religious order do you belong to?" and then make them submit to invasive body searches for possible contraband.

By their persistence, the women gained some respect over time and were a veritable lifeline for prisoners, bringing them food, shoes, clothing, medicine and maternal affection and taking back information to families desperate to hear about their loved ones but afraid to visit them only to be arrested because their names, too, were on some blacklist supplied by informants.

One of Oscar Romero's expressed fears was not so much death as the possibility he might be kidnapped and tortured. When death did come after three long years living with the threat that each day might be his last, it was mercifully sudden, a bullet in the chest that caused massive hemorrhaging and apparent unconsciousness. Many others were not so fortunate, including those who survived detention, physical and sexual abuse, binding, water torture, sleep and food deprivation, electric shock. Thousands of documented cases display a pathological creativity in the ways one human being can torment another to get information or just for sadistic pleasure. Twenty years after the peace accords, few Salvadorans older than 40 lack personal stories of loss and trauma they are still struggling to exorcise and escape.

War, Eileen Egan of Pax Christi once said, reverses the Corporal Works of Mercy. Feed the hungry and clothe the naked become mass starvation, poisoned rivers and wells, and survivors taking the shoes and coats from the bodies of the dead. Welcoming and visiting become competition over scarce resources and the abandonment of friends and neighbors in order to survive.

The SHARE bus drove through Santa Elena, one of San Salvador's more luxurious metropolitan districts, replete with Mercedes dealerships, American style malls, brand name hotels and restaurants. We drove past the American embassy, the largest in all of Latin America, a multi-acre, walled compound filled with functionaries and bristling with electronic gear. We were told, seriously, not to photograph it from the bus. It reportedly does minimal service granting visas to Salvadoran students or workers hoping to leave the country, but it does serve as a key nodal point and listening post for the entire Central American region tied by satellite to a global network of similar installations sending encrypted data streams to far away situation rooms and off-budget

agencies whose job is to protect American interests around the world. Think Green Zone and the half-billion dollar bunker embassy the United States hopes to leave behind in Baghdad when our military stands down there.

The El Salvador we saved 30 years ago from a communist threat that never was, by giving billions of dollars in aid to prop up an unpopular government during a bloody civil war, did survive to become what Ronald Reagan promised it would be: "a shining city on a hill," but only for some and as a gated community living behind walls topped with concertina wire -- a garden party surrounded by a strapped and volatile developing country struggling to provide the basic necessities of life to the majority of its people, food, clean water, health care, education for all, school uniforms, agricultural support, better roads, due process, and hope. It can happen, and will some day, but at what cost and by what conversion of worldview both here and, even more importantly, in the United States?

The Temple police who came to arrest Jesus probably did not need Judas' help in locating him in the olive groves across the Kidron Valley from Jerusalem, but the positive ID he provided by greeting Jesus with a kiss was helpful for a night arrest. Jesus was in custody quickly and without incident. Within hours he would be interrogated, mocked, beaten and on his way to Golgotha, another potential insurrection nipped in the bud, another pathetic example of the oldest lesson of all, that it is always better to take out one troublemaker than to risk the system. Darkness will have its hour, when evil can show its face openly, glad to lay out the logic of national security and do what is necessary to protect its interests, its real motives. Who will know, or really care, as long the world wakes up to a familiar normalcy, the status quo?

Holy Week is always about now. We remember in order to challenge ourselves to live responsibly within the terrible continuities we ourselves once set in motion with decisions we made long ago, promises we have not kept, sins we have never asked forgiveness for of the victims we never knew or have forgotten. Conversion requires turning our lives to face the sinful momentum of suffering we continue to contribute to each day we live as consumers in a world where others are being consumed. Power has always produced pyramids, while community prefers circles. Some of us have lifestyles, while most people have only lives they must negotiate precariously day by day. "The crucified of history," Egnacio Ellacuria, murdered in San Salvador in 1989, once called the world's poor. We have tried to see, to hear the truth, and we are genuinely uncomfortable now. How will we change our reality enough to change theirs, so connected are we to one another that every benefit we claim has its cost halfway around the world? Can we take them down from the cross if only to save our own souls, or is it too late?

Guadalupe Mejia is asked, "What gives you hope?" She looks out at us, crowded around her in school chairs in a hot classroom at FESPAD, a legal and public policy organization in El Salvador that has for the past 20 years tried without success to bring Romero's killers to a court of law. She answers, "We can only have hope if we also have justice, truth and reparation." Right relationships, transparency and accountability. This alone will save us.

We must be moved by her words. It is Holy Week and this is about passion, an appeal from a man who is facing imminent death. The question is, moved to do what? To understand some truth that is always hovering at the edge of our consciousness? To wake from a long sleep, as Peter, James and John did to find Jesus standing over them, sweating blood, begging them to watch even an hour with him? Will we be just witnesses to his agony, or will we somehow share it? Will we find our way to the foot of the cross, or will we stand afar off, able only to weigh the implications of so much inconvenient truth, so much senseless suffering inflicted on, can we really believe this, no less than God, who take personally what happens to the poor.

Thanks be to God. There is more to this journey. And even as darkness rules now, we trust that something better is going to follow the night.

[Pat Marrin is editor of *Celebration*, NCR's worship resource. He was in El Salvador covering the events

surrounding the 30th anniversary of the assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero, which was March 24.]

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March 30: [Anointing](#) [2]

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April 1, Holy Thursday: [Fools rush in](#) [4]

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April 3, Easter Vigil: [Know when to hold 'em](#) [6]

### See also

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- [Books: The essential Romero](#) [8]
- [Commentary: A Cold War perspective on Romero's death](#) [9]

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