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Obama to visit Romero's tomb

by Pat Marrin

NCR Today

The White House has confirmed that President Obama will stop at the tomb of Archbishop Oscar Romero in the crypt of the Metropolitan Cathedral in San Salvador during his upcoming three-nation visit to Latin America. The president will visit Chile, Brazil and El Salvador from March 19-23 to address mostly issues of economic and security cooperation.

The symbolic stop on Tuesday, March 22, at Romero's grave on the eve of the national commemoration of his assassination in March of 1980, will serve as kind of solemn pause in the state visit to recall the 12-year civil war that devastated the small Central American country.

For anyone who has visited Romero's tomb, the prospects of an American president going the cathedral crypt invites prayerful hope that the experience will personalize a painful history in the relationship between the United States and many Latin American countries.

The impact of American policy in the region has too often been devastating. The large photos of Romero's death that serve as contemporary stations of the cross around the tomb are a sobering reminder that decisions made far away often have shocking consequences.

Yet the spirit of Romero was always one of reconciliation and hope, and that is what most take away from any visit to his memorial.

In the 1980s, U.S. policy-makers defined the conflict in El Salvador as a Cold War struggle with global communism. The United States provided millions of dollars in military aid to the ruling junta and military.

When the war ended in 1992, ongoing political repression and economic instability led to large-scale emigration, much of it to the United States, where subsequent deportation of young people caught up in

the gang culture of major U.S. cities led to a refueling of social violence in El Salvador, which has one of the highest murder rates in the all of Latin America.

Poverty and social instability continue to thwart economic development and investment in the country.

Obama's visit to El Salvador will offer support to President Mauricio Funes, a centrist reformer who was elected in 2008, but who has struggled to hold the country together politically since the global economic downturn that same year.

Funes campaigned as part of the populist wave identified with the election of Obama. He also publicly defined himself in the spirit and purpose of the martyred Romero, promising to walk with the Salvadoran people toward reconciliation and social justice.

President and First Lady Michelle Obama will visit San Salvador and then travel to the north of the country where some of fiercest fighting of the civil war took place.

U.S. efforts to inject aid and investment into the country since the war have often run into environmental concerns over the impact of proposed mining and hydro-electric use of scarce water resources. Dollarization of the currency tied the Salvadoran economy to U.S. fiscal policy and resulted in severe inflation of basic food and fuel prices, and recent trade agreements that benefit multinational corporations have hurt regional markets, especially agricultural production.

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Many groups hope to use the occasion of the Obama visit to press their concerns.

Archbishop Escobar Alas of San Salvador has appealed to President Obama to address immigration reform in the United States as a critical issue impacting El Salvador. El Salvador accounts for the third largest group of Hispanic immigrants in the United States. Many hold only temporary protection status under immigration law. The Salvadoran-American National Council, made up of Salvadorans who are American citizens, is also appealing to the president to grant permanent residency to some 200,000 immigrants who qualify.

According to Jose Artiga, co-president of the Council and executive director of the SHARE Foundation, an international organization committed to economic development in EL Salvador, "Granting permanent residence to this community is a creative way to support immigrants that want to play by the rules, and that have a ten-year excellent track record of being law abiding and hard working members of the community. It will be consistent with the U.S. tradition of keeping families together." (See full text of letter below)

[Pat Marrin is editor of Celebration, NCR's worship resource]

For always up-to-date news and links about El Salvador, visit <http://luterano.blogspot.com/>

The Salvadoran-American National Council will be announcing this Monday, March 21, at the Archdiocese of San Salvador a petition to President Obama to convert the temporary status of some Salvadoran immigrants in the United States into permanent residence

This March, U.S. President Barack Obama will visit Chile, Brazil and El Salvador as part of a

major initiative to renew and strengthen ties between our countries. This visit to El Salvador coincides with the 31st anniversary of the assassination of Monsignor Oscar Romero, the archbishop who fought against great odds on behalf of the oppressed.

President Obama's visit to El Salvador is historic; marking the first time a U.S. President will meet with President Mauricio Funes of the FMLN in El Salvador after the 12-year Civil War and nearly two decades of right wing rule. This visit represents a new chapter in U.S.-Salvadoran relations and raises hope and expectations for a constructive working partnership.

According to the U.S. Census, today, 1.7 million Salvadorans live in the United States. Salvadorans represent the third largest Hispanic community in the U.S. after Mexicans and Puerto Ricans. Close to one million Salvadorans are U.S. citizens.

We participate in the social, economic, political and cultural life of the United States. We have born and raised our children here. We have constructed small and large businesses, been elected to local, state and national political offices, shared our art, food and music. We are teachers and students, engineers and electricians, health care providers, non profit employees, gardeners, janitors and executives.

We celebrate the wonderful mosaic of cultures that make up the United States of America. We vote in local, state and presidential elections. We are part of the rich fabric of the American family. We preserve a strong link to El Salvador; we have organized dozens of Associations to support our places of origin within El Salvador, and provide vital economic resources, sending over three billion dollars in annual remittances.

For the last decade, over 200,000 Salvadorans have resided in the U.S. legally under Temporary Protected Status (TPS) granted by the Bush, Jr. Administration in the aftermath of the 2001 earthquakes which devastated El Salvador. These Salvadorans work, study, pay taxes and do business. To qualify for the renewal of their TPS every 18 months, they have demonstrated they are in full compliance with U.S. laws.

On the occasion of President Obama's first visit to El Salvador, the Salvadoran American National Council is asking President Obama to use his authority and establish an executive process using existing laws such as the cancellation of removal to allow those qualifying and with Temporary Protective Status (TPS) to adjust their status to permanent residency.

Granting permanent residence to this community is a creative way to support immigrants that want to play by the rules, and that have a ten year excellent track record of being law abiding and hard working members of the community. It will be consistent with the US tradition of keeping families together.

Such action is not without precedent. In 1992, during the transition from the Bush, Sr. to the Clinton Administration, former President Bill Clinton changed the TPS status into a DED (Deferred Enforced Departure) and later many Central Americans, Cubans and people from the former Soviet Union were allowed to apply for permanent residency.

Please join me, the Salvadoran American National Council, and hundreds of churches of all faiths in the US in asking President Obama to fortify the bonds between the US and El Salvador by taking these 200,000 Salvadorans in the US from their 10 year old temporary status to a permanent residence.

Jose Artiga
Executive Director, SHARE Foundation
co-President Salvadoran-American National Council

Jose Artiga is the Executive Director of the SHARE Foundation (www.share-elsalvador.org) and Co-President of the Salvadoran American National Council. SHARE strengthens solidarity with and among the Salvadoran people in El Salvador and the United States in the struggle for economic sustainability, justice, human and civil rights. The Salvadoran Council is a membership organization committed to strengthening democracy and the social and economic development of all Salvadorans.

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