

'Defense of life' doesn't always deal with abortion

Mary Ann McGivern | Apr. 3, 2012 NCR Today

I have been writing about accompanying [Sister Gloria from Guatemala](#) [1] on a speaking tour in New York, New Jersey, Delaware and Washington, D.C. One among the many things that have provoked my thinking is Gloria's use of the phrase *en defensa de la vida*, or "in defense of life."

Gloria used the phrase first at our meeting with the Guatemala Human Rights Commission about U.S. military training operations in Guatemala and the impact of more trained Guatemalan soldiers being offered \$5,000 a month in U.S. dollars to go to work for the drug cartels.

Gloria used the phrase again when we met with The Center for International Environmental Law to talk about environmental damage from mining in Guatemala. It made me and the others present sit up straighter and pay closer attention. Gloria was not talking about abortion.

Then she used the phrase talking to a women's group who were intensely interested in women's issues in Guatemala. Again, she was not talking about babies or birth control or abortion. She was, I think, describing how the sisters tell their students accounts of the horrific genocide of the '80s, hard stuff their parents are reluctant to describe.

The phrase opened the discussion. The women wanted to know if abortion is legal in Guatemala. No, but women do get abortions. Are contraceptives legal? Yes, but they are not always available and the husband must agree to use them -- though women do get their tubes tied without their husbands' knowledge. Gloria was straightforward and matter-of-fact.

The conversation went back to education. The women wanted to know Gloria's story, what motivated her at age 11 to go to boarding school, who the women were who gave her a scholarship, about her family's natural reluctance to let her go away to school, about the small pueblo's disapproval at her leaving the pueblo to get an education beyond the third grade. Right then and there, the women raised \$600 for a one-year scholarship for an indigenous girl to go to the middle school run by the Holy Family sisters.

My own small resolution is to reclaim that phrase "in defense of life." That's what my work has always been about, whether it's providing shelter for families, releasing people from prison or getting guns off the street. All life needs to be defended. We need to claim our work.

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