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LGBT advocates find solidarity at El Salvador gathering

Francis DeBernardo | Apr. 27, 2013
Viewpoint

On the day after the first Jesuit and the first Latin American was elected pope, I was fortunate to be on the University of Central America campus, a Jesuit school in El Salvador. The excitement on campus that day was electric and the student body was abuzz with energy.

But the excitement was not about the new pope. That news seemed like an afterthought compared to the event beginning that day on campus.

Gathered in the school's Segundo Montes, SJ, Auditorium (named for one of the six Salvadoran Jesuit martyrs assassinated at the school in 1989), some 350 people took part in El Salvador's first national conference on lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender human rights. The March 14-15 conference, "Felicidad y Diversidad Sexual como Derechos Humanos" ("Happiness and Sexual Diversity as Human Rights"), was sponsored by ALDES El Salvador (Asistencia Legal para la Diversidad Sexual de El Salvador). It brought together lawyers, legal scholars, politicians, faith leaders and LGBT advocates to move forward El Salvador's burgeoning LGBT human rights movement. By the end of the second day, more than 1,000 people had participated in this meeting in San Salvador, the nation's capital. My colleague, longtime Catholic LGBT advocate Loretto Sr. Jeannine Gramick, and I were part of the program, presenting the topic of "Faith Communities as Promoters of Human Rights."

That first morning, the atrium echoed with voices filled with enthusiasm to begin the two days of meetings. The registration line snaked around the reception area and the aisles in the auditorium were filled with people sitting on the steps. Strangers welcomed one another, eager to meet the people with whom they would be sharing this event. In Spanish and English, people greeted each other, not letting even language become a barrier to the camaraderie.

The excitement was certainly the exhilaration of this event being a "first." The participants represented three distinct groups: University of Central America students, advocates who have been working on this topic since the Salvadoran LGBT rights movement began about 20 years ago, and U.S. visitors. Over and over I heard people say how important it was to come together, not just to learn, but to support one another in their common work. As in any fledgling social movement, isolation is a great detriment, and the thrill of finding colleagues with whom to share the work is an enormous benefit.

The conference was a joint effort between activists and legal specialists in the United States and El Salvador. Ana Montano, a Salvadoran woman who is an immigration and LGBT rights lawyer in San Francisco, was aided in conference preparation by John Marrin and Danielle Mackey, two organizers from the United States who live in El Salvador. Lawyers and legal scholars from both nations presented at the meeting, discussing ways that professionals in both countries could help one another.

Though faith was only a small segment of the conference's program, the participants were keenly aware that the

nation's leading Catholic university was hosting the event. Omar Serrano, the campus' vice rector for social outreach, welcomed the conference, saying that it was "an honor" to host the program, and acknowledged that church institutions could do more for LGBT rights, including "asking forgiveness" for previous inaction. All attendees were keenly aware of how faith groups have helped to spread homophobia; being welcomed to a Catholic campus was an important positive sign that was not lost on the participants.

The human rights situation for LGBT people in El Salvador is as bleak as it was in the United States 40 years ago. Violence, murder, ostracism and economic deprivation are all too common for those who choose to be public about their sexuality and gender identity. The "machismo" factor in Latin culture augments the repression sexual minorities experience.

Because people are fearful of coming forward after a violation of their rights, cases do not get prosecuted, and statistics reflect this underreporting. That the atmosphere is still so repressive made the fact that the conference was happening all the more remarkable. And the courage of the presenters to discuss their work and personal stories publicly was all the more inspiring. An American participant told me, "People in El Salvador 'come out' at the risk of their own lives. In the U.S., we 'come out' at the risk of temporary hurt feelings."

Though the social atmosphere may seem to someone from the United States as if El Salvador were "behind the times," in some ways it is way ahead of its large and liberal Northern neighbor. For example, transgender issues were front and center at this conference, definitely a main part of the agenda. When I attend conferences in the U.S. on LGBT topics, transgender issues often feel like an afterthought. Similarly, intersex people (those born with genitalia and secondary characteristics of both genders) were also well-represented -- something that I have seen only once at meetings in the U.S.

Attending the conference was a particularly poignant experience for me because I trace so much of how I connect faith with social justice back to the 1980s, when civil war raged in El Salvador and Archbishop Oscar Romero and the four North American churchwomen were murdered. In my early 20s at the time, those events made me see the way faith interacts with social and political life, and inspired passion within me to be involved with justice.

During those times, it was common for delegations of North Americans to visit El Salvador to monitor human rights violations and to express solidarity with the people there. Projects like this galvanized my generation. So it was heartwarming during this conference on sexual diversity to meet with a U.S. delegation of mostly young people who traveled to El Salvador to be part of this event and to meet with Salvadoran LGBT leaders to learn ways to partner in the future for the protection of human rights.

The Interreligious Task Force on Central America, based in Cleveland, sponsored the delegation. Participants were from a diverse group of faiths and backgrounds, united by the common thread of wanting to help build a network of justice for sexual minorities. It was inspiring to see how the solidarity work continues. In the '80s, groups were working on economic and political oppression; now the topic is oppression based on sexuality and gender identity.

Different from the 1980s solidarity work, however, is the fact that, in this newer version, El Salvador now has the support of the U.S. Embassy in the area of LGBT human rights, whereas during the civil war, the embassy was seen as the symbol of oppression. On the eve of the conference, the U.S. ambassador, Mari Carmen Aponte, hosted a reception for the meeting's organizers, presenters and El Salvador's LGBT leaders. Aponte's reappointment was almost derailed by U.S. congressional leaders who were upset that she wrote a 2011 op-ed in a Salvadoran newspaper, praising that country's leaders for signing a United Nations declaration calling for an end to violence against gay and lesbian people.

At the reception, Aponte's enthusiasm for LGBT equality showed she was obviously unperturbed by these critics. Her encouraging words and gracious hospitality were signals to the attendees to continue their work for LGBT human rights. The reception was an inspiring beginning to these auspicious two days.

By the end of the conference, Montano, the emcee, joyously announced that during the two days, the first Salvadoran lawyer agreeing to work on LGBT rights cases on a pro bono basis came forward -- a necessity given the economic challenges of the populace. Montano was optimistic that this lawyer would be the first of many more. She was also optimistic about the future of the conference. Her words of farewell to participants: "Hasta el año próximo" -- "Until next year."

[Francis DeBernardo is the executive director of New Ways Ministry, a national Catholic ministry for LGBT people and the wider church.]

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