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Human rights are the concern of the entire people of God

Jon Sobrino | Oct. 29, 2013
Commentary

"In the beginning was the people of God."

"The victims must always be at the center."

With these two phrases, we would like to shed some light on the confusion and, in many cases, the indignation caused when, without warning and without taking into account people's dignity, Archbishop Jose Luis Escobar of San Salvador, El Salvador, on Sept. 30 shut down Tutela Legal [1], the church's legal aid office which, since 1982, had worked with victims of the most egregious human rights violations of the country?s 12-year civil war.

Since the closing of Tutela Legal, there have been communiqués from those who did the firing as well as those who were fired, with the former getting more publicity. Soon there were additional communiqués from renowned international agencies, from the José Simeón Cañas Central American University in San Salvador, and from El Salvador's conference of religious women and men. More recently, the archbishop and the attorney general have exchanged opinions about the rights of both groups to the files of Tutela Legal.

Many other things have happened, some of them known to the people of God and the majority unknown, as is usually the case. The archbishop recently named a commission of well-known priests to keep watch over the files; to guarantee that the new human rights office, which the archbishop has promised to establish, will not be restrained from doing the kind of aggressive, high-quality work done by Tutela Legal; and, finally, to repair the image of the archdiocese, now even further deteriorated than it was by the archbishop's removal -- again, without previous notice or warning -- of Fernando Llort's mural from the façade of the cathedral [2] in December 2011.

A *campesino* described what has happened in these words: "Sad. Shameful."

The laity, the people of God, and Socorro Jurídico.

"The people of God" is an abstract expression whose concrete meaning isn't well-known to many Salvadorans. Nevertheless, 50 years ago, the Second Vatican Council said what is most real about the church of Jesus Christ is "the people of God" and not "the hierarchical church." This means that bishops, priests and the so-called laypeople are all, in a primordial way, equal members of the church. The differences come later and are only of a functional order and say nothing about the quality of Christian life of the members of the different groups.

In the 1970s in El Salvador, it was laypeople who concerned themselves with human rights violations and sought to defend the victims. That's when Socorro Jurídico, the first church-sponsored human rights legal office, was born. For centuries, many Salvadorans had suffered the slow death of poverty, the original violence. But in the 1970s came quick death from repression. It cried out to heaven, and the laypeople of Socorro Jurídico, some of them lawyers, not only went to the victims' aid, but also -- and this was something new -- helped them defend their human rights, which were being grossly violated. That explains the use of the adjectives "jurídico" in

Socorro Jurídico, and "legal" in Tutela Legal.

Socorro Jurídico had its offices at the Jesuit high school in San Salvador. A Jesuit, Fr. Segundo Montes, worked with the group and helped it grow. Archbishop Oscar Romero, archbishop of San Salvador from 1977 to 1980, came to see it as an important collaborator in his defense of the victims and his denunciations of the victimizers. He mentions it on the first page of his diary (which, as it has been preserved, begins Friday, March 31, 1978), referring to some of Socorro Jurídico's staff by name, speaking of specific tasks and adding, "I thank you, and want to express my satisfaction at the way you, as lawyers with a Christian conscience ... have responded to the call" to organize a permanent team of distinguished lawyers and law students the church could call on for legal advice.

Later came Tutela Legal. Its longtime director, Maria Julia Hernández, was a beloved and unforgettable figure. Over the last 30 years, several bishops and priests and many laypeople have worked with Tutela Legal. There has been cooperation and at times, there have been tensions between them. That's the way things tend to work in history.

Now we are entering a new period. However it turns out, we insist that human rights are the task of the entire people of God. I recall this here because it is no routine theological subtlety, but a Christian and historical necessity. Laypeople have responsibility, as do other members of the people of God, including ministers and hierarchs. They all have the same dignity, and they all should treat each other with respect.

The hierarchy is not above the people of God, but at its service

The authority, the ministerial power of the hierarchy, surely offers opportunities to do good things. But as history shows us, like all powers, it has its dangers. "You don't have to tell me that," said the late Fr. Ignacio Ellacuría. "I am president of the university." (Ellacuría led Central American University in San Salvador until his assassination in 1989 with five other Jesuits, their housekeeper and her daughter.)

It is taken for granted that in democracy, there should be ways to overcome this danger, or at least to limit it. That's why the late Jesuit theologian Fr. Dean Brackley spoke so much about the need for accountability. Those in power should give an account of what they do. In church matters, there is always the Gospel, with its utopia and its demands. Jesus said, "Those who are higher up must be willing to lower themselves."

In the face of public events that cause grave confusion, as has happened with the closing of Tutela Legal, history, democracy and Gospel traditions offer other ways of acting: a willingness to explain decisions ahead of time with dialogue and convincing arguments, a readiness to be held accountable, and a friendly and human attitude.

In a utopian vision, the ideal is for the people of God to be an example of *solidaridad*, certainly to help and defend those in need. But there must also exist, within the people of God itself, another form of solidarity, one that doesn't diminish the first but rather helps it to grow: It is for ministers, laypeople and hierarchs to help each other and let others help them and, when there are injuries, real or imagined, to be open to sincere dialogue and forgiveness. For the hierarchy, it's a question of lowering itself in order to serve and not waiting for the others to lower themselves first. When we have that kind of solidarity, the people of God will be a great help to the country.

In the present conflictive moment, it appears that -- at least to judge by people's words -- there is agreement that the victims are the most important.

In this country, Socorro Jurídico and later Tutela Legal gave great importance to the idea of preserving "historical memory." Over the years, they have poured out love on the thousands of people, especially women

and children, who were persecuted, murdered or disappeared or were forced to flee the country in order to live. Both institutions have maintained thousands of people with life and dignity.

Ellacuría called them "the crucified people." On June 19, 1977, in Aguilares, after the army had massacred more than 100 *campesinos*, Romero said, "You are the pierced divine one." With these words, he not only gave them dignity; he also confessed, openly, before them, how he understood his mission as archbishop: ?It is my job to go around gathering up corpses.? He saw this as being part of his job.

"Picking up corpses" is a strong way of saying how the people of God should act before the victims. Socorro Jurídico, Tutela Legal, the Central American University's human rights institute, the other human rights groups, and the members of all the churches in El Salvador can all make these words their own.

It's important that the files of Tutela Legal be well-protected. The contributions of the nongovernmental organizations are also important. But none of this can take the place of "picking up corpses," as was done by Romero and many others, many of whom ended up as martyrs.

God only knows what will be the future of Tutela Legal. It is my wish that the events of recent days will not lead to a diminishing of its tasks, but rather to their growth. I hope the current discussions will help shed some light for the people of God and will not fall into the temptation -- understandable but not very Christian -- of "We are more right than the others."

The above reflections may seem excessively conceptual and complicated, even though our aim was to make them simple and illuminating. I will end with the brief and clear words of Pedro Casaldáliga, the Spanish-born bishop emeritus of São Félix do Araguaia, Brazil, and a practitioner of liberation theology: "Everything is relative, except God and hunger." In El Salvador we could well say: "except God and the victims."

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