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Walking in Tepecoyo

April Gutierrez | Dec. 3, 2010 NCR Today

As I reflect on my Nov. 9-14, trip to El Salvador with a delegation from Loyola Marymount University, I take away an expanded understanding of solidarity and accompaniment.

I had understood solidarity as what I do and how I live my life influenced by the least among us. My encounters last month with women in El Salvador reveal that solidarity includes a willingness to be known by those we would accompany.

When I hear stories about the four churchwomen who accompanied people in El Salvador -- lay missionary Jean Donovan, Maryknoll sisters Ita Ford and Maura Clarke, and Ursuline sister Dorothy Kazel who 30 years ago today were brutalized and then killed by Salvadoran National Guardsmen -- it's easy to over-focus on their deaths. "Could I make the same sacrifice?" one ponders.

But now after my experience with genuine human encounters, I think about remembering the four church women for their life of witness.

What has become clear is that it is my life, my living that I offer. That is was the four women offered: laughter when a child dances, tears when someone doesn't get the job, which gives hope and depth to our encounters. Similar to Dorothy, Ita, Jean and Maura, I am called to offer my presence to others and to be vulnerable enough to offer of my story.

Our delegation walked up the mountain to meet some of the CASA students [1] in their work site in Tepecoyo. Our guide explained that just a couple weeks prior, a young woman of the village in her eighth month of pregnancy had to deliver her baby stillborn. We would deliver letters of support to her. I asked the guide if this was the woman's first pregnancy. It was, I was told, and I went numb. "I miscarried in my first pregnancy but now have a one year old son," I said quietly.

"You must tell her," our guide told me. "She needs to know she is not alone, that you went through this, and especially that you now have a healthy baby."

I rarely talk about my miscarriage. It happened in the first trimester, and people thought that I would not skip a beat, just try again, and be happy that I know I can conceive. They didn't realize how I felt: I already had a baby, and I loved her. I had already dreamed of our future together, her name, what instrument she would play. In the middle of celebrating the inauguration of our university's new president, I was rushed to the emergency room.

Not many know that my husband and I took a week off from work to recover, grieve and hold each other. Our pastor walked with us for more than a year afterward and helped us name our baby, Rose. We planted a bush in front of the house.

My encounter with the young women in El Salvador was imperfect and awkward. My stomach was in knots; the young woman and her mother stood timidly in the doorway of their kitchen. I asked someone to translate, then

overwhelmed by our uneasy glances at one another I began to cry. I explained: I too had a beautiful baby that I lost in pregnancy. I love and miss her dearly.

Remembering my numbness after losing Rose, I wanted to offer the woman a sense of hope. I explained that I had a healthy baby about two years after my first pregnancy. We embraced awkwardly. I noticed the tears in her mother's comforting, tired eyes.

Her mother, probably in her forties, was of a generation that would have known the civil war first hand. Salvadoran women had to learn to bear pain silently, privately. Though her daughter acted numb, the mother was overcome with emotion, and hugged me close after my stumbling testimony. Tears streamed from her eyes, eyes that had no doubt wept over disappeared brothers, cousins or children. She held me tightly with hands that would have wrung over loss, clenched in fear of rape, prayed the rosary and moved a home by moonlight to a squatter village to keep her babies from knowing life as a child soldier.

A woman's pain has the power to unite, yet most often lives in loneliness. When I lost Rose I thought no one I knew had gone through this, but many came and told me their stories. Our witness to one another transformed painful experiences to ones of strength, hope with scars.

When we share, the road is less wild and uncharted. A sense of being accompanied brings strength and helps rewrite the story. The four church women's sacrifice, their sharing a path full of silent sorrow known by countless Salvadoran women, brought into the light a story that needed to be told. Their accompaniment into the darkest of places brought intolerable injustice met with deep faith to the world's attention, transforming shame to honor, dignity and action.

Like the four church women, I am called to offer my presence to another person's experience and to be vulnerable enough to share my story. Taking myself out of isolation, I find a large community to share in the suffering and together we find healing.

The CASA program [1] transports people whose eyes are open to relationships offering true human exchange, so vulnerable -- with belly laughs, snotty tears and not the right words -- Christ lives where people are being broken open.

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[1] http://www.scu.edu/casa/