

Acompañamiento in El Salvador

Over years of working with Maryknoll and Pax Christi I have been witness to many creative expressions of active nonviolence in different countries, but my personal engagement has been mostly in the United States - with one important exception.

In the U.S. for many years a diverse community of people committed to peace, social justice and ecological integrity has repeatedly engaged in nonviolent actions toward a variety of objectives. Some sought an end to repression or the egregious violation of human rights in a particular context (e.g. Haiti, Guatemala or South Africa); others intended to prevent or stop war (e.g. the first Gulf War, the U.S. response to the attacks in September 2001, the Iraq War in 2003); others, to address systemic injustice (e.g. illegitimate and overwhelming external debt of impoverished countries; unjust trade agreements) or destructive environmental practices; yet others, to express solidarity or outrage (e.g. with #BlackLivesMatter or immigrants or in response to the assassination of human rights and social justice advocates).

At times, the nonviolent efforts included specific public actions involving many people (an annual Economic and Ecological Way of the Cross; vigils and demonstrations that often included civil disobedience and fasting); at other times the actions were carried out by one person (Concepcion, who sat in front of the White House 24 hour a day for 35 years to warn about the danger of nuclear weapons) or a few people (Ploughshares activists). Sometimes the activity was planned well in advance, dramatic, even repeated annually (e.g. efforts to close the U.S. prison at Guantanamo or the School of the Americas); at other times it was spontaneous. These efforts often have included a liturgical or prayerful component, dramatic public witness, efforts to engage the media, education, dialogue with political decision-makers or corporate/finance, even church, officials and an ongoing campaign.

But a very different nonviolent effort that I believe is extremely important took place in Central America, particularly in El Salvador during the civil war in the 1980s. Similar activities have taken place in other contexts over the years, but I believe the *acompañamiento* campaigns in El Salvador were extraordinary and have not to date been well enough examined.

My description of the campaign in El Salvador is based on my own experience and is not in any way rigorous. In 1986 Salvadoran exiles living in the U.S. organized a delegation of about 20 people to accompany a group of 500 Salvadorans back to their own land at El Barillo, near Suchitoto, which was then still under intense conflict. They had been living in a camp for displaced persons in San Salvador for over seven years and they were tired of being unable to plant crops and care for their families. They were moving back into a zone of conflict that had been intentionally depopulated by the Salvadoran military to “drain the sea” of purported supporters of the revolution.

The move home was difficult and dangerous for the Salvadoran community. The United Nations, the Church, the Red Cross and the government had all told them not to go – that it was too dangerous, but the move of a civilian community back into a zone of intense conflict began to break the hold of the Salvadoran security forces on the countryside.

After a few very difficult days the internationals present were arrested - forced by the Salvadoran military to leave the returning families a few heavily mined kilometers from

their destination. We and they were not sure they would survive because the Salvadoran security forces, particularly the Atlacatl brigade, which had surrounded the community and arrested us, was well known to have committed atrocities, including the massacre of nearly 1000 civilians at El Mozote a few years earlier. But they did survive. They planted their crops and when they reaped their first harvest of beans and corn a few months later, they sent each of us a little packet of black beans and corn kernels. I have treasured them since as powerful symbols of courage and life – and the beginning of the end of repression and civil war in El Salvador.

The return to their lands of the community of El Barillo was followed by the organized return home of many other civilian communities in El Salvador. Most visible were the repatriations of communities from the Mesa Grande and Colomoncagua refugee camps in Honduras. Each of these courageous actions by the Salvadoran people shared some important characteristics. They were

- initiated by the people of El Salvador who were well organized and represented internationally;
- absolutely nonviolent, even in the midst of a vicious war;
- grounded in the faith of the Salvadoran people and a belief that their desire for an end to repression and for social justice in El Salvador was just;
- extremely courageous, given the possibility that any of the multiple “moves home” could have resulted in a massacre;
- well organized with every person, every family well prepared for the hardships and the dangers of the move;
- very public, making full use of the international media for protection;
- accompanied by international presence, using and strengthening an international network of individuals, faith communities and organizations willing in solidarity to take on in a small way the risk of the returning communities; and
- effective, absolutely disrupting the military strategy of the Salvadoran government and their allies.

In the following years, as the returned communities struggled to survive, they continued to call for international accompaniment. I remember, for example, being asked to return to El Salvador to accompany truckloads of food and medicine intended for one of the communities that had returned from exile in Honduras. Shipments of necessities for the community, which had resettled in a very rural part of El Salvador, had been repeatedly intercepted by the Salvadoran military. Our small delegation – again using the power of public exposure through the international media, was able to help open a lifeline for food and medicine for that small community.

I have always thought that the lessons learned from those years of struggle in the midst of war in El Salvador carried insights that might be applicable as we seek nonviolent answers in other dangerous situations.

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