

Like Grains of Wheat

A Spirituality of Solidarity

Margaret Swedish and Marie Dennis

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*First Encounters:
Come and See*



Stories of solidarity are as varied and rich as the people who live them. They often begin with a decision to accept a simple invitation, “Come and see,” but they all change their subjects forever.

For those in our reflection groups, the initial invitations came most often from U.S. missionaries working in Central America, from Central American communities of faith, from labor unions, universities, human rights groups, popular organizations, or Central Americans living in exile in the United States, people who believed that international “exposure” might help slow human rights violations in their countries or lighten the terrible repression of their people by Central American security forces. The invitations were rooted in an understanding of the social and political potential for global solidarity and a theology that assumed good will among foreigners, even those who lived in a country whose government was allied with their oppressors.

Those who responded came from diverse backgrounds and life experiences. All were touched in a unique and powerful way that altered not only their lives but also how they think about their faith and how they see themselves as human beings in this world.

What They Received

Each weekday Tom Howarth crosses a bridge between two worlds. Since 2002 he has become a neighbor and friend of the homeless poor of Washington, D.C., a housing advocate, a man with a new mission and direction in his life. From Monday to Friday he commutes between his home in the suburb of Arlington, Virginia, and his job at the Church of the Savior's Jubilee Housing program in Adams Morgan, a Washington neighborhood with a mixture of gentrified housing, high-priced night clubs, poverty, street violence, a large Central American immigrant population, and a deeply committed progressive community working on local, national, and international justice and peace issues.

It wasn't always like this. Not long ago, Tom was working for a lobbying firm, immersed in the political world of the nation's capital. Originally from Massachusetts, he had moved with his wife Rea to the D.C. area in the early 1980s. They became active in a Jesuit parish in Georgetown. In 1984 their daughter Caitlin was born. At that time, Tom was working on Capitol Hill for a senator from New Jersey.

Tom was aware of the murders of the four U.S. churchwomen in El Salvador in 1980 because the brother of Maryknoll Sister Ita Ford, Wall Street lawyer William Ford, lived in northern New Jersey and was one of the senator's constituents. Ford had become a vocal advocate in the effort to stop U.S. military aid for the security forces that had abducted and killed his sister.

"I knew even then that I didn't like U.S. policies in Central America, particularly in Nicaragua," Tom recalls. "I was opposed to them, but I wasn't really engaged in any way."

Tom was like most people in the United States. Concerns about U.S. policy in Central America had not translated into

anything that kept him awake nights, or that influenced his political or personal choices.

But the massacre of six Jesuits and two women at the Central America University in San Salvador on November 16, 1989, changed that, transforming his life forever.

By that time, Tom's Georgetown parish had already established ties with a sister parish in El Salvador. The country was certainly on the community's radar screen, but, as Tom recounts, up to that moment, the project had steered clear of politics. He knew instinctively, however, that there would be no way to keep politics out of *this* murder case or out of any response made by his parish. The Salvadoran Army, the U.S. government's ally and financial beneficiary, was the prime suspect in the massacre. In fact, it was eventually learned that the murders were carried out by an elite U.S.-trained counterinsurgency battalion under orders from the military high command. To make matters worse, U.S. officials tried initially to cover up that fact, even pointing the finger of blame at the guerrillas of the Farabundo Martí Front for National Liberation (FMLN).

Tom attempted to initiate discussion and debate in his parish. He tried to set up various educational programs on U.S. policy in El Salvador, but he encountered "a certain reluctance." He was told, "We're not sure it's time for that. This isn't the appropriate environment." But, Tom insisted, "Jesuits like those serving here were gunned down in the middle of the night and the U.S. government had a role in it. The whole parish needs to hear about this."

His persistence worked to a certain extent. Speakers did come and programs were held. The biggest change, however, happened in Tom, not in the parish. For him, the experience raised the question, "Is this where I'm supposed to be?"

In 1991 he took his first trip to El Salvador. A friend from Bethesda, Maryland, Dr. Peter Gyves, had worked in El Salvador for three years and knew the Jesuits. He convinced Tom to go.

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“He implied that there was something I would get from going,” Tom says. “I wanted to be able to give something, but even when I was on the plane the first time, I couldn’t imagine what that was. I remember thinking, I don’t speak the language so I can’t really teach anybody anything. I can hardly talk to them, let alone teach anything. I’m not a doctor; I can’t heal anyone. I’m not particularly handy with my hands, so I can’t build anything. What is it that I can do?”

The question was all wrong, he reflects years later. Tom, like so many others who traveled to El Salvador during the war, found that what was important was not so much what he had to give but what he was about to receive by stepping out of his world into the world of the Salvadoran poor.

On this first trip, Tom visited the parish of María, Madre de los Pobres located in a desperately poor, overcrowded urban slum. That week the parish was holding a fiesta to honor their pastor, Father Daniel Sanchez. Sanchez was, and remains, a vocal advocate for the rights of the poor. Under threat of repressive reprisals, which by then had claimed the lives of many priests, religious, and other pastoral workers, Padre Daniel had decided to withdraw from the parish for a time to reduce the tension.

“During the fiesta, I sat with Peter and two friends of his, Brenda, age 8, and her little sister, María Natalí, age six. We enjoyed their company and they sang like birds.”

The next morning, at the nine o’clock Mass, María Natalí sat down next to Tom. “She was very quiet,” he says. “I don’t know if I should admit this, but during the Mass, when we went to Communion, I actually took a little bit of the host and gave it to her. I think I realized that she hadn’t made her first Communion yet, but there was something about it. I wanted to establish some linkage, some relationship with her.”

Thus began a lasting friendship.

While on that first trip, Tom’s delegation met with Lutheran bishop Medardo Gomez, a pastoral leader who had been tar-

geted by repressive forces because of his support for the popular struggle. Death threats were part of his daily life.

“He advised us to fast,” Tom says, “something you might expect from a bishop, no? Except he urged us to fast from our own security so that others might be more secure, and he urged us to fast from our own preconceptions of how the world works and open ourselves up to new and truer realities.”

He also met Zoila.

“Zoila was introduced to me as the pastor’s helper who cooks, and quite well, for the delegations. And, oh yes, her son was killed by a death squad and his body was delivered to her in a box.

“Slowly, too slowly, you learn that Zoila worries about those you don’t see—the poorest of the poor and the most isolated. Zoila peels a layer off the parish reality and lets you look at the true desperation there. She reminds you that the reality that must inform your passions is the reality along the river bank in what is called ‘the hole’ where people try to live in a place fit to die.”

These encounters opened the path of Tom’s conversion. He remembers Efraín who was “so sad to learn how much your shoes cost because he could not imagine ever seeing that many *colonos*,” and Father Dean Brackley reminding the delegation to “let El Salvador break your heart,” with the knowledge that the Salvadoran people’s gentle forgiveness would mend you and make your heart stronger.

And that’s exactly what happened to Tom Howarth—and so many others—after these initial encounters. First, his heart was broken; then the mending began.

Going to the End of the World

Caked with mud and weary from a challenging, adventurous trek into the mountains of northern Guatemala, Clark and Kay

Taylor found themselves perched atop a couple of mules, being guided along a mountain path by five men they had never met before this day. They were returning to the capital city where they would catch a flight back to Boston, back to their affluent neighborhood in Needham, Massachusetts.

They had come a long, long way from home.

The Taylors had just spent three days in the isolated mountain village of Santa María Tzeja in the Ixcán, an area that had suffered severely from the repression meted out by the Guatemalan Army's rural counterinsurgency campaign in the early 1980s, to explore the possibility of a sister-community relationship between the village and their Congregational Church of Needham.

As they retell the story of the journey down the mountain, their laughter is infectious.

At one point, Kay recalls, the load on the pack mule began to slip and the men stopped to readjust it. When they were done, they let the animal go and the sudden jolt spooked the mule Clark was riding. As it took off through the jungle, Kay's followed. Now at the mercy of the mules, there was nothing they could do but hang on for dear life.

"So here were the two of us galloping off through the jungle on these mules, with all the men behind us. Clark's mule made a turn—and Clark didn't." He went tumbling down a ravine.

Kay's mule galloped on. "My whole life sort of flashed through my mind. Here I was, galloping off through the Guatemalan jungle by myself, not knowing how this would all end."

That reflection was true in more ways than one, a metaphor for a new and unexpected journey, a relationship that continues to unfold more than seventeen years later.

How did this nice, older, middle-class couple from Needham, Massachusetts, end up, "muddy and bedraggled," as they

describe themselves, galloping off through the Guatemalan jungle on the backs of two mules?

For the previous twelve years, Clark had focused on what he describes as a “totally consuming” effort to build an alternative college, the College of Public and Community Service, at the University of Massachusetts in Boston. By the mid-1980s, he was looking for a new challenge and purpose in his life.

Meanwhile, in Nicaragua, the contra war was raging, as was opposition in the United States to the Reagan administration’s sponsorship of and assistance to the contra forces. Already, thousands of U.S. Americans had traveled to Nicaragua to see first-hand the revolution that had brought down a dictator and ignited so much hope in the poor. Most came back inspired by the Nicaraguan people and committed to doing whatever they could to alter U.S. policy, to stop contra aid.

That year, one of Clark’s colleagues made a proposal to send a delegation from the college to Nicaragua. “I signed on ten minutes after hearing about it,” says Clark.

In January 1985, Clark made his first trip to Central America, entering a country stricken by a savage U.S.-fueled civil war. “I came back from that trip just turned around,” he says, deciding from then on “to make that area the cause for the rest of my life.”

At the time, Kay was working as a counselor at Needham High School and finishing up her studies for a doctorate at Harvard. She wasn’t quite sure what to make of Clark’s new passion, since it conflicted with other life plans they had made.

They decided to do some exploring together. The next summer, Kay and Clark traveled to language school in Costa Rica and then on to Nicaragua. By that year, the contra war had already taken a terrible toll on the Nicaraguan people. Thousands of noncombatants had been killed, leaving behind grief-stricken families, broken communities, and deep psychological trauma. With this dramatic introduction into the region’s

painful reality, Clark came home with the inevitable question: What can *I* do?

The answer came not from Nicaragua, but from Guatemala. An anthropologist named Beatriz Manz was about to travel to the country to conduct research on internally displaced indigenous communities in the Ixcán. These were communities that had been targeted by the army's savage rural counterinsurgency campaign and army officials were not keen on having anyone study or take testimony from this population. Manz's trip was a dangerous undertaking and she was looking for a little protection. Clark was invited to accompany her on the trip, and he agreed.

On their way into the Ixcán, Clark and Beatriz stopped in the town of Playa Grande where a local priest, hearing of the project, suggested that they visit a small, isolated community called Santa María Tzeja. "If you think you are seeing poverty here, you ought to go there," he said. The next day, with a guide provided by the parish, they set off on the five-mile hike through the mountains, the only way to get there.

"It was relentlessly up and down for eight kilometers," recalls Clark. "We didn't carry water because we hadn't realized how long a trek it would be. I nearly expired. I got to the edge of the village and essentially collapsed. This was my introduction to Santa María."

Clark and Manz spent three days there. The vulnerability of this community, which had suffered so much from the repression, was painfully obvious. As they left, Beatriz commented to Clark, "wouldn't it be great if there were international eyes on this village?"

Clark went home and shared the story with Kay. They decided to approach their church and propose a partnership with Santa María Tzeja. The timing for the proposal was not ideal. For nearly two years, Clark had been attempting to convince the congregation to declare itself a sanctuary for Central Amer-

ican political refugees in the United States. But people's fears of the consequences of defying the U.S. government's immigration laws had prevented him from obtaining the necessary 80 percent support of the congregation. Now came a proposal for a different kind of engagement and commitment, though no one yet knew what it would mean in practice.

After more than a year of committee meetings and seemingly endless conversations with parish members, in January 1987, "the church decided, for whatever it would mean, to offer a partnership with the village."

Later that year, Kay and Clark set off for Guatemala with their meager language skills, a single bed sheet, a couple of backpacks, and a camera. After arriving in Guatemala they traveled north to Cobán where they caught a small plane to fly them over the mountains to the landing strip in Playa Grande.

They had not been on the ground more than a few minutes when an army helicopter flew over them. "We knew they were checking to see who had arrived because we were very close to the Playa Grande military base." They hitchhiked to Cantabal and from there planned to hire a guide to walk them through the mountain passes to Santa María. Several days of torrential rains had made the mountain trails impassable. They waited a few days for conditions to improve, then began the arduous trek up the mountain.

"I thought I was going to the end of the world," says Kay. "I had never gone anyplace like that before. We were covered with mud up to our knees and fell several times. It was pretty awful."

They arrived at the village tired, muddy, and soaked. That evening, as the community gathered under a tin-roofed shelter, Clark, having memorized a little speech in language school, made the proposal to form a partnership between Santa María and the Needham church. Members of the community asked a few questions, then Clark and Kay shook hands with the village's development committee.

“Nobody really knew what partnership would mean,” Kay says. “We didn’t know what it meant, and it was a new idea to them, too.”

The Taylors stayed three days, the subject of much curiosity. “At that point, there weren’t a lot of people coming through Santa María. It was kind of the end of the road. There was no way to get there, so it was totally isolated,” says Kay. “And here were these big white people saying, ‘We want to partner with you.’”

As their stay ended, the community took pity on “these bedraggled messes,” providing the mules and the guides for the trip back to Cantabal.

And that’s how they ended up galloping helplessly off through the jungle.

The story ended happily, however, if without a certain dignity. Kay’s mule came to a sudden stop at a stream, while Clark limped up after her, calling her name. He was bruised but otherwise okay. The guides took control of the halters.

Now it was time to cross the stream. Clark went first, but in the struggle to hang onto the mule’s halter in river waters swollen by the recent rains, he tore his hand open. So, the men suggested that Kay get off and walk across a nearby bridge.

“By that time, I had probably been on the mule for about two hours. I got off and couldn’t stand up. My legs were bowed and I couldn’t stand up. A man who came up to about here on me [gesturing to her shoulders], trying not to laugh at us, helped me across the bridge. Of course, I was in stitches, and that sort of broke the ice.”

“Well, it was a bonding experience,” Clark interjects, laughing heartily. “They still talk about this. It was a great equalizer.”

“This was our introduction to Santa María,” he adds. “And just being able to do this together was wonderful.”

They returned to Needham with photos and great stories. “The reaction of people was energizing,” says Clark, “because

people who were our age or younger would say, ‘Wow, you did that? And if you were able to do something like that—and, you know, you’re sort of normal suburban people—if you could do that, maybe I might have the courage to do that too.’”

The energy they brought back with them was contagious. People were inspired by their enthusiasm, and the positive response encouraged them further. “We felt like we were doing something, beginning something that had the potential of being important for people in the church.”

They were right about that, for their adventure launched the congregation on a sister-community project that exists to this day.

Living in the Suffering

Monica Maher went to Honduras by way of a mission-conscious family—her father had been a Maryknoll seminarian before deciding to marry and have a family—and a sense of church rooted in the progressive social teachings that emerged from the Second Vatican Council. “I experienced ‘church’ as a home church,” she reflects, “as a community base [committed to] civil, economic, and social rights. All of that was part of my experience.”

With this background, Monica felt drawn to overseas work. She earned a master’s degree in international development and gained experience working with Catholic Relief Services in the Dominican Republic and Haiti. But this work didn’t satisfy her. She was looking for a different kind of engagement, a more direct experience of living and working alongside the poor. Gradually she found herself drawn to the liberation struggles in Central America and to the church there that had made a profound preferential option for the poor.

In 1991 she traveled to El Salvador, where she accompanied refugees returning from camps in Honduras to their homes in areas of conflict that had been emptied of their

populations by the Salvadoran Army as part of its rural counterinsurgency campaign. The repopulation project was initiated by popular organizations without the approval of the Salvadoran government or of army officials, who considered the “going home” campaign to be a subversive strategy of the FMLN. International accompaniment was a decisive factor in the refugees’ safe return.

The experience had an important impact on Monica. “I really felt drawn to the church of Central America,” she reflects, “because I knew it was a more popular, participatory, and justice-oriented church than what I found in the United States.”

The opportunity to become part of that church came in the form of an offer to take a job as coordinator of a health promotion program in Honduras under the auspices of an organization called Concern America. Concern had been contracted by the Jesuit community in northern Honduras to develop a health promotion program among communities with few medical resources and enormous human needs.

Monica’s job was to support the health promoters in the area, all of whom were women, and to network with other groups around the country.

The collaboration with local organizations and the training of women in leadership roles within those organizations brought Monica into relationships that changed her life. Very quickly, she found herself engaged in the many hard issues faced by poor women in a *macho* culture, issues of poverty and extreme hardship, of absent fathers and domestic violence, of mental health and women’s legal rights. Gradually these issues absorbed more of Monica’s time as she developed relationships with the health promoters and leaders of community organizations. As she began to enter into the daily lives and struggles of the women, she found deep bonds beginning to form like none she had ever known before. She discovered a population both incredibly vulnerable and amazingly strong.

Among this new circle of friends was a woman named Sonia, a health promoter and local leader in the women's networks. Sonia was at the time living along a roadside in a tiny *champita*—a shanty with walls made of scrap wood and cardboard and a leaky thatched roof.

Her house was built on what amounted to a “mudslide,” says Monica, “a house right on a muddy hill. It was awful. On one side of the road and the other there was water, just sand and water, with mosquitoes, and the constant threat of malaria and other diseases.”

Even in such a marginal space, Sonia was not secure. She was a squatter under threat of eviction, struggling to raise ten children, battling hunger, poverty, and chronic illness on a daily basis. But, says Monica, “she had this great resilience.”

They became friends and Monica spent many hours with Sonia and her family. On nights of the full moon, Monica would come by for a visit and they would sing, dance, and share stories. Sonia would put a bed frame with a mat outside the house so that Monica could sleep (sleeping outside would give her some protection from the rats that infested the *champitas*).

Meanwhile, a large foreign corporation had bought the land surrounding Sonia's little house and was in the process of developing a large African palm plantation for the production of palm oil. The squatters were an inconvenient presence. Eventually, Sonia and her family were evicted.

Being “in relationship” often means living with the suffering, the inhuman conditions, the effects of injustice on an individual human being who is now your friend. It becomes very personal.

We Have God and We Have You

Sister Laetitia Bordes of the Society of Helpers was visiting sugarcane workers in Veracruz, Mexico, during Holy Week in 1974.

It was her first trip to a Latin American country, and the impact was searing.

“It was a horrible experience,” she recalls nearly twenty-five years later. “Peasants, families were living in barns, *graneros*. There was no place to wash. Everyone slept together. Afterwards I cried and cried,” she says. “I just wanted to forget I had ever seen that place. It was hell.”

The experience altered the course of her life. She spent the next several years involved in the organizing work of the United Farm Workers, then in 1980 traveled to Nicaragua to witness the revolution first-hand. Like so many other U.S. Americans, she was deeply moved by the hope that the revolution had sparked among the country’s poor, and especially among young people.

Meanwhile, in El Salvador, it was that very hope that was causing great concern for the U.S. government. The success of the popular struggle in Nicaragua was inspiring popular movements in El Salvador, where people were facing similar conditions of repressive rule and the crushing of all non-violent means of political change.

Following the fall of the Somoza dictatorship in Nicaragua in July 1979, the repression in El Salvador increased. The following year, Archbishop Romero, the four U.S. churchwomen, six leaders of opposition political parties, and hundreds of other community leaders and activists were assassinated.

Laetitia, like thousands of other U.S. Americans, watched with horror and began mobilizing the faith community to respond—both in protesting U.S. support for the Salvadoran dictatorship and in offering solidarity to those suffering persecution.

Following the assassination of Archbishop Romero in March 1980, a group of thirty-two women fled El Salvador into Honduras in fear for their lives. They were never heard from again. The case of their disappearance became a terrifying mystery and indicated possible collaboration between the Salvadoran and

Honduran military governments in the repression. In 1982, while working for the Latin American Task Force at the Catholic Archdiocese of San Francisco, Laetitia was invited to join a delegation of U.S. citizens traveling to Honduras to make inquiries regarding the fate of the women.

Because of the extent of the U.S. intelligence presence in the country and its ties to the Honduran military government, it was logical that one of their stops would be the U.S. embassy in Tegucigalpa. As Laetitia recalls, the delegation went back and forth between Honduran and U.S. embassy officials, frustrated at every turn in their quest for information on the fate of the women. “I became aware that the enemy I was facing,” she says, was not just the repressive governments of the region, but was also “my own country.”

Confronting the role of the United States in the region’s conflicts was, for many U.S. Americans, one of the most difficult—and unavoidable—steps along the journey of solidarity. U.S. citizens were learning, many of them for the first time, the extent of U.S. involvement in the repression perpetrated by the region’s military governments over many decades. They were learning that the overriding priority of U.S. policy in the region was to keep in place governments compliant with U.S. geopolitical interests in the region, no matter what the human cost.

At the same time, U.S. Americans were coming into contact with a faith that seemed almost impossible in the context of the horrific violence. Poor people in Christian communities were facing war and repression with complete confidence that Jesus Christ was with them in their struggle for dignity and justice, even to the point of giving their lives in that struggle.

While in Honduras, Laetitia visited a Salvadoran refugee camp near the border. A Salvadoran man offered testimony to the delegation about his son who had been tortured and dismembered in front of his family. Laetitia asked him, “How do you keep going?” He responded, “We have God and we have you.”

For the suffering poor of Central America, the solidarity of U.S. Americans was a source of hope and strength in the midst of their struggle.

Hitting the Wall

For some U.S. Americans, the impact of first encounters unfolded over time; for others it was sudden, shattering an old world, a point of no return.

Anne Balzhiser remembers the moment.

In 1992 Anne decided to join the first delegation from her Catholic parish in Arlington, Virginia, to visit the parish in the diocese of Santa Rosa de Copán in western Honduras with which they had recently formed a sister-community relationship. Honduras is one of the poorest countries in the Western hemisphere and the living conditions of most of the area's residents are radically different from those of suburban northern Virginia.

It was on the fifth day of her trip when her world was shattered in an experience she describes as "hitting the wall."

The delegation attended a meeting of the community's parish council. "All these people were working, most of them were barely literate," she says, "and there was an English nurse helping to translate what they were writing on large pieces of paper, making notes on their projects—agriculture, literacy, health programs, women's issues, all kinds of things. And I just totally lost it. I began crying, just weeping. I just could not stop. I wanted so much to be part of them and part of their journey. I fell in love with the people and the culture and the struggle and all of it. There are so many layers and levels—from the global social justice issues to the personal spiritual journey. And then there's a very selfish part—I just like so much being with them and seeing the world through their eyes and having fun in ways that I was never able to have fun before."

Anne returned home motivated by a profound desire to be able to communicate with the people she had met. “With a vengeance I wanted to learn Spanish,” she says. “As I learned the language I found that I was able to express a part of me in completely new ways. People say that the minute I start talking about Honduras or with some of my Honduran friends, they can physically see a change in me, that I’m more animated. I just come completely alive.”

This Is My Family

For others, what was found was a new sense of identity.

Francisco Herrera was born in Calexico in southern California, close to the Mexican border. Raised as a Catholic with a strong sense of his Mexican roots, he had been especially struck by the stories of the early Christian martyrs, the martyrs in the catacombs, those who had been willing to give up their lives for their faith. He would soon discover this kind of faith vibrant and alive in people very much like him.

During his college years, Francisco’s awareness of his religious and cultural roots deepened. While attending junior college in the San Diego area, he came into contact with the Jesuit community and, in 1981, joined a group that was planning a liturgy at the University of San Diego (USD) to commemorate the first anniversary of the assassination of Archbishop Romero. By that time, U.S. support for the military government in El Salvador had become a topic of intense national debate and the focus of a growing solidarity movement, especially among churches deeply moved by the witness of Romero and the Salvadoran base Christian communities. Delegations of religious leaders were traveling to El Salvador to take part in the Salvadoran commemoration events as a gesture of solidarity and, in the United States, thousands of educational and religious events were taking place all across the country for the first anniversary.

Francisco recalls attending one such event at the USD campus. It featured a film describing the history and roots of the revolution in El Salvador, the struggle of *campesinos* to change deeply entrenched structures of economic injustice and political domination in a land where just fourteen families controlled most of the country's wealth and resources.

For Francisco, the impact of the liturgy and the film was powerful. "I said, 'Wow, this is where I come from!'" He immediately identified with the Catholic and *campesino* roots of the Salvadoran reality.

"This is my family," he said to himself. "I'm *campesino*. I couldn't do anything but respond."

Touching the Faith of the Poor

Many U.S. Americans were drawn to El Salvador by the courageous faith of the poor, that faith that had so inspired and converted their martyred pastor, Oscar Romero. As they touched this faith, often in the briefest of encounters, their lives were transformed.

One of the inevitable stops on a trip to El Salvador was Romero's tomb, which had been built inside the cathedral in San Salvador, a building battered and broken by an earthquake many years before. Romero's predecessor, Bishop Luis Chavez y Gonzalez, had stopped the reconstruction of the heavily damaged building, saying the work would not be completed until the needs of the poor in his country had been met. Romero continued that legacy. The church's gaping holes, protruding beams, and rough cement interior stood in testimony to the option for the poor of the Salvadoran church.

All day long, the poor of El Salvador streamed through the cathedral to visit Romero's tomb. Day after day they passed by to talk to "*Monseñor*," to ask for favors, to tell him about their struggles, to ask him for courage. Sometimes people literally

moved in with him, occupying the space for days or weeks at a time to assume his protection as they struggled for their rights, or when arriving as refugees from rural areas attacked by the Salvadoran military.

Said a solidarity activist at the Cleveland retreat, “We entered the cathedral when it was occupied by a small community in flight from their village which had been utterly destroyed by the U.S.-supplied Salvadoran military. We were painfully aware that our government had contributed to their displacement and loss—aware of our own complicity in their suffering—and specifically asked for their forgiveness. It was simply, seriously, given.”

The generosity of the poor, people with so little in the way of material possessions, touched the hearts of many North Americans. One night of being offered the only bed in a house—a bed usually shared by four or five people—while the whole family slept on the floor; one meal of bread store-bought for the *gringos/as*; one meeting with the families or mothers of the disappeared who relieved a delegations’ thirst by going out and buying Coca-Cola—such encounters put a mirror up before the sharp contrasts between North and South, not only in material terms, but also in terms of a lived and vibrant gospel faith.

And, for most U.S. Americans, it was a humbling experience.

Sometimes the moment of transformation came with a simple gesture of friendship offered across the chasms of culture, history, and faith. This is how one woman from North Carolina described such a moment: “I know the precise time when things changed for me. I had decided to join a delegation from my parish to Guatemala. I studied all the different things they told us to study before going. The only thing I didn’t do was learn much Spanish . . . but everything else I did. I read, I prayed, I did devotions, the whole bit. So I was really ready.”

Bishop Juan Gerardi, head of the Guatemalan bishops’ human rights office, had been assassinated in April 1998 and the

group's trip was scheduled for that June. Her family was nervous and didn't really want her to go. "So," she says,

I asked my sister to write a letter for every day that I was there, a letter that I would open as my daily devotion and support, so that I would know I was connected. And she did.

One day, those in the delegation went on a picnic. We were traveling on a Guatemalan bus. Now, if you've never been to a "third world" country, you don't know the implications of that, but it's just an incredible experience in itself. There were about three to five people sitting on every seat. There was stuff hanging all over the bus. We were going up and down mountains. The people had taken all the previous day to stuff things in little baskets for our trip. They had babies on their backs; they were carrying everything.

We got off the bus at a lake and the countryside was gorgeous. I was feeling somewhat alone, but in a good way. I wasn't worried about where I was or about the bus experience, I was just having kind of an alone moment. As I walked along there was a lady behind me with a baby on her back. She had carried that baby during the whole hour bus ride and now she was also carrying the food that had been prepared for us. So, here I was in my alone moment when she caught up with me and rearranged her stuff so that she could slide her hand into my hand. And I wasn't alone anymore.

That morning, in one of her daily letters, my sister had written to me, "Today may [you] be born again, may you feel everything old fall away and feel something new, and may the hand of God touch you today."

That was my morning devotion for what happened that day.

Accompaniment: First Step in the Journey

The stories of solidarity that impacted the lives of thousands of North American people of faith are profound and complex, yet with something quite simple in common. They began often with a small gesture of accompaniment, a decision to walk, for however short a time, with a people, a community, whether in a war zone, a refugee camp, a town under siege, or a village of displaced persons or refugees seeking safety in the United States.

What these stories initiated, however, was a journey far different from anything that had been anticipated, a journey into the real world and its painful reality, a journey into themselves within that world, a journey into a faith that for many had become cut off and isolated, detached from the conditions of real human beings. They discovered this faith vividly alive in the hopes and aspirations of the poor. They found themselves on a journey that stretched them, pulled them, stripped them, and liberated them.

The invitation came, they said yes to it, and they came back transformed:

- Sister Ellen Lamberjack, O.S.F., from Tiffin, Ohio, who remembers going to a Guatemalan town and visiting a church that had once been occupied by the army and used as a brothel, a place of torture and death, a church with bloody hand marks still on the walls, with tiles pulled up so the blood of the victims could soak into the floor—and how the words from scripture arose from the depths of her soul, “Their blood will cry out from the earth.”
- Laura, a Mexican-American whose family worked in the fields of California, whose father once packed tomatoes for \$1 per day while they lived in a dirty chicken coop, whose mother had to breast-feed in the fields. One day she met an illegal

Mexican family, *braceros*, and immediately identified with them. Her mother opened their home to indigents and the undocumented precisely because “that’s who we once were.”

- Sister Kathleen Kelly, S.C., who worked in the Rio Grande Valley for several years and who, in the face of the suffering of migrants and farm workers, asked, “What do I do?” and how the answer came, “Be there”; and so she made herself “a voice” for poor people along the border, later reflecting, “This can be one of the most painful things, to be there at the foot of the cross, to be there with the pain.”
- Jean Stokan, who on her first trip to El Salvador talked with a group of young people who were meeting clandestinely every morning to study the bible, and who told her, “We have reality on one hand and the bible on the other, and we ask ourselves what we ought to do,” and who said that, as they read the bible, they also feared for their lives, yet still worked every weekend in refugee camps, knowing of the danger; and she remembers that they weren’t depressed, but rather that their eyes just shone full of life. “Every second mattered,” she says. “I want my life to matter that much, that every second be used to make a difference.”
- Gene, who served in the military in Panama and saw how people were being treated by the “Americans,” how they were often humiliated, treated as if they were stupid—seeing, as he puts it, “the other way that America behaves.”
- Another North Carolina activist, who remembers being in Central America on a delegation and seeing a woman reach for the food she was about to throw away.
- A young man raised in an affluent Republican family, who “just wanted to help,” and so he traveled to a village in the rainforest to educate people about Jesus, but found out that every child in the town had died in a measles epidemic, and

recalled saying to his parents, “Something’s not right.” “It was like blinders coming off,” he says, and “light beginning to shine in all areas . . . like scales falling off my eyes.”

- Sister Andrea, who went to visit internal refugees in El Salvador in 1984 and there met a twelve-year-old boy whose entire family had been slaughtered, and who said to her, “Please pray for me that I don’t hate the people who did this to me.”
- Sister Mary Ellen Foley, R.S.M., who said “yes” to the invitation to join a Witness for Peace delegation in the war zones of Nicaragua and who remembers being at Mass the night before she went, and how she was “shaking the whole time—I was just terrified about going.” Yet, to the comment, “Still, you went,” she replies, “Of course!” as did so many other North Americans who went, despite the fear.
- A delegation that drove to a tiny settlement near a displaced community in a conflict zone not far from Usulután, El Salvador, at the end of a long hot day, where the family had slaughtered one of their scrawny roosters and prepared exactly eleven portions, one for each delegation participant, with a piece of chicken, some broth, a *tortilla*, and a cup of coffee, and how they knew that was Eucharist.
- And the hundreds of U.S. citizens who spoke of what it was like to discover that we are at the top of the champagne glass, the tiny percentage of the world’s population that enjoys most of the wealth that bubbles up from the bottom, that we are the wealthy minority in a world of poverty.

How liberating this discovery has been, they say, how liberating to put themselves at risk, to learn the truth about the world, to discover their faith as if for the first time.

What happened to them? How did this journey of accompaniment change them so profoundly?