

**PLANTING THE SEEDS FOR THE PROMISED LAND:
THE NEW MODEL OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN EL SALVADOR**

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INTRODUCTION

“If they kill me I shall rise in the El Salvadoran people. Let my blood rise in the seed of the people...for the hope of the people shall never perish¹.” A people deprived of freedom, desolate, and in despair, derive their strength from their religious beliefs and theological foundations. El Salvador and its distinguished Archbishop, Oscar Romero, illustrate such a situation. During the late 1970’s it was a country marked by civil unrest, military takeovers, and senseless bloodshed. Romero embodied the obligations the Catholic Church must maintain in El Salvador - to speak for those who have not a voice to raise or a forum to speak. Archbishop Romero was a means by which the people who suffered at the hands of their oppressors could realize that they had not suffered nor sacrificed their life in vain. And with the pain and suffering they experienced, they gained a self-consciousness that identified, interpreted, and acted towards the movement of justice and peace. The movement was grounded an idea of liberation that believed in the power of God and the love that God represents.

Romero and the Catholic Church aimed towards liberation in El Salvador by peaceful non-violent movements consistently reminding them that God had not forgotten them. It may seem that this would be the standard role for any Christian organization or, for that matter any religion by virtue of doctrinal reasoning; however, the history of the Church in El Salvador proves that this was not the case. This thesis attempts an introduction to this remarkable transformation within the Catholic Church in El Salvador. Candidly speaking, such a subject truly is not within the limits of words and set page numbers. It would be insufficient to say that the following account

incorporates every aspect of the war in El Salvador, the history of the Church in El Salvador, the present-day workings of the Church, and the framework and theological structures of liberation theology. Clearly, each one of these subjects is a work, a volume, on its own. The reality is that I could not begin to explore if in fact a new model of the Catholic Church exists in El Salvador without mingling all these subjects in order to find the seeds that were planted in the small patch of earth in El Salvador. Thus, I give a succinct account of the root causes for the revolutions in El Salvador during the 1970's. However, for further edification, I have provided a chronology, which I obtained from Max G. Manwaring work, *El Salvador at War an Oral History*. Primarily, I concentrated on the explaining the history of the Church in El Salvador and the **new** Church that arose from the revolutions.

The struggle of the poor in El Salvador, identified as the “church of the poor,” is a faith struggle. It springs not from an impulse of change but from the very soul of the people who live and die in El Salvador.

¹ Archbishop Oscar Romero

“They took my boy to the treasury police headquarters and kept him for three weeks. They did awful things to him. They starved him and then fed him rotten food. They covered his head with a cement bag filled with lime and beat him with a bamboo rod. As he gasped, he breathed in the lime, burning his lungs and slowly turning them to stone. When he was finally released, he had few marks on his body, but inside he was dying.

Roberto came home to live with me and to die with me. At night I’d hold him in my arms and wipe his lips as he coughed up blood. He couldn’t eat. Drinking water caused him terrible pain. He could not talk much during those last days, but when he did, my boy told me about his work with the Christian base communities. He told me about the Bible and how God favored the poor. He told me about Monseñor Romero and about the struggle for justice.

I never heard these things from the bishop of San Vicente or from any of his priests. But coming from the last gasps of my son’s life, I believed. And in the few years since he has died, I’ve become active in the struggle for liberation. I have joined a Christian base community and studied the Bible. I’ve found truths there that I never found in the Church. I have found the strength to raise my son’s children as he wished them to be raised².”

Maria Luisa Lopez, a basket maker, living in San Vicente, El Salvador remembers the last days of her son’s life. Roberto was a factory worker, who left his rural town of San Vicente in 1974. His hopes and dreams are not quite different from our own. In search of a better life, he moved to San Salvador, the capitol of El Salvador. He met a young woman, Virgilia Sanchez, whom he eventually married and had children. What is different about Roberto’s life is that he suffered intense and unjustifiable persecution at the hands of the El Salvadoran government. Roberto and his wife, Virgilia, were active in the labor unions and in the small Christian base communities that sought justice and peace for El Salvador.

² Santiago, Daniel. *The Harvest of Justice: The Church of El Salvador Ten Years after Romero*. Paulist Press. New York, NY. 1993. 1.

Justice and peace in El Salvador, especially in the 1970's and 80's, was a prospect of impossibility. The conditions were brutal – human rights violations, increased violence directed against poor communities, kidnapping, torture, and assassination. The world in which Roberto and Virgilia lived in, as well as their children and their grandmother, Maria Luisa, is a testimony to the tragedies that have occurred in El Salvador. Their story is symbolic of many who have made the ultimate sacrifice and given their lives to the struggle for liberation in their country. It is a liberation seeded in the poor³, displaced, and powerless. It is infused by holy men like Archbishop Oscar Romero; and it is galvanized by a Catholic liberation theology that sets to fuse faith and action together. The presence of a Christian base, specifically the Catholic Church, has played a significant role within the popular movement. The Christian base communities have the vision of a new society and utopia to which the poor aspire and for which they struggle and give their lives⁴.

Emerging from the revolutions in El Salvador, specifically during the late 1970's and early 1980's, was a new model of the Catholic Church. This new model toiled (at all costs) for social justice, and became involved in social and political movements to bring justice and peace to the struggle of liberation for El Salvador's poor. The new model incorporates liberation theology as part of the theological doctrine that channels both faith and action of the Catholic Church and its believers. Historically, however, the role of the Catholic Church was not a vehicle for freedom nor was it a voice for the people. The Church, traditionally, was an oppressive and

³ Poor is defined as a collective poor, the “popular classes.” It includes the socio-economically poor, evangelically poor, the wronged, exploited, discriminated, and oppressed.

⁴ Wright, Scott. *Promised Land: Death and Life in El Salvador*. Orbis Books. Maryknoll, NY. 1994. xxx.

authoritarian force in El Salvador, which maintained the militant status quo. Its method of evangelization was invasive and contributed to colonial imperatives. In spite of this history, a tender branch grew which aimed at transforming the entire body of the Church. Lead by clergyman like Archbishop Romero and moved by the martyred Jesuits of the Central American University (Universidad Centroamericana José Cañas), the Church evolved into a strong influential force in El Salvador. Correspondingly, the Church has been placed on the road to renewal, which has surely result[ed] in a new manifestation of the Church as [an] institution⁵. In El Salvador the traditional Church has been deposed, to be replaced by a Church that works as an advocate, a voice for the poor, oppressed, and marginalized. It publicly denounces the prevailing political and economic order, challenges the democratic credentials to Salvadoran governments, and tenaciously seeks for a peaceful settlement to the revolutions. It is from this new model of the Catholic Church in El Salvador that we intensify the framework for a just society.

There are important lessons of history to be learned from a decade of war in El Salvador. The story begins in 1979, when insurrection seized the smallest country of Central America – El Salvador. Although the account of political instability has been prevalent in this area since its Declaration of Independence from its Spanish colonizers in 1821, it is in the late 1970's that chronic political, economic, and social tensions generated another crisis in El Salvador. It is this crisis that revealed the urgent and grave need for peace in this part of the world- so that the tragedy of seventy-five thousand lives lost (and how many before that) – and six billion of U.S. aid to a cruel military regime - are not repeated.

⁵ Boff, Leonardo. *Church: Charism and Power: Liberation Theology and the Institutional Church*. Diercksmeirer, John W (trans.) Crossroad: New York, NY. 1985. ix.

The root causes of the civil war in El Salvador stem from three bodies – the extreme polarizations of wealth and poverty, the dominant role of the military, and the absence of strong democratic institutions. The catalyst that ignited the continuing violence in El Salvador was a military coup on October 15, 1979; the date when General Carlos Humberto Romero was ousted from power. General Romero had been brought in by the oligarchical powers, who believed that he would be able to establish a military regime strong enough to control the various forces that (pre-1979) had been agitating for change. He was unsuccessful. And, none of the three major powers in the conflict – the military, the insurgents, and the United States – were prepared for the political disarray that would come.

Why revolution? The dispossessed of El Salvador determined to destroy the old, outworn economic political and social structures of the prison-country which for close to half a century [had] been under the yoke of implacable military dictatorships, guarding the interests of the oligarchy and foreign capital, to include the United States⁶. In *Voices from El Salvador*, a collection of journal entries written by Mario Menendez Rodriguez during the conflict, Rodriguez verifies the ominous economic and social disparities. He writes:

*** “Less than half of one percent (.5) of the owners possess thirty-seven and three tenths percent (37.3%) of the arable land while ninety-one and four tenths (91.4%) own twenty-one and nine tenths (21.9%).**

***Fifty-eight percent (58%) of the populations have less than ten dollars (\$10) a month to live on.**

***Sixty percent (60) of the Salvadorans living in rural areas and forty percent (40%) of those living in the cities can not read or write.**

⁶ Rodriguez, Mario Melendez. *El Salvador: Una Authentica Guerra Civil*. Solidarity Publications. San Francisco. 1983. 6.

***Just sixteen percent (16%) of the economically active population work all year round.**

***There are less than three (3) doctors per ten-thousand (10,000) inhabitants and most of the country's thirteen hundred (1300) doctors are concentrated at the capital.**

***There are under two hospital beds per thousand inhabitants (2 /1000) while there are no reliable infant mortality data**

***Population density is two-hundred per square kilometer (200/1), and in San Salvador over two-hundred thousand (200,000) people exist in the subhuman conditions – with cardboard or newspaper covering, no plumbing facilities, running water or electricity.**

***In such a setting, even minor struggles to back wage demands become grave social conflicts⁷.”**

It is hard to imagine that within our own world, in our own time, people could suffer so.

Resistant movements to the military dictatorship grew from the suffering of Salvadoran people who sought to make a fundamental human rights claim – life and the freedom to enjoy it without the fear of persecution. These resistant movements, along with the relentless advance of the Salvadoran people, created a powerful force that kindled a liberation movement. Several groups worked towards liberation from the military, to name a few, the Farabundo Martí Popular Liberation Force (FMLN), the Armed Forces of National Resistance (RNA), the Democratic Nationalist Union (UDN). However, these groups also added to chaos and violence.

When the persecution began in 1977, the bishops conference in El Salvador united against these horrific actions, however, the repressive laws for the maintenance of public order brought division among members. Some believed in order to end the maltreatments, a surrender to the laws needed to be made. Other churchman, in

⁷ *Ibid.* 6.

specific, those of the archdiocese in San Salvador, believed that action in corroboration with the resistance movements needed to be taken (violent or otherwise). The Church hierarchy failed to reconcile the bishops of the archdiocese with those of the rest of the country, but regardless of its divisions, the Church was not immune to the brutal tactics of the military regime.

The persecutions against the Church in El Salvador were primarily concentrated on the archdiocese (San Salvador) whose socially committed evangelization programs aroused the suspicions of the armed forces⁸. Ten priests, beginning with the Jesuit Rutilio Grande, a deacon and five nuns were assassinated in the first wave of persecution. Priests were seriously threatened, tortured, or expelled; all the Jesuits were threatened with death between 1977 and 1980. Christians from the base communities were threatened, arrested, harassed, tortured and assassinated for their activities as Christians and resisters. Liturgical celebrations were broken up, Church buildings and Catholic colleges were attacked, and the archdiocesan radio station was mobbed several times and systematically jammed; presbyteries and convents were bombed and machine-gunned, as were the homes of their lay collaborators. In many parts of the country, but in particular the archdiocese, the army occupied churches, profaning the Eucharistic host and the sacred vessels. The Church held its own, but the way the clergy stood firm against the continued waves of persecution, in ways that other resisters could not. Their reaction made a deep impression on the nation and gave the Church great credibility in the eyes of the people, a credibility not before given to a Church that often had not sided with the people.

⁸ Dussel, Enrique. *A History of the Church in Latin America: Colonialism to Liberation*. Neely, Alan (trans.) William B. Eerdman's Publishing Company: Grand Rapids, MI. 1981. 265.

Before the revolution, the Church participated in the lives of the people in a completely different manner. The arrival of Christopher Columbus and the first Christians to reach the Caribbean marks the first stage of evangelization in Latin America. The violent clash between the European world and civilizations of the “New World” brought about a profound change that was to have drastic consequences in the history of the Amerindian peoples⁹. In Central America, the first missionaries dealt with endless problems and difficulties, not to mention the frequent insurrections by the native people as well as the frequent rivalries between the conquistadors and colonizers. In *A History of the Church in Latin America: Colonialism to Liberation*, written by Enrique Dussel, he states:

In Central America, the imposition of Christianity had to contend with endless problems and difficulties, not least the frequent rivalries among conquistadors and resistance from the Indians. The first phase of the evangelization in the Guatemala region, from 1524 to 1529, was marked by the active intervention of lay people, the clergy being few and lacking in religious formation. The second phase of the process of Christianization can be dated from 1530 to 1541, when Spaniards began to settle in Guatemala. The third phase runs from 1541 to the death of Bishop Francisco de Marroquín in 1563. Throughout all three, the Dominicans, who laid the foundations for their first convent in 1529, carried out the bulk of the work of evangelization.

Dussel’s brief account of the evangelization of Central America offers an insight to the varying characteristics that defined the type of Church that would be established. The point of fact that Catholicism came to Central America as a conquering religion that worked as a strategizing tool for the conquistadors. Everything “Indian” was

⁹ *Ibid.* 43.

condemned *en bloc* as the work of the devil, which in practice meant that the “Indians” were stripped of their identity and downgraded to second-class beings, whose very humanity depended, in the judgment of the conquistadors, on the degree to which they absorbed Iberian religion and civilization¹⁰. The missionaries did not understand the religions or spiritual practices of the native peoples, nor was it their concern. Large crosses and immense cathedrals had been erected in Central America for the benefit of the Spanish monarchs to claim the Central American lands as missionary in purpose. While religious intentions or the prospect of evangelization did not inspire these lands and conquering voyages, the idea surfaced, nonetheless.

Dussel's account continues by explaining the creation (and strength) of the ecclesiastical structures, which only forwarded the ill effects of colonization. He writes:

“Local ecclesiastical structures came into being promptly in all the dioceses of Spanish America. In addition to the chapters established by the bishop in the cathedral churches, individual parishes were set up in the Episcopal town and in those places where Christian Spaniards predominated, whereas mission stations were founded for the Indian population living for the most part in the country areas and not yet or only just christianized; these missions, or *doctrinas*, were almost exclusively in the charge of religious orders¹¹.”

The presence of the Catholic Church in Central America began with the conquest of the area and was dependent on the spread of colonization. Thus, Latin American societies entered into the history of [their] development of a universal system of interdependence as dependent societies due to Iberian colonization. Their history can be traced, to a large extent, as the history of successive dependent modifications. In conclusion, the

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 52.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 60.

different societies of the region have reached different positions without having been able, up to this time, to break way from the general framework¹².

Although the missions and the process of evangelization was primarily a product of a brutal conquest, it would be erroneous to lay this claim as a generalization. Dussel explains:

“This process [colonization] was condemned by some missionaries, who saw that the cross and the sword could not go hand-in-hand, if there was a real desire for genuine evangelization...A constellation of missionaries – Dominicans, Franciscans, Augustinians, Mercedarians and Jesuits – formed with an evangelizing outlook very different from that promoted by the crowns of Spain and Portugal with their system of Royal Patronage. Two evangelizing programs were on a collision course. That of the crown, on one hand, was supported by eminent scholars who legitimized imperialism and war against the Indians, upheld the inferiority of the Indians, and declared that it was right for them to be governed by Spaniards¹³.”

Hundreds of years would pass and as a stream of constant rebellions and wars between the native people and the conquistadors plagued Central America, the Church remained influential.

With the shift in philosophy, theology, and science that occurred during the period known as the *Enlightenment*, Central America and its relationship with its colonizers and missionaries changed greatly. In both Spain and Portugal, the reforms introduced under the influence of the *Enlightenment* were an attempt to avoid the dissolution of their empires under the pressure of a new international order, the cultural

¹² Gutierrez, Gustavo. *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*. Inda, Sister Caridad and Eagleson, John (trans.) Orbis Books: Maryknoll, NY. 1988. 51.

¹³ Dussel, Enrique. *A History of the Church in Latin America: Colonialism to Liberation*. Neely, Alan (trans.) William B. Eerdman’s Publishing Company: Grand Rapids, MI. 1981. 52.

hegemony of science and technology and the difficulties stemming from the actual situation of the American colonies¹⁴. Furthermore, the Church and its missionaries had accumulated great wealth. Economic changes of the eighteenth century gave new value to labor and land, which the Church due to the establishment of missions in previous centuries had plenty. Dussel further clarifies this point when he writes:

“The missions authorized by the empire as a means of establishing frontiers has, under the regions orders, developed into community projects outside the control of the colonial administration and private ownership. The productive efficiency of these projects provided a sharp contrast to the lower returns achieved by Spanish and Portuguese colonists. The economic strength of the Guaraní missions, the labor force they absorbed and their closure of large areas to outside trade, finally led to uniting Spanish and Portuguese with British, France, and Dutch traders against the activities carried on by the missionaries. What most annoyed the European bourgeoisie of the Enlightenment, dedicated to the defense of private property, was the success of experiments in holding goods in common within the communities¹⁵.”

Irritated by the success of the missions, Spanish administration scrutinized the Catholic Church often claiming the accumulated wealth of the clergy as corrupt and sinful. Nowhere was this censure more evident than the Jesuit missions. When the first Jesuits arrived, as well as the Dominicans and Franciscans, they began to denounce the abuses they saw. The Jesuits were unlike the missionaries that came before them, as Dussel characterizes:

“The first priests, almost all secular, came with the conquistadors and devoted themselves to administering the sacraments to them and baptizing the natives en masse. They built the

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 81.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

first churches in the first white settlements, persecuted the priests of the pre-Hispanic native religions and burned their codices. They were paid a salary by the early town administrators, but also took advantage of the booty produced by the conquest¹⁶.”

These Jesuits were not concerned with the religiosity of the native peoples, nor was their allegiance to the Spanish monarch; rather, it was to God and God’s people. They were not interested in benefiting from the conquest, but in preaching a faith to the natives and defending their rights. The activities of the clergy, thus, were different from the first clergy who journeyed with the conquistadors in the 16th century.

The first half of the eighteen-century in Central America colors the history of the Jesuits in Latin America. Continuously denouncing the economic power of the Jesuits, as well as social and cultural influences (i.e. education), the King of Spain was lobbied by Spanish bourgeois and administrators for the expulsion of the Jesuits throughout Central America. For the sake of peace in the province wealthy landowners and *encomenderos* rebelled and petitioned the king to expel the Jesuits, beginning in 1723. In search of peace, the Madrid treaty, signed in 1750 by Spain and Portugal, set limits on Portuguese expansion in the interior of the continent by ceding an immense tract of mission territory affecting 30,000 Guarani people. Albeit the Spanish ideas that such an action would bring forth peace, the Guarani took up arms and threw back the Spanish-Portuguese Forces, in 1754. A small victory, but within two years Spanish and Portuguese forces overcame the indigenous resistance. The fact that the missions resisted the Spanish demarcation was sufficient protest of seeking Jesuit expulsion¹⁷. The Society of Jesus had achieved economic as well as spiritual ascendancy throughout

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 243.

the conflict. For the Spanish and Portuguese, the Jesuits had set up barriers to their economic and societal colonial hegemony. These barriers formulated preventative measures to ensure that the native population would not be enslaved and exploited as a cheap labor force. In 1767, the Jesuits were expelled from all Spanish territories. It seems ironic that the Society of Jesus found its origin in the same country that demanded its expulsion¹⁸.

The greatest repercussion of the Enlightenment reforms on the organization of the Church in Latin America was undoubtedly the expulsion of the Jesuits, along with the weakening of the religious orders and the systematic subjection of the Church to the authority of the state, in accordance with the regalist spirit of the age¹⁹. It was these measures that provoked social movements in search of emancipation from Spanish colonization and domination. The colonial and *Enlightenment* period in Central America brought forth a spirit of emancipation and reform, which would ignite the eventual decolonization of Latin America in the 19th century.

The Church in Central America, despite the remarkable role it played in the decolonization of Latin America, participated quite differently when nation-state governments were put into place. In El Salvador, like many other Central American countries, alliances between the Church and State maintained the status quo of military support, political and social stagnation, and the economic elite. In actual social policy or political affairs the Church was often silent. It left these matters to the State, and

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 82.

¹⁸ Society of Jesus is a religious order of the Roman Catholic Church. Its members are called Jesuits. St. Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556) was a Spanish churchman who lived in the Loyola Castle near Azpeitia, Guipúzcoa, Spain. He founded the Society of Jesus, naming it as the *Compañã de Jess* [Span.,=(military) company of Jesus]; a group founded to counter the Protestant Reformation.

¹⁹ Dussel, Enrique. *A History of the Church in Latin America: Colonialism to Liberation*. Neely, Alan (trans.) William B. Eerdman's Publishing Company: Grand Rapids, MI. 1981. 81.

thus, was concerned more with the spread of Protestantism and Communism. From its alliance with the State, the Church emerged with a traditional outlook and lacked in leadership or any defined pastoral strategy²⁰. In the majority of El Salvadoran Catholic dioceses, the traditional Church lived and thrived for the first half of the 20th century. The traditional Church alleviated people's burdens by never questioning the political, social, and economic chaos that surrounded the parish. The Church hid in its "smells and bells" and wrestled abstract foes like Protestantism and Communism, without facing the realities that surrounded them.

There exist, however, people who map out a completely different path often in opposition to the accepted majority directive; the clergymen and women of the San Salvador diocese were just these mapmakers. Without the support of the Church hierarchy and often in hostile disagreement, these men and woman began changing the face of the Church in El Salvador. Animated by the spirit of the Second Vatican Council²¹, the San Salvador diocese understood its function as a vessel to respond to the demands to the El Salvadoran reality. After the Second Vatican Council, new directions were needed – pastoral experiments were made, examined, and conclusions were drawn that evangelization had to be intensified, paying special attention to adapting religiosity to the requirements of liberation, through empowering local communities, training their pastoral agents and promoting the integral liberation of all Salvadorans²².

²⁰ *Ibid.* 262.

²¹ Popularly called Vatican II, 1962–65, the 21st ecumenical council of the Roman Catholic Church, convened by Pope John XXIII and continued under Pope VI. Its announced purpose was spiritual renewal of the church and reconsideration of the position of the church in the modern world.

²² Dussel, Enrique. *A History of the Church in Latin America: Colonialism to Liberation*. Neely, Alan (trans.) William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company: Grand Rapids, MI. 1981. 263.

Monseñor Luis Chávez, the archbishop of San Salvador from 1939 to 1977, stamped the spirit of the Second Vatican Council in his archdiocese. Monseñor Chávez provides the perfect example of clergy who worked towards empowering the people of El Salvador. He was close to the people and worked with them in his pastoral work. Open-minded and not fearful of new ideas, Monseñor Chávez initiated numerous programs and fueled movements that promoted a Catholic conscience and action. Chávez promoted cooperatives, such as the development of communications media and schools for the poor. He placed a great deal of institutional weight of the Church to the elimination of injustice and the fate of the poor; he gave the Church a presence in all the political and social crises. The San Salvador diocese was marked by Chávez's commitment, and set the stage for greater changes in the El Salvadoran Catholic Church.

The archdiocesan clergy of San Salvador, unlike those with the traditional Church mindset, became a major social force. People began to identify with the Church and claim it as their own. It was in the arms of the Church that people found comfort and support for the struggles in their life. And at the same time, a new way of being Church and priest made itself felt²³. Nuns abandoned their fee-paying convents and took charge of rural and suburban parishes without priests, where they set up base communities and trained pastoral agents²⁴. Church clergy found themselves in direct contact with the real state affairs of the country - political concerns and social forces. As clergy became more involved with these affairs, they returned to their congregations with a renewed understanding of their mission.

²³ *Ibid.* 262.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

As the consciousness of the Church clergy was intensifying, so too were the peasants. For instance, mass attendance rose, as did the reception of the sacraments. Furthermore, some archdioceses, like Chávez's, offered short courses on the theoretical frameworks for understanding social structure of poverty and oppression. Between the years of 1972 and 1975, Christian peasant organizations began to spread rapidly among the San Salvador suburbs, as well as some rural communities. It was pastoral work and ideas of liberation theology that prepared the way for these organizations. Once established these organizations utilized parish structures to spread and consolidate, which meant that it became difficult to see where the Church ended and organization began²⁵. The ruling oligarchy roused to magic away the danger through military deployments, enlarging spy networks, imprisonment, kidnappings, torture, and assassinations²⁶. However, these tyrannical measures only promoted and energized Church involvement and popular movements for peasant organization.

During the years of Monseñor Luis Chávez, the Church was clearly divided. Part of it remained tied to its traditional ways, and the other, as described above, began to make dramatic changes in its theological interpretations and involvement with the El Salvadoran people. The traditional Church held steadfast to the status quo, and maintained very little involvement. Yet, eventually, the traditional Church would begin to breakdown. Nowhere is this more evident than in the leadership of Archbishop Oscar Romero. Oscar Romero was, in fact, a traditional clergyman who denied any association with the dramatic changes taking place in his own Church and in San Salvador. However, he is the embodiment of the evolution of the Church. Romero

²⁵ *Ibid.* 264.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

moved from being the traditional clergyman to **the** leading voice of the Salvadoran people is the embodiment of the evolution of the Church in El Salvador.

Before his death, Archbishop Romero told a journalist: “I have frequently been threatened with death. I should tell you, as a Christian, I do not believe in death without resurrection. If they kill me, I will be resurrected in the Salvadoran people²⁷.” Romero was appointed as Archbishop of San Salvador in 1977, after Monseñor Chávez’s death. The advent of his tenure was given in great uncertainty as Rome looked toward San Salvador as disorderly due to Chávez initiatives. Thus, Romero was favored as a “safe” choice since he was known as a bishop of the traditional church. But, his spiritual uprightness and the harshening of the persecution at the time he took office proved more powerful than his traditional patters of thought²⁸. It was unexpected that the election of Romero would bring forth the greatest transformation within the Church in El Salvador. Archbishop Romero reinforced Chávez’s approach, a surprising move to his superiors as well as congregation. In the three brief, but radical, years that Romero held occupancy as Archbishop, he became the Christian conscience of the nation, criticizing the injustice and violence produced by the ruling structures and giving hope and strength to the poor masses²⁹. Dussel captures Romero’s work when he writes:

“In pastoral matters he [Romero] developed the lines laid down by Vatican II and Medellin, that is, an approach rooted in evangelization and the preferential option for the poor, which pointed up to the desperate problems of the country. This led him to lay great stress on the formation of base communities and the training of pastoral agents on one hand, and to a general defense of the people’s right to life on the other. He

²⁷ Wright, Scott. *Promised Land: Death and Life in El Salvador*. Orbis Books. Maryknoll, NY. 1994. xxvi.

²⁸ Dussel, Enrique. *A History of the Church in Latin America: Colonialism to Liberation*. Neely, Alan (trans.) William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company: Grand Rapids, MI. 1981. 264.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

considered himself the pastor of the organized groups, giving them humanitarian aid and at the same time criticizing them strongly³⁰.”

Archbishop Romero’s actions went far beyond normal church boundaries and he became a powerful social and political influence.

In areas where the people were silenced, Romero would speak for them; where they were hungry and in pain, Romero would feed and heal; and, where they died, Romero would bless. Often the victim of attacks and threats, Romero labored to bring justice to El Salvador. He once stated in a homily in the San Salvador Cathedral:

“It is necessary to call injustice by its name, to serve truth, to denounce the exploitation of the people, to denounce discrimination and violence inflicted against the people, against their spirits, against their conscience and convictions, to promote the integral liberation of people, to urge structural changes, and to accompany the people in their struggle for liberation³¹.”

The traditional sectors in El Salvador, the same ones who supported his appointment, regarded him as the **cause** for the nation’s ills. Rome neither approved of nor understood him³². They criticized Romero for his openness and for the theology he preached. But, to the Salvadoran people he was simply their pastor, material evidence that God was listening to their prayers and hopes.

Like Moses to the Hebrews, Romero to the Salvadoran people, the Promised Land was to be had by the bonds of faith and action. For the Salvadoran poor, their fate, as Romero described in a speech, “[Was] to disappear, to be captured, to be

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Wright, Scott. *Promised Land: Death and Life in El Salvador*. Orbis Books. Maryknoll, NY. 1994. xxv.

tortured and thrown in the street as cadavers³³.” Their struggle for liberation, as Scott Wright passionately describes in his book *Promised Land: Death and Life in El Salvador*:

“It is a struggle against violence, particularly the dominant violence of poverty and military repression which condemns the poor to death. It is also a struggle for life, a struggle in which Christians have played a significant role within the popular movement, within the repopulated and repatriated communities of the rural areas, as well as within the marginal communities of the capital. The Christian base communities have provided a seed of the Kingdom of God, a vision of the new society and utopia to which the poor aspire and for which they struggle and give their lives³⁴.”

Surrounded by violence, chaos, and death, Romero worked towards creating a utopian society in El Salvador. He was assassinated while giving mass on March 24, 1980. His inspiration was his faith and his hope was that justice would renew the unjust and peace would tame the madness of war. These aspirations seem capricious to non-believers, but on a pragmatic level Romero was able to work towards both by creating base communities for the purpose of educating the people and organizing against the brutal military persecutions.

It is only when we see that it is possible to collectively change our own lives and our communities, is it possible to change society and transform the world³⁵. This was the purpose of the base communities, they bestowed the simple task of changing their society. Base communities were created to organize and empower the people. By

³² Boff, Leonardo. *Ecclesiogenesis: The Base Communities Reinvent the Church*. Barr, Robert R. (trans.) Orbis Books. Maryknoll, NY. 1986. 264

³³ Wright, Scott. *Promised Land: Death and Life in El Salvador*. Orbis Books. Maryknoll, NY. 1994. xxxvii.

³⁴ *Ibid.* xxx.

³⁵ *Ibid.* xxviii.

sharing experiences, gaining education, and working together to solve their problems, base communities sprung in small towns in order to organize the poor and help them create their **own** understanding of their situation. Since these communities were Christian in affiliation, they referenced Biblical stories and identified with these stories. Their empowerment grew from the value of their own experiences as well as each other's and a deep faith. To be more specific, Wright, who participated in the El Salvador Special Task Force for the United States set up by several (U.S.A.) Catholic Church organizations reveals a base community member's response to the biblical recount of the first Christmas in his own exegesis:

“Jesus was born a refugee. He, too, had to flee from one place to another. We should not be ashamed to be refugees; this is the same path that Jesus had to walk. God is very near to us. We are part of the people of God, we are on the way, and we are walking toward the Promised Land which is El Salvador³⁶.”

In identifying with the praxis of faith, the base communities contribute to a theological framework known as liberation theology.

Liberation theology enlists action from the “voiceless” so that through faith fused by action of the dispossessed and the silent can become self-determined. Liberation theology, deeply rooted in theories of social justice, is a “doing theology³⁷.” Underlying liberation theology is a prophetic and comradely commitment to the life, cause, and struggle of millions of debased and marginalized human beings and a commitment to ending historical inequities³⁸. In that it begins by addressing the

³⁶ *Ibid.* 5.

³⁷ Boff, Leonardo and Boff, Clodovis. *Introducing Liberation Theology*. Burns, Paul. Trans. Orbis Books: New York. 1999. xi.

³⁸ *Ibid.* 3.

perceptions to the harsh conditions experienced by the oppressed, as in El Salvador. Liberation theology is a method implored to address these conditions, inequities, and subjugation. The conceptions, structure, and strategy of liberation theology not only provide for social justice, but attempts to obtain and construct a more just society.

In *Introduction to Liberation Theology* by Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, the authors offer a detailed starting point to understanding the suffering experienced not only in Latin America, their area of expertise, but in other Third World nations. They write, “according to ‘conservative estimates,’ there are in those countries held in underdevelopment:

- **500,000,000** persons starving;
- **1,600,000,000** persons whose life expectancy is less than 60 years of age (when a person in one of the developed countries reaches the age of forty-five, he or she is reaching middle age; in most of Africa or Latin America, a person has little hope of living to that age);
- **1,000,000,000** persons living in absolute poverty;
- **1,500,000,000** persons with no access to the most basic medical care;
- **500,000,000** persons with no work or only an occasional work and a per capita income of less than \$150.00 a year;
- **814,000,000** persons who are illiterate;
- **2,000,000,000** with no regular, dependable water supply^{39,}

The statistics undoubtedly paint a vivid picture of desolate and depressing conditions. Nevertheless, all they do is paint a picture; the reality must be a

³⁹ *Ibid.* 2.

frightening, if not a mournful truth. Liberation theology attempts to address issues on three levels – social, individual, and religious. Each are defined below⁴⁰:

- ***Social.* Collective oppression, exclusion, and marginalization.**
- ***Individual.* Injustice and denial of human rights.**
- ***Religious.* Social sinfulness, “contrary to the plan of the Creator and to the honor that is due to him.”**

True theology springs from spirituality – that is, from a true meeting with God in history⁴¹. In particular, liberation theology was created when faith confronted the injustices done to the poor⁴². The theological commitment to this notion is embedded in Christology referring to the relationship between God and the poor. In the Bible, God is named the “father of orphans, defender of widows⁴³.” There is, indeed, a special, reciprocal relationship between God and the poor. Other theologies stress contemplation, but liberation theology advocates action.

Action, liberating action, traditionally takes form in two ways – **Aid** and **Reformism**. “Aid” is help offered by individuals moved by the spectacle of widespread destitution⁴⁴. “Reformism” seeks to improve the situation of the poor. However, both these forms do not grant “the poor” an autonomy created by their efforts. To be more specific, aid often includes agencies and organizations that place a temporary “band-aid” on the situation of the poor. It remains a strategy for helping the poor, but treating

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 3.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* 3.

⁴² Poor is defined as a collective poor, the “popular classes.” It includes the socio-economically poor, evangelically poor, the wronged, exploited, discriminated, and oppressed.

⁴³ Psalm 68.

⁴⁴ Boff, Leonardo and Boff, Clodovis. *Introducing Liberation Theology*. Burns, Paul. Trans. Orbis Books: New York. 1999. 4.

them as (collective) objects of charity, not as subjects of their own liberation⁴⁵. Furthermore, the poor remain stigmatized as “those who have nothing”, rather than those oppressed by *others* with capabilities to transform their situation.

Reformism is similarly problematic. Reform only exists within social relationships and the basic structuring of society,⁴⁶ which are already established. In development and reform in poorer nations, reform only leads to greater defeats because the outcome is perhaps always at the expense of the oppressed. The end result is hardly ever in their favor. Thus, the alternative is that the poor should utilize both these strategies in their favor, but more importantly work out a course of action that truly enables a change in the social conditions.

The strategy of liberation should include: an united front, through understating of the situation through a process of conscientization⁴⁷, discover the causes of their oppression, organization, and act in a coordinated fashion. We see this methodology in place in the case study of El Salvador. After the structure and process materialize, the liberation strategy attempts to hold true to the faith and beliefs that ground the liberation theological perspective. In movements inspired by liberation theology, must include a commitment to one’s neighbor, in particular the poor and oppressed, in order to be valid. The result is that a liberation movements that renders credibility to the principles of freedom, justice, love, and peace for all humankind.

It may seem this statement “freedom, justice, love, and peace for all mankind” is an ambition caught within a whimsical dream world, especially when you consider that

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 4.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 5.

El Salvador continues to suffer at violent hands. One would only conclude that liberation theology holds no actualization or practicality. This condemnation lies in the fact that liberation theology has spirituality at its roots and a dream of a just society as its final aim⁴⁸. Perhaps this might be true, except that no mobilization, transformation, or renewal of any society or its foundations begins without a dream. A dreamer of a better society was Jesus Christ, who according to Ephesians:

“Has made peace between us Jews and you Gentiles by making us all one people. He has broken down the wall of hostility that used to separate us. By his death he ended the whole system of Jewish law that excluded the Gentiles. His purpose was to make peace between Jews and Gentiles by creating in himself one new person from two groups. Together as one body, Christ reconciled both groups to God by means of his death, and our hostility towards each other was put to death⁴⁹.”

Revealed are the possibilities of creating a new humanity, and thereby making peace. Thus, the dream belongs to the realm of reality. It is action imbued with correct understanding that transforms reality⁵⁰. The members of this free society would participate in a just world devoid of liberation struggles because the mechanisms that generated oppression would be denounced. From out of the oppressed a new humanity would be born and a humankind imbued with a spirit of justice and peace would be established.

⁴⁷ This term is derived from the Boff and Boff work, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, which is defined as the basic learning unit linked with the social and political context of the learner, as distinguished from purely objective learning of indoctrination.

⁴⁸ Boff, Leonardo and Boff, Clodovis. *Introducing Liberation Theology*. Burns, Paul. Trans. Orbis Books: New York. 1999. 93.

⁴⁹ Ephesians 2:14-17.

⁵⁰ Boff, Leonardo and Boff, Clodovis. *Introducing Liberation Theology*. Burns, Paul. Trans. Orbis Books: New York. 1999. 93.

The new model of the Catholic Church that we gain from the example of El Salvador is a Church that identifies with the people as its cause. It is a Church that heightens the possibilities of justice and peace not as a philosophical endeavor, but as a self-determined product of faith and action. Peace is, above all, a work of justice⁵¹. It is a permanent task that is not found but is built. Peace presupposes and requires the establishment of a just order in which persons can fulfill themselves as human beings, where their dignity is respected, legitimate aspirations satisfied, access to truth recognized, personal freedom guaranteed; an order where persons are not objects but agents of their own history⁵². Liberation theology, in recognition of the continual struggle for justice and peace, challenges the idea that so long as the perceived maintenance of peace and order by oppressive power groups, the inevitability of violence, injustice, and domination will continue. Peace can only be obtained by creating a new order that carries with it a more perfect justice among persons⁵³. Through a change in structure, transformation of attitudes, and conversion of hearts, neither established through passivity nor conformity, justice and peace can be acquired. Therefore, wherever social peace does not exist, we will find the most extreme and harsh conditions within political, economic, and social inequalities.

In Pope John XXIII encyclical entitled, *Pacem in Terris*, he calls, “May the day soon come when every human being will find therein an effective safeguard for the right which derive directly from his dignity as a person, and which are therefore

⁵¹ Second General Conference of Latin American Bishops. “The Church in the Present-Day Transformation of Latin America in the Light of the Council.” (August 26-September 6, 1968). *Liberation Theology: A Documentary History*. Ed. Hennelly, Alfred T. Orbis Books: New York. 1997. 109.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*

universal, inviolate, and inalienable rights.⁵⁴ Liberation theology and social justice forward a conscientiousness of these rights and dignities, alongside a solid affirmation and active participation in the public political, economic, social affairs that express the universal family humankind belong to. By participating in the affairs of those whose rights are restrained from meeting their full capacities the dream of a free society is nearer to its establishment here on earth. In El Salvador, men and women worked for peace, and from their thirst for justice were closer to creating the human dispositions and material conditions for its actuality.

Wright wrote, “There are many lessons that can be learned from the Salvadoran people. They teach us a deeper sense of what it means to live. I don’t think it’s possible to really live with integrity without struggling so that everyone has what he or she needs to live a dignified life: land, employment, food, shelter, health care, and education. To be able to give your life for others, to have this capacity and this love to give up your life in a struggle so that all people have life, that is what the Salvadoran people teach us.” The Salvadoran people give us an example that their fight in the 1970’s and the battles that they continue to fight today is to become a people capable of realizing a society that is transformed by justice, solidarity, and a dignified and lasting peace. In understanding their suffering, we must ask ourselves, how are we responsible for their suffering? The Catholic Church in El Salvador, through the courage of Archbishop Romero asked that same question, and found that they, WE, are responsible. Through faith of God and man, the Church embarked in attempting to embrace a vision of a society that seeks justice, not for the sake of law, but for the sake

⁵⁴ Pope John XIII. “*Pacem in Terris*.” Fahey, Joseph J. and Armstrong, Richard. [ed]. *A Peace Reader: Essential Readings*. Paulist Press: New York. 1992. 125.

of an eternal duty to all mankind. The seeds of a Promised Land have been planted in El Salvador by the spirit of a Catholic Church committed to the rights of the people and dedicated to vision of justice.

AFTERWORD

At the beginning of this project, I was struck by the awesome task that lay before me. Writing and researching is a stressful and time-consuming commitment, but it is nothing compared to the task that remains after this project. My task now is that with the knowledge that I have gained, what will I do. In this world, there exist people who suffer indignities and hardships beyond a conception that I could rationalize or begin to comprehend. I have lived my life much removed from such abuses, domination, or coercion. Although I could claim, as would anyone else, my obstacles and difficulties in my own life, in comparison, especially after my research, they seem insignificant. Nonetheless, I can connect with the pain and struggles of those seeking liberation.

The peace process in El Salvador has proven to be shaky and not lasting. United States foreign policy is often weak and deceitful. And, it seems that the just society that so many have fought for has been futile, for violence remains in El Salvador. But, movements firm in a theology that participates in social justice, the word of God, and action that promotes justice and peace, participate in a living history that constantly ignites change. I see the movement in El Salvador as a symbolic struggle for a just society that all people face, even those living in First World nations. In its most minute fraction, I see the liberation movement in El Salvador, as a Roman Catholic and Mexican-American, as part of my identity. Movements, such as the one in El Salvador, have liberated my own people from authoritarianism and faith has relieved their

suffering. I have been given the opportunities that I hold so dear now, as a result of their struggle and faith. And I must help, those less fortunate.

In our own lives, in our own worlds, the seeds of a promised land have been given to us. However, the option belongs to us, whether or not we will plant these seeds. The way that I chose to live my life, by my convictions and actions, must always be cognizant that I too will become a part of this tradition. And not until the day comes when people no longer have to suffer, go hungry, or live in pain, will I forget that I must participate in the struggle as an instrument of justice and an advocate for peace. Now let us re-dedicate ourselves to the long and bitter- but beautiful-struggle for a new world...the choice is ours⁵⁵.

⁵⁵ Martin Luther King

CHRONOLOGY

The Conflict in El Salvador, 1979 – 1987

In Disarray: 15 October to October 1981

1979

- 15 October President Carlos Humberto Romero is deposed in a coup led by Colonel Adolfo Arnoldo Majano and Colonel Jaime Abdul Gutiérrez.
- 16 October Civil-military junta announces state of siege: suspends constitutional guarantees for 30 days; announces ambitious social and economic reform program; and calls for free elections.
- 22 October Junta names 12-member cabinets that represents all opposition to the Romero government – including Communists.

1980

- 5 January Junta dissolves. New Christian Democratic Party military junta formed 1980.
- 6 March Archbishop Arnulfo Romero assassinated.
- 11 October FDR/FMLN organized from the May 1980 union of the five insurgent groups – as a result of pressure by Fidel Castro.
- October-November 600 tons of weapons provided to the guerrillas. Some traced back to Vietnam.
- 4 December Bodies of four American women – three nuns and one lay worker- are found in shallow grave along highway from the airport to San Salvador.
- 5 December U.S. suspends military and economic aid to El Salvador.
- 15 December “Radio Liberation” starts broadcasting to El Salvador from Nicaragua, inciting people to organize a general insurgency against the Salvadoran government.
- 17 December U.S. restores economic aid to El Salvador.

1981

- 4 January Two American labor leaders and head of Salvadoran Institute of Agrarian Reform is assassinated at Sheraton Hilton in San Salvador.
- 10 January Insurgent forces begin “final” offensive.
- 14 January U.S. resumes military aid to El Salvador.

- 5 March Junta announces establishment of electoral commission to prepare for legislative election to be held in 1982.
- 4 August Government turns over the first land titles to be issued under the Agrarian Reform Program.
- August France and Mexico give diplomatic recognition to FDR/FMLN.

Insurgent Ascendance from the End of 1981 to the end of 1984

- December Insurgent forces begin the “general” offensive – a rationalization of the “final” offensive.

1982

- 28 January Campaign to elect a Constitution Assembly opens.
- 28 March Elections held for Constituent Assembly.
- 22 April Areal party leader Roberto D’Aubuisson elected president of the Constituent Assembly.
- 29 April Constituent Assembly names Dr. Alvaro Magaña as president of a provisional government to replace junta.

1983

- U.S. begins to train Salvadoran battalions and officer candidates in the U.S. and Honduras
- 8 September Constituent Assembly approves law permitting peasant labor organization.
- 11 December Vice-President of the United States George Bush visits El Salvador. Makes U.S. position clear regarding the necessity to secure human rights.
- 16 December Constituent Assembly unanimously approves final version of new constitution.
- 17 December Special unit created to investigate and eliminate death squads.
- 21 December Constituent Assembly becomes national legislature.
- 31 December Insurgent forces stage major attack and take over Fourth Brigade Headquarters at El Paraíso.

1984

- 25 March Presidential election. No candidate wins majority. Run-off election required.
- 6 May Run-off election held. PDC Candidate José Napoleón Duarte wins with 53.9% of the vote.
- 24 May Five former National Guardsmen are convicted of the December 1980 murder of four American churchwomen.
- 1 June José Napoleón Duarte inaugurated as first freely elected president in 52 years.
- Mid 1984 Government forces begin to regain the military initiative.
- 8 October President Duarte at U.N. General Assembly calls for dialogue with armed opposition.
- 15 October Meetings between government and FMLN take place at La Palma.
- 30 November Additional government-FMLN meetings at Ayagualo.
- 1 December Insurgent forces ambush government troops in El Salto in northeastern La Paz Department.

*The War Changes Direction from the End of the 1984 to the end of 1986***1985**

- 31 March National Legislative Assembly and municipal elections held. PDC takes a majority of seats in the National Assembly and 58 percent of the municipal councils.
- Early 1985 Insurgent forces begin to change tactics from relatively large-scale, conventional-type attacks to smaller unit actions. At the same time, more economic and civil population targets come under attack.
- 19 June Persons dressed as Salvadoran military personnel attack several nightclubs in San Salvador's Zona Rosa, killing 13 unarmed people in cold blood – including 4 off-duty U.S. Marines.
- 10 September Inés Guadalupe Duarte Duran, oldest daughter of President Duarte, and her secretary, kidnapped.
- 10 October Insurgent forces generate a major attack on the Army's Basic Training Center at La Unión.

24 October Inés Guadalupe Duarte Duran, her secretary, and mayors and other municipal officials kidnapped earlier are released in exchange for over 100 insurgent prisoners.

*November A National Reconstruction Plan (Unidos Para Reconstruir) unveiled
Stalemate: 1986 to Present*

1986

8 January Government forces initiate long-term “Operation Phoenix” with the intention of driving insurgents from strongholds on the Guazapa Volcano in Cuscatlan Department. Lasts until mid-1987.

26 February Gunman convicted of the 1981 Sheraton murders given maximum 30-year prison sentences.

1 June Insurgents accept President Durante’s proposal for resumption of peace talks.

10 October Major earthquake in San Salvador. More damage done in seven seconds than throughout insurgent action over past seven years.

1987

21 January Insurgent forces attack El Paraíso again. This is the first major attack since the effort at La Unión in October 1985.

20 May Government forces initiate “Operation Monterosa” with intention of disrupting as many insurgent operations as possible. Last through August.

Fall Central America Peace Plan proposed by President Arias of Costa Rica. Received great acclaim and Arias is given the Nobel Peace Prize.

6 November President Duarte announces a unilateral ceasefire and general amnesty in El Salvador, citing his desire for all critics of the government to return to the country and participate openly in a free and nonviolent electoral process.

7 November Insurgent forces initiate the most destructive economic sabotage operation since the beginning of the war.

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