

Marjory Zoet Bankson: Prophetic Imagination in El Salvador

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On the morning that our group left ASAPROSAR, Dr. Vicky Guzman arrived to see us off with her family – husband Francisco, college-aged daughter Lucy and 8-year-old Katya. Since the staff does not work on Sunday, the "first family" came bearing tamales, milk and cornflakes for our breakfast – one more instance of the personal care Dr. Vicky gave during The Seekers visit to ASAPROSAR.

When we were settled with coffee and juice in the outdoor patio that was our dining room, she apologized for being late. "I didn't sleep much last night," she said, "because at midnight, I got a phone call – a death threat. Anonymous, of course."

We were stunned. Who would want to kill Dr. Vicky? "What will you do?" someone asked.

"Nothing," she said. "Just keep doing what we're doing. It's been 8 years since I got a call like that." She was shaken but calm. Lucy could not keep her tears inside. Katya stayed close, touching her mother as if to make sure she was still safe. Francisco stood a little apart, as if unsure how to be with her.

The last death threat came in 1988, just a year before the 6 Jesuits, their housekeeper and her daughter were killed at the

University during the war. We visited the rose garden where their blood hallowed the ground just a week before. Suddenly the words of their story seemed close and our circle of prayer with Vicky felt deep and tender as we prepared to depart.

Who would want to frighten Vicky? Want to stop her work? She tried to reassure us by saying it might have been a disgruntled former employee, but words from other leaders in El Salvador echoed around us. Reuben Zamora, the former guerrilla leader and presidential candidate in '93 had reminded us that the economic conditions which led to the 12-year civil war had not really changed. Edgar Palacios, pastor of the Shalom Baptist Church in San Salvador, preached from a liberation perspective and spoke of "war by other means." The Lutheran Bishop Gomez had received a similar death threat earlier this month and while visiting him, we heard the story of a man seeking asylum because he had uncovered serious corruption in the police department and was afraid for his life.

Who would want to stop healthcare workers from bringing basic services to the rural poor of El Salvador? In his book, The Prophetic Imagination, Walter Breuggemann describes the "dominant consciousness" as a static social order based on the economics of affluence for a few, the politics of oppression by a few and the religion of immanence and accessibility for those in power, not for all. Any program that would bring hope and confidence to those who are left out of the dominant system could be seen as a threat. In contrast, Breuggemann says, "the prophetic imagination" stands against the static social order by countering the economics of affluence with the economics of equality; confronting the politics of oppression with the politics of justice and in religion, celebrating God's freedom to care for rich and poor alike. We saw the workers of ASAPROSAR in many different settings during the week we spent there and knew that they were living a dangerous witness of prophetic imagination in El Salvador.

#1 The Economics of Equality: the Mission of ASAPROSAR

Today, ASAPROSAR is a well-established NGO with 60 paid staff members and 60 more in the field who work primarily as volunteers. The headquarters where we stayed is a walled compound which once belonged to a wealthy landowner in Santa Ana, the second largest city in El Salvador. "He ran away during the war," Vicky said, "so we got it at a good price." Somehow it seemed fitting, an example of God's justice (even humor) that a spacious country estate would now shelter Vicky's training center and dorm for visitors!

When ASAPROSAR was founded in 1985, Vicky was 39 years old and had been offering healthcare in this mountainous area for more than 10 years. As a woman, she could not enter medical school in El Salvador, so she went to Mexico for her training and there she did an internship with "barefoot doctors" helping the rural poor. It became her passion and her call. She began by herself, walking or riding a horse to the villages where there was no healthcare at all. "I felt safer then than I do now," she said. Villagers watched for me and warned me of dangers.

Soon her mission became education as well as treatment. She began to train local volunteers—primarily women—to encourage basic sanitation and water treatment for drinking. Although she could not pay them in the beginning, we heard stories of personal transformation from several – how they went from being "poor, dirty and hopeless" to the self-confident leaders they are now. Today ASAPROSAR employs 24 health promoters along with midwives from the communities. We saw Headstart programs, parent meetings, home visits for vaccinations and the kind of personal outreach that some of us were involved with in the early days of FLOC.

Vicky is clearly a visionary and she sees the connection

between basic health and rural poverty. In the past 3 years, she has expanded her vision for the economics of equality to include a model farm practicing some of the basics of sustainable agriculture: crop diversity, contour plowing, replenishing the soil organically and sharing the good news of increased productivity with others.

Another initiative is the microenterprise loan fund based on the Gremmein Bank model from Bangladesh: money is loaned to a circle of entrepreneurs who are then responsible for repayment as a group. We saw how a loan of even \$100 could expand production and create some economies of scale to expand a small business of farm produce, a restaurant or tiny hardware store, pinata production or convenience shop. We visited a loan circle and recognized the value of common purpose and community responsibility in support of these individual entrepreneurs. Seekers money has been used by Dr. Vicky to start both of these important efforts to expand the economics of equality.

While we were there, Vicky got word that the government wanted ASAPROSAR to administer rural healthcare for two government jurisdictions as well as the district she was already covering. She rejoiced in that sign of support and recognition, though she knows her organization could easily be pulled away from its primary mission. As Ron reminded us in the paper he distributed in our class, El Salvador is full of contradictions and nothing is as it seems on the surface.

Another exciting example of economic equality was Eileen Guidron's pottery in San Salvador. Crippled by cerebral palsy, Eileen runs an international business that employs deaf and other disabled people while she works to raise consciousness in her own country of the need for access to public life for people like herself. Again we met Christ in the marketplace!

#2 The Politics of Justice: Moving Beyond Individual Connections

For us as Seekers and citizens of the United States, the chance to visit El Salvador was set against the backdrop of American support for the government during the war that raged between Bishop Romero's death in 1980 and the stalemate that was acknowledged by both sides in the peace accord of 1992. It's hard for us to claim a part in the politics of justice when our government spent a billion dollars a year to preserve the politics of oppression.

On the other hand, the politics of justice were served as the American government also approved funding for grassroots development through the Interamerican Foundation and Vicky was the first project that IAF funded when Ron Arms reopened their office in El Salvador in 1985. For Seekers, a direct connection with ASAPROSAR began in 1987 when Ron carried a gift of \$1,000 for a project of his choosing.

Seekers' awareness of El Salvador grew when Rozanne and Bob adopted John in 1988 and he became a lively part of this community. This was John's first visit back to the country of his birth and we all benefited from his questions, direct as an 11-year-old can be. Following a visit by Vicky to Seekers, Pam Halsey joined a trip to ASAPROSAR by members of the UCC church in Norwell, Massachusetts in 1990—the year after 6 Jesuit teachers were murdered at the University. Ron continued to make yearly proposals for specific projects at ASAPROSAR and some of us began to dream about a trip that would include younger members of Seekers.

Through Ron and Julie Arms, Seekers' international giving was expanded to include support for the effort to involve women in the electoral process behind Reuben Zamora for president in 1994. When we had lunch with the Zamoras, he reminded us that "people are rich when they have something to give" and we

certainly experienced that from the compesinos that we visited in remote areas. Julie also made a connection with Emparero Palacios when she was a member of the Festival Church and took a contribution from Seekers when the Arms' visited Shalom Baptist Church during a family vacation in 1994. Rev. Palacios acknowledged that the war had gone underground but clearly positioned his church in a poor section of San Salvador, committed to hope and action there.

To witness the work of people who risk their lives and speak on behalf of those who have no voice in the power structure is to meet Jesus face-to-face. Dr. Vicky and the others we met have the means, the contacts and the education to "make it" somewhere else, but they choose to stay and work for an alternative system they believe in, one that will bring the economics of equality and the politics of justice to the poor.

#3 The Religion of God's Freedom: a Revolution Within

Before we went, Ron asked members of the Salvador class to answer the question, "Where do you expect to meet Christ in El Salvador?" As I recall, none of us mentioned UCA, the University where 6 Jesuits were slain in 1989; none of us mentioned the Baptist Church, where we heard from a man who was teaching human rights at the Police Academy today, and none of us dreamed of meeting Dagoberto Guterrez, a Communist guerrilla leader now serving as a representative in the Chamber of Deputies – but those were places where we caught sight of God's freedom to move beyond the standard places where we might have expected to meet Jesus in action.

Our experience at Seekers and Church of the Saviour prepared us to see Christ where the poor and marginalized were included. Not only did we see Christ among the healthcare workers and preschool educators, villagers creating their own cistern and single mothers able to support their children

because loans were available to them for the first time, but one group of Seekers visited the Barefoot Angels, Vicky's newest mission with homeless children still living on the streets and witnessed moments of grace there. The contrast between their lives and ours could not have been more stark or poignant.

But we also encountered Christ in more unexpected places – examples of God's freedom and surprise. We saw Christ in the face of an aging Spanish priest who "just happened" to come early for a baptism at the Romero chapel. Though the UCA campus was supposed to be locked, we found people who opened each gate and door until we were standing in the rose garden where 6 Jesuits, their housekeeper and her daughter were murdered by soldiers in 1989. The man who guided us there was one of the 6 surviving priests who happened to be in another building that night. And when the Spanish ambassador arrived the next day with safe passage for them, he smiled slightly: "We told him to take a hike. We're staying to finish our work here." It was like talking with a witness at the foot of the cross! We learned later that he is the Rector of the university, influencing a whole generation of younger Salvadorans.

The following day, we visited Shalom Baptist Church. In the Bible study class, Edgar Palacios was completing their work with the Book of John. "By simply looking at the text with open hearts," he said, "we have come to the conclusion that Jesus is savior and liberator of the outcast, the poor, the disenfranchised." Then he opened a discussion of the text and one of his church members spoke – an articulate young father, whose wife and child sat with him. "I am a member of the new police force," he said, "and feel I am living out God's call in my work teaching human rights at the police academy." It was like hearing the centurion bear witness to Jesus as the Son of God.

Finally, God's freedom surfaced in a surprising encounter with

one of the foremost Communist guerrillas, who told us that when they were grossly outnumbered during the war, he discovered Christ was the common thread that held his 85 men together, giving them the sense of purpose and will that they needed to survive. Converted by his study of the Gospels, Dagoberto asked us leading questions and preached a Gospel of liberation that we would recognize as the Exodus story of deliverance and covenant relationship. He spoke of gifts, vision and call, challenging us to take God's call more seriously because of our visit to El Salvador.

On the last night that we were in country, we shared dessert and conversation with Vicky at home with her family. She talked lovingly about the members of her extended family whose pictures brought their presence into the room: her mother and grandmother especially. After awhile, she shared the citation on the honorary doctorate recently given to her by Holy Cross College. It described her vision for healthcare and much more, the terrors and abuse she suffered during the war, and the hope that her work was bringing to thousands of people now. "The words restore my own vision," she said quietly, and we were reminded of the value of community.

Vicky works alone in many ways. She has no community of kindred souls there, though she wants to build one as her organization expands. She seemed hungry for fellowship with believers and went far beyond the "extra mile" to make our visit a good one. Vicky Guzman faces the realities that Jesus faced in our Gospel lesson for today, but her call and vision are clear: the economics of equality, the politics of justice and the religion of God's freedom in El Salvador. I pray we will have the will and the courage to share that with her.
AMEN.