

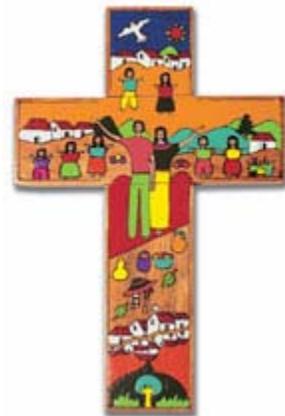
Meeting the victims, falling in love

by Dean Brackley, S.J.

Waves of foreign delegations have come to El Salvador during recent years. The pilgrims deplane a little anxious, vaguely dreading what awaits them. They know that the people are very poor. They have heard of massacres and bombings of the past and the hunger and sickness of the present. They fear, half-consciously, that these poor people will lunge for their wallets, or that when they, the visitors, arrive at their first poor community, they will suffer a massive Irish-Catholic -- or Jewish or Methodist -- guilt-attack and at the very least they will have to sell their VCR when they get back home.

As happens with most of our fears, it doesn't turn out that way. On the one hand, the visitors spend much of their time in El Salvador wondering why these poor people are smiling. The people are glad they came and receive them with open arms. On the other hand, if the pilgrims listen to the stories of flight from the army, torture and death squads, and since the war, of unspeakable hardship and premature death, the victims will break their hearts. And that, after all, is the main reason the pilgrims have come. It is an experience of extraordinary richness, if the visitors muster the courage to take it in. The encounter stops the visitors short and focuses their attention. "My God!" they cry, "half their children die from preventable disease. The powerful steal from them at will. There is no justice. And what has my government been doing here in my name?" The poor bring the visitors face-to-face with evil; and the visitors respond with horror. Not that the poor are all saints. (Hardship brings out both the best and the worst in people, the D'Aubuissons and the Romeros.) They just obviously do not deserve what they have to suffer. The injustice clashes strikingly with their humanity.

This presses in upon the visitors, and it can shake them to their roots. As the poor draw deeper into their own reality, the newcomers pass from observers to participants. The more they allow the poor to crash through their defenses, the more unsettled they feel. They begin to see their own reflection in the eyes of their hosts, and they say to themselves, "Hey, these people are just like us!" They sense a gentle invitation to lay down the burden of their own superiority (of which they are mostly unaware) and identify with these humble people, despite the differences between them. They begin to feel smaller and more "ordinary." A sweet shame comes over them, not bitter remorse but more like the shame one feels when falling in love. The visitors feel themselves losing their grip; or better, they feel the world losing its grip on them. What world? The world made up of important people like them and unimportant poor people like their hosts. As the poet Yeats says, "things fall apart;" the visitors' world is coming unhinged. They feel resistance, naturally, to a current that threatens to sweep them out of control. They feel a little confused -- again -- like the disorientation of falling in love. In fact, that is what is happening, a kind of falling in love. The earth trembles. My horizon is opening up. I'm on unfamiliar ground, entering a richer, more real world.



We all live a bit on the periphery of the deep drama of life, more so, on average, in affluent societies. The reality of the periphery is thin, one-dimensional, "lite," compared to the multilayered richness of this new world the visitors are entering. In this interchange with a few of their representatives, the anonymous masses of the world's poor emerge from their cardboard-cutout reality and take on the three-dimensional status of full-fledged human beings.

Actually, there are more than three dimensions here. The eyes of the victim beckon. They are like a bottomless well in which something infinite draws me on. In their welcome, peace sweeps over me. I feel almost at home in this strange place. Although an accomplice to the world of important people like me and unimportant people like them, I feel accepted, forgiven -- even before I have cleaned up my act with them or billions like them.

After reflecting on these issues for some years, it only gradually dawned on me that I belong to a peculiar tribe. The middle-class cultures of the North are newcomers to world history and have only existed for about 200 years. We're not all bad people, we're just a tiny minority under the common illusion that we are the center of gravity of the universe. The poor can free us from this strange idea.

Don't get me wrong. The middle-class cultures have made extraordinary advances in civilization. True; many came at great cost to the despoiled nations and races. Still, these are historic achievements. And I'm not even talking about ambiguous technological progress. I mean the spiritual, cultural and political breakthroughs: the unheard-of opportunities, political liberties, democracy, the critical consciousness of the Enlightenment, and all that. No need to demean these gains. The problem for us is that the new freedoms and economic security have distanced the non-poor from the kind of daily life-and-death struggle that has been the daily fare of the poor of all times right up to today. Maybe 90 percent of all the people who ever lived have struggled every day to keep the household alive against the threat of death through hunger, disease, accidents and violence. By distancing the non-poor from the daily threat of death, the benefits of modernity have induced in us a kind of chronic low-grade confusion about what is really important in life, namely life itself and love. Besides, superior technology and the communications media induce us to think of our culture and perspective on life as the norm, and basically on track. The encounter with the poor stops us short; it recollects us. When we come out on the other side, we realize that the marginalized are actually at the center of things. It is we, in Washington and Paris, who are on the fringe.

These people shake us up because they bring home to us that things are much worse in the world than we dared to imagine. But that is only one side of the story: If we allow them to share their suffering with us, they communicate some of their hope to us as well. The smile that seems to have no foundation in the facts is not phony; the spirit of fiesta is not an escape but a recognition that something else is going on in the world besides injustice and destruction. The poor smile because they suspect that this something is more powerful than the injustice. When they insist on sharing their tortilla with a visiting gringo, we recognize there is something going on in the world that is more wonderful than we dared to imagine.

It seems that the victim offers us the privileged place (although not the only place) to encounter the truth which sets us free. The poor usher us into the heart of reality. They bring us up against the world and ourselves all at once. To some extent, we all hold reality at arm's length -- fending off intolerable parts of the world with one hand and intolerable parts of ourselves with the other. The two go together. As a rule, our

encounters with the world place us in touch with internal reality, as well. In particular, when the world's pain crashes in upon us in the person of the victim, the encounter dredges up from within us the parts of ourselves that we had banished. The outcast outside us calls forth the outcast within us. This is why people avoid the poor. But meeting them can heal us. We will only heal our inner divisions if we are also working to heal our social divisions.

The victims of history -- the destitute, abused women, oppressed minorities, all those the Bible calls "the poor" -- not only put us in touch with the world and with ourselves, but also with the mercy of God. There is something fathomless about the encounter with the poor, as we have said -- like the opening of a chess game with its infinite possibilities. If we let them, the poor will place us before the abyss of the holy Mystery we call God. They are a kind of door that opens before that Mystery and through which God passes to get at us. Clearly we need them more than they need us.

Small wonder that people keep returning. Something has happened, a kind of falling in love, I think.