



CATEQUISTA

by Bill Dexheimer

Maria is a priest. A Salvadoran woman with brown eyes and complexion, jet-black hair, and a stature significantly taller than most of her countrywomen, she is 24 years old. Maria coordinates the pastoral work of teams of Catholic *catequistas* (lay pastoral ministers) of the Catholic Church in a largely rural area that covers about one-quarter of the country of El Salvador. Most of the people she works with are *desplazados*, persons displaced by the violence of a war that is now in its tenth year.

Maria is bishop and priest to the poor *campesinos* who are the heart and soul of the network of grassroots Christian communities that many Salvadorans call the *Iglesia Popular* (people's church). The church is anathema to the conservative hier-

archy, but a beacon of hope for the poor. As in all of Latin America, the *Iglesia Popular* in El Salvador crosses denominational lines. Catholic Archbishop Oscar Romero of San Salvador was martyred for having stood with the poor and oppressed. Today, Salvadoran Lutheran Bishop Medardo Gomez is one of the most visible leaders of this truly ecumenical movement.

Maria grew up in a poor, working-class *barrio* on the edge of San Salvador. Her father left home when she was young. She got involved at the age of 13 with the work of the Base Christian Communities (small Bible reflection groups made up primarily of the poor) teaching catechism to children. She completed high school, but then decided to do pastoral work.

"I left home when I was 17, and even if I could have had the opportunity to continue studying, that was

no longer attractive to me. I wanted to contribute to the creation of new Christian communities, to help others see that we needed a change in our country."

Maria left behind the relative comforts of the city to live with and minister among people suffering the extreme effects of the war. Alongside her pastoral work, Maria helped the villagers organize themselves as communities. With the assistance of church organizations, the villagers have set up their own schools, medical clinics, and bakery, sewing and agricultural cooperatives. The *Iglesia Popular* throughout the country is committed to serving the whole person, the whole community, breaking down the traditional dichotomy of spirit and body.

When Jesus sent out the disciples, he told them to carry "no purse, no bag, no sandals" (Luke 10:4). When Maria goes out to the villages she

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blends in with the *campesinos* as if she were one of them. She eats the same food, wears the same clothes, walks the long trail to carry water, and lives with one of the families in their mud-and-bamboo home. Maria receives no salary, other than expenses to cover her bus fare from San Salvador. In the *Iglesia Popular*, it is the poor ministering to the poor.

"Our ministry consists first and foremost in helping people understand that we all have this right, to open each other's eyes, to announce the Good News of hope and liberation," says Maria.

"We used to go to church like water jugs, just waiting to have water poured into us. Our faith was a "borrowed" faith. Recently we learned that we have a treasure within us: the life we have lived. And if we take that lived experience, and reflect on it, taking into account of course all our errors and limitations, still we see that we ourselves have something to share with others on the journey towards the Kingdom. We can take the message and give it life."

In a traditionally male-dominated society and church, Maria is one of many women who have taken on leadership roles during this time of war. She inspires women to claim their rightful places in society.

"The faith of our *campesina* women was always very traditional, although at the same time it has been very much a living faith," she says. "It has not been a liberating faith, a faith that would bring a woman to question her own position in life. It's the faith that was handed down to her through the generations."

"Many women have entered a process of transforming this faith. These women often take an active role in the life of the church—a changing and dynamic role in motivating and deepening the faith of the communities. We have become *catequistas*, and I must say we make very good *catequistas*!

"The first step for women to take is to become aware that we have our own unique identity, not only within the church, but also as women in our Salvadoran society. We have not yet lived this new identity. Women have to confront doubly miserable conditions of exploitation.

"Our struggle is for the liberation of a whole people, for the dignity of all. I don't believe the oppression of women can be explained by simply saying it's all the men's fault. The way women have been forced to live is the fruit of a certain system. Just as a bad tree produces rotten fruit, the society produces this unjust situation for women, and we must change it."

Hundreds of *catequistas*, and thousands of members of Christian Base Communities, have been killed in the war that has now taken 70,000 civilian lives. Maria's family has been profoundly marked by the violence—two of her brothers were murdered by government security forces in 1983. Whenever I see Maria, I thank God she is still alive, for her work is extremely dangerous. She moves in and out of the conflict

zones, often by herself, passing through numerous army check-points. One day she talked frankly about the dangers.

"Out of pure necessity, and because we continually suffer blow after blow of violence in our communities, we see our mission as one of defending life, of trying to give life a chance to flourish among us.

"One never knows when the difficult and painful moments will come. Alone, face to face with a torturer, you never know if you'll hold up. What I'm most afraid of is being afraid in that moment. You see, you're not afraid all the time, you just take it for granted that when you are fully integrated into a process such as this, your life is never guaranteed. We are a pilgrim people," Maria says. "We're going through our own exodus, building up God's kingdom. We dream of the day when this Kingdom would take root in our tiny country, when the necessary structural changes would overcome the underlying causes of the war." ■

The Rev. Bill Dexheimer is an ELCA missionary in El Salvador.

Artwork by children at the Artisan Cooperative, "22nd of April Community," San Salvador.

