



**CROSSES AND RESURRECTIONS:
GOOD NEWS FROM CENTRAL AMERICA**

The 2009 Romero Lecture

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Thank you very much for the opportunity to speak here today. A special thanks to the Archbishop Romero Trust and to CAFOD who, over the years have shared the sufferings and the hopes of the church in Central America.

I bring greetings to you on behalf of our university community at the UCA, the Jesuit community, and the church in El Salvador, as well.

This is an important time for our country and our church. Next November marks the 20th anniversary of the deaths of the six Jesuits and two women who were murdered at our university, the UCA, in El Salvador. We will commemorate the 30th anniversary of Archbishop Romero's death in March of next year. So, we are beginning a kind of jubilee year of anniversaries. In addition, last Saturday José Luis Escobar Alas was installed as the new archbishop of San Salvador. Finally, as the global economic crisis spreads and our ongoing regional crisis deepens, Salvadorans go to the polls next month to elect a new president. Surveys suggest that a major shift in national political life may be in the offing. As we struggle to respond to these new challenges and opportunities, we will look to the life and witness of Archbishop Romero and our other martyrs to guide us.

Today I want to share with you some of our pain and suffering, as well as the consolation that springs from the deep faith of our people. I also want to say a word about the growing movement of international solidarity that is such a promising sign of our times. You will see that the crosses and resurrections of Central America can inspire all of us to respond better to our broken world.



1. Overview of El Salvador, C.A.: Polarization

By world standards, El Salvador is an “average” country in an average region. We are in the middle of the U.N. Development Programme’s Human Development Index, along with most of Central America - not with the Haiti, the Congo or the poorest countries of Africa but certainly not with Europe and North America. But, internally, El Salvador, and most of Central America, is a place of extremes. That makes this an ideal place to observe crucial tendencies in society, to see where the world is going and maybe where the church is headed, too.

1.1. *Economic polarization.* If I had to use one word to characterize El Salvador, and most of Central America, it would be *polarization*. First of all, we are polarized economically.

As I was preparing these remarks, my friend, Alfredo stopped by to talk. He is a bricklayer and can't find work. Only 20% of the national workforce has a decent, stable job, according to a new study. Alfredo isn't one of them. Now he can't pay for his electricity bill or his children's school fees. They barely scrape by on tortillas and beans and some extras his sick mother contributes. She cannot afford the surgery and medicine she needs. Alfredo is tempted to migrate to the U.S., or do something more desperate. But he cannot pay the \$7,000 for 'the coyotes' who guide migrants past rapists, thieves and murderers as they trek northward through Mexico.

Alfredo's household is all-too-typical of the struggling poor in Central America, a region of 40 million people, where the per capita income is \$7.00 a day. But, since ours is one of the most unequal regions in the world, the average person doesn't receive anything like that. In El Salvador, which is typical of the region, the richest fifth of the population receives 56% of national income, and 21 times what the poorest fifth, including Alfredo, receives. So, in El Salvador more than 40% of the people live on less than \$2.00 a day. (Last August the World Bank reported that 2.6 billion people, almost a third, consume less than \$2.00 a day) However, prices in El Salvador are especially high. I estimate that two-thirds of Salvadorans live in poverty, half of these, or one-third of the population, in extreme poverty.¹ When things were getting better elsewhere in Latin America, they were getting worse in Central America, where U.S.-supported neoliberal policies followed on devastating civil wars. For example, while malnutrition in Latin America and the Caribbean fell between 1990 and 2003, in Central America it increased, from 17% to 20% of the population.² With the surge of fuel and grain prices these last two years, millions more people have joined the ranks of the poor.

¹ See the United Nations Development Program, "Human Development Indicators," in *Human Development Report 2007-2008*.

² Organización de las Naciones Unidas para la Agricultura y la Alimentación (FAO), "Estrategia para extender a escala nacional el Programa Especial para la Seguridad Alimentaria —PESA— en América Central 2005-2009", p. 2. (http://www.fao.org/spfs/pdf/Estrategia_PESACAM.pdf). Cfr. *idem*, *The State of Food Security in the World 2006*, p. 19 (http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/30_10_06_fao.pdf)

Social spending is abysmal and fails to alleviate the suffering. The Salvadoran government spends less than 3% of GDP on education.³ Although young people, especially girls, now receive more education than their grandparents did, almost two-thirds of the population (64%) has not finished elementary school. Less than 15% have finished secondary schooling. More than three-fourths (78%) have no health insurance.⁴ A surgeon-friend of mine who works in the main public hospital tells me, “We ask the government for \$5 million worth of medicines for the year. That is what we need. They refuse to give us a penny more than \$2 million.” Virginia pauses for emphasis and adds: “Many people die because of that.” According to an inside source of mine, social spending is very low despite the fact that large and medium businesses typically make more than a 50% profit on gross income. Businesses massively evade taxes, which are low in any case.

When I worked in the South Bronx, in New York, in the 1980s, I saw how the exclusion of large sectors of the population from a decent way of life produces a threefold crumbling: of communities, families and individuals themselves. In El Salvador it feels like I’m witnessing the globalization of the old South Bronx. In today’s more urban society, social exclusion generates tremendous insecurity, rampant delinquency with urban gangs that, in tandem with organized crime, drug dealing and violence, undermine a state of law. The violence sometimes surpasses that of the civil wars in the 1980s. With 92 homicides per 100,000 young people, El Salvador is among the most dangerous places for young people in the world.⁵

Social Pressure and Safety Valves. In different forms, this kind of inequality and exclusion has characterized El Salvador and Central America since the Spanish conquest. The “safety valve” for the social pressure generated has historically been that poor people simply died before their time, or were killed for rebelling. The twentieth century witnessed many attempts to modernize society, and the hoped-for changes served as a kind of second safety valve for historic social pressures. Unfortunately,

³ Ibid.

⁴ Lillian Vega, head of the Economics Department of the UCA, “Cátedra realidad nacional. Conmemoración,” unpublished paper delivered at the UCA for the 19th anniversary of the UCA martyrs, San Salvador, Nov. 12, 2008.

⁵ *La Prensa Gráfica*, 26 November, 2008, reporting on a new study by The Red de Información Tecnológica Latinoamericana (RITLA). The average rate for Latin America as a whole is 36.6 per 100,000, far higher than the second-place region, Africa, with 16.1 per 100,000 (ibid.).

from the very beginning, these efforts were crushed, sometimes by the United States alone, sometimes by local elites, sometimes by both together. As the century progressed, reformers grew more radical --like Fidel Castro and the leftist movements in Central America from the 60s to the 90s—, and the reaction grew more brutal and violent. Today the fundamental social contradictions remain in place, and nobody expects things to change soon, even with a big change in government, as we shall see.

As a result of this situation, people are heading north, literally, in droves. The new safety valve is California, Texas and Arlington, Virginia. Hundreds abandon the country each day to make their way north. The same is true of Guatemala and Honduras, our neighbors.

Clearly, as Ignacio Ellacuría said some years ago, “It remains an urgent task in El Salvador to give sight to the blind and to set free the oppressed in a global process of liberation which continues to have the poorest and those most in need as the first ones to whom all good news is addressed.”⁶ Ellacuría called for transforming our civilization of capital into a civilization based on work, solidarity and participation.

1.2. *Political polarization.* Especially in countries with leftist parties and movements--Nicaragua, Guatemala and El Salvador-- politics is sharply polarized around the interests of rich and poor. In El Salvador the ultra-right ARENA, party has been in power for 20 years. It is likely that elections in March will bring to power a center-left president of the FMLN party of the former guerrillas, led by more hard-liners. The prudent choice of a moderate candidate masks the unwillingness of these hard-liners to reach out to center-left forces. As a result, anyone who wants to oust the present government must vote for the FMLN. The result has been an eclipse of centrist parties which, in the end, favors the right. However, since the 1992 peace accords, the political opposition has gained ground, as the level of political fear subsided in most areas.

But by itself a change of government will not produce the liberation Ellacuría calls for. Even if the FMLN candidate wins, fundamental inequalities will not change soon. Politics isn't what it used to be, especially in small countries so dependent on big

⁶ I. Ellacuría, “Los retos del país a la UCA en su vigésimo aniversario”, Conference delivered on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas (UCA), September, 1985. In *Planteamiento universitario 1989* (San Salvador: UCA, 1989), p. 164.

economic powers and so intertwined in the broader international economic and political relations. Capital rules, even dependent capital.

1.3. *Polarized Generations?* A new kind of generation gap has opened up in Central America. The median age in the region is 21; in Guatemala 19.⁷ The younger half of the population is the first generation that is predominantly urban, the first generation raised universally before the TV set, the first exposed to modern, even post-modern pluralism and the first not to see themselves as fated to live just like their parents. From the impoverished countryside, young people typically want to move to the city to work or study or even migrate to the United States. Not that they are at constant odds with their elders, but they are more critical, more open to what is new and less sure of things.

1.4. *Morally Polarized.* El Salvador is polarized morally. One either opens one's heart to the kind of suffering I have described or closes oneself to it. Ours is a region of cruel negligence of people and their needs, as I have already described, but also of great kindness, solidarity, sanctity. It is a place of death squads and of martyrs.

For inspiration consider my good friend Teresa Perez. Ignacio Martin-Baro, one of our martyred Jesuits, was pastor of her poor rural parish. At a commemorative Mass for 'Nacho', Teresa recalled how, after the murders in the UCA, soldiers occupied the local chapel, and some abandoned parish work in fear. Teresa, a grandmother and catechist, did not. She testified, "If death finds us here working for the church, let's welcome it!"

Recently I stopped by to visit her. Knowing she had been sick, I asked if she was eating enough. With grandchildren scurrying about the dirt floor, she leaned close so no one would hear. Smiling she answered, "Don't you think it's more important that the little ones eat?"

In Central America we live with daily crucifixions, but also resurrections, which help to bear our crosses. Grace abounds and manifests itself in deep reserves of humanity and Christian spirit, especially among the poor. This is a major source of hope in these hard times.

⁷ Extrapolación de United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population División, "National Trends in Population, Resources, Environment and Development: Country Profiles", <http://www.un.org/esa/population/publications/countryprofile/profile.htm>, consultado 10-09-06.

Those who suffer most celebrate life with profound gratitude; they share what little they have, practice hospitality and stubbornly resist the lethal forces around them. Their faith and solidarity spreads out in concentric circles, like a contagious medicine. They build up the church, which they serve generously. They are the foundation on which to build a more human future and a more faithful church.



2. The Church and the Churches

In El Salvador practically everyone believes in God,⁸ and 87% consider religion very important in their lives.⁹ I confess that sometimes I wonder what god people actually believe in; and with the cultural transformation now underway, we dare not take the future of the faith for granted. But for now, with all its ambiguities, this religious spirit is one of the greatest riches of this suffering region.

Today 55% of Salvadorans say they are Catholic, which is low for Latin America. Pentecostal protestants made spectacular gains during the 70s and 80s, in part because Catholics were slow to respond, in the light of Vatican II and the Conferences of Medellín and Puebla, to a rapidly urbanizing society, suffused with the mass media and more critical of traditional authority. Today protestants number about 29%. They

⁸ En 1995 sólo 1.1% dijo no creer en Dios. IUDOP-UCA, "La religión de los salvadoreños en 1995", *Estudios Centroamericanos*, 563 (sept. 1995), p. 853.

⁹ IUDOP-UCA, "Encuesta sobre valores", Serie de Informes 80 (sept. de 1999), p. 14.

are mostly pentecostal evangelicals. Among mainline protestant denominations, only the Baptists, with a long history in El Salvador, have a large following. During the years of political and military conflict, the Pentecostals kept a scandalous silence in the face of atrocities, while the government rolled out the red carpet for evangelicals from the U.S., as a counterweight to more prophetic voices, especially in the Catholic Church. In recent years, though, the leaders of two large Pentecostal groups have adopted a more sophisticated and responsible stance in the face of systemic injustice. The Pentecostal churches are late arrivals to the kind of polarization that has characterized the Catholic Church for a long time.

Where populations are both religious and divided, it is hardly surprising that the churches are polarized, principally over the massive poverty and injustice. What does the plight of the poor majority mean for the church? Where does their plight fit in the church's agenda? Not everyone responds in the same way.

Since the Second Vatican Council, many Christians in Central America have come to understand that God is the first to stand with the poor, to take up their cause, in the name of universal love, that the faith requires that we, too, stand with them, that we be a church of the poor. For taking that prophetic stand, the church in Central America has been blessed with many martyrs, including dozens of priests and religious and three bishops –Monseñor Romero (1980) and Monseñor Joaquín Ramos (1993) in El Salvador and Bishop Juan Gerardi in Guatemala (1998)—as well as a cloud of catechists and committed lay Catholics and many protestants, as well. They have given the credible testimony that the 2007 Aparecida Conference called for.

And yet, many in the churches find their memory unsettling. In El Salvador as elsewhere, this prophetic vision of a church of the poor has never been the majority view. For some, massive injustice is not a major issue for the church, whose proper concern is the salvation of souls. However much we are obliged to feed the hungry, our job is not to criticize the institutions and practices that generate misery and exclusion. That is the task of the government and other social actors, including Catholic laypeople. But many others of us reject this reduction of the Church's mission. For us, the poor are the crucified vicars of Christ. If we don't walk with them, then we are not walking with him. If the message is not good news for the poor, then it is not the gospel of Jesus

Christ. That vision and practice, sealed in blood, continues to shape the religious culture of country and the wider region. It must continue to leaven the whole church, even as it evolves to face new circumstances and generational change.

In their turbulent cultural surroundings, young people suffer frequent periods of disorientation and personal crises. The majority lacks a solid Christian formation. Still, many do participate actively in church and show up in large numbers at events commemorating Romero and the other martyrs. In a cynical and suffering world, the martyrs inspire. When the church walks with the poor, as they did, it draws on the power of the cross and the faith appears credible. Young people respond to the good news of a credible love.

At the UCA, our theology department and the Romero Centre strive to hand on that legacy of the church of the poor, to present and future generations, but also to the stream of visitors from abroad that seems to swell each year.



3. International Solidarity

The crosses and resurrections of Central America draw pilgrims from far and wide. These present and future collaborators are another major source of hope.

Pilgrims. Since the UCA is on the route of many visiting groups, it is rare that a week goes by without a delegation from abroad requesting a talk –in English! I always look for a chance to tell them why we think their visit is important. It is important for the communities they visit, but also for the visitors themselves.

First-time visitors deplane apprehensive, asking themselves half-consciously: What will happen when we arrive at these poor communities where the memories of war crimes remain fresh? Will I have a massive Catholic (or Methodist, or Jewish) guilt attack? Will I have to sell my car back home to buy medicines for these people? Trade in my laptop for a wheelchair? Fears like these evaporate on contact with the people, and the visitors spend the rest of their visit wondering why these people are smiling, how they keep going and why they insist on sharing what little they have with perfect strangers.

The Salvadorans smile because they feel honored by the visit. While everything around them says, ‘You don’t count’, ‘We don’t need you’, ‘No social services for you’, ‘Better to migrate North’ -- the visitors from so far away are saying something different: ‘You are important’, ‘you count for us’, ‘you matter’.

If the visitors have the courage to listen to the stories that no one else will hear – of massacres yesterday, and cruel injustice today-- these poor people will break their hearts, the visitors will fall in love and then return home renewed in hope and “ruined” for life. That will be the most important thing to happen on their pilgrimage. What does in fact happen? The visitors see their reflection in the eyes of their poor hosts. With that, the ground begins to shift under their feet; the anonymous poor masses of the world suddenly take on three dimensions. They are moving from the periphery of the visitors’ world and closer to the center. The world seems to change before the visitors’ eyes - the world they have until now half-consciously divided into important people and unimportant people. Their horizon opens.

For many younger visitors, this is a watershed experience. Their consumer society makes it difficult for them to find their way, to find themselves. Whatever they

may know of the Gospel of Matthew, they are bombarded with others: the gospel of conspicuous consumption, the gospel of Wall Street, or maybe now, just Walmart, the gospel of MTV and the sweet life. Engaging this pluralism is disorienting and leads many to question early on whether everything their parents taught them is untrue. What is right, after all? What is wrong? What is true or false? What about God and church? All, this combined with limited life experience, makes it hard to find one's way.

When young visitors enter communities like Jayaque and Tonacatpeque, they forget their problems back home. If they have the courage to listen to those heart-rending stories I mentioned, they will experience a question welling up within them: If this is how the world is, if this is an average country, then how do I want to live my life? The wonderful thing about this question is that this is not their parents nagging about when they are going to get it together and settle down. It's not the priest. No, it's coming from within them. It's their deepest voice, frequently accompanied by joy and enthusiasm which are signs that the Spirit is nudging them to take up their deepest vocation in life.

Let me dwell on that word "vocation" for a minute, since it has no place in the lexicon of our consumer culture. Capitalist society might offer us a job or a profession, but the closest thing to a "vocation" it proposes is getting and spending and just having fun. In our hearts we know that aiming so low degrades us. The temptation is to live in permanent childhood.

Our vocation might be to parent, to teach, to lead a social movement or a combination of such activities. But engaging the victims of injustice surfaces the deepest vocation we have as human beings: to spend our lives in love and service. Ita Ford, the Maryknoll sister who was raped and murdered with three companions in El Salvador in 1980 wrote to her niece Jennifer a few months before she died: "I hope you come to find that which gives life a deep meaning for you. Something worth living for – maybe even worth dying for—something that energizes you, enthuses you, enables you to keep moving ahead. I can't tell you what it might be. That's for you to find, to choose, to love." Ita invited Jennifer to discover her deepest calling. Life is short; we only get to do it once. We can sleep through it. Consumer society is designed for dozing. Christians recognize the still, small voice that invites us to find ourselves by

losing ourselves as the call of Christ. This, finally, is how God changes the world -- calling people like Abraham and Sarah, Jeremiah and Mary, Peter and Paul, Oscar Romero, Dorothy Day, and you and me.

The victims not only evoke our deepest calling. They put us in touch with the deepest mystery of our lives: the dying and the rising going on in us and around us. They reveal to us that the world is far more cruel than we usually suppose; and at the same time, they help us see that something is underway that is much more marvelous than we usually imagine, a revolution of love and goodness in the teeth of cruelty and contempt. Sin abounds, but grace abounds the more. In places like El Salvador, where we face crosses and resurrections at every turn, the coming of God's reign sometimes seems palpable.

This is how bad things are globally: Over 100 governments today practice torture¹⁰; the war in the Democratic Republic of Congo goes unnoticed, while as many as 5 million die there, mostly through sickness and hunger.¹¹ In Darfur more than 5,000 displaced persons have been dying each month. Up to 300,000 have been killed in this Sudanese conflict and 2.7 million displaced. Poverty kills more people each year than all those who died in World War II; 963 million people are chronically hungry, and the number is rising¹²; more people (about 25,000) die¹³ daily from hunger or hunger-related causes¹³ than die from terrorism in an entire year;¹⁴ a fifth of the population lacks drinking water and basic health services; global unemployment has increased more than 20% in the last ten years and is now poised to skyrocket.¹⁵ One billion people in rich countries receive 80% of world income, while 3 billion in poor countries receive 1.2% of total income.¹⁶ It is a world that is organized in such a profoundly unjust way that for several decades popes have been calling for deep changes in economic policy and political institutions.

¹⁰ International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims, *Annual Report, 2007*, p. 4; <<http://www.irct.org/IRCT-Annual-Reports-60.aspx>>, consulted Jan. 28, 2009.

¹¹ *New York Times*, Dec. 13, 2008, p. A5.

¹² <http://www.fao.org/news/story/en/item/8836/icode/> (consulted Jan. 28, 2009).

¹³ "Hunger and World Poverty," www.Poverty.com, cited by Bill Quigley, "Twenty Questions: Social Justice Quiz 2008," <truthout.org/article/twenty-questions-social-justice-quiz-2008>.

¹⁴ "Terrorism Deaths Rose in 2007," Voice of America, May 2, 2008; cited by Quigley, "Twenty Questions."

¹⁵ Eduardo Galeano, *Patas Arriba. La escuela del mundo al revés*. México: Siglo XXI, 1998, pp. 29-30.

¹⁶ Lilian Vega, Cátedra Realidad Nacional, UCA, Nov. 12, 2008.

This easily tempts us to throw up our hands in despairing resignation, or, at best try to love the people in our family and forget about the rest. But the good news overwhelms the bad for those who have eyes to see and ears to hear. As my friends on the left say, ¡Otro mundo es posible! Another world is possible! As a Christian, I want to say: This new world has already begun and it is destined to triumph. I've seen it in El Salvador. That's the reign of God, God's revolution. I mean to suggest that God is at work full-time to overcome this bad news with good news of life and love and to enable us to participate and bear abundant fruit. One palpable sign of hope is the movement of international solidarity.

Globalizing solidarity. I like to invite visiting delegations to see their engagement with El Salvador as part of the world-wide movement of international solidarity that has been growing exponentially in quantity, in sophistication and in effectiveness. As national governments, even at their best, lose their effectiveness, this is one of the most hopeful signs of our times, although the media and their powerful backers seem not to notice. As markets and arms sales and narco-trafficking globalize, so, too, does solidarity. Solidarity builds clinics in El Salvador, but also campaigns to ban cluster bombs and antipersonnel mines. The Jubilee 2000 campaign and its sequels forced the G7 governments to concede debt relief to the world's most highly-indebted nations. None of that would have been possible twenty years before, without internet, e-mail and cheaper international air travel. And notice, too, that the churches, and the Catholic Church in particular, are better positioned than anyone else to globalize international solidarity. No other organizations have the people on the ground working among the poor all over the world and, let's hope, the motivation and tenacity to help empower the poor, resist violence and defend the environment at the grassroots level.

Besides helping the poor, international cooperation changes the visitors, as we have seen. This is crucial, because unless things change in places like Europe and North America, they will continue to go badly in places like Central America. In particular, engaging the poor of the South renews the church in the North. I'm tempted to suggest an appendix to Pope Benedict's encyclical *Deus caritas est*, which specifies that the practice of love is indispensable to church and parish life. My appendix would

recommend that every parish in the North form a sister-relationship with a congregation in the poor South –for the good of all concerned.

So, as the powerful globalize markets, finance and communications, we need to globalize the practice of love and turn this violent new century into the Century of Solidarity and transform our civilization based on capital into a civilization based on people and their labor. More than anything else, this will require “new human beings,” including a critical mass of people in Europe and North America with hearts capable of identifying with the poor majority of the planet. They must also be able to address complex issues of trade, finance and human rights law in their home countries.

Where will these new human beings come from? If they don't come forth from the churches, I doubt anyone else will fill the need. The church must form these new human beings with hearts of flesh. Its schools should give a privileged place to the intellectual and moral formation the world calls for.

4. Education and Formation

This brings me, a little awkwardly, to the question of formation. During the past week in Great Britain, many people have expressed concern about declining participation of young people in church life and how, despite the great need and despite generosity and creativity, not everyone in the church embraces the cause of justice and peace as a central dimension of the church's mission. This seems to me a major challenge and opportunity.

While I cannot offer any solution to these problems, I think what we have already said here throws some light on



them and also on how we can help form that critical mass of “new human beings” I mentioned. For that purpose I append these final reflections. While they are partly autobiographical, they also reflect the philosophy of education that motivated Ignacio Ellacuría and his colleagues and that continues to guide us at the UCA.

In these confusing times, it is difficult to find our way, as I said, especially for young people. Like most of them, when I was in college, my own world-view unraveled in tatters, precipitating a difficult time of searching for what is true and for what I should do with my life. That searching taught me crucial lessons, most of which I could only formulate clearly years later. What I discovered was that, if we want to search with integrity for what is true and what is right, we have to attend to the three sources of truth: concrete reality, the voice within us, and the truth that comes from a wise community. Let me say something about each of these.

First, we have to face up to reality in all its starkness and beauty. Ellacuría always insisted on that, and it remains fundamental for us at the UCA. Of course, reality is vast and complex, so we must specify the priority of facing up to the drama of life and death, good vs. evil, oppression and liberation, sin and grace. That is the nucleus of reality, where meaning is most dense. So, we need to feel the impact of the victims, the poor, taking in how bad things are, as I said earlier –and responding to it. It is only then that we can appreciate how good things are at the same time. Life is not a spectator sport. From the sidelines we may be able to analyze the football game, but in the moral game of life, we have to participate in order to appreciate what is going on. This means that we need to challenge our friends who want to interpret our situation in practical isolation from the most pressing human and environmental problems. Hot tubs are not the place from which to discern what we should do.

Since reality is too rich and complex to catch on the first bounce, contemplation is strictly necessary to assess it. So, too are responsible leaps of faith, as Augustine saw so clearly. Belief in God is a crucial, illustrative case, though not the only one. It deserves special mention, I think, because it is such a hot topic in Great Britain these days. If we believe in God, that is because the evidence points in that direction, not just the measureable evidence but especially the moral, existential evidence. In that case, not taking that leap would be less reasonable, less responsible than not leaping.

All this implies that pure reason is insufficient for learning the meaning of life. Much less can we reduce rationality to the empirical method of the natural sciences. In pursuit of wisdom, only reason integrally considered will do: reason rooted in reality and in ethical practice and contemplation. The exercise of reason must also be purified.

That is, second, we need cognitive liberation, which entails getting free from the fears and idols that fuel our prejudices and hide our blind spots. Since these are rooted in our commitments, we need to undergo conversion. As we saw earlier when reflecting on the experience of pilgrims in El Salvador, engaging the crosses of the poor and the victims provokes the kind of wholesome crisis that fosters cognitive liberation.

More than anything else, the conversion in question entails the basic commitment to follow our conscience as best we can and come what may. That crucial turn allows us to see straight. Above all, it allows God to work on us and to guide us via the consolation of the Spirit into the light. Reason integrally considered includes all that, too.

Third and finally, we need community to both challenge us and to support us in an alternative vision and way of life. Not any community will do for this. It behooves those of us who have only lived a few years on the planet to recognize that the human race, for all its foolishness, has collected some extraordinary treasures of wisdom to help guide us in life. So, the community we need to help us search must be a wisdom-bearing community. We need to identify ourselves, critically, with some wisdom tradition. Catholicism does that for me. With all its limitations, it has a prophetic corrective built in to it. But in any case, this seems to me a good basis on which to challenge our friends who want Jesus without the church, who are spiritual but not religious.

It also implies that we, in church, must challenge and support one another in our searching. Since we love others, we will challenge the authenticity of their searching and welcome that kind of help from others. To what extent are we searching and discerning authentically, attentive to the three sources of truth: the truth of the creator of all reality, the truth of the Spirit who moves us inwardly, the truth of the Word who is the source of all truth and the criterion for purifying and perfecting all cultures? All three sources point us to the crucified victims who usher us into the deepest meaning of our

lives, the dying and the rising. They draw us into our deepest vocation to love and serve.

I have shared with you some of the crosses and resurrections of El Salvador and Central America, which show us, I think, how the world and the church are faring today. The deep humanity and Christian spirit of our people have fostered the commitment of our martyrs. I have tried to show how important the growing movement of international solidarity is for suffering peoples and for the church as a whole. Finally, I have shared with you how I think we have to help people search for the truth today and how we can support and challenge one another to respond with integrity to our suffering neighbour.

May Archbishop Romero and our other generous witnesses inspire us, and may we inspire each other, to overcome our fears and idols and engage our broken world. May God strengthen the church and make us more and more the sacrament of that new human family which has already dawned and is destined to triumph.

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