



*"En Misión con
El Salvador:
In Mission with
El Salvador"*



San Salvador, El Salvador
Tuesday, 26 February, 2013

Dear friends, in mission with El Salvador:

A Day in Quite the Life

A single day like yesterday is enough to convince me of the rightness of not having abandoned the prisons of El Salvador at this critical juncture.

Early in the day, I got word that we'd be meeting with the mini-gangs with respect to the gang truce / peace process evolving in El Salvador's prisons, now extending to towns and cities, designated by multi-sector pacts as sanctuaries "free of violence".

The group awaiting us (the president of AEIPES and myself) were members of one of the three mini-gangs, a couple dozen in all. Some are inmates at Mariona prison, sharing a module with two other mini-gangs. Others are inmates at a couple other prisons in the country, including Ilopango women's prison. Still others were gathered in from the streets. Imagine tattooed gang members being allowed

to join their homeboys for a day in prison. Imagine their enthusiasm over such a family reunion.

My first impression upon entering was the dense smoke, the heavy air, in this enclosed, sterile space made available for our meeting. Soon the smoke faded into insignificance as I began chatting with some of these animated gang boys. I knew little, almost nothing, about their "Maquina" gang--its history, its make-up, its geography.

This prison, Mariona, is huge, and ultra-crowded. Built for 800 inmates, it encloses almost 6,000, housed in 3 main sectors and a few smaller ones. Conducting AEIPES activities in this prison, such masses generally leave me with the impression of a mafia-controlled mega-facility, still plagued with distrust and suspicion, in spite of the peace process. Whereas in other, smaller prisons, a friendly atmosphere prevails, where most greet and chat with ease and camaraderie, often in Mariona, by contrast, one is made to feel invisible in its cold and distant spaces. Are inmates here: timid? guarded? pompous? arrogant? distracted?

However, this was not the case yesterday, in this Mariona prison space. Shortly after entering, I felt like I was back in the days, three years ago, when we concentrated on gang-prisons filled with homeboys in their gang-segregated spaces. All here were family, and it felt like a family reunion. Though I knew none of them, and I don't believe any knew me, I was welcomed right into their family, never feeling like an intruder or a stranger. Throughout the day, when they would meet to deliberate about their deepening involvement in this peace process, which they joined a couple months ago, I did give them their space, so they could feel free to raise and discuss potentially delicate issues. Besides, knowing too much isn't particularly healthy in this country, still.

Almost three years ago, our prison mini-team of two Salvadorans and myself lost touch with the two main gangs, "MS" and "18". At that time, we had been concentrating on leadership training with gang leaders in different gang

prisons. A new law was passed, making gang leadership even more of a crime than gang membership, with harsher penalties. Anyone assisting gang leadership in any way could also be considered complicit and guilty. No lawyer could assure us that some judge would not view our role and involvement as illegal, if we were ever arrested and charged, something which happens quite readily to the "undesirables" in this country. Associating with gangs in any way was viewed with high levels of suspicion. We could end up as inmates ourselves, a full-time calling which we weren't quite prepared to assume. Besides, the participants in our workshops were being sent to a maximum-security prison, infamous for physical and psychological torture and isolation, hardly something we had envisioned or desired for them.

During our hiatus, at the end of May, 2011, our Quetzalcoatl Foundation, which I had co-founded in 1999, went through dark times, provoking our mini-prison team to take our leave. Over the summer of 2011, we linked with AEIPES, an association of ex-inmates with whom I had worked as inmates in the 1990's, and since then, as ex-inmates, in a prison coalition including several other organizations. The focus of AEIPES is with the "civilian", "common", non-gang prison population, so our distance from the gangs increased. However, working in "civilian" prisons, we began to hear noises from several mini-gangs, secluded inmates in these civilian prisons, feeling left out of this promising peace process and seeking to be involved. So, we're now working with gangs again, though they are different, smaller gangs, with their own unique histories, philosophies and development.

What they share with the other gangs is this sense of family, a strong sense of belonging and of loyalty. Another common element is their readiness to welcome and include a stranger such as me, and their eagerness to unload much of their life story on me, individual and communal. In "civilian" prisons, individuals are usually friendly and chatty, but there's not this same sense of cohesion and camaraderie, of family ties. Everyone's in prison on their own, with perhaps a friend or a neighbour or two, maybe an occasional family visit, to help one through the daily trials and stresses. But a gang family in prison is different. A full day with this group left me feeling like it wasn't enough . . . in spite of that heavy smoke clouding the air and my lungs, normally intolerable. No doubt our process with this gang will continue.

From jail to jazz. A couple campesinos-just-become-university-students joined me in the evening for the launching of San Salvador's 2-week jazz fest, masterfully undertaken by Matthias Schriefl and his band of 4 from Germany. I met these student friends/neighbours a year ago, when CRISPAZ hosted the Luther College (Regina, SK) delegation for a week. That week included this rural home stay, a stay repeated with another recent visit by Luther College students. My hosts both years, in their remote village in Chalatenango, have become my neighbours here in San Salvador, since their town council is renting a house for half a dozen students, just minutes away from my home. So they drop in frequently (as dozens of university students from Santa Marta and other rural communities have been doing for decades). New to jazz, they stayed wide awake until I dropped them off at 10:30 p.m., in spite of having been up since 3:00 a.m. in order to get back to San Salvador in time for their 7:30 a.m. classes, and in spite of the usual pattern of one of them, who drops off in a deep snooze by 8:30 p.m. while the rest of us chat. That's how entertaining Matthias and his band were!

So, a single day like yesterday is enough to convince me of the rightness of not having abandoned the prisons of El Salvador at this critical juncture. And yet there are so many such days. I could well write about many other special days, even just the ones spent in prisons:

--Feb. 14, dancing the day away with about half of the 1,800 Valentines who live in Ilopango women's prison (you'd think even an old Canadian man might be hot stuff in such a female setting, but no, dancing among themselves is all the diversion and inspiration they need, leaving me to pastoral conversation and taking photos and video clips--and, well, yes, just a bit of dancing);

--Feb. 16, movie night at this same Ilopango women's prison, where 1,000+ enjoy the movie "Charlie St. Cloud", a good reflection/discussion-starter as I ask several women after the movie who the phantoms are in their lives, no longer present physically, but ever-present emotionally and spiritually (one had lost her partner of 10 years to a bullet 3 months ago, leaving her and their 8-year-old son to experience his ongoing--though phantom--presence in their everyday lives of separation);

--Feb. 19, an all-day planning session with 4 dozen of these same women, enthusiastic and dedicated, divided into half a dozen different commissions to plan the year's events (I join the "religious" commission, evangelicals/pentecostals who have planned mostly prayer and praise vigils (Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Anglicans, etc., being absent, Eucharist and Bible study don't register with this holy commission, much less openness to sexual diversity, which abounds in this prison setting);

--Feb. 20, joining 1,000+ male inmates at Mariona prison in such a prayer, praise and healing vigil, led for hours and hours--and hours--by a couple dozen worship leaders from outside the prison and a couple dozen formally-dressed inmate "ushers" (not a single one greets me as I stand intentionally in their path, alone, trying to gauge the "friendliness" level of this stand-offish mega-prison--I do chat with some of my neighbours, at-risk-youth with whom I've worked in the streets and alleys of nearby *barrios* over the past 10 years, unable to avoid prison, too often through no fault of their own . . . in fact I might have been caught chatting--pastorally--even during the praise vigil itself).

So, as costly as this transition has been financially, as stressful as it has been emotionally and as troubling as it has been spiritually, I feel more than compensated--challenged and fulfilled to be continuing on in El Salvador. I am most grateful to God, and to all who are making this ongoing two-way ministry possible, beginning with the Alberta and the Territories (ABT) Synod of the ELCIC for setting up the channel and the necessary logistics, and branching out across North America and Europe as so many, in solidarity with El Salvador and with our vision for mission, seek to make use of that channel for designated gifts, supporting also through prayer and affirmation.

I am especially grateful to my Salvadoran sisters and brothers, who continue to make my life so rich and meaningful as we share in this mission and ministry, learning together and growing in faith and love, hope and peace.

This certainly beats retirement!

In mission with El Salvador,

Brian

Rev. Brian Rude, DD,

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