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Chapter 8

The Role of the Church in the Context of Violence (Juan Angel Castro)

Abbreviation

FMLM *Farabundo Marti Nationalist Liberation Front*

Introduction

Violence has impacted the Church throughout its existence. The history of the Church is replete with stories of both tragedy and resilience. From Saul's efforts to thwart the growth of early Christianity to current challenges globally, contexts of violence for Christians have been a constant reality. The personal experience and theological reflection I wish to offer for your consideration comes from a recent case study from El Salvador. I offer this testimony to you as an affirmation that the Holy Spirit makes his power most evident in places of deepest tragedy and darkness.

Once the Violence Started, It Never Stopped: The Civil War and the *Maras*

The history of El Salvador in the first part of the twentieth century provides the seedbed for the violence. From the 1930s to the 1970s, one dictator followed another. Regardless of the various political ideologies of each new leader, not much changed. What remained constant was that one hundred families controlled the wealth of the nation while the popular masses lived in abject poverty.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the glaring social and economic chasm between rich and poor spawned the breeding ground for conflict and violence.¹ No one should have felt surprised when

¹ Allan Everett Wilson. *La Crisis de Integración Nacional en El Salvador 1919-1935*, vol. 17 *Biblioteca de Historia Salvadoreña*, 1st ed. (San Salvador: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y el Arte, 2004): 101.

an armed insurgency emerged in opposition to the powers that controlled the nation's social and economic structures. Peasants, urban poor, young people, university students, and key Catholic religious leaders allied with an insurgency that would soon develop into a powerful guerrilla movement known as the *Farabundo Marti Nationalist Liberation Front* (FMLN). The insurgents hit like a hammer with one act of terror after another. They dynamited bridges, knocked out power towers and attacked the communication centres. Soon the violence escalated by kidnapping or murdering prominent businesspeople. In retaliation, the government mobilised the armed forces and struck back with an even more extreme lethal vengeance. Many Salvadorans allied with one side or the other with the majority repulsed by both.

The war raged on for twelve long years. The atrocities, including massacres committed by both sides, were horrific.² Seventy-five thousand people were killed,³ mostly civilians, and eight thousand more “disappeared”.⁴ Hundreds of thousands were left homeless. The nation was in shambles.⁵ Finally, on 16th January 1992, “peace agreements” were signed between the government and the FMLN. The war had no winners.

The violence of the civil war forced a major exodus of the population. Parents left children behind to be raised by a relative.⁶ Families, by the thousands, simply disintegrated. A

² Jose Victor Villavicencio, “Pentecostal Churches and Human Rights in the Framework of the Armed Conflict in El Salvador (1987-1991)”, *Journal of the Department of Theology*, Universidad Evangélica de El Salvador (January-April 2017): 39-42.

³ BBC World Newsroom, “Inocente Montano: The Massacre of Eight People for Which the Former Colonel of the Army of El Salvador Was Sentenced to More Than 130 Years in Prison in Spain [Inocente Montano: la masacre de 8 personas por la que el excoronel del ejército de El Salvador fue sentenciado a más de 130 años de cárcel en España]”, *BBC*, 29th January 2020, [Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-51305046>], [Last accessed: 20th March 2024].

⁴ BBC World Newsroom, “Inocente Montano.”

⁵ Andrea Rincón, “El Salvador: From the Civil War to Decisive Elections [El Salvador: de la Guerra civil a unas elecciones determinantes]”, *France24*, 2nd January 2019, [Available at: <https://www.france24.com/es/20190201-el-salvador-elecciones-presidenciales-candidato>], [Last accessed: 20th March 2024]. See also: “El Salvador Civil War [Guerra civil de El Salvador]”, *Wikipedia*, [Available at: https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guerra_civil_de_El_Salvador#cite_note-53], [Last accessed: 20th March 2024].

⁶ Ibid Rincon

generation of children grew up without parents, without a sense of values, or a set of basic principles. This generation has been called: “*The Children of War*” [Hijos de la Guerra].⁷

In the years that followed the war, the nation was marked by resentments, grudges, and bitterness. There was no period of reconciliation, no retributive justice, and no pardons granted for the innocents. The consequences were not unlike those suffered by other nations after genocide.⁸ And all too soon, a new wave of violence grasped the nation by the neck: The Maras.

The Rise of the *Maras* (Gangs): MS-13 and Mara 18

The seeds of violence sown during the civil war sprouted into a siege of unspeakable terror that, in one way or another, lurked in the doorways of every family. No one was exempt from the horrors about to transpire. The *maras* (gangs), exploding to include seventy-five thousand of El Salvador’s youth, wreaked terror wherever they wished. People’s lives spun out of control, and they could not do a thing about it. After the civil war, Salvadoran society – fragmented and wounded – collapsed upon itself. Soldiers in the military and soldiers from the guerrilla movement felt frustrated and angry. The war had accomplished little. It was the *status quo* all over again.⁹

Thousands of Salvadorans who fled the nation came to Los Angeles, California in the USA. Many of their young people got involved in the criminal activities of local city gangs. They would be arrested, convicted, and deported back to El Salvador. The national nightmare of

⁷ Carlos Medrano, “Children of War [Hijos de la Guerra]”, *Computer Science and Communications Unit Salvadoran Lutheran University*, 29th July 2016, [Available at: <https://uls.edu.sv/sitioweb/component/k2/item/457-hijos-de-la-guerra>], [Last accessed: 20th March 2024].

⁸ Marcel Uwineza, “Rwanda: Conversion Continues [Ruanda: Continúa La Conversión]”, *The Society of Jesus* (Jesuits Global), 12th April 2022, [Available at: <https://www.jesuits.global/es/2022/04/12/ruanda-continua-la-conversion/>], [Last accessed: 20th March 2024].

⁹ Oscar Martinez, *El Salvador el soldado y la guerrillera* [The Soldier and the Guerrilla], (San Salvador, El Salvador: UFG-Editores, 2008).

violence started all over again. The ground was fertile to recruit, reproduce, and multiply. Young Salvadorans were unemployed, living in poverty, and merely surviving in the fog of utter hopelessness. Abandoned by parents who had fled after the civil war, the appeal of the gangs gave young Salvadorans a sense of family, identity, power, and money.¹⁰ Two rival gangs, MS-13 and Mara 18, battled for power. Isaac, a former gang member said, “The gang was a brotherhood; we knew we were doing bad things, selling drugs, stealing, fighting with other gangs, but [...] we took care of ourselves, protected ourselves, and we helped each other.”¹¹ Another former member, Nestor S., told me, “We were told we were a family, but every day was a fight between kill or die.”¹² Isaac’s hope for a brotherhood never materialised; “Of all my companions,” he said, “only I am alive.”¹³

Gang members ranged between the ages of thirteen to twenty-nine. Being young in El Salvador was synonymous with violence and crime.¹⁴ They kidnapped, raped, trafficked in drugs, extorted, and laundered money.¹⁵ By 2014, there were thirty-two thousand hardened

¹⁰ Walter Murcia, “Gangs in El Salvador: Proposals and Challenges for Youth Social Inclusion in Contexts of Urban Violence [Las pandillas en El Salvador: Propuestas y desafíos para la inclusión social juvenil en contextos de violencia urbana]”, *United Nations Project Document* [Naciones Unidas Documento de Proyecto], September 2015, [Available at: https://www.cepal.org/sites/default/files/publication/files/39362/S1501050_es.pdf], [Last accessed: 20th March 2024].

¹¹ Personal testimony of Isaac, ex-gang member, in interview conducted with the author 1st September 2023. The name has been changed for personal safety reasons.

¹² Personal testimony of former MS13 gang member in interview conducted with author 12th September 2023. The name has been changed for personal safety reasons.

¹³ Personal testimony of Isaac.

¹⁴ Norbert Ross, “When Being Young is Synonymous with Danger, the Country is at Risk [Cuando ser joven es sinónimo de peligro, el país está en riesgo]”, *El Faro*, 16th November 2023, [Available at: <https://elfaro.net/es/202207/columnas/26251/Cuando-ser-joven-es-sin%C3%B3nimo-de-peligro-el-pa%C3%ADs-est%C3%A1-en-riesgo.htm>], [Last accessed: 20th March 2024].

¹⁵ Marcos Gonzalez Diaz, “‘Before We Were Under Siege’: The Neighborhoods of El Salvador That Are Reunited after the ‘Disappearance’ of the Gangs Due to Bukele’s War [‘Antes estábamos sitiados’: los barrios de El Salvador que se reencuentran tras la ‘desaparición’ de las pandillas por la guerra de Bukele]”, *BBC World News*, 27th March 2023, [Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-65059584#:~:text=Ambas%20pandillas%2C%20cuyo%20origen%20se,de%20vuelta%20a%20El%20Salvador>], [Last accessed: 20th March 2024].

criminals on the loose, sowing terror across the country.¹⁶ By 2022, they numbered seventy-two thousand. Government forces were overwhelmed by the extent of the violence. The gangs were better armed than the military.¹⁷

Extortion was rampant. The gang extorted everyone: merchants, street vendors, truckers, even pedestrians. They killed anyone who refused to pay.¹⁸ People left work early enough to arrive home before dark. No one ventured out on the streets after dark. San Salvador, the capital city, was held hostage by a youth mafia – the new gangsters of Salvadoran society.¹⁹ Gang members' body and face tattoos identifying them with their gang, MS-13 or Mara 18 were enough to intimidate the public.



¹⁶ Murcia, “Gangs in El Salvador”, 10-14.

¹⁷ Murcia, “Gangs in El Salvador”, 10-14.

¹⁸ Gonzales Diaz, “Before We Were Besieged”.

¹⁹ Maria Ali-Habib, “Mass Arrests in El Salvador Raise Fears”, *The New York Times*, 29th March 2022, [Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/es/2022/03/29/espanol/bukele-el-salvador-pandillas.html>], [Last accessed: 20th March 2024].



The acts of violence and barbarism were unprecedented in a nation already long accustomed to violence. Newspapers reported atrocities that had happened the day before. For example, “A clique of Mara 18-*Revolucionarios* hijacked a minibus full of passengers. They sealed the entrance, doused the vehicle with gasoline, and set fire. They shot passengers who tried to escape through the windows. There were 17 dead, most charred.”²⁰ One of the survivors was a young man who attended the church.

El Salvador became one of the most violent countries in the world with a homicide rate in 2015-16 of more than one hundred per 100,000 inhabitants, or a total of 6,650 murders. The government classified the gangs as terrorists.

Then it got worse. In one single day in March 2022, there were sixty-two random murders. This spike in violence was the last straw. The Legislative Assembly approved a “state

²⁰ Roberto Valencia, “Bukele vs. the Maras: Who are El Salvador’s Main Gangs and Why It Is So Dangerous to Mix Them in Prisons [Bukele contra las maras: cuáles son las principales pandillas de El Salvador y por qué es tan peligroso que las mezclen en las cárceles]”, *BBC World News*, 29th April 2020, [Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-52466682>], [Last accessed: 20th March 2024].

of exception,” expanding the powers of police and military forces to arrest any potential suspect without due process. By August 2023, they had arrested seventy-seven thousand suspected gang members.

A Critique of the Church Amidst the Violence

The Roman Catholic Church

In 1968, the Latin American Bishops held their General Council in Medellin, Colombia and issued a document critiquing the social and economic structures embedded in society as unjust and oppressive, systematically marginalising the poor while protecting the best interests of the elites. The bishops argued that existing political and economic structures and the elites who controlled them had systematically marginalised the poor. The statement by the bishops provided an affirmation that unwittingly yielded a launching pad for the formation of liberation theology in Latin America.

Liberation theologians contended that one could only understand the Bible through the lens of the poor. The theologians linked biblical justice to a condemning of the wealthy for their exploitative actions. The liberationist’s view of the gospel demanded that people of faith stand for a more just society and get involved politically, with an eye to change or even overthrow the sinful structures embedded into society.

El Salvador’s Archbishop, Oscar Romero, was a reluctant but strong proponent of liberation theology. Along with other Catholic leaders, Romero opted to ally with the left-wing insurgency. By aligning with the FMLN, the Roman Catholic Church had, in effect, joined ranks with a leftist insurgency. The allegiance that the Roman Catholic leadership gave to the FMLN came with tragic costs. On 24th March 1980, Archbishop Oscar Romero, while saying mass, was fatally shot.

More than twenty years after the war ended, a traditionalist voice within the Catholic Church, *Rorate Caeli*, lamented the Church's progressive efforts for responding to culture's challenges.²¹ While the Church was increasingly identifying more effective means of becoming relevant to the poor, faithful Catholics abandoned the Church in droves, searching for an authentic spirituality wherever they could find it. Consequently, they found what they were looking for in charismatic groups and Pentecostal churches.

Pentecostal Churches

It is true that whether for good or bad, Pentecostals avoided direct political involvement with either the left or the right, avoiding a political situation which they viewed as a dirty business. Their critics argued that a position of neutrality was a *de facto* vote for the *status quo*. Pentecostals contended that to take a political side would almost ensure that any opposing groups would never enter their doors again. The doors of Pentecostals had to stay open for everyone.

Critiques also arose that saw these thousands of grassroots churches as nothing more than an extension of American-made missionary colonialism. Still, others complained that Pentecostals holed themselves up in the safety of their churches, avoiding the realities of life that surrounded them. These churches had more to do with "hallelujahs" focused on spiritual matters, rejecting involvement in any social efforts that ministered to the physical needs of the poor. For the most part, over the last four decades, these critiques have been debunked in a multitude of academic publications, including books, peer-reviewed journal articles and research projects.²²

²¹ Roberto de Mattei, "Crisis in the Church: A Historical Perspective" *Rorate Caeli*, November 2018. Available at <https://rorate-caeli.blogspot.com/2018/11/de-mattei-crisis-in-church-historical.html#more> {last accessed August 18, 2024}

²² Examples would include Edward L Cleary and Hannah W. Stewart-Gambino editors. *Power, Politics and Pentecostals in Latin America* (Boulder: Westview Press. 1997) See also David Martin, *Pentecostalism: The World Their Parish* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002) pp 71-131 . See also Miguel Alvarez, *Integral Mission: A new Paradigm for Latin America Pentecostals*. (Oxford UK: Regnum Books, 2016)

A Missional Theology: Never Lift

Race car drivers have a saying: “never lift”. Simply put, when the race starts, the driver accelerates to full speed and for the rest of the race will “never lift” their foot off the accelerator, no matter what! “Never Lift” is an appropriate label to describe the role of a local Pentecostal church in El Salvador. No matter the violence of war, during times of peace or the subsequent waves of violence that never seem to recede, the Pentecostal Church in El Salvador has remained vigilant, serving as agents of the good news of the gospel for every person. They will “never lift” from the task for which the Spirit has empowered them.

The cycle of spiritual restoration begins when a believer, often brand new, shares his or her faith with family, friends, co-workers, and passengers on the city bus – with anyone who will listen. A typical testimony: “A month ago, my life was a mess. I gave my life to Jesus. Now, I am a brand-new person. Would you like to come with me to church?” Usually, two defining experiences take place – salvation and Holy Spirit baptism – often followed by supernatural events like tongues, prophesy, divine healing, miracles, and divine answers to prayer. Congregants come together in worship, participate with a family that cares for others, and receive spiritual formation and training to serve as workers or even pastors. A small church called a *campo blanco* inevitably gives birth to another small church because, once outside the church walls, every one of these new converts now tells someone about Jesus. The cycle begins all over again. The missional priority that the Spirit-empowered church in El Salvador offers is simple: in violence or in peace, our strategy for growth is that we will “never lift”.

They Overcame Him by the Blood of the Lamb and the Word of Their Testimony

Such testimonies of transformed lives through the power of the Spirit best illustrate the transforming power of the Holy Spirit in the context of extreme violence. Every story differs

with a unique set of circumstances or context. In so many ways, however, each story is the same. The stories that follow are representative of hundreds, even thousands, of testimonies that have resulted from a Spirit-empowered commitment to “never lift”.

Juan Angel Castro (My Story)

I was a university student when the armed insurgency took shape in the country’s mountains. Some of my university friends enrolled in the Military Academy, while others decided to head for the mountains to join the guerrillas. I knew that I too would soon need to decide.

Like many young Latinos, I loved soccer. A friend told me about a soccer team I could join on the condition that I attended the youth group sponsoring the team. When I first attended, I was surprised to find students my age who were sincerely interested in others. I loved their enthusiasm when they sang or read the Bible together, but I just wanted to play soccer.

One evening, a few months later, instead of holding a practice, the leader announced that we were “evangelising”. I was not a believer, but I headed out to evangelise with the others. I found three men in a grocery parking lot asking people if they could carry their groceries in return for a few pesos. I asked if they wanted to talk about God. They agreed, so I read the “four spiritual laws” I found in the tract. If someone wanted to accept the Lord, the tract instructed, ask them to kneel and repeat the prayer in the tract (I found out later that it was the sinner’s prayer). As we repeated the prayer, I decided to accept the Lord for myself. That decision in a parking lot would forever change my life. Instead of heading for the mountains, I entered the ministry.

My Friend Roberto

When Roberto and I graduated from high school, we went to university. Roberto decided to head for the mountains to join the guerrilla insurgency and told me his story:

One day, while on patrol, we were ambushed by the army. My entire squadron was annihilated. I was the only one still alive. Alone and facing certain death, I remembered a tract someone had given me that asked: "If you were to die, where would you go?" I wasn't religious, but I started to pray. I told the Lord, "I don't even believe in you, but if you exist and can deliver me from this mess, I'll serve you for the rest of my life." I took courage and carefully worked my way down the mountainside. I practically passed through the middle of the soldiers. It was as though God made me invisible. God delivered me, and I kept my word. I am a pastor.

Salvador Molina (Former Guerrilla Leader in the FMLN)

A well-known evangelist was holding a crusade at San Salvador's national stadium. Our [...] group was ordered to kill the preacher. Five of us, our weapons hidden under our coats, entered the stadium and pushed through the crowd to get close to the platform. With our machine guns ready, we were about to take the shot; the evangelist raised his hand and said, "There are five men who have come to kill me. I tell you to repent. Give yourself to the Lord." At that moment, the five of us fell to the ground. When we got up, no one had seen us. We escaped from the stadium. We knew we had experienced the power of God. I gave my life to Jesus.

Nestor S. (Former Gang MS Who Told Me about His Conversion)

Nestor S. was the leader of a gang cell. Within the gang structure, he was prestigious and respected. His involvement in drug trafficking resulted in lots of money.

One afternoon, a pastor approached him and said, "I came to tell you that God has something better for you. He can get you out of this gang. You won't have to live in fear, constantly on the run, looking over your shoulder. You are going to serve God. God wants to make you a pastor and a preacher of the gospel." Nestor told the pastor, "I'll think about it."

Nestor was confident that because of his status near the top of the gang structure, he was almost untouchable, but Nestor was wrong. Rival drug traffickers began to view Nestor as a threat to business. They decided to find a way to eliminate him. The Narcos paid one of Nestor's own gang members to betray him. The person Nestor believed to be a loyal friend shot him five times. One of the bullets pierced his lung, and another punctured the intestine. By the time that Nestor was hospitalised, infection had set in, and he slipped into a coma. The attending doctor

later reported, “I came into the room and whispered into Nestor’s ear, ‘If you believe God can lift you up and bring you out of this coma, squeeze my hand.’” As Nestor recounted to me, “The doctor said I squeezed her hand.” Then, the doctor began to pray and prophesy. Within an hour, Nestor came out of the coma. His body began to heal rapidly. Just when he was ready to be discharged from the hospital, the police arrested him. He told me:

While in prison, when I gave my life to Jesus, I broke down and cried like a child. I asked the Lord to transform my life, and he did. I got baptised and began to prepare to be a pastor. Other gang members heard my testimony and watched how I conducted my life. One after another, they experienced the power of the gospel through the power of the Spirit, accepted Christ, and experienced the same. For almost a year, I pastored a prison church of gang members who could not attend church.

Then, another miracle happened. Nestor was unexpectedly released from prison, a free man. He began serving in the church of the pastor who had first told me about Jesus. Now, he is the pastor of his own Pentecostal church. Nestor is right when he testifies, “Only God can change a person like me.”

“Never Lift”: A Strategy of the Holy Spirit

No human plan or strategy can explain the explosive growth of Pentecostals²³ except for the supernatural intervention of the power of the Holy Spirit. In 1980, at the beginning of the civil war, Catholics accounted for 91 percent of the population. evangelicals comprised less than 7 percent (of which 70 percent were Pentecostals). By the war’s end in 1992, evangelical Pentecostals had more than doubled. In the most recent polls, Pentecostals and Catholics each represent 40 percent, evangelicals are in the majority in the urban centres and, perhaps most importantly, among young adults, a statistic unthinkable in 1980. Encouragingly, the Church is

²³ The Spanish word *evangelico* is a literal translation of the English word evangelical. *Evangelico* is often used interchangeably in Central America with the word Pentecostal. In El Salvador the terms *evangelico* and *Pentecostal* may be used interchangeably. More precise definitions are certainly appropriate in academic research. See Douglas Petersen, *Not by Might Nor by Power*, (Oxford: Regnum Books, 1996) pp 59-79

actively Pentecostal – with tongues, prophecy, healing, miracles, and exorcism commonly practiced by believers.

Concluding Story

A new prison in El Salvador opened in January 2023 designed to house gang members. At the time of this writing, 1,200 are members of the church in prison – the *prison*. God has transformed their lives, and most are already filled with the Spirit.

Revelation 12:11 reminds us that following Jesus is never an easy path. The nation in which I serve is a pervasive context of violence that requires my deepest reliance on the Holy Spirit's power just to survive. Moments where "life and death" hang in the balance are regular experiences in El Salvador. Nevertheless, I have learned that because of the power of the Spirit, I need "never lift." The same power that raised Jesus from the dead empowers my life and followers of Jesus in El Salvador. We will "never, *ever* lift!"

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Abstract

The problem of violence is nothing new, and it goes back to the beginnings of humanity, when Cain murdered his brother Abel. This is now a universal problem, everywhere and everytime there is violence.

Origin and emergence of the Civil War in El Salvador (1980-1992) and gangs in El Salvador (1992-2023).

What was the role of the Pentecostal church in the midst of violence, and how can the church respond to this problem?

Above all we have been called to preach the gospel. The Pentecostal Gospel that we preach fills all human needs even in the midst of contexts of violence, for every culture, every individual and at all times.