

About twenty-five years ago in El Salvador, when rebels challenged the disparity between rich and poor in land ownership and governance, the reigning administration crushed the uprising by persecution. 80,000 Salvadorans lost their lives, including a group at the Jesuit University, a team of American missionaries, and even the archbishop of San Salvador, Oscar Romero. Many Salvadorans fled into exile. When the war finally subsided, these refugees were repatriated to new homelands.

In 1991 St. Regis decided to join a number of parishes in Kansas City who twinned with local Catholic communities in El Salvador. The organization we contacted, SHARE, partnered us with a community of about 60 families, all refugees who were returning to El Salvador from Honduras. They named their community after two American martyrs, Ita Ford and Maura Clark. We support each other in prayer, and each month we send a donation to Comunidad Ita Maura, while seeking ways to influence our legislature on their behalf, and to live lives in solidarity with the struggles of the poor.

Over the years several parishioners have traveled there to assure Comunidad Ita Maura of our support. I visited with a group in 1993 and yesterday I returned from my second visit. The community sends its greetings and its thanks to St. Regis. I saw amazing improvements -- definable streets with curbs and drainage; larger, sturdier, and more numerous homes; electricity twenty-four hours a day; and accessible water. They still have a long way to go. There is no phone line yet, the pollution is offensive, the water is filled with parasites, there are no private baths, accommodations are primitive, people share their streets and homes with their livestock, and the roads to and from the community make driving an absolute chore. Just sitting in the van to get there, we got dirtier than you've ever seen another human being -- over the age of ten.

Our next steps with the community are to recommit ourselves to better correspondence, to evaluate two projects they are proposing for our contributions, to formulate a project they could help us with, to organize a visit here from members of their community, and another visit from our community there. Our Social Services Ministry Council, which already has a full plate, will have its hands full after this trip.

The other highlight of our trip was to participate in the mass and procession honoring the twentieth anniversary of the martyrdom of Archbishop Romero. It was a soul-stirring celebration of the man who embodied the movement of justice for the poor.

St. Paul says today that some people look for signs, for spiritual experience; others look for wisdom, for well-crafted ideas, but what Christians offer is Christ crucified, on surface an image of failure and foolish leadership, not of spiritual inspiration. And yet the cross has become for us a demonstration of the power and wisdom of God.

The struggles of El Salvador stir our faith in life after death and hope after desperation. St. Regis is in a unique position to help a community experience the mystery of the cross, and to find inspiration for our struggles.