



December 1, 2018

Dear friends,

On October 14th, Archbishop Oscar Romero was canonized at the Vatican, officially recognizing him as a saint. In celebration of “Saint Romero of the Americas,” we’d like to share his story through the eyes of someone who knew him – former PeaceWorks Board member Esther Chavez. Esther and 23 others, including her son Joaquin, traveled to Rome to participate in the canonization mass.

In 1978 the Catholic radio station in El Salvador had just been bombed and the Archbishop of San Salvador, *Monseñor* Oscar Romero needed to find another way to share his sermons with the millions of Salvadorans who looked to him for spiritual and moral guidance. This was during El Salvador's civil war, and the government had already betrayed its people in favor of a small ruling class who ran the economic, political and military life of the country. Thousands of Salvadorans had been killed or disappeared.

It was Esther Chavez's task to transcribe the *Monseñor's* homilies and with her help, Romero's words would travel to churches in even the smallest, most remote communities. Decades later, these words continue to inspire millions around the world. “Saint Romero was killed because he chose to work with the poor,” Esther explained at the November 8th dinner forum. “And now we can feel honor and also the calling to follow in his steps because the situation in the United States right now is calling everyone.”



DINNER FORUM WITH DOUGLAS CASTRO

ACADEMIC RESEARCHER WITH A FOCUS ON
SOCIAL MOVEMENTS IN NICARAGUA
WITH THE JESUIT CENTRAL AMERICAN
UNIVERSITY (UCA) IN MANAGUA

SATURDAY DECEMBER 8

6:30PM FRIENDS MEETING IN CHATHAM
158 SOUTHERN BLVD, CHATHAM

PeaceWorks, 1125 Woolley Ave., Union, NJ 07083
917-301-6967, peaceworks.org

The Education of an Archbishop

When Oscar Romero was plucked from obscurity to become the Archbishop of San Salvador in 1977, he wasn't exactly a candidate for sainthood. After all, he was chosen by the Catholic hierarchy because he had a reputation for compliance. Some would say he was conservative, others described him as bookish, not particularly aware of how Salvadorans lived outside of the capital city, San Salvador.

But a month after Romero was elected archbishop, his friend and colleague Father Rutilio Grande was assassinated. Grande had been serving some of the tens of thousands of Salvadorans who toiled in the sugar cane plantations, living in extreme poverty. The service to bury his friend became a defining moment for the new archbishop. As Esther put it, "Rutilio really helped [Romero] see reality." After Grande's death, Romero began to meet and preach to Grande's parishioners and other poor communities and his sermons began to address the injustice and escalating violence. Romero continued to speak out through the eve of his own assassination by government forces on March 24th, 1980. In a direct message to soldiers in the Salvadoran Army, Romero appealed, "*I beg you, I beseech you, I order you in the name of God: Stop the repression!*"



February 1977. Oscar Romero is installed as the Archbishop of San Salvador. Walking with Romero to his right is his good friend Rutilio Grande who was assassinated three weeks later.

Esther's Journey

During frequent trips to meet with his parishioners, the archbishop also visited Esther's San Salvador neighborhood, La Chácara, a "base community" where people lived and worked together in the spirit of Christ.



Thousands poured into the Vatican to see Pope Francis lead the mass for the canonization of Saint Oscar Romero of the Americas. After, the pope got in a small vehicle and drove around the plaza to greet as many people as possible.

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“Every Wednesday for a few years we met and studied the Bible, but not the kind that you pray and say “it’s God will” Esther said. “We applied teachings to the current day situation. Never in the Bible does it say that God’s will is for the poor to be poor. In the Bible...people in time of Christ, and how they lived, we had to apply that to today and this was the base of the revolution in El Salvador. Because it was the base communities that started to organize and mobilize people! When people started living the word of the Bible, it was this consciousness that gave birth to the popular movement.”



Esther Chávez and her son Joaquin at the Vatican.

During this time she asked Romero what he thought she could do for her community. The archbishop asked her to identify local needs. Esther thought about it and decided to start a daycare center for the children of working parents. Like Romero, Esther was targeted for her efforts. She explained that the daycare center was the reason she had to leave El Salvador. The government accused her of “teaching kids to be guerrillas.”

“My life changed and we went to the U.S. and started a new chapter,” Chavez explains. “But I never forgot where I came and continue to do this work. Because if someone gave their life for the oppressed, why couldn’t I? This is the message I want to leave – it’s not important where we are, but to do what is right.”

In New Jersey, Esther became a teacher, a human rights activist and a PeaceWorks board member.

Esther said she was bitter towards the United States when she left El Salvador. The U.S. Government had funded the Salvadoran military with millions of dollars in weapons and training, as well as tactical and operational support. But Esther said she soon met people in the U.S. who were also working hard to help the poor, who stood in solidarity with people from Central America in the spirit of *Saint Romero of the Americas*. She says she is proud that her kids grew up in the U.S. and are now doing good things to help others.

“I would like to appeal in a special way to the army’s enlisted men, and in particular to the ranks of the Guardia Nacional and the police -- those in the barracks. Brothers: you are of part of our own people. You kill your own campesino brothers and sisters. Before an order to kill that a man may give, God’s law must prevail: Thou shalt not kill! No soldier is obliged to obey an order against the law of God. No one has to fulfill an immoral law. It is time to take back your consciences and to obey your consciences rather than the orders of sin. The Church, defender of the rights of God, of the law of God, of human dignity, of the person, cannot remain silent before such abominations. We want the government to understand seriously that reforms are worth nothing if they are stained with so much blood. In the name of God, and in the name of this suffering people, whose laments rise to heaven each day more tumultuous, I beg you, I beseech you, I order you in the name of God: Stop the repression!”

*Archbishop Oscar Romero
Sunday March 23rd, 1980*

Join Us this Holiday Season

Come to our Saturday December 8th dinner forum with Douglas Castro. He's an academic researcher whose focus is on popular movements in Nicaragua. Considering that his university, the Jesuit UCA, was at the heart of resistance that rocked Nicaragua earlier this year, he'll have a lot to say about what exactly happened...and where things are going.

Year-end donations will be hand-carried down to Nicaragua with a delegation of our board members. We'll meet with our partners, distribute funds and prioritize work for 2019. We will continue to support projects that help the most marginalized Nicaraguans-- street kids, women escaping domestic violence, small farmers struggling with the effects of climate change, environmental activists working to save endangered sea turtles, among others. There are so many ways to help!

We hope to see you this weekend at our dinner forum and look forward to hearing from you in the New Year.

En paz y solidaridad...y Feliz Navidad

Denis, Diane, John, Micha, Maggie, Susan, Marilyn and Guy
The PeaceWorks Board

PEACEWORKS PROJECTS AT A GLANCE:

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- **Our 74th humanitarian aid shipment (sent in October) has arrived** and was distributed in Nicaragua. Thank you to all who donated items and money!
 - **Our yearly delegation to Nicaragua leaves in January.** This is an excellent time to donate as we can hand-carry funds to our partners. Our "Jim Burchell People to People" Campaign has all kinds of ideas for ways you can help, like \$50 to buy a goat for rural family. Visit peaceworks.org for more details.
 - **New donations have brought the communities of Yalagüina y Pueblo Nuevo, Nicaragua closer to getting new water systems.** Skip Winter and Brooks Smith have just raised \$11,000, but still far short of the \$52,000 that our partner FEDICAMP will need to finish the project. Even the smallest donations will help FEDICAMP make small steps that will get potable water to 110 families (representing over 500 students) living in very remote communities.

I'd like to contribute to the JIM BURCHELL PEOPLE TO PEOPLE CAMPAIGN:

\$50 \$75 \$100 \$150 \$250 \$500 \$1000 \$_____

I'd like to contribute to PeaceWorks general fund to pay for shipments and other projects:

\$50 \$75 \$100 \$150 \$250 \$500 \$1000 \$_____

Please add me to the PeaceWorks email list for meeting reminders and events announcements.

Name: _____ Email: _____

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