

Marching through March?

Some of you have heard from Christian Chavarría recently, on his speaking tour around Alberta (imagine a Salvadoran getting a visa to visit Canada? Canada is back!) observing that while Canadians are born, live and die, Salvadorans are born, survive and die. This is certainly true in terms of: public security and safety; financial matters; health concerns; environmental vulnerability; often dysfunctional society, from family to national levels. And yet, having "lived" in El Salvador for almost half my life--pushing three decades--I must acknowledge that I have done a lot more "living" here than I could ever hope to have done "living" in Canada.

One important disclaimer: while I am surrounded by "survivors", almost 24/7, I really have very little personal experience of what it means to "survive" in El Salvador, or anywhere, in any of the aspects mentioned above. I live a life of unspeakable privilege in this country: I'm not under direct threat; I'm at much less risk of losing my life, whether to violence or to illness; I live in a rather stable home environment; I have health insurance, and access to the best health care; I have a pension, which is evidently more secure than Salvadoran pensions, for the few that even have them; I have a Canadian passport and can leave the country if I have to and when I want to; I have savings for a rainy day / season; I have a valuable and valued network of family and friends, here, there, everywhere; I never go hungry (unless I'm too lazy to shop / cook / eat).

March especially has been a month filled with living, abundant and rich. Can one overdose on living?

As if March isn't full enough, just being March in El Salvador, March included Holy Week this year. Holy Week in El Salvador is supremely holy, set apart, spiritual, social, adventure-filled . . . memorable. This



year Holy Week included 2 houseguests from Edmonton and Mississauga for a few days, then a visit from a long-time SK / Ottawa friend later in the week. It also included a couple days of indulgence with a housemate's extended family and a friend from our street-ministry days in a quiet, secure, mountainous, river-rich (Sumpul, back and forth across the Salvadoran-Honduran border, "*bien mojados*"--"wetbacks"), agricultural, historical corner of this mini-country, complete with every non-monetary amenity one could ever hope to enjoy. For one, we'll be enjoying our banana harvest for some weeks to come. The solemn,

humble "*Santo Entierro*" (Holy Burial) procession down a rural road, the anticipatory Easter vigil in an urban parish, joyous Easter worship led by 20 inspired youth . . . I hardly noticed that I didn't make it to the beach with most Salvadorans (though I regrettably had to turn down one invitation to join a youth group for their day-long excursion).

Oh, and during Holy Week, we had 5 days of 24-hour water service, with unprecedented pressure . . . all at the height of the dry season. I was almost tempted to stay home and wash and re-wash clothes, dishes, floors, etc. all day, flood the yard and terraces, shower repeatedly . . . alas, the keeper of the "*ANDA*" water valve evidently returned from the beach on Tuesday.

March is also San Romero month: film and fora; several masses; two lengthy, victorious processions; a soul-filled musical vigil; enlightening visits to Romero sites; energizing concerts . . . Salvadorans thankful that their Saint has now been recognized and beatified by the Vatican, and is awaiting canonization imminently. These journeys through El Salvador's faith-history were deepened and broadened by the March 12 commemoration of Fr. Rutilio Grande's martyrdom. News of his imminent beatification by the Vatican was greeted enthusiastically.

This March brought us the inspired and inspirational First Ecumenical Conference on Reconciliation and Peace, which brought together a wealth of wisdom and experience on the theme, including 18 UCCanada participants, all with much to contribute, at both personal and conference levels. Their delegation included two moderators (Bill Phipps; Calgary, in the late 90's, and Jordan Cantwell, currently), and two residential school survivors from Maskwacis, AB, Canada, all of whom spoke, all of whom inspired.



As if this weren't enough, we were compelled to squeeze in the first half (5 concerts) of San Salvador's 4th annual Jazz Festival; the impressive First International Film Festival; not to mention a couple Italian cinema movies (all free of charge--do invite all your friends!).

Alas, I didn't manage to celebrate the Spring equinox with Mayan friends this year, always a creation-immersion ceremony.

With one house-mate blessed / plagued with as much wanderlust as I, we manage to expand our mini-world with lots of exploring, especially of nature, culture and culinary zones, wherever we find--or take--ourselves. I pride myself on "keeping up"; I'm sure he doesn't interpret reality so unrealistically.

The gangs, the government and *IPAZ* (ecumenical church response) have had an even more roller-coastery month than usual, but all that news and all those views could fill another entire newsletter update. Suffice it to quote one of yesterday's oh-so-reputable daily newspapers (well, summarize and paraphrase): Monday, March 21, 28 murders reported; Monday, March 28, 0 murders reported as of 7 p.m., which the newspaper, in its perspicacity, described as "a slight decrease". One could say that. Hint--hood-covered press conferences with major gang reps--of a repeat of the March 2012 "truce" fill our pages and airwaves and cyberspace. All manner of speculation, analyses, suspicions, accusations and security measures is rampant, uncontrolled.

Here are a couple readings for your enlightenment / entertainment (if it weren't all so tragic, it might be considered comic):

<http://luterano.blogspot.com/2016/03/gangs-and-government-agree-gangs.html>

And not even Hollywood could invent this episode:

<http://luterano.blogspot.com/2016/03/hypocrisy-el-salvador-style.html>

The month of March culminates with the commemoration of yet another larger-than-life figure, whose seed was planted in a tomb on 30 March, 2007. Might the wisdom, passion and example of Dr. María Julia Hernández--director of the Roman Catholic archdiocesan "Tutela Legal" human rights office--inspire us all: *"Si me reconocen que lo hagan como una persona amante del pueblo salvadoreño, defensora de los Derechos Humanos"*. ("If they recognize me, may it be as a person who is a lover of the Salvadoran people, a defender of human rights.").

Finally, at the end of March, we received government approval to resume our ministry in prisons, this time through long-time friends and colleagues CoCoSI (<http://cocosi.org/>). What we have to offer--a listening ear, open arms, community-building, diverse psycho-social programming to build integral health (a philosophy / strategy too rarely implemented--or even attempted--in this country, it seems)--is what Salvadoran youth and society most need, in my humble opinion. They need to be "taken into account", a phrase I always listen for, but too rarely hear. Yet authorities, claiming to want to reduce violence, insist on imposing more and harsher repressive measures, which have always failed or even backfired in the past, mistakenly hoping that more and harsher punishment will bring El Salvador's youth into line. I fear any calls for "conversion" are misdirected, or at least not broad enough, in this too-criminal, too-violent, too-dysfunctional society, from family to national levels.

So, who could ever "survive" in Canada, or even in some remote, quiet "all-inclusive" tourist resort, after being immersed in such abundant "living" in El Salvador?

Hoping to slow down "slightly" (as per the newspaper definition?) in April (and that's no April Fool's joke) . . .

Addicted to abundant living,

Brian

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