

A Parable of Prodigals

By Brian Rude

From the perspective of "El Salvador", Jesus of Nazareth might seem hopelessly naive . . . or naively hopeful. Until quite recently, it seemed impossible to imagine a Salvadoran prodigal son returning home. But then, a collective Prodigal Son, thousands strong, did return home, from their far-off land. The challenge was then to imagine a Prodigal Father, welcoming this prodigal son home with open arms. Then--amazing grace--that too happened. So, the problem now is not that the Prodigal Son would never return, nor that the Prodigal Father would not be found. The problem is that the older brother isn't allowing the prodigal father to stretch out his arms and lovingly receive his prodigal son back into the family home, much less celebrate his homecoming with a fattened calf.



GANG MEMBERS AT A PENITENTIARY SURRENDER THEIR WEAPONS DURING THE TRUCE

This older son, under a veneer of respectability and "legality"--dutifully living according to innumerable rules--rounded up the extended family and numerous neighbors, together, sanctimoniously, shutting the gate in this prodigal brother's face, ensuring that he could never enter the family home. This older brother and company were intent on convincing themselves, and all around them, that there had been no real change, that the prodigal son was the same as he'd always been, the same as when he left home, and that his presence would be more of a burden than could be tolerated. Their prevailing "wisdom" is that these prodigal compatriots/brothers/sisters are to be shunned totally, left well outside the gate. Nobody is to speak to them, much less dialogue with them, neither family nor neighbors, media nor mediators. "Dialogue" has become a swearword, totally taboo, as it was in the days of martyred Jesuit priests Ellacuria and colleagues, whose prodigal father-like faithfulness provoked their martyrdom.

Eventually, the Salvadoran prodigal brother returned to his far-off land, where he went back to living with his own "family", and by his own rules.

Shortly after this amazing March 2012 homecoming phenomenon--the national truce between El Salvador's primary gangs, *Mara Salvatrucha* and *Barrio 18*--an informal mini-survey was conducted as to whether anyone was aware of a similar kind of surprise--an entire gang population declaring a national truce and asking forgiveness from the entire nation--having happened sometime in history, somewhere on this planet. A couple responses spoke of more individual cases of repentance and homecoming. There was one account of a revival-type scenario in a prison setting, though not linked to any particular truce or reconciliation or peace process.

Other comparable scenarios have come to light.

An excerpt from a "Healing of Memories" seminar in Rwanda, 10 years after the genocide, tells of such corporate repentance:

" . . . we met a group of thirteen hundred young adults on the eve of their release back into the community. Most were contrite, and as we arrived they sang songs about returning home and not knowing whom they would find. All of them were minors at the time they participated in the genocide, and some were shockingly young. They had simply been swept up in the maelstrom, and many of them are still profoundly haunted by the very terrible things they had done. They feel a great sense of sorrow, and they don't want to rot in prison; they want to find a way to be part of creating a different kind of society. As we left, these young people were singing their hearts out about their commitment to rebuild Rwanda with their own hands. I prayed that they would find the space to make that contribution. Their future remains uncertain, because it is asking a great deal of people in their communities to accept back the very individuals who may have killed their mother, father, brother, or sister, and then to continue as if life is normal." (Fr. Michael Lapsley, *Redeeming the Past: My Journey from Freedom Fighter to Healer*, 2012, 192).

In the past decade, *Los Ñetas* and Los Latin Kings, as part of their truce and peace process from 2005-2009, in Ecuador and Spain, asked for pardon from their victims and asked that they be given work, because they wanted to become part of the economically active population.

In El Salvador, the gang truce held stable remarkably well for an entire year, in terms of the much lower homicide rate (5 or 6 daily, down from 14 pre-truce). Since mid-2013, that rate has crept back up to the current 11 or so, which, along with extortion rates which have not dropped significantly, have led many Salvadorans, from the general public to the attorney general to the archbishop, to declare the truce dead. The term "truce" itself took on a most negative connotation early on.

Working in non-gang prisons, I saw, and still see, the positive effects of the truce and peace process every day, thanks to an ongoing atmosphere of respect and trust at all levels, reduced confrontation and violence, freedom from massacres and riots. So the truce and peace process have made a tremendous positive difference in these prison settings.

The ecumenical faith response, "Initiative for Life and Peace" (IPAZ), launched initially in November, 2012, also waned, or withdrew, through much of 2013 and early 2014. It has been revived as of May, showing greater promise for committed accompaniment of this peace process, proposing triangular dialogue: IPAZ and society in general with all branches of government; dialogue between the rival gangs; dialogue between the gangs and IPAZ.

Most of the attention, at all levels, had been focused on the truce between the two primary gangs and the peace process which evolved out of that, extending to 11 municipalities, officially. Its extension to numerous "civilian" (non-gang) prisons, while receiving reasonable press coverage for the first year, never captured the public imagination. The public was more drawn to prison news when it was spiked with violence and blood.

Criticism of this process revolved around the lack of transparency and the mystery as to whether or not the government was behind it, or involved at all, and, if so, at what level. There was considerable public pressure to shut gang youth out of society-- exclusion that had been their cross to bear all their lives--a goal whose success was ensured by blocking media access in prisons once again. There are numerous ways in which this pacification process could be improved, such as being more inclusive of all sectors of society, taking all into account, including women and youth themselves, both gang and non-gang. Colonial-style *machismo* will hopefully be overcome in its numerous manifestations as this peace process evolves.

Little connection is made between the violence of 2014 and the unresolved violence and war crimes of 1970 - 1992. Resolution of the present crisis without addressing the earlier blight on Salvadoran history, a pending task which sparks considerable resistance, makes an uphill battle even more daunting.

There is growing awareness that the ongoing economic crisis, historic and current, limiting the necessary resources and provoking marginalization and exclusion, must be addressed. There is considerable resistance to the significant fiscal reform which will be needed to include all youth in society and thus reduce the delinquent violence and insecurity which plagues all of society.

The definition and analysis of the identity of "victimizers" needs to be broadened beyond gang perpetrators to other manifestations of organized crime operating, for the most part, behind the scenes. Some significant cases have emerged in 2014. Salvadorans and others are eagerly waiting to see if the legislative branch of government will respect due process and pursue justice in these cases, in spite of numerous setbacks over the past months.

As of June, 2014, with the inauguration of the new government, a renewed attempt is being made to revive and redirect the nation's peace-making energy. The broader government-initiated response envisions the official launching of the multi-sectorial "*Consejo Nacional de Seguridad Ciudadana y Convivencia*" (National Council of Citizen Security and Coexistence) by September 29.

While El Salvador is not yet slaughtering the fatted calf to celebrate the prodigal son's return, the prodigal father is once again heading down the road to welcome his prodigal son home, inspired by the vision of diplomatically persuading the elder son to join in the party, celebrating potential family re-unification.

About Brian

Brian Rude was born in Grande Prairie, Alberta, on 24 August, 1956. He moved with his family to Calgary, Alberta, then Vernon, British Columbia, before leaving home to study in Saskatchewan and Alberta. He graduated from the University of Alberta, Edmonton (BA, 1979) and from Lutheran Theological Seminary, Saskatoon (MDiv, 1983; DD, 2009). He resumed studies (mostly online) at the U of Toronto (DMin, 2009 - ____). Brian served as pastor of a rural Lutheran congregation in Saskatchewan (1983-85), followed by an urban congregation in Calgary, Alberta (1985-88).

Brian's first visit to El Salvador was in 1985, when he coordinated an ecumenical delegation of 26 participants from around North America, as a response to Canada's "Ten Days for Global Development" ecumenical focus on Central America. The delegation was hosted in El Salvador by CRISPAZ's Jennifer Casolo. He organized a similar delegation in 1987, at which time he began arranging for a more permanent position with the Lutheran Church in El Salvador, with sponsorship from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, at the national level until 2012, then at the Alberta and the Territories level starting in 2013. Hoping to stay until 1989, he feels privileged that his role of resident accompaniment and solidarity continues to this day. Arrested and expelled by the Salvadoran government during the offensive of 1989, he spent a year "in exile" in Canada, overwhelmed by diverse and enthusiastic audiences across the nation throughout the year.

Brian accompanies the marginalized in El Salvador, primarily prison inmates and personnel, but also campesinos/as, persons living with HIV/AIDS and other illnesses, at-risk youth (gang, non-gang and those caught between), the LGBTI community, students and migrants. He is a listener, to "the least of these", who generally don't have a voice. His own voice is best heard in North America, he feels, as a "reverse missionary". He welcomes North Americans to hear the Salvadoran voices which inspire him, especially first-hand, especially in prison spaces.

An inveterate wanderer and explorer, Brian has spent several months in countries such as Zimbabwe and Sri Lanka, several weeks in a couple dozen other countries, and has lost count of the dozens of countries stamped in his stack of passports for shorter periods of time, on all continents except Antarctica. While he has seen all North American provinces, territories and states from the air. He has yet to set foot in 1 province, 2 territories and 4 states. The irony of living all these years in a prison-cell-sized country, with minimal multi-culturalis



m (and without access to pianos or ski resorts!), is evidence for him of God's sense of humor.

Part of the reason for leaving Canada in 1988 was to escape the strangle-hold of boards and committees. Nevertheless, Brian succumbed to joining the CRISPAZ Board in 2009, and doesn't regret it.