

# IN EL SALVADOR

## Discovering a God Who Hides Himself

By CARMEN MANUELA DEL CID

*'I will be who I will be.'* (Exodus 3:14)

*The war has ended*

WITH THE ENDING OF THE WAR the communities directly affected by the armed conflict in El Salvador have to learn to live not in terms of the war, but in terms of reconstruction. This fact, which appears to be so obvious, is however extremely complicated for two main reasons.

Firstly, during the war the organizing structure of the community was geared to giving logistical support to the guerrillas. This meant that the communities were used to being dependent on the directions given by the leadership of the Farabundo Martí Front for National Liberation (FMLN), leadership which was necessary at that time to defend life from the systematic aggression of the army against the repatriated communities.<sup>1</sup> In peacetime this system has lost its *raison d'être*, and although there is some contact with the Front as a political party, it does not impinge on people's lives as it did in wartime. The responsibility for safeguarding and fighting for the life of the people of these communities now lies in principle with the people themselves. The situation is complicated by the effects of the war: a visible manifestation of this is the generalized apathy now experienced by the communities and which directly affects their organization.

During the war, organization was a matter of life and death: people needed to be organized in order to confront the systematic aggression of the army and the government. Organization was a key element for survival, but it was also an element of internal repression which denied people the right to criticize or to show discontent with measures they thought unjust. They were unable to protest publicly about the forced recruitment of their daughters and sons, for example, or the corruption of leaders; the right to express their grief for the loss of loved ones was denied them too. Today all these past resentments are surfacing, and the current leaders are being judged in the light of the behaviour of certain leaders in the past. Present leaders are looked on with mistrust because of this negative past experience during the years of war. This has

become a vicious circle: few leaders are prepared to put up with the criticisms now being voiced by the people; new candidates are not prepared to stand for office. Consequently the same community leaders are re-elected and end up suffering from burnout. So the communities are becoming organically weaker and weaker, causing ruptures in the social fabric, leaving them more vulnerable to negative external influences, and lowering their capacity to fight for the implementation of the peace accords.

Secondly, there is the difficulty of inserting the ex-combatants into the life of the post-war communities. Peace has revealed the traumatic effects of the war on the entire population, but especially on the young. Most young people joined the guerrillas when they were children. At that time life consisted only of 'today', because they did not know whether they would be alive tomorrow. They lived as fully as they could in this 'today', in the near certainty that they would not see the next day. Then peace came, and now these young people, who learnt to live only for the moment, do not know how to manage lives which go with certainty beyond the 'today'. In the war they only learned to use arms, and that was enough. In peacetime this is no use: now the young people are required to learn how to work the land, in order to comply with family obligations, but they are not all disposed to take up this apprenticeship with courage.

Another factor which influences the insertion of young people in the reconstruction of communities is linked to the need for identity. Belonging to the people's army gave them an identity, made them feel that they were the Front, they were 'the boys'.<sup>2</sup> The civilian population trusted them: they were there for them, in a certain sense. Now in peacetime their status has changed suddenly and completely. If before the young people felt that they were important protagonists in the building of a new society, now they feel rejected by the people who think they are 'lazy, vicious, and good-for-nothing'.<sup>3</sup> They are experiencing a loss of identity in circumstances which they even feel are more adverse than the war itself. In the war they knew what their role was; in the peace they are having to search for a place and rediscover what is to be their participation in society. In general terms all the repatriated and demobilized guerrillas are trying to find a synthesis between the past and the present so that they can continue building the future.

Walking with people who have experienced in their own flesh the brutality of the war means being ready to listen time and again to what they have lived through, ready to heal the pain caused by these

memories. This is not at all easy, because there is inner suffering involved, but, at the same time, it is a privilege to drink from the well of the experience and faith of a people. It motivates one to stay with them in the fight for life.

*God wants life in spite of death*

Suffering has always been difficult to understand, especially when it is a suffering produced by the hardness of the human heart which has freely chosen death as an option for life (Deut 30:15). Communities who experienced in their own flesh the terror of feeling their lives threatened, who were defenceless as worms, fragile before the power of arms, came through a living process to understand that God did not want people to die, or go through situations brimming over with the cruelty and the inhumanity of their enemies. From this total negation of life, they discovered the face of a God with a merciful heart, a God who wanted life. They saw, therefore, that life had to be defended, and their struggle became a fight to the death for life. Out of this experience they explained their suffering as the necessary pains of giving birth to a different society. This interpretation was something that generated hope and a commitment to transform this reality of death into a reality of life.

The spirituality which the people developed in this period is a spirituality of hope: this can be seen in the drawings and writings that came from the people in the refuges and later from those who were repatriated. Their drawings and their songs denounce their suffering, but at the same time they transmit the energy and courage to work for a better future, a future in a land 'flowing with milk and honey', a place where they can live with the dignity that every human being deserves. The experience of suffering leads them to find a God who is present in their struggles, present in their suffering. They feel that God is identified and in solidarity with them both in their personal struggles and in the great collective struggle.

It has to be said that while the feminine face of God does not appear explicitly, it is the women who most identify with the suffering of Christ, because they know that he was a defenceless victim like themselves. The great majority of women lived through the war feeling at the mercy of the enemy, and in that they identified with Christ who confronts his enemies from physical weakness but also from the strength of his spirit. They were more vulnerable than the men, both physically and emotionally, because even in the refugee camps the enemy always reached them. The enemy always harmed them through

their sons and daughters, whom they had to give up to the war even if they did not want to, in order to reach the utopia of a free country. In one sense the women were the weak ones, but at the same time they were the strongest. From their inner strength they preserved that spirituality of hope, encouraging the faith of the people in the camps and refuges. It was the women who, in the celebrations of the Word, reflected on the nearness of God to the suffering people, to the people who were resisting the enemy, the nearness of God to the orphans and widows. It was the women who, faced with the question 'Where is God?', could answer 'He is here among us!'

*Seeking a God who hides himself*

With the signing of the peace accords in 1992 the armed conflict in El Salvador officially came to an end. The whole population was profoundly moved by this moment. There were great expectations for the new future, a general longing for things to be different from those they had lived through in times past. The people wanted to breathe a little life, and hope shone before their eyes with an indescribable brilliance. But the brilliance clouded over, giving way to the trauma of a whole people<sup>4</sup> torn between resignation and indignation at having paid such a cost – 75,000 lives – in their fight to the death for *life*.

The coming of peace has allowed the pain so long repressed to be spoken of freely. The expression of this pain is significant especially for the women, who were often forbidden for security reasons to express publicly their profound grief over the death of a loved one fallen in battle. In the days of the *guindas* (whole communities fleeing from the enemy, sometimes for days on end), for the safety of everyone young children sometimes had to be killed when they began to cry, so as not to betray the presence of the community. The mothers had to resign themselves to this horror, because the children died to save a multitude.

Now all this repressed pain, in men and women, is surfacing in different ways: from psychosomatic illnesses to the loss of any feeling for life in its many manifestations,<sup>5</sup> but above all in the interpretation of the horrors people lived through in the war. The pain is interpreted in the light of the present, but in comparative terms, comparing the hoped-for reality and the reality as it is. Faced with reality as it is, all the pain caused by the physical and psychological suffering of the war is being reinterpreted, flavoured with the bitterness of a 'useless suffering'. Very often men and women need to talk about what they have lived through. The memories flood back so easily that a song, a

place, a word, can bring back the horrors in every detail. And nearly always the stories end with a question, which is at the same time a profound lament: 'And what was the use of all the struggle and all the suffering? What was it for, if we are not better off than we were before? We are worse off because we have lost our sons and daughters and we are poorer than before.'

After the signing of the peace accords and the euphoria which the ending of the war brought with it, the repatriated and demobilized people of the Front are finding that the reality which they were aiming to change has hardly changed at all. They are faced with the necessity of continuing to struggle and press for the implementation of the peace accords; they feel deceived and frustrated. And it is from this frustration that they are seeking to make sense of what they have lived through. So they ask, 'How do we find meaning in suffering if it has been useless? And if this suffering has been useless, what is the point of going on struggling?' A clear change has taken place in the interpretation of the meaning of suffering, partly because the physical and emotional exhaustion resulting from the war has not allowed them to perceive that the fight for a different, human, fraternal and just society is not over.

To describe the faith process the communities are going through in these post-war times, I would use the biblical image of Naomi, who left her country with her family to save them from the famine which was laying the land waste. This woman, after fighting all her life in the hope of changing her situation, finally finds herself abandoned, without children and without husband. That is why, on returning to her people, she wants to be called Mara, which in Hebrew means 'bitter' (Ruth 1:20-21). She wants to be called Mara because she feels full of bitterness; contemplating her reality at this moment, and weighing up her life, she feels she has lost more than she has gained. Humanly speaking she is right to feel like this: she has lost her children and her partner, she has no house, no land, and on top of this she is now old and too tired to go on struggling. But this is only a stage to be gone through until she is in a fit state to reread her new situation, discern the possibilities in that reality, and then take the necessary steps to transform it.

The communities have to reach the stage of being honest about the reality: the reality is what it is; one may wish it were different, but it is not. Only by accepting the reality of what is, will they be able to take the steps to transform it, only then will they discern that the great absent one was always present.

During the war the communities had an Exodus experience in which they met a God who was close, a God who promised fidelity in good times and bad, a God who was there, accompanying them. In the post-war period the communities do not feel the strength of the nearness of God – God now seems to be absent. And although the people do not speak explicitly of the absence of God, we say that there is the experience of absence because they do not speak explicitly of God's presence, they do not link God with the fight for life as they used to do. If you speak with the older people of the communities about how they see the situation within the community, they think that 'things are going badly in the community, nobody respects anybody else, no one wants to help the widows work their land, though in Mesa Grande [a refugee camp in Honduras] before we came here they promised to help the widows and the old people and said we would all work together, but nothing of that has been done here. The truth is that here we have forgotten God.' Generally when we forget someone, it is because that someone is absent, and if the absent one does not share our daily living then they are forgotten. The people feel the absence of God because of the same oppressive reality that surrounds them, locally, nationally and globally.

The aggression of the economic situation is so strong and asphyxiating that it is exiling the God of Life by putting the people into an accelerated rhythm, an urgency, of seeking ways to ensure subsistence. Unlike wartime, when the salvation of one was the salvation of all, now it is a matter of 'let those who can, save themselves'. It is clear that the neoliberal system aims at closing the spaces for the welcoming of the other, and therefore of God. This system, which is the structural expression of a minority of humanity which has opted for death, just as the majority has opted for life, is not interested in the God of *life*.

What type of spirituality can emerge from this reality? It could be said that within the communities two types of spirituality are struggling, one stronger than the other. There is a conformist and permissive spirituality, and there is a spirituality of resistance.

The conformist and permissive spirituality is one which does not move beyond the lament, the complaint, the frustration, and which leads to aggressiveness towards others, towards the environment and towards the people themselves. This spirituality has in its centre the absence of God, it leads to the belief that it is not worth going on struggling for the old dream of a different world because things are not going to change, and if things do not change, it is better to look after oneself without bothering about whether others are trampled in the process.

The spirituality of resistance is one which, in spite of the aggression surrounding the communities, goes on maintaining the hope that reality will change. It is the hope based on the conviction that this change can only come from below. This spirituality is moving some men and women to commit themselves to the search for the integral development of their communities, but as a development which starts from solidarity with the most defenceless sectors of the communities. This approach seeks to maintain a critical conscience, in the face of the convenience of letting oneself be dragged along by the current of the 'individual well-being', or the passivity of 'we can't do anything'. We call this the spirituality of resistance because from it gospel values are kept alive, leading people to commit themselves to life, especially the life of the poorest. And it is a spirituality of resistance, too, because it sets itself against the reigning priorities which are now the market, competition, production, capital. These are priorities with no regard for the environment, or the growing impoverishment of the great majority, or the values of solidarity, of mercy – in other words, where life in all its multiple manifestations counts for nothing.

From this spirituality the actual situation can be read as a part of the road which has to be trodden in this great fight for life. From this spirituality can be discovered the God who hides himself, who is in the resistance, accompanying people in the fight which, as it was before, is unequal but, also as it was before, where God's presence is what gives strength to go on fighting from weakness. God is discovered as the one who continues to invite us to make an option, and to opt for *life* in spite of *death*.

The communities present a depressing reality: among the people there is a sense of existential failure. This is an experience contrary to what was lived in the time of war when, in spite of death, pain, fear and the gratuitous taking of life, the communities lived with hope; life, though steeped in death, had meaning. Nevertheless, regardless of this depression a spirituality in resistance is emerging which continues to believe in life in spite of the slow physical and spiritual death of the majority. It is emerging even though people are being brought to believe from their own experience of life that there is no tomorrow, that all that matters is the decontextualized present of the past, and that God belongs to the private sphere and has nothing to do with the day to day struggles of the great majority of the people.

### *Conclusion*

The war is over, the roar of the planes and helicopters which so terrorized the population, especially the women and the children, is no

longer heard. It is as if it has all been a nightmare, that the long days and nights of fleeing are only tales of terror that the children do not quite believe.

The war is over, but the fight to the death for life is not. Today we have to fight for the implementation of the peace agreement, fight against the subtle or shameless aggression of the government towards the communities which were formed on repatriation. We have to fight against faith postures which alienate instead of being credible voices in the midst of so much distortion of the truth, instead of being light in the midst of darkness. They are alienating when they become changed into the official channel of the interests of the powerful, presenting a god lost in transcendence, a god who has nothing to do with the great and the small struggles of the people.

Today we are struggling to keep what has been won: 'the organization' of the communities. This 'organization' is slowly becoming unsustainable because the dominant ideology has mortally wounded it, has made some feel that well-being, comfort, consumerism, private initiative are good – at the cost of communitarian well-being. What is now important to these people is the individual not the community, capital not the person.

Today we have to fight against forgetfulness, against despair, against the fatigue which leads to permissiveness,<sup>6</sup> fatigue which is the door through which injustice can become engraved in the heart of the communities, thus aborting the dream of those who gave their lives in the search for a different society.

This article was translated from the Spanish by Pamela Hussey SHCJ.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> A term which describes the civilian population which fled from the violence of the war and took refuge in other countries, and who before the war ended decided to return and repopulate their communities.

<sup>2</sup> An affectionate term which the people used to refer to the guerrillas.

<sup>3</sup> Pejorative expressions the people apply to the young, witnessing to the ill will they bear the ex-combatants whom they consider to be responsible for the social disorder of the communities.

<sup>4</sup> When I speak of the people I am not including the historical élites wielding political, economic and military power.

<sup>5</sup> This loss of feeling can be seen in the lack of response to nature, in the disintegration of community values and of solidarity; today it hardly matters if by acting individually we damage other persons or the environment; there is little interest in active participation in religious events, like celebrations of the word, the mass, etc.

<sup>6</sup> A phenomenon in some communities where everyone does what they feel like, trampling on each other.