

During Spring break this semester, I was part of a group of 14 people from the School of Theology and Ministry at Boston College that went on an Immersion trip to El Salvador.

The group consisted of laymen and women, and one priest. There were 12 Americans, 1 New Zealander and myself, a Singaporean and currently a resident at the Assumptionist Center in Brighton. Since Fall last year, we had been eagerly preparing for the trip by fundraising, getting to know one another, researching on El Salvador and working out logistical details together. The purpose of the trip was for us to be immersed in the history, culture and society of El Salvador in the span of one week, and an important part of preparing ourselves for this task was to pray together at each pre-trip meeting. This spiritual preparation served us well in letting us experience fully the small taste we had of the sadness, despair and joys that El Salvador has had in the last few decades.

In El Salvador, we met with different groups and people and had dialogue sessions with them. In each session, we gained a glimpse into a different part of Salvadoran life. We met with different persons and groups who worked in Salvadoran prisons, with orphans, abused street children, with post-war trauma victims, and even with members of El Salvador's ruthless and notorious gangs. We met with Christian base communities that work with the poor, as well as Christian groups that help people who fall prey to Mexican "coyote" smugglers. We met with government senators from both the ruling and opposition party, and heard how the ruling party senator, who had been tortured as a rebel in the 1980's by a 10-day sleep deprivation now sits next to, in parliament, with the man who tortured him. We met with artisans who make a living by selling their handicrafts.

In short, our one-week trip in El Salvador presented us with a bite-size history into El Salvador. It was very challenging for me during the different dialogue sessions, because almost all of them revolved around stories of the pain and suffering of the Salvadorans. I could actually feel the pain, to a second-hand extent, of the Salvadorans throughout the civil war, the mindless massacres, of the street children who have been abused by their own families, of the prisoners, of the gangsters who have no better life opportunities, and of the orphans. Yet, despite the suffering, the people we dialogued with were all working actively to build El Salvador from the ground up, dedicating their lives for a better tomorrow. Many of them have done so at great personal costs.



What rubbed off on me was that a deep sense of hope pervaded the Salvadorans. In spite of the collective and personal suffering, they, and especially the younger ones, are full of hope that tomorrow will always be better for the whole country. One memory that persists with me is that a young orphan who is studying to be a mechanic said, “God has given me this opportunity, and I intend to make the best of it”. That is the vibe I am left with of El Salvador, that the time of war and conflict is over, and now is the time for us (Salvadorans) to rebuild our lives and each other.



The highlight of the trip for me was participating in mass at the tomb of El Salvador’s hero-saint, Monsignor Oscar Romero. The Mass was very much in the style of Romero. The presiding

priest was charismatic and riled up the crowd with anti-government rhetoric. The congregation loved it. The special part of the Mass for me was during communion, when people would receive the Eucharist and go straight to Romero's tomb and pray sorrowfully there, presumably for the strength and perseverance for a better tomorrow. This was Romero's fight, for a better El Salvador each day. The whole atmosphere of the mass was tremendously uplifting, giving everyone inspiration to continue the good fight in the spirit of Romero.

The trip has left the whole group, and especially myself, with a contradicting sense of humility and hope; Humility in that we encountered so many inspiringly selfless people in their service to the Salvadorans, and the hope that we must keep on building each day in our hearts. El Salvador, the country of the Savior, will always remind me that no pain and suffering can overcome the hope we have for a better tomorrow.

By Matthew Chua