

Bron's Talk

As you probably know El Salvador is a small country that lies between Guatemala and Honduras in Central America - the size of Wales with a population of over five million. So grossly over-populated.

Since the Spanish conquistadors landed over 500 years ago it has suffered a history of appalling brutality and injustice. Centuries of military dictatorship and corrupt governments culminated in 1979 with civil war between the US backed Salvadoran Army, the oligarchy and the ordinary peasants ('Campesinos'). As a background comment, suffice to say that 94% of the land is owned by 6% of the population. The civil war that followed was one of our century's cruellest ones - over 80,000 people were killed, death squads abounded, as did torture - 70% of the people became refugees.

I've been to El Salvador annually for 30 years now working as a volunteer. So how did I come to get involved in a very far off and little known country? Well in 1985 I read a book I bought for 20p from Hay Oxfam shop where I was a volunteer, about the systematic slaughter of the native people in Central and South America. I couldn't forget it - it haunted me. I was then a night nurse at Hereford Hospital, spending most of my free time visiting my elderly folk - so what could I do? By chance, I saw a letter in The New Statesman from the El Salvador and Guatemalan Human Rights Group I am an admirer of Oscar Ramero. I wrote - I joined - started to teach myself Spanish and finally decided I'd go out for a month, paying my way and helping in any way I could. The group wrote to a priest they knew - twice -with no answer but by this time my month's holiday was booked - so I sent Father Manuel a Christmas card and went.

I arrived nearly two days later, too tired to even be apprehensive - a decrepit old taxi took me from the airport to Mejicanos, a very poor area in San Salvador. It was pitch black, the electricity pylon had been blown up and I could hear other not too distant explosions. I knocked at the tiny black grill in the parish house door and practised my first Spanish. 'Padre Manuel, por favor'. All I got in the rapid answer was 'Espania Vacaciones'. My heart sank, but, so typical of the warm hospitality I was to unfailingly meet (except from the Immigration and the Army), they welcomed

me in.

No one spoke English and my Spanish was very basic. By chance the priest belonged to the Passionist order, so Padre Miguel - no doubt with relief -phoned the Passionist Sisters to see if I could help them. Before they collected me, Miguel took me with him to an orphanage run by the Catholic Church. I remind you that the Salvadoran Government does nothing for their children, not in prevention, protection or care. There were 100 children there, from two week old infants swinging in tiny hammocks in the trees to 14 year olds, and only four people to care for them all. I've never forgotten them.

The next day I went to live with the Passionist Sisters in their simple little breezeblock home with tin roof (no protection I was later to discover from helicopter bullets!!) We had no electricity or flush toilets and daily carried the water - the nuns on their heads in urns - me in buckets. The door was always open and in came the people and children - whom I was to get to know so well. I grew used to the soldiers up and down the streets, guns cocked and pointing, the army trucks full of soldiers - each machine gun pointed outwards - and the ominous and constant putter of the low flying helicopters.

There was no doctor so, with some trepidation I can tell you - I'd trained as a nurse and midwife years before and had been in social work for many years -held a daily clinic in the Church. All the diseases associated with poverty presented - malnutrition, anaemia etc and everyone had their personal disaster to relate - of torture, 'disappearance' of loved ones, death squads, fleeing from the army - all were refugees and, of course, the children were involved in all these tragedies, so on top of their many physical maladies was grief, depression and psychological illness. I quickly found that an important part of the treatment was listening, a hug, and for the kiddies an old Christmas card. When I come back to this country I always get a material shock - often the children over there would show me their card a year later.

With the nuns, I attended the nearby church, my first time in a Catholic one. I was a recent Anglican after long years of agnosticism, little dreaming that first Sunday, that five years on I'd be received into the Church, amongst the people

whose example of living (and liberation theology) had led me to that act. If you think confirmation nervous making - try doing it in Spanish! But it was deeply moving - amongst the people I knew so well and cared for - that was over 25 years ago but I'll never forget it.

That Sunday night a young nun joined our small community - Coralia - radical and committed. She slept in the bunk above mine and every night we'd conduct a serious conversation - yet often hilarious between her lack of English and my poor Spanish. Twice a week we'd visit the political prisoners and political could mean being in possession of a bible - subversive literature. But that's another story.

Thereafter I went back every year - in between sending all I could in cash and giving talks to raise awareness and money - sending it through the good office of the Jesuit Mission in London.

In 1987 I saw the aftermath of the dreadful earthquake and the proliferation of cardboard and black plastic bag houses - if one can grace them with that term. Eight years ago I experienced two earthquakes, and hundreds of strong tremors myself - quickly learning to put the children between door frames - safer than in the streets with falling debris.

Whilst I was out there in 1989 (November 11th actually) open war broke out - and I learnt a new Spanish phrase 'Toca y Queda' (curfew) and still recall the sound of the frantic patter of hundreds of feet running up the road to beat the 5pm deadline - and certain death - that abounded, shells bombs, guns. I survived, but many didn't - among them six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper and her young lassie, murdered in the university where they worked, by the army. I remember the stunned silence, then the weeping, when the news broke - I was huddled on the floor looking after 200 refugees in the kitchen of a Jesuit parish hall – the sorrow and fear – us next? Such was life in El Salvador.

In 1990 and 1991 I spent three months in the volcanic mountains of Chalatenango where the individual stories were even more shocking - the village I lived in was virtually populated by women and children, the men were mostly dead. I used to go swimming daily in the River Sumpul with the children, enjoying the hot sun, their joy and the clear beautiful river bordering Honduras -but that, too, had been the scene of a terrible massacre where the Campesina women

and children were chased into the river by the shooting Salvadoran army and on the Honduras bank, their soldiers shot too. Most of the victims were babies and toddlers either shot or slipping from their mum's grasp and drowning. Dysentery was endemic, kids died of malnutrition there.

The peace accord between the Guerrillas and government was brokered in 1992 by the United Nations, who stayed on for four years to supervise it, good people. But El Salvador remains one of the most violent countries in the world and the war, as ever, left in its wake the jetsam of fighting - too many loose weapons - and children.

So many children orphaned, lost in the fleeing of refugees from the soldiers, children running away from the abject poverty at home, from physical, sexual and emotional abuse.

Coralía (Cora for short), who'd slept in the top bunk on my first visit, had become a close friend over the years so, when she left the Order to work with street children, I joined her as a volunteer. She worked for a small organisation, which ran a residential centre for twelve boys - but our work was mainly on the street. They were long and distressing hours talking with the children who lived on the streets, many openly sniffing glue, and who could blame them seeking comfort in that illusion? The reality was stark enough. Every evening we shared a final coffee at a street stall talking of the pressing need for preventive work to stop kids becoming street children and the particular need for care of girls - no group helped them. Then one night I returned to the nuns and found a letter from my sister, we'd lost our parents two years before, she wrote that their small holding had at last sold. I sat sweating on my bunk bed, swatting mosquitoes and working out my share. The next day I told Coralía and AMOR was born. Monsenor Oscar Romero, (as you will know was the radical Archbishop shot at the altar by soldiers in 1980) and thus 'Association Monsenor Oscar Romero', AMOR (which is *love* in Spanish) is what we called our foundation for children.

The property that we finally bought was an old, run-down one - coincidentally just across the road from where I'd spent my first night in the country - six years before - in Mejicanos - a very poor barrio area of San Salvador.

Whilst the Centre was repaired, Cora worked on the local streets befriending children and I

returned to social work, sharing my salary with her. Despite my age I was - and remain - an impulsive person and, literally, never considered how we might fund the Centre once it was bought - but a British Jesuit priest Fr Michael Campbell-Johnson contacted CARITAS - (Germany) who agreed to finance the Centre for a year but did three. Meantime I carried on giving talks and holding events etc to supplement costs. The most prestigious one was in Hereford Cathedral where I was acutely aware that Fr. Ellacuria, the Rector of San Salvador University, should have been alongside me - but he'd been shot with his colleagues and staff. I had attended their requiem mass. In 1996 was the grand opening of the Centre named Casa Harry Edith - for my parents - as their hard work (and mine as a kid) had bought it. It flourished - Cora headed a staff of part time cook, two educadoras (teacher/carers) and two part time outreach social workers who visit the surrounding communities where problems abound - poverty, crime, prostitution, drugs, apathy - I was a social worker for 20 years in this country - and - believe me, apathy - a by product of poverty is a problem in itself.

You all know the tedium of repetitious fund raising - talks, coffee mornings, car boots etc - and from 2000 the whole burden of maintenance fell on ACES, as we called our little committee of volunteers on registering as a charity in 2000. I've always regretted that, on registering, we had to change our name to ACES in this country.

Briefly the goals of AMOR are to prevent children living on the streets and to rehabilitate those who do so. Up to 75 children attend daily at the Centre but a lot of work is outreach. Mejicanos is a huge, very deprived area of 200,000 people - many of whom are children. The AMOR team work with 200 youngsters in these communities. The initial contact is usually by a team member befriending kids wandering the streets, hanging about waste ground, glue sniffing, begging or selling as cars stop at lights or - before it closed - making a living on the vast, stinking rubbish dump competing with adults, packs of dogs, rats and huge black vultures.

If the children have a home, visits are paid to it - trying to help the parent or adult - who is often involved with drugs or a prostitute. Many of our children have been abused in every way and all live in abject poverty, lacking proper food, schooling, medical care, any stimulus like toys and, so

importantly, love.

Visiting the homes is depressing - not only the poverty but sometimes hostility. Parents are always invited to the Centre - to help if they want - and to the little 'fiestas' at Christmas, Monsenor Romero's Day and Children's Day -sadly few come. Having no minibus to take the children out means hiring a bus -so that's a rare event - but every year I add my £200 winter fuel payment to share a trip with the kids. Their first view of the sea is a real joy - they laugh - they scream from the bus and on the beach can't decide whether to run into the waves - or away. When a child first comes to the Centre we take them for a medical and provide any ongoing medicines - all very costly - it's said that medicines cost more in El Salvador than anywhere else in the world - I believe it - from personal experience now.

The day starts at 7am - mornings are taken up with teaching basic literacy and numeracy skills - with the aim to get them integrated into school as soon as possible - all schooling is part time in El Salvador - understandably the kids all prefer the morning session as the teachers get more irritable in the afternoon- no wonder with the heat and overcrowding! AMOR keeps close contact with the schools. The Centre afternoons are used to help with homework of the morning school children and crafts, art - the kids love painting, dance and music. Two Danish volunteers once donated some instruments so there's a band of sorts!

Small discussion groups are held on drugs, abuse, sex, gangs - a real problem over there - four of our children have been shot to death on the streets. One of the saddest groups I've sat in was when everyone in the circle related how they were treated at home - from being beaten with electric wire to having stones 'thrown at me'. I'm afraid nearly all of them have suffered some form of abuse in their lives. So quite a bit of our funds go on psychological treatment – expensive - but then nothing's free over there.

Meals are two mid-time snacks of fruit, biscuits and a nutritional midday meal -many kids eating veg for the first time - but you never ever see a scrap of anything left on the plate.

No child is asked about religious belief but the underlying ethos of the Centre is Christianity and its manifestations - in loving, sharing and caring for each other. For the first time in their lives the

children are respected as individuals with rights - and they proudly sing the song they've composed - to every visitor 'Cada nina y cada nino tiene derecho' - and the 'derechos' (rights) are listed in subsequent verses. We have a bust of M. Romero in the quiet area.

Games are popular and now we have the new Centre with a playground all free time is spent on football, basketball or the huge skipping rope where staff, boys and girls mix. Airlines are much tighter now but I used to manhandle two huge suitcases, a rucksack that tipped me back of the National Express bus, whilst in front hung a vegetable net full of balls of all sizes I'd fished out of the Wye –or now, the Avon - or annexed - if one lies on the village common unclaimed for three days it's mine! And, of course, lots of folk have donated lego, jigsaw, cars, dolls and we've humped them out over the years. They are all shared. Similarly all the children help with cooking and cleaning - there's a rota - El Sal is pretty macho so new boys are often seen handling a broom awkwardly - if a little girl goes to take it, the others remind her to 'show him how, don't do it'.

As the work went on we realised the great need for a refuge - particularly for girls. In 2000 I wrote round 30 charities asking for help to buy a small residential house. Only CAFOD responded positively - with £10,000 - the rest we raised and finally bought 'Casa Amando' named for one of the murdered priests. The house is just up the road from the new Centre and provides a home for 12 (sometimes 14) girls from 4 to 17 - all at risk of physical or sexual abuse. They go to school and to the Centre so a housemother is only needed for weekends and 5.30 pm - 7am in the week. The girls live as a family helping with cooking and doing all their own cleaning and laundry.

I should explain that every penny raised goes out to maintain the children. Nothing is spent on admin, travel etc. hence the sparseness of material on our table tonight - just leaflets and the quarterly newsletter produced on a computer but lots of photos. This last year has been the first one when we've failed to raise the total money needed to maintain the Centre and Refuge. Coralia is busy looking for financial help in El Salvador but it's hard to find. Here we continue to seek funds too. We desperately need help to continue the work with the children.

Two years ago I made - I thought - my last trip out as I was pretty unwell out there but I feel I must go to help look for funds - it's taken me two years to save the fare - and the costly health insurance.- I go next month.

When a child has been at the Centre or Refuge a little time they sit with a member of staff and tell her a bit about themselves - I've certainly talked for long enough so let one of the children speak for herself now .

"I'm called Rosa - Rosita - I live with my aunt - my mammy isn't here anymore she left when I was 7 - I'm 12 now. I used to have to beg on the street every day - if I didn't bring enough money back my aunt beat me. Sometimes I stayed out all night too frightened to go back - and bad things happened to me - I can't tell you - I'm too ashamed. Then Coralia talked to me on the street one day and visited my aunt. Now I come to the Centre every day and I'm in the 4th grade at school. After school I come back to the Centre - I learn more and play and can talk about things if I want, I feel now for the first time in my life - someone cares about me"

Muchas gracias