



## **Two Shining Stars: A Personal Reflection on the Deaths – and Lives – of Salvadoran Pastors Francisco Carrillo and Jesús Calzada de Carrillo**

*by*

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I knew from the outset that this would be one of my most difficult trips as ELCA regional representative in Central America. And it was.

During the flight from San José to San Salvador, I tried to read part of a new book on gang violence in Central America, searching for insights that might help me better understand a phenomenon that has reached such frightening proportions in El Salvador. But other more urgent questions kept disrupting my train of thought:

What words of comfort can I offer to the Carrillo children? How can we, as members of the worldwide Lutheran communion, best accompany them and the Salvadoran Lutheran Church (ILS) as they mourn such a tragic loss? Will my words and actions be adequate for

all that I might be called upon to do? All I could do was say a silent prayer as I left the plane and began an intense 6-day visit.

My Initial “Orientation”

Right after my arrival in San Salvador, I had my first encounter with the children of Lutheran pastors **Francisco Carrillo** and **Jesús Calzada de Carrillo**: a son, a daughter and their respective spouses.

Five days earlier, their parents had said good-bye to them as they left Jayaque to make the short trip down the mountain to the “Montes de Penzburg” congregation in the “2 de Mayo” community. There they would conduct worship as they had done every Saturday afternoon for years. Little did anyone suspect that this would be their final pastoral act.

A few hours later, their children learned that Francisco and Jesús had been shot and killed as they were leaving the church and getting into their vehicle for the return trip to Jayaque.

That fateful call was followed in rapid succession by a series of heart-

wrenching tasks: identifying the bodies of their murdered parents, negotiating funeral arrangements, accompanying the bodies of their parents from San Salvador back to Jayaque for the wake, funeral service and burial, all of which took place in less than 48 hours.

As they quietly recounted the details of this painful family ordeal, a sense of righteous indignation came to the surface. “*No es justo lo que les hicieron.*” [It’s not right what they did to them.] For some reason, these words remained with me throughout my visit.

It surely wasn’t right that Francisco and Jesús were gunned down just a few steps from the church entrance of the congregation that they had faithfully served for more than a decade. But they are only the most recent martyrs in El Salvador, a nation whose soil is bathed by the blood of the martyrs.

It was equally unjust when an elite Salvadoran military unit entered the grounds of the Central American University (UCA) 17 years earlier and assassinated six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper and a 16-year old girl . . . Nor was it right when a military sniper assassinated Archbishop Oscar Romero as he was celebrating mass in a convent chapel on March 24, 1980 . . . Nor when the long procession of El Salvador’s lesser-known martyrs, motivated by their faith in a God of truth and justice, were summarily executed by death squads during the years of the Salvadoran civil war.

And it isn’t right that Salvadorans have to live in the climate of violence and fear that they do *today*.

In between these flashes of anger and indignation, the Carrillo children were gripped by another emotion . . . fear. “*Tenemos mucho miedo.*” [We are

really afraid.] And with good reason. When they returned home from the cemetery right after their parents’ burial, they were confronted with another frightful scene. Their house was being watched by an unidentified man. There was no time to waste. In that moment, they had no choice but to grab what few personal possessions they could and leave.

You see, violent crime has reached epidemic proportions in El Salvador. The official statistics say that the national murder rate was 55 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2005. This translates into an average of 10 murders per day. During the week that I was there, the daily death toll was much higher. In two days alone, a total of 33 people were killed.

Like the children of Francisco and Jesús, surviving relatives of murder victims are often tracked down, threatened and even killed to make sure that no one dares say anything to police investigators.

Due in part to such threats and intimidation, the vast majority of violent crimes in El Salvador are never investigated. But there is another reason why potential witnesses are afraid to cooperate. They may unknowingly seal their own death sentence by talking to a corrupt police official who belongs to the same organized crime ring that is under investigation.

Recently, a new witness protection law was passed in El Salvador in an attempt to respond to some of the fundamental weaknesses in the criminal justice system. But government prosecutors admit that much more than a new law is needed.

Effective implementation will require a major commitment of public funds so that key witnesses and their families can be relocated and protected during the course of a criminal investigation and trial. But the likelihood that the Salvadoran government will approve the necessary funding any time soon is very remote.

Consequently, this cycle of violent crime and impunity won't likely be broken in the near future. And that means that poor Salvadorans from communities like Jayaque will continue to live under a constant cloud of fear, praying each morning for divine protection and doing the best they can to stay out of harm's way as they go about their daily routines.

#### The Power of a Photo

Given the multiple obstacles to a thorough investigation of the Carrillo murders, one could easily lose hope. Ironically, however, a photo of Francisco and Jesús that was circulated just three days after their deaths (copy attached) provided an unexpected source of emotional strength for me and for many others of the Salvadoran Lutheran Church.

When I first opened this photo from my office in Costa Rica, it brought tears to my eyes. During the frequent meetings that I attended in Bishop Medardo Gomez' office, the same photo periodically flashed across the screen of his personal computer.

In a round of visits with government prosecutors and police investigators, a pastor of the Salvadoran church took a copy with him and conspicuously placed it on office desks where it remained for the duration of each meeting. Afterwards, he commented to

me: "*Esa foto hizo mucho trabajo hoy.*" [That photo did a lot of work today.]

On the last day of my visit, a life-size enlargement of this photo appeared on a new banner that had been hung in the open-air chapel where Bishop Gomez meets each Wednesday with church leaders for devotions and Bible study. I'm sure that this banner will also be used in many future church events and public actions on the Carrillo murders. All morning long, a smaller reproduction remained in the center of the altar flanked by two candles, one for Francisco and the other for Jesús.

What is so special about this photo? It vividly captures the essence of Francisco and Jesús while they were alive: their essential goodness, simplicity of being and devotion to each other; and their unconditional commitment to the poor communities they served as Lutheran pastors.

It has been tremendously helpful in enabling those closest to the Carrillo family and to the Salvadoran church to recall the rich details of two grace-filled lives rather than dwell on the tragic circumstances of their unjust and untimely deaths.

#### A Living Legacy of Faithful Ministry

While this photo certainly serves as a moving visual reminder, *living* evidence from the ministry of Francisco and Jesús abounds and is clearly evident in the lives of the people around them, beginning with the close-knit family that they left behind.

Like their parents, the Carrillo children are gentle, soft-spoken and deeply committed to the ministry of the Lutheran Church in Jayaque. In the midst of their own grief, they are deeply concerned for the physical, mental and

spiritual well-being of parishioners in Jayaque, especially members of the “2 de Mayo” congregation where the murders took place. And they constantly ponder ways to keep the different ministries of the church going in Jayaque.

In hushed conversations with church members, the breadth of the pastoral ministry carried out by Francisco and Jesús became evident: children with happy memories from the end-of-the-school-year party that they had celebrated with their pastors a few days earlier; youth talking about the rehearsal schedule for the annual Christmas pageant that had been planned; women of all ages expressing their desire to continue a Bible study that had become a weekly part of their lives.

And like most congregations of the Salvadoran church, the diaconal ministry of the Lutheran church in Jayaque was extensive: an office for the defense of human rights; the local Green Cross ambulance service; a large and well-organized Emergency Committee ready to respond to different natural disasters; a water purification program; a newly-opened daycare center; and services for the elderly.

Their faithful testimony of loving service explains the massive outpouring of support from the entire Jayaque community – not just from members of the Lutheran Church – on the day of their funeral. That public recognition in Jayaque was extended to every corner of El Salvador on November 11 thanks to the Salvadoran Jesuit community who dedicated their 17<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration of the UCA martyrs to Francisco and Jesús.

The Final Word

By the last day of my visit, the overwhelming sense of grief that had engulfed the Salvadoran church was beginning to recede, gradually replaced by an emerging determination to see that justice is done not only in the case of the Carrillos, but also in countless other cases that have brought so much pain and suffering to Salvadoran society. As Bishop Gomez himself said: *No podemos dejar que el mal venza el bien.* [We cannot permit evil to defeat good.]

Francisco and Jesús were true disciples of Jesus Christ, the suffering servant. Without question, their friends and neighbors in Jayaque, their bishop and fellow pastors, and the ecumenical community of El Salvador will continue to mourn their loss. But an even more profound task beckons each one of us who has been touched by their lives: to learn from their witness of faithfulness and to imitate their example.

It has been impossible not to think and talk about Francisco and Jesús since my visit to El Salvador. On my first Sunday back in Costa Rica, I was overcome with conflicting emotions of sadness and joy when it came time for the reading of the Old Testament lesson:

“Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever.” (Daniel 12:3)

Francisco and Jesús: Thanks be to God for your wonderful ministry among the Salvadoran people and for giving them – and us – a glimpse of what it means to be true disciples of the Christ we profess to follow. Now, may you rest in peace in the eternal care of the God you loved and served so faithfully.

*Que así sea.*