

Bringing Central America home

Why declare sanctuary?

**ROSS and GLORIA
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MY FIRST DIRECT exposure to the Sanctuary movement occurred in June 1984. Gloria and I had served as missionaries under the Presbyterian Church of Guatemala for 13 years; we are well informed about suffering and oppression in Central America. Gloria had just been invited to serve as the Sanctuary coordinator of the Southern California Interfaith Task Force on Central America, and I was working toward the organization of another task force on Central America within the Presbyterian Synod of Southern California and Hawaii.

A Sanctuary caravan arrived that afternoon from Phoenix; a potluck supper and worship service were planned for that evening; the caravan left the following morning on the next leg of its journey. A very young Guatemalan family, Alfredo (not his real name), his wife, three-year-old daughter, and baby, and another young man, who had recently come across the border from Mexico, were being accompanied to a sanctuary church in Seattle. This was not done secretly. The caravan cars carried banners; services open to the public were held at each stop; the media were invited. I was asked to translate when the young couple gave their testimony that evening and when they talked to journalists after the service.

Their story was simple, direct, and utterly unsophisticated. After giving thanks to God, the churches, and all who had helped them along the way, Alfredo explained that theirs is just one among "hundreds and hundreds" of families who have fled from Guatemala "looking for a safe place to be able to live and to raise our children." He noted that their story is difficult to believe and difficult to tell "because really it is incredible."

His uncle and two brothers-in-law were assassinated in 1980 by soldiers dressed in civilian clothes. His brothers-in-law had been rural school teachers, and they left behind his two widowed sisters and their five children. Four years later violence struck again. Two airplanes arrived to bomb the neighboring hamlet. "I remember when the bombs fell. I felt my heart burst from the noise they made. We looked and saw how the black smoke rose, and then at a distance you could hear the trees

topple over. After about ten minutes a helicopter arrived where we were, machine-gunning indiscriminately. The women were crying, shouting, praying, carrying along the smallest children, the men pulling on the older children, fleeing in any direction."

Alfredo's mother and father were not at home but working on a plot of land about two miles from the house. He and his wife and children were also outside the village. But his two sisters were there, along with Anita, his oldest niece, her little brother, another nephew, and his youngest niece, who had just been born 17 hours earlier. They were burned alive in their home, "accused of being guerrillas by the army of my country, who with their own hands in their official uniforms carried out the act."

It was two o'clock in the afternoon. "No one could enter the hamlet as the army continued guarding the 24 cadavers, in addition to my family, to see who would claim them in order to kill them as well. When it was all over, we found my family made into balls of meat and bone. We were unable to recognize anyone. The children were for the most part reduced to ashes."

Alfredo concluded with these words: "There are hundreds of stories like mine. Some we can tell. Others no one can tell because whole families have been exterminated."

It is with these stories in our minds that we would like to try to explain why churches in the United States—as well as synagogues, universities, and other organizations—are declaring sanctuary for Central American refugees.

R.K.

The Sanctuary movement is—in its broadest common denominator—a deeply human, humanitarian, and interfaith response of compassion. We who are Christians are challenged not only by the Old Testament teachings regarding the cities of refuge or the examples of sanctuary churches in the Middle Ages but by the central mandates of our faith. When Jesus was asked about the greatest commandment, he quoted the Shema from Deuteronomy 6:4 and linked it directly with Leviticus 19:18: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." And this same chapter of Leviticus contains the admonition: "When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. The stranger who sojourns with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as

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yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God."

We must reach out and help the Central American refugees who come to this country because our hearts are moved with compassion, because this is a central mandate of our faith, because we know about the oppression and death from which they have fled, because we know that grave danger awaits them if they return.

For Christians in the Sanctuary movement this is a matter of conscience. It is not a minor issue, a debatable ethical choice, a legal controversy. It is a matter of faithfulness to Christ himself. In Matthew 25, where Jesus describes the Last Judgment as the separation of the sheep and goats, he states unequivocally that those who provide food, clothing, shelter, medical care, and legal aid to the most needy of his brothers and sisters are in fact serving him. Conversely those who refuse to do these things are rejecting him...and they are condemned to eternal damnation.

Central American refugees are surely to be counted among the most needy, the most vulnerable people in our midst, those whom we must serve in obedience to Christ. Once again love of God and love of neighbor are inextricably bound together. I John 4 admonishes Jesus' followers explicitly on this point by declaring that those who love God should love their brothers and sisters also. He even states that those who do not love their brothers and sisters whom they have seen cannot love God whom they have not seen.

We also believe that providing sanctuary is an act of solidarity. The people of Central America are Christians, whom we recognize as, like ourselves, members of Christ's body.

It is important to note that the Sanctuary movement is a shared ministry. Very few Central American refugees in this country choose or are chosen for this ministry, and those refugees who enter this ministry carry a heavy responsibility. On the one hand we offer them refuge and try to meet their needs as they struggle to survive in an alien and often hostile environment. On the other hand they covenant with us to give their testimonies; to tell what is happening in their countries; to be a voice for the voiceless—the tens of thousands who have already died, the hundreds of thousands who have been uprooted, the widows and orphans, those who even now face torture, rape, and death in Central America, and those who daily fear detention and deportation in this country. The task of the Central American refugees who enter the sanctuary ministry is to inform, to educate, and to evangelize us. It is not an easy task for each time they give their testimonies they relive the trauma they risked their lives to escape.

We are making our stand for justice in accord with national and international law and in accord with the highest moral principles. Both the United Nations Protocol on Refugees, of which our government is a signatory, and the U.S. Refugee Act of 1980 grant the right to political asylum and protection against deportation to persons who demonstrate a well-founded fear of perse-

cution in their own countries. Extensive reports of the UN, the Organization of American States, World Council of Churches, National Council of Churches, Americas Watch, Amnesty International, and many other organizations demonstrate that Central Americans are bona fide political refugees, not illegal aliens.

After World War II, out of deep anguish over what happened to European Jews under the Third Reich, many nations joined with the U.S. to establish the Geneva Convention, which grants not only the right to flee from armed conflict and gross violation of human rights, but also the right to aid those who flee. Nevertheless our government is now prosecuting Sanctuary workers under laws which can make them felons liable to five years in prison and/or \$2,000 fine for each Central American they transport, "harbor," or conspire to so assist.

The Sanctuary movement is a call to national responsibility. Some of its critics insist that the laws of this country provide ample recourse; they suggest that political processes be utilized, if necessary, to rectify the laws regarding refugees; they believe that declaring sanctuary is unnecessary, illegal, and even harmful to the legal fabric of our society. In response sanctuary workers affirm the legitimacy of our constitutional system, try to utilize all the judicial and political means at their disposal, and challenge the government itself to fulfill the law. Local and national religious bodies have made every effort to persuade the administration, the Congress, and the courts to recognize the rights of Central Americans as refugees, not illegal aliens. In particular we are working for the passage of the Moakley-DeConcini Bill, which would require the administration to recognize Salvadorans as refugees, and a similar bill for Guatemalans, which might eliminate the need for sanctuaries. Declaring sanctuary through our churches is only a last resort, after exhausting other legal and political means, because Central Americans are being deported and some are upon return being arrested, tortured, and killed.

The Sanctuary movement offers Central American refugees the opportunity not only to find safe haven but also to tell about the atrocities which our government supports in Central America, to seek redress not only of our treatment of refugees here but also of our intervention in Central America. This is perhaps the primary reason for the government's attacks on the Sanctuary movement; for some of us it is the primary reason for supporting it.

Most of the people who support the Sanctuary movement never thought they would find themselves outside the framework of the law. We find it difficult to believe that the government can make it a felony to attempt to protect the lives of Central American refugees. On the other hand we know that Christians have always had to define the limits of their obedience to civil authority ("render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's") because of our unquestionable allegiance to a higher authority ("and to God the things that are God's").

Justo Gonzalez, staff associate for International Relief and Development of the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A.,

expresses our attitude to authority in the following words:

There has been a long tradition of Christians who broke the law, not because they despised the law in general, but on the contrary because they so respected it that they did not wish to see it tarnished by unjust laws. As a result of their actions in disagreement to established law, Telemachus was stoned to death, John Knox served as a galley slave, John Calvin had to leave his native France, and Martin Luther King, Jr., went to jail. But also through the actions of these and many other Christians who broke the law, laws were made more just.

More is at stake than first meets the eye in the Sanctuary movement. We can now see that the church must take seriously both meanings of the word "sanctuary." It is a holy place, because there we render to God our corporate acts of worship. It is also a place of refuge, particularly for the poor, widows and orphans, and refugees, because the God whom we worship has compassion on them and requires us to protect them. These two meanings are so closely tied that we cannot faithfully do one without the other.

The government itself has helped us to understand this truth. It has seen fit to violate the sanctity of the church as a place of prayer and worship in order to infiltrate and destroy the Sanctuary movement. The current trials of Sanctuary workers will in fact determine, at least to some extent, whether the government has the right to define, to limit, to stop the ministry of religious people in this country. For some of us the right to provide sanctuary is as fundamental as our right to worship God according to our faith.

In April 1985 I received an urgent call to join a delegation of U.S. congressmen, religious leaders, human rights advocates, and Guatemala scholars to go to Guatemala to investigate the recent deaths of two leaders of the Guatemalan Support Group for the Families of the Disappeared and to be present at a public procession planned by this organization for April 13 as an appeal to the government to release or provide information about their missing relatives. When I arrived in Guatemala City, I discovered that the congressmen would not be joining us due to death threats against them. We met with the leaders of the Support Group, mostly women, who are the only organized voice for human rights in Guatemala today.

Their stories are tragic. Not only have their loved ones disappeared, but they themselves have been imprisoned without trial, raped, tortured, and their powerless organization has been threatened. Because their appeals had gone unheeded, they decided to make a public protest, knowing that they would have to risk their lives. On March 30, two weeks before the demonstration, Hector Gomez, one of their leaders, was picked up after their

regular meeting; his tortured and mutilated body appeared the next day. On April 4 the secretary of the Support Group, Rosario Godoy, was found with her brother and three-year-old son, all killed by asphyxiation. On the day of the procession some 250 people gathered at City Hall and began the walk up Sixth Avenue to the National Palace. No incident occurred, though the total absence of military and police and the closing of shops along the city's main thoroughfare were ominous. When we arrived at the National Palace, the women made their appeal before about 1,000 people,

ending with a soliloquy directed to the disappeared, promising to continue to seek their release...or news of their deaths.

The stories I heard from those brave Guatemalan women are just like the stories I hear every week in Los Angeles as I meet with Central American refugees. These are the stories that must be heard in churches throughout our country so that our hearts will be touched, our faith awakened to action, and our lives challenged.

G.K.