

A Brief Summary of Our Nineteen Day Hunger Strike at the St. Paul Cathedral

- "Our hunger strike is a voice that cries out for justice."

1. The Situation Leading to the Hunger Strike

Ten years of hard struggle by the Salvadoran people against their oppressors have gone by without either clarifying to the U.S. public the reasons for the conflict or awakening them out of indifference. Only recently has the U.S. public felt the impact of events occurring in El Salvador, starting with the offensive of the FMLN in the capital city, San Salvador. Even then, the North American people still remained confused and distanced from the conflict, partly as a result of the strong media campaign by the Bush Administration.

It is clear that the intensification of the struggle in El Salvador, due to the resistance and capacity of the FMLN to sustain their offensive, created more interest in the U.S. public and motivated them to act in greater solidarity with the Salvadoran people. This was particularly true when the news broke of the indiscriminate bombing of civilian populations in San Salvador. However, the single incident which created the condemnation, the awakening and greater commitment of the U.S. public was the assassination of six Jesuit priests and their two housekeepers. Then, one sensed that genocide had reached its limit and that there existed in the cosmos a voice that clamored for justice and needed a way to express itself. At that moment, we chose to begin our humble but resolute hunger strike in defense of the Salvadoran people and the intrinsic respect for human dignity.

2. The Beginning of Our Hunger Strike (November 23, 1989)

On Thanksgiving Day, at 10:00 a.m., we attended mass at the St. Paul Cathedral. A group of supporters, whom we had notified privately of our decision, accompanied us in the Cathedral. Initially, the group of hunger strikers was composed of five Salvadoran refugees, a Bolivian and two U.S. citizens, including Fr. Roy Bourgeois, the spiritual guide of the group.

We made a simple, clear declaration. It focused on the true source of genocide in El Salvador: the military aid that the U.S. government gives to the government of El Salvador. The declaration stated:

We are people of faith from El Salvador and other Latin American countries. We mourn the deaths of the six Jesuit priests and all those murdered in El Salvador.

In the spirit of prayer we are conducting a hunger strike at the St. Paul Cathedral and we ask for an immediate end to all military aid that the United States government gives to the government of El Salvador. At the same time, we ask Archbishop John Roach to end his silence and join with us in asking for an immediate end to U.S. military aid to El Salvador.

In our country the Cathedral is a place where we can go to pray, take refuge, hold a hunger strike, and express our needs. In our country the clergy are the voice of the

voiceless.

We invite all people of conscience to join with us.

As it turned out, this short declaration came to be a powerful call to the people of the United States. The moment we declared our hunger strike, the Cathedral became a symbol of that voice which cries out for justice. The flow of individuals, delegations, musicians, telegrams, postcards, letters, children's drawings sent to us from schools, etc., was continuous and came to us from all directions. People of all ages, creeds, races, social strata and leadership capacities came to visit us, to ask us questions about the conflict in El Salvador and to support us.

A. A Few Events Which Occurred During the Hunger Strike

a) The small conflict with Archbishop Roach.

This conflict was set off by our initial declaration which included the following:

...At the same time we ask Archbishop John Roach to end his silence and join us in asking for an immediate end to U.S. military aid to El Salvador.

At 2:00 p.m. the same day that we had begun the hunger strike, Archbishop Roach presented himself, less than cordial and notably perturbed. He briefly informed us of his record in procuring peace in Central America and then showed us his correspondence to President Bush, Salvadoran President Cristiani and Salvadoran Archbishop Arturo Rivera y Damas. Finally, he let it be known that he was not pleased that we had indisposed him in this way, in view of his actions on behalf of El Salvador. We responded in a respectful manner and tried to make him understand that we had no malicious intent to indispose him, and that where he had remained silent was specifically regarding the issue of an immediate end to U.S. military aid -- aid which we were certain was the real cause of the genocide and the major obstacle to a political solution to the conflict in El Salvador.

Archbishop Roach recognized the validity of the above-mentioned point and promised to write another letter to President Bush to address the issue of military aid. In addition, upon our request that he send a letter to the Catholic community as the Lutheran bishops had done, he stated that he would consider it and make a later decision. These two letters have been published and we thank Archbishop Roach for writing them. Nevertheless, we feel the need to clarify that we do not share with Archbishop Roach his position that the United States should withhold a substantial portion of military aid to El Salvador while evaluating human rights and the willingness of the Salvadoran government to negotiate. Our disagreement is rooted in our belief that these conditions and evaluations prolong even more the suffering of the Salvadoran people and postpone the possibility of a political solution to the conflict, and that, in certain measure, such a position is an acceptance of the genocide. In addition, in the past, certain conditions have been placed on military aid but have not been met, as demonstrated by the continually worsening situation in El Salvador.

In any event, we thank Archbishop Roach for all that he has done for peace in Central America and for us during our stay at the Cathedral.

b) Rally in front of the Cathedral (Sunday, December 3)

Ten days into our hunger strike, we saw another example of the effects of the strike. Despite extreme cold, in front of the Cathedral, a large rally was held as a gesture of solidarity with the Salvadoran people and of support for our action of sacrifice. The significance of the strike and the participation of grassroots organizations and political leaders brought the rally the media coverage that it deserved as an important, serious, newsworthy event.

c) Telephone call from Congressman Thomas Foley (Friday, December 8)

Through a bishop from the State of Washington, Rep. Thomas Foley, Speaker of the House, was informed of our hunger strike. Rep. Foley communicated with us at the Cathedral by telephone. After we confirmed to him our decision to continue our hunger strike until we saw a real possibility of an end to U.S. military aid to El Salvador, Rep. Foley stated that he opposed military aid to the Salvadoran government. He also told us that he would meet with his Democratic colleagues to find the best way to present the issue in the Congress. He asked that we trust him and suspend our hunger strike.

We believed that this conversation with Rep. Foley was very important evidence that our sacrifice was not in vain and that our demand had reached the very center of power and decision making.

We now await the reconvening of Congress to see if Rep. Foley will follow through with what he promised us and with his obligation to oppose the criminality of the U.S. government in sending military aid to El Salvador.

d) A large vigil at the St. Paul Cathedral (Sunday, December 10)

This action made us seriously consider ending our hunger strike because it persuaded us that our demand to end military aid was in the hands of the public and their leaders.

The massive attendance by such diverse groups and the moving spirit and bold commitment shown by all of the participants in the vigil left no doubt in our minds about the legitimacy of our action and its demand and, above all, about the determination of the people and their leaders to undertake and continue the struggle until our common goal had been reached.

The vigil was a powerful voice in defense of justice, condemning the genocide in El Salvador and demanding an end to the military aid. It was a demonstration of the morale, the conscience and the sense of political responsibility of U.S. citizens.

e) The end of the hunger strike (Monday, December 11)

After the vigil, that same evening, Sunday, December 10, we met privately in the room where we rested in the Cathedral. Attempting to be as objective as possible, we began to evaluate our action with the hope of making the clearest possible decision to further the cause which had given rise to the hunger strike. Ultimately our decision was to end our hunger strike and to call a press conference the following day, Monday, December 11, at 11:00 a.m., in order to

communicate our decision. The group which ended the strike (due to two changes early on in the strike) was composed of three Salvadorans, three U.S. citizens, a Guatemalan and a Bolivian.

The document that we distributed at the press conference, after a brief ceremony of breaking bread together, read as follows:

As we enter our 19th day of our hunger strike, we have reflected on what has transpired since we came to the Cathedral on Thanksgiving Day. We have seen a serious response from religious and political leaders along with a tremendous outpouring of support from Minnesotans and others throughout the country.

Others continue to take up the cause of ending military aid to El Salvador. Tomorrow two more hunger strikes will begin: one at President Bush's church in Washington, D.C., the other in the Cathedral of San Antonio, Texas.

The voiceless are making their voices heard. We are ending the hunger strike and coming out of the Cathedral to continue working to stop all military aid to El Salvador.

We thank all of you who have supported us. We are convinced that working together, we will win peace and justice for El Salvador.

EVALUATION

We can say that our hunger strike was very effective and persuasive because it touched the hearts and the consciences of the U.S. people and awoke in them a sense of political responsibility. It motivated, mobilized, directed and moved to commitment both common citizens and political, religious, community, labor and student leaders.

However, we are pleased to acknowledge that we were able to achieve this thanks to the great amount of work and sacrifice of those in the Support Group who worked directly with us, and thanks to other anonymous collaborators who deserve our respect for their work in this struggle.

We also want to thank the news media, the reporters, photographers and camera people who provided serious and dedicated coverage to this event, which enabled us to make our message heard and to shorten our days of sacrifice.

During this brief period of the barely 19 days that we resided in the St. Paul Cathedral, we could appreciate the wealth of moral values in the North American people -- in complete contrast with the values of their government.

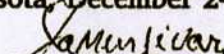
We believe that our hunger strike has contributed to the creation of new prospects, favorable conditions and a moral depth in our political work in Minnesota, which should not be allowed to dissipate. We believe that these new prospects and conditions will bring results to the degree that we all work hard, responsibly, with vision and in unity -- all of us who have a commitment

to fight for the well being of our own people and all of us who have decided to continue the struggle until we end all U.S. military aid to El Salvador.

The magnitude of the experience which we acquired in this short period of time while we consumed only water cannot, for the moment, be condensed in these few details. We apologize and recognize that we owe you more; but in summary we would say that, in one form or another, we have all gained some experience, even participating minimally in this event, and that we are called on to take advantage of what we have learned for the benefit of our peoples.

Minneapolis, Minnesota, December 24, 1989


Fr. Roy Bourgeois


Jorge Menjivar

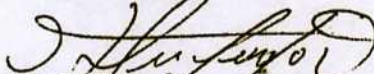

Rene Hurtado


Jorge Montecinos


Valerie Steffenson

Rodolfo Pivaral


Jerry Rau


Jesus Hurtado