

Enduring Hope: 500 Years of Prophetic Resistance to Military Empire

Pax Christi USA gathering at the SOA

By Rev. Jim Barnett, OP

I want to offer you a context – a historical precedent of 500 years ago – for the theme of tonight’s gather: “Enduring Hope: 500 Years of Prophetic Resistance to Military Empire.”

Today, at the School of the Americas, we are concerned with Honduras and El Salvador and Haiti – and the 2,000 immigrants so cruelly detained at Stewart Detention Center where we gathered this morning. We remember, too, the prophetic witness of Rufina Amaya, the only survivor of the massacre at El Mozote, whose family and 1,000 others were so cruelly murdered in El Salvador thirty years ago.

But the first word and action of resistance came in 1511, less than 20 years after Christopher Columbus' first trip to this continent.

It was in what was called “Hispaniola”, which is now the island of Haiti/Dominican Republic. We might never have known of this incident but for the three volumes of *The History of the Indies*, written by a Dominican friar, Bartolome de las Casas, who was there. And you might never have heard of Las Casas and his expose of Columbus if it were not for Howard Zinn and his *People’s History of the U.S.*

Most of the historical record comes from the diaries and reports and letters of Las Casas. There were four young Friars who were sent as missionaries to Hispaniola, accompanying Columbus on his third journey. They loved the land. They fell in love with the people. Their account reminds me of what that wonderful Jesuit, Dean Brackley, said about his experience in El Salvador: “Contact with the poor breaks your heart... then you fall in love... then you're ruined for life.”

After a few months, the Friars decided they wanted to be closer to the people, so they left the community of Spaniards and moved to a simple hut made of palm branches. They took on the indigenous people’s diet. They spent days/weeks/months studying their language. They learned the people’s customs and culture, and especially their love of nature. The people revered the land and called it their “mother” – *la madre tierra* – because it gave them life.

But they also saw some really ugly things in the Spanish soldiers and merchants and other clergy. These were taking advantage of the generous spirit of the native Americans, and kept increasing their demands on the workers. The people worked very hard, yet were treated unjustly and given almost no recompense. They were being treated like slaves...worse, like animals. . They were beaten up; the girls and women were abused, raped and made pregnant; then the babies were born into slavery.

The Friars complained to the authorities. The head of the whole colony was the son of Columbus, Diego Colon, but he and the other Spanish leaders kept patronizing these young men, saying, they didn't know what these "Indians" were *really* like—how dirty they were, and lazy, and ignorant. Colon said, "Why they can't even learn Spanish... they'd turn into savages when they had strong wine... and the women *wanted* to get pregnant by the Spaniards" so they could have fair-skinned babies. They told the Dominicans that they'd get used to it and that their main task was to serve the needs of the Spaniards, and to make sure these "Indians" worked hard and did not get drunk.

The Friars couldn't imagine such racism and greed and prejudice on the part of their fellow countrymen. It's similar to what happens with the military adventures of most Empires. Look at our own horrors at Abu Graib, and other places in Iraq. Our soldiers were guilty of horrible violence and torture and abuse that they would never get away with at home.

Finally the four Dominicans couldn't take it anymore. They met in a kind of retreat, and each one shared what he had seen and experienced. They prayed hard. They looked at the causes of the problems. They studied the Scriptures. They decided they had to speak out. It was the Second Sunday of Advent, 1511. The readings were tough, prophetic: from Isaiah and John the Baptist. They prepared the preaching, and then all four signed their name to it, as a way of saying that they—the community—were the authors of the sermon. They chose Antonio Montesinos to preach it:

"Yo soy la voz de Cristo gritando en el desierto de esta isla.

"I am the voice of Christ crying out in the desert of this island. Listen well with your ears and your hearts to the Word of God that is being proclaimed to you... Your very souls are at stake.

"Todos Ustedes estan en pecado mortal.

“You live and will die in mortal sin for the cruelty done against these innocent peoples. How can you keep them oppressed and worn out from the work that you keep piling on them? The extra work is causing them to get sick and many are dying. You are killing the people in order to acquire your precious gold!

“Con que derecho – con que autoridad pueden tratarlos con tanta violencia?”

“By what right and by what authority do you carry out such detestable violence against these people – A people so peaceful and so much like Christ himself? By what distorted sense of justice do you keep them in such horrible conditions?

“Estos... no son seres humanos?”

“Are they not human beings, the same as you? Are they not images of God, sons and daughters of our Father Creator? Are they not brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ? Are you not obliged to love them as you love yourselves? Do you not feel this? Do you not understand this? Has your greed caused you to lose all sense of what is right?

“I tell you, unless you change, you can be certain that in the manner in which you are living, you can no more save yourselves than those who have no faith at all!”

Let us remember these words, and take them to heart, as we continue our prophetic resistance to military empire here at the School of the Americas this weekend.

Thank you.