



AN INTERVIEW WITH FR. PAUL SCHINDLER

By: Rafael Garcilazo

CRISPAZ visited Fr. Schindler at his home at the Immaculate Conception Parish in La Libertad in order to learn about his life, work and legacy in El Salvador.

Fr. Paul Schindler grew up in Cleveland, Ohio with 8 brother and sisters. Attended grade school at St. Charles and went to St. Ignatius Jesuit School. Later went to Borromeo College Seminary, and studied philosophy and theology at St. Mary Seminary. In 1967, Fr. Schindler was ordained in Cleveland and his first assignment was in the parish of Wadsworth, Ohio, where he remained for 5 years. After this he was sent to El Salvador. His first stint in the Central American country was from 1972 to 1982. He then returned to Cleveland where he served as a Pastor for 26 years. Retirement could not keep him from returning to his beloved El Salvador, and has been here since 2008.

When you were first assigned to El Salvador, what did you know of this country and what were your expectations?

I had no clue (chuckles). I grew up with a sense of mission. My family always used to receive Mission Magazine, and I used to read it all the time growing up. I thought about going to the missions even though I was a diocesan priest. Pope John XXIII asked the church of the United States to send their clergy to the third world, and Cleveland picked El Salvador. Back in 1964, the Archdiocese started in La Union, then in Chirilagua, and then eventually came down here to La Libertad. We were in 3 different parishes.

I got a letter after my first assignment which was like 5 years, saying that they needed people to work in El Salvador, your name has been suggested, are you interested? And I said: Here I am Lord. So that's how I ended up in El Salvador. But I had no idea.

We would come down on a pre-visit, to see what it was like, and it was overwhelming of course. Then I came down to work. I knew no Spanish at all when I came down here. I learned it with the kids. I would go out for a walk and talk to them. The kids are great teachers because they would laugh at you when you make errors. So you learn Spanish, the *caliche* (slang), and all that other kind of stuff that goes along with it. When I was assigned here, I was a young priest. The priest that was here at the time was going back to the States. So after a year, I was named Pastor here in La Libertad. I worked with the sisters Dorothy, Jean, Ita, and Maura. Dorothy, Jean and I worked here together. We did a lot of stuff together.

That was all part of my stay here in El Salvador during the 70's. The sisters were killed in 1980, and I left here in 1982. On every vacation I had, I would come back here and help out--give the guys a break.

My expectations ... you don't know what you were going to get into. A lot of stuff was thrown at us at that time. We had a good team in those days. The Cleveland mission here in El Salvador has just celebrated 50 years. We have had easily, 50, 60 or perhaps 70 priests, nuns, and lay people that have worked here in El Salvador. These people would go back and work with the Spanish-speaking people in our diocese. It is a much better way to know the culture, to know the people that go up to the U.S. So often we get immigrants going up and the local priest does not speak Spanish, does not know the culture, and mistreats them. So by the fact that Cleveland has had people here in El Salvador, those who minister learn about the culture. When people leave here, they understand the needs, the true needs of the people. In that sense, we are like a reverse mission.

Based on your experience, what is the structural reason for injustice/poverty? Who is responsible?

Everybody has the right to develop their own gifts and talents. So anytime that right is denied, when people cannot be all that they can be, you have an injustice. When you read the gospels, they are nothing more than rich and poor. You begin to realize that Jesus spent all his time with the poor, and he didn't make them rich. What he did was give them a sense of dignity. That which takes away that dignity becomes an injustice.

People aren't paid fair and just salaries. People are not allowed to develop their talents. I have supported 62 kids in college right now. I get paid from Cleveland and 100% of what they pay me I put into these kids. You know, I received all my family's inheritance, but I have everything I need. So the idea is to help them discover and develop their talent. That's part of the whole process, besides helping the people with more needs.

At one time, 14 families owned El Salvador. They feel they have an uncontested right to that. Yet, no one has the right to own all of the land. Sure, we have a right to own a decent place to live. But when you look at so many of these people, especially the landowners, they will have 3 or 4 *fincas* (farms) or businesses. Everything is concentrated in the hands of a few. They do not allow the regular people to progress. The root problem is the distribution of wealth.

Jesus constantly said, "Woe to the rich, woe to the rich". Because you can laugh now, but you are going to pay someday. It is obvious and evident in a place like this... but then you listen to Trump say things like "You want rich people to be your leaders because we make money" and you have the problem because many people support that. They think that we are all going to be rich because he is rich. Certainly not! He's just going to rape you and leave you behind. The root cause is the distribution of wealth.

How did the first time you serve in El Salvador define your priesthood?

One of the things I learned early on as a priest was that you are not here in El Salvador to save these people, you are here to be saved. You come for your own salvation. You learn what the whole meaning of life is when you come. As a priest, you do a lot of sacramental work but at the same time you empower people. That's part of what Jesus did. He empowered the disciples, he empowered those who followed him. The source of the power is always the Eucharist, the center of all the sacraments. As a priest you make sure that people understand the Eucharist, they have to understand that it is not just a magical thing. Let's become Eucharist-centered. That's where we get our strength from, and that's where we get our orientation from. As a priest you begin to realize that you are not just *sacramentalizing*, you are helping people understand, celebrating the Eucharist with them.

You had decided to return to Cleveland after Archbishop Romero had been appointed, what made you stay longer? Who was Romero for you? Before and after listening to him.

The church is not all church, let's put it that way. There is a lot of clericalism. People sort of live apart from reality... Romero had that reputation. I knew Rutilio Grande, he preached here in the parish ten days before he was killed, so a lot of the people like Urioste, Rivera Damas, and Rutilio Grande, they were the people that helped me define my priesthood when I was down here working for different reasons.

The formation that I had was with people like Rutilio Grande. Luis Chavez y Gonzalez was archbishop when I first came down and was going to retire. We priests across the diocese sat down and signed a letter in which we said that we would like Rivera Damas to be our new archbishop. And, of course, they appointed Romero. I had already been down here for about five years and so I was at odds, I thought to myself: If I am down here I want to work with a bishop I can walk with along the pastoral line.

At first I didn't know Romero, I had only heard about him. At that time Bishop Tim Hickey was our bishop in Cleveland. I said to him: I'm not sure that I can work with this new archbishop Then Rutilio Grande was killed, and we had a priests meeting. Romero had been appointed but not yet installed as the archbishop, so he came at the end of the meeting. As we were having the meeting, I was sitting in the first row. I always like to sit in the first row because you can watch the interactions at the head table, which is important to understand what is really going on. Romero came in and sat next to me. He was shaking. The meeting came to an end, and they said, "The new archbishop is here and he would like to say a few words." So he got up and talked. When he was finished I said: I'm not going anywhere!



Archbishop Oscar Romero with Fr. Paul Schindler

The guy was so clear and so understanding. That was my first encounter with Romero. After that, he came down here several times. I would go to San Salvador, and walk to the seminary, that's where Romero was. I could walk into his office, and his secretary would just say: He's here, walk right in. You could walk right into his office anytime you wanted and needed to. At first I only knew him from reputation, which I later learned was not the best way to know someone.

What were some of the most challenging / difficult experiences while serving in El Salvador?

Death squads used to come to town. They would always leave bodies along the road. They would take someone out of their home, they would interview them, and they would kill them. And leave them along the road. It was very common. Last time I was here I buried 37 mutilated bodies that were left along the road, or thrown in the ocean.

We always knew when the death squads were in town, they had a special kind of car. Which always parked in front of the national police headquarters every time they came to town. They would be here for two or three days, that's when the people would disappear. So we knew when they were here. Lots of people would show up here around 5 or 6 in the morning saying: "Father, they took my son or my husband last night and he has not come back."

We had like five different jails here in town, so I would advise them to go to the jails and ask for your son, and come back and tell me what you've found. They would always say they had not found them. Then I would go with them and I would do the same thing. I would visit the same places and they would say they didn't have them. Then I would go to the woman that would cook for the jails. She would tell me who was in what jail, and I would see if it was the kid that was missing.

I would call a friend of mine at the embassy, his name was Bill Smart, and he was the Covert Intelligence Officer. I would say "Bill, we got a problem down here. I got a kid that's in jail and they won't admit that they have him. I'm afraid he's going to end up thrown in some place." And then Bill would say to me: "Oh Father, we can't get involved in local politics, but I'll see what we can do. And then, the next day the kid would be free. He would call somebody that would call somebody that would call somebody.

And then, of course I would not stop there. I would take the kid and go back to the jail where he was and say, "The other day I came over asking for Carlos here, and you said you didn't have him. He tells me he was in the jail here with you." I would put their feet to the fire a little bit. So they knew they were not going to get away with it. They would say: "Oh we were investigating and we did not want to impair the investigation...." We would put their backs against the wall so they knew they would not get away with it.



The digging out of the bodies of the churchwomen was horrible. You knew what you were going to find, but you did not want to find it. The nuns had gone to the airport to pick up Ita, and they were supposed to come in early. I was in the capital all day Tuesday. When I came down, I expected to welcome Ita and Maura and Maddy, we were going to celebrate mass and then have dinner together. They did not return home that night.

The following day we received the call from the archbishop saying that there was the possibility that the four churchwomen had been found, buried. We were doing interviews at the time because all the press were in town. They had just killed Juan Chacon and other political figures, and there were a lot international press here. When we got the call, we stopped the interviews and all the press came with us. They filmed the whole thing. So the digging out the bodies

was all caught on film. We dug them out, Ita and Maura are buried in Chalatenango and Dorothy and Jean are buried back in the States.

After being in Cleveland until your retirement, why did you decide to come back to El Salvador?

Let's put it this way--I never left El Salvador. I was always back here whenever I got the chance. Our goal was to do reverse mission. I went back and started a Spanish speaking community in the Akron area. It's just so much more meaningful as a person, as a priest especially, to work down here. I could sit around, I'm past retirement. I can retire any day I want, go to someplace, watch football games, and read the papers. But it just doesn't make sense. When you are down here, you see the need is so great. I never left. I've always tried to be of help to the people here. And of course you find fulfillment in this.

What message(s) would like to share about El Salvador and its people with folks from the US. What can the US learn from El Salvador?

When I came back here after 26 years to work, all the kids that were in my youth groups back in the 70s were now grandparents. They were all very involved with the church but none of their economic levels had risen at all. So I decided that what I was going to do was to help them get educated. With a little education you won't be living from hand to mouth. So the goal was to better the conditions here so they don't have to go to the US. We are destroying families in that process.

We have 1000 kids in our school. Last year almost 100 of our kids were taken out of our school to go to the States. Ten percent of the kids from our school had gone to the States without documents. The father of the girl that works with me here lives in the States, while her mother is living here. Her one brother just went to the States a year ago. So families are split up.

You have to improve the conditions here, make them worth living. For skilled labor here you get paid \$12 a day. In the US, \$12 an hour is what you make. As you can see it's hard to keep people here. The idea is to help the people help themselves. We are very lucky here in town. We have very good youth groups. One of the advantages is that kids can get work. I pay their tuitions, but they have to pay for board and transportation. They got to make money. We have restaurants, we are a tourist town. So any given weekend we have thousands of people from the capital here. There is a lot of money that goes through. Kids work as waiters and have some kind of work. So we don't have that much gang activity as there is in much of the rural area where kids have no hope at all.

So the idea is to help them stay here not to help them go to the States. I'm very much happy here. I always get a kick out of my classmates that go to Florida for retirement. I tell them come here, we got paradise. I live two blocks from the ocean. You are paying how much in Florida to rent a hotel room and sit by a pool, when you got the ocean here. It's a screwed up world!