

Falling in Love with El Salvador's People

By Ted Matyas
class of 2009

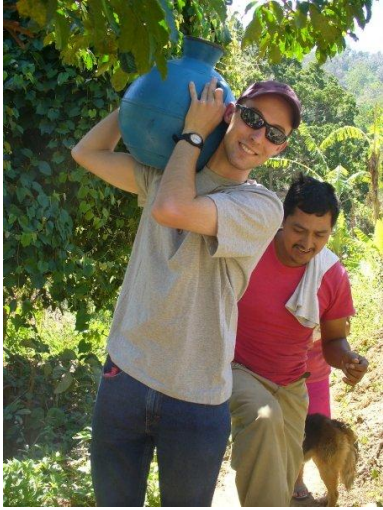


On a direct flight from Newark, NJ to San Salvador, El Salvador, I was not thrilled to be occupying a middle seat. Looking to my left, I was envious of both Sister Cathy (directly to my left) and my father (across the aisle) whom were seated in aisle seats. Being a reserved person, I was not excited to be sandwiched on a five-hour long flight. As I sat quietly praying that someone would not be seated to my right, a petite middle-aged El Salvadorian man arrived to claim that seat.

That Salvadorian man would mark the beginning of my spiritual journey. It was not until a couple of hours into the flight that we would start conversing. Between my broken Spanish, his limited English, and Sister Cathy's translations, I would discover that he was more than just a foreigner with a window seat. He had a name: José, a family, a life journey, and aspirations. José has been working as a cook in both Italian and Japanese restaurants in Paterson, NJ. He was excited to be returning home to El Salvador to be with his family. As he talked about his country and life journey, he reflected a sense of pride and optimism. José would be the first of many *Salvadorans* who would change me profoundly.

In San Salvador, Sister Cathy, my father, and I represented Immaculata University on this community service trip. We were joined on this trip with groups from Alvernia University and King's College as well. The trip was part of project FIAT, an international mission trip sponsored by the Handmaids of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. The afternoon of our arrival, we unpacked at the volunteer house where we would be staying

and then traveled to “La Puerta del Diablo.” “La Puerta del Diablo,” was a mountain point on the outskirts of San Salvador. To see this vista alone would have made the trip worthwhile. From its pinnacle, we could see inland to the sprawling city of San Salvador. Looking to the coast, we could see miles of rolling tropical farmland and hedgerows that in the distance finally reached the breaking Pacific waves. The land was so dry yet so lush. Our March trip was in the middle of their dry season that spans from November to May. From this point, I began to understand why José was so proud of his country and how it was beginning to impact me.



Throughout the week, we participated in various service projects in the pueblos of San Salvador’s countryside. We had the opportunity to serve the *Salvadoranos* through construction projects, visiting the local orphanage, and playing games with the children at a local parish center. For construction projects, we worked on the foundation for a chapel and library in two communities. The local people were grateful for our service and worked side by side with us in the construction projects.

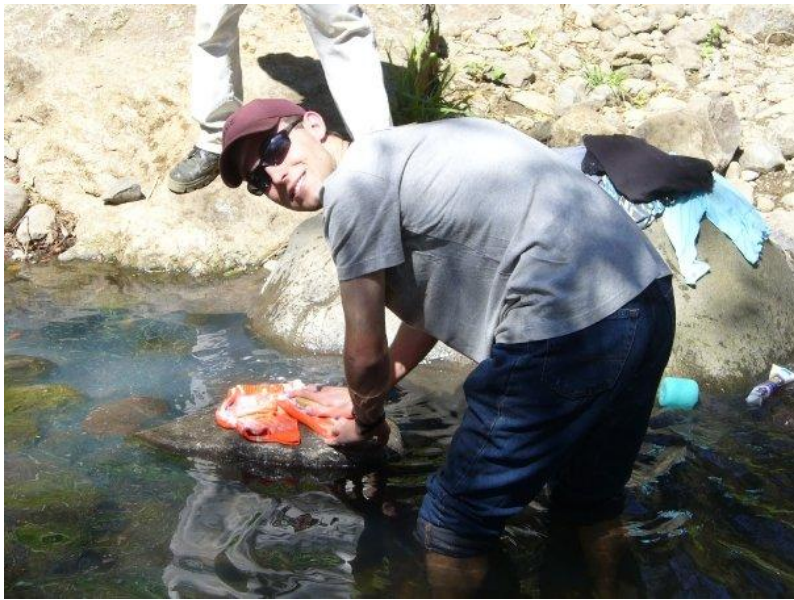


Throughout the week, we came to appreciate the life and work of Archbishop Oscar Romero. During his time as Archbishop from 1977 to 1980, Romero advocated for a decent standard of living and free and fair elections which the *Salvadoranos* had suffered the lack of for the longest time. His assassination at the hands of the government on March 25, 1980, would mark the beginning of a



violent Civil War that would rage until 1992 and claim over 75,000 lives. During the trip, we visited his tomb in the San Salvador cathedral, the chapel where he was assassinated, and the *barrios* of the poor for whom he advocated.

In the middle of the trip, we visited the Jesuit-run University of Central America. It was there during the peak of the Civil War in 1989, that six Jesuits, the housekeeper,



and her daughter were assassinated by rebel forces. Jesuit Dean Brackley, who teaches Theology at the University, gave a thought-provoking synopsis of El Salvador prior to, during, and after the Civil War. Father Brackley suggested that, “To fall in love with the El Salvadorian people is to become

ruined for life.” By this, he was suggesting that it is heartbreaking to witness all the obstacles they have suffered through the years and continue to suffer.

Every day brought us closer to God. Besides seeing the face of God in the *Salvadoranos*, we had the option of attending daily Mass and evening reflections. This allowed us to collect and share our thoughts while better appreciating how God was calling us to serve others.

By the end of the week, we had come to appreciate every thing about El Salvador. The delectable cuisine, the warmth of the people, and the beautiful terrain all contributed to a pleasurable trip. As I reflected from my window seat on my airplane ride back to the

States, I realized just how naïve I was to think that I was exclusively giving service to the Salvadorian people. In reality, they gifted me with a rich culture that is ever so proud and optimistic. Father Brackley's advice proved true, I had fallen in love with the Salvadorian people, and was consequently enriched for life by the experience.

