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## Regis University and the People of El Salvador: A Tool for Jesuit Education

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### Abstract

Jesuit education challenges us to ask tough questions of ourselves and those around us. At Regis University in Denver, Colorado, the University's mission encourages students to ask, "How ought we to live?" For some, the answer to this question can be found in a classroom, but, for others, the answer is more obvious in other settings. This question is especially prevalent as each year a group of students, faculty, and staff travel together to El Salvador to learn about important Jesuit history, diversity, solidarity, and justice, and how faith can play a role in the bigger picture of how each participant attempts to answer the question of how ought we to live. This unique learning opportunity impacts all those who participate in a way that changes them forever.

We stepped off the bus onto the highway in San Salvador and began to dodge traffic. To our right was a mega mall: people in the upper-class, the consumers. Around the other side of the bus was the community of La Cuchilla: the poor, the marginalized, the other. A simple four-lane highway was all that physically separated these two areas but, in reality, in truth, these two pieces of land were worlds apart.

La Cuchilla is a poor community comprised of shacks, haphazardly built on a small piece of land in what Salvadorians call "the last lung" of San Salvador. This group of people had been displaced and pushed out of their homes in order for the mall to be constructed, but mostly, these people had been demoralized. As we walked through the town, stepping over exposed plastic water pipes and ducking under tangled electrical wire, we began to see the faces of the people appear. Soon our group was accompanied by kids, dogs, the community leaders of the area, and the elderly. They wanted to convey their stories to us so that we could see how they lived. These people were poor. They didn't have enough food or shelter, they had no

apparent opportunity, yet they were still hopeful. As we headed back toward the bus, one brave woman stepped up with a few pleading words. She said, "We are human just like you. We may be poor, but we are still human."

It seems hard to see how God's love is active in these people's lives. Their plight is tough and they are seldom treated with basic human dignity. Why do these people seem hopeful in spite of their circumstances? If we as a Christian people have the courage and imagination to look, we see God's love alive and active in the midst of His people and, in the words of one woman's plea, the need for all of His people to be treated with basic human dignity. For the people of La Cuchilla, their hope comes in the teachings of Jesus' first public ministry when He unrolled his scroll and proclaimed: "I am here to bring glad tidings to the poor, proclaim liberty to captives, restore sight to the blind and let the oppressed go free."<sup>1</sup> For those who made their homes in "the last lung," hope of God's love is found in the story of the Sermon on the Mount where He taught that blessed are the poor in spirit, and they who mourn;

blessed are the meek, and they who hunger and thirst for righteousness; and blessed those who are merciful.<sup>2</sup>

It was here, in this broken community of seemingly hopeless people, that it became apparent that God's love and hope is for everyone. It was in La Cuchilla where we first came to truly understand what it means to stand in solidarity, make a commitment for change, honor a preferential option for the poor, know the presence of God, have hope, and where we began to more fully contemplate the question posed in Regis' mission—how ought we to live?

Dean Brackly, S.J., a professor of theology and ethics at the University of Central America, emphasizes in his writings the importance of the promotion of justice through educational experiences such as service learning, experiences that engage students with poverty and suffering and study abroad programs in poor communities. He suggests that these opportunities help to facilitate moments which ultimately lead students to seek out their vocation in life but, moreover, their vocation to love and serve.<sup>3</sup>

In addition, Pope John Paul II's apostolic letter, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, explains that Catholic universities have a responsibility to "demonstrate the courage to express uncomfortable truths, truths that may clash with public opinion but that are also necessary to safeguard the authentic good of society."<sup>4</sup> In essence, Jesuit institutions of higher education have a responsibility to teach students to ask challenging questions of themselves and of others in the world around them. With these ideals in mind, Regis University's annual trip to El Salvador plays an important role in helping to further develop what the Superior General of the Society of Jesus, Peter-Hans Kolvenbach S.J., outlined as the themes of Jesuit higher education.

On that day, off the side of the road in San Salvador, we were witnesses to one of those themes in action, to God's love manifested in us, in His people. We came to learn that His

love is to be practiced by us and made active through us. In our visits to El Salvador, a country still recovering from a devastating civil war nearly 20 years ago, we heard Rosa's story; her father had been assassinated in front of his home for actively loving people enough to try to protect them. We heard Alicia, who founded a group of mothers searching for family members who had disappeared, tell us about being captured, tortured, raped, and left for dead. We heard Rogillio, the lone survivor of a two-day massacre in which he witnessed all of his family and friends brutally murdered. We met Damian and Carolina, who fought in the guerilla army to give hope to the Salvadorian people. We saw where the six Jesuits were murdered because they preached about God's love for his people. We visited Archbishop Romero's home and chapel, where he was shot down for being a vessel of God's love for the poor and oppressed.

We saw God's love manifested in action through the countless and nameless who put their lives on the line, who put their concern for others above their own, through those who barely have enough for themselves, yet share with those who have even less.<sup>5</sup> Although we were in El Salvador at different times with different people, the message is always the same: through these stories, we see God's love alive in the actions and lives of people.


We must stand in solidarity with those at the margins. We must ask ourselves, how ought *we* to live? We must examine our choices and question the choices of those around us. We must honor a preferential option for the poor and, perhaps, most importantly, we must discern with open ears and open hearts our true calling to a vocation that guides us to love and to serve.

Through this experience in El Salvador, we learned that one of the ways we ought to live is by living love. With this realization, we have a personal responsibility, as Mark's gospel tells us, to love the least of God's people. We are responsible for sharing their stories, to be

God's love in action manifested for our brothers and sisters.

The Jesuit mission engages those of us in education with a variety of opportunities:

- shaping men and women for others;
- developing a concern for a world that is bigger than we are;
- providing an education and experiences that offer a holistic view that challenges students to think critically about their surroundings; and
- cultivating a connection between a student's faith and work for justice.

The annual El Salvador trip at Regis University in Denver, Colorado, is an innovative and challenging experience that surely begs the bigger question of the university's mission of how ought we to live and provides students and faculty with firsthand opportunities to find answers to this important question. 

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[http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/apostolic\\_constitutions/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_apc\\_15081990\\_ex-corde-ecclesiae\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apostolic_constitutions/documents/hf_jp-ii_apc_15081990_ex-corde-ecclesiae_en.html).

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Lk. 4: New Revised Standard Version.

<sup>2</sup> Mt. 25: New Revised Standard Version.

<sup>3</sup> Dean Brackley, S.J., "Higher Standards," *America* 194, no. 4 (2006).

<sup>4</sup> Robert Brown, *Liberation Theology: An Introductory Guide*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993).

<sup>5</sup> Vatican: The Holy See, "Apostolic Constitution of the Supreme Pontiff John Paul II on Catholic Universities: No. 32," accessed October 13, 2012, [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/apostolic\\_constitutions/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_apc\\_15081990\\_ex-corde-ecclesiae\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apostolic_constitutions/documents/hf_jp-ii_apc_15081990_ex-corde-ecclesiae_en.html).

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