

# SALVANET

A Publication of Christians for Peace in El Salvador, CRISPAZ

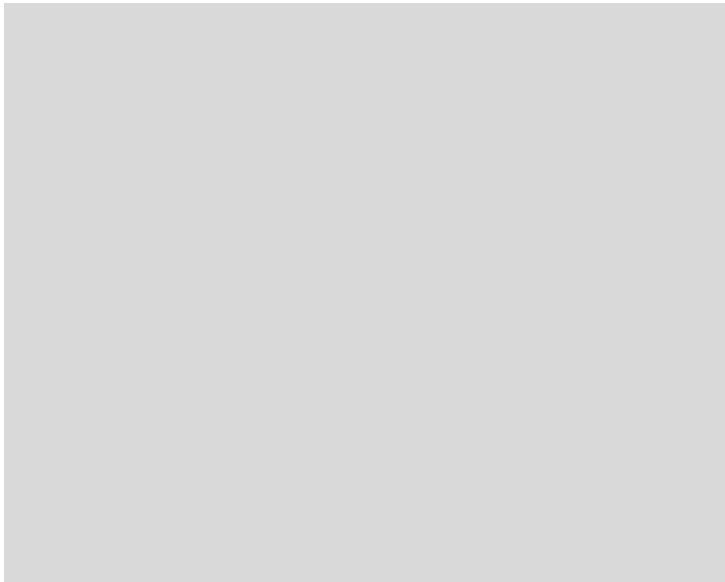
## El Salvador Quakes Hit Hard Hope to Build a New Country

by Raúl Gutiérrez

As *replicas* or aftershocks continue to keep Salvadorans in fear for more than a month, disaster figures of the two earthquakes are still being calculated. The official figures provided by the National Emergency Committee (COEN) of 1,149 deaths, 8,056 injured and over one and a half million homeless could easily rise during the following weeks after several boulders and landfalls are removed from roads and destroyed villages. Those still missing are counted by the dozen; pieces of bodies are found here and there.

The January 13 quake, which measured 7.6 on the Richter Scale, was one of the strongest in Salvadoran history. This time the quake hit the interior of the country (the 1986 quake primarily hit San Salvador). Most of victims resided in some 170 small towns, which were levelled.

Photo: Raúl Gutiérrez



Houses destroyed by the landslide at Las Colinas.

Considerable damage was also reported in the countryside.

According to United Nations sources, the losses resulting from the first earthquake exceed one billion dollars. The agricultural, fishing and other national industries suffered severe damages. Many public (over 1,500) and private buildings were damaged. Two of the main highways were closed due to landslides which killed many who were travelling on those roads at the time of the quake.

A middle class neighborhood in Santa Tecla, Las Colinas, which is located at the bottom of the El Balsamo mountain range, was one of the areas most devastated by the first earthquake. An avalanche of about 150 meters wide and 500 meters long buried 270 houses with over half a million cubic meters of mud and killed at least 470. Rescue crews found just a few survivors after searching day and night. Many more are still missing. The shocking images earned international media coverage. Other towns such as Armenia, in the western department of Sonsonate, did not get the same attention, although more than 80 percent of the houses collapsed.

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January – March  
2001

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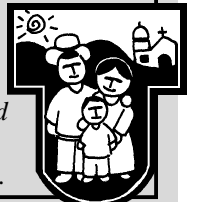
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*CRISPAZ, Christians for Peace in El Salvador, was founded in 1984. We are a faith-based organization dedicated to mutual accompaniment with the church of the poor and marginalized communities in El Salvador. In building bridges of solidarity between communities in El Salvador and those in our home countries, we strive together for peace, justice and human liberation.*



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- † El Salvador Encounter Delegation Program (ESE)
- † Communication Information Network on El Salvador (CINES)
- † Summer Immersion Program (SIP)
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# EARTHQUAKES

*Continued from page 1 . . .*

As the rubble is removed and highways are being cleared, many Salvadorans continue to look for their loved ones, or at least their remains. Many of them lost everything: families, houses, vehicles and possessions. For now their grief is indescribable: the young girl who returns to Las Colinas after the quake and finds out that her neighborhood has been completely wiped out—she can't believe her eyes. What in heaven happened here? Or the thoughts of a man that

went to buy school supplies just before the quake and left his five children at home. Minutes later, everything was gone, including his children.

Salvadorans are still in shock. The only thing that keeps them going is hope. Hope that El Salvador can be reconstructed under a renovated vision: a vision that would include everyone and would advocate for a society of equality and justice. Only then will Salvadorans be able to get some respite, despite any aftershocks.✚

Photo: Mauricio Figueroa



Photo: Raúl Gutiérrez



*Children in Verapaz, having lost their homes, find temporary shelter in tents.*

## Effects of January 13 and February 13, 2001 Earthquakes

	<u>January 13</u>	<u>February 13</u>	<u>Total</u>
Deaths	827	322	1,149
Wounded	4,520	3,536	8,056
Destroyed homes	92,080	52,820	149,900
Buried homes	688	0	688
Damaged homes	130,005	48,055	178,060
Those left homeless	1,160,316	372,603	1,532,919
Damaged public buildings	908	30	938
Landslides	574	45	619
Damaged piers	43	10	53
Damaged churches	344	29	373
Damaged hospitals	18	5	23
Damaged public clinics	85	27	112
Other damaged clinics	11	2	13
Affected schools	1,366	200	1,566

*Source: La Prensa Gráfica, February 26, 2001*

## A Second Quake

On Tuesday, February 13 at 8:22 a.m., the one-month anniversary of the January quake, a second earthquake hit El Salvador. This quake, which measured 6.6 on the Richter Scale, caused major destruction and death primarily in the departments of La Paz, San Vicente and Cuscatlán. The village of Candelaria, near Cojutepeque, Cuscatlán was especially hard hit. Five school children and their teacher were killed and other children were buried as a result of this quake which killed 322 people and left more than 3,500 injured.

As of March 1, more than 4,000 aftershocks from both quakes, some measuring as much as 4.6 on the Richter Scale, continue to rock the country. Salvadorans are fearful that the seismic activity has not yet ended.✚

Photo: Raúl Gutiérrez



Evacuations near Los Chorros after the January 13 earthquake.

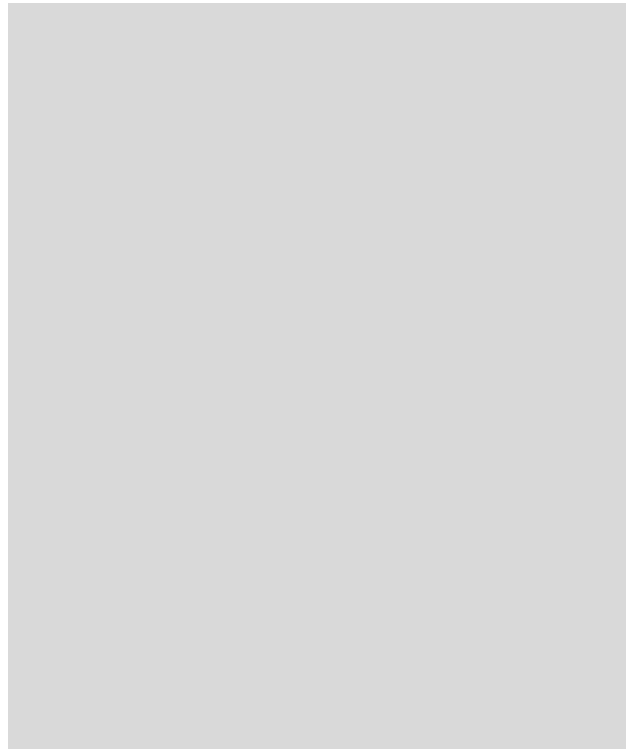


Photo: Mauricio Figueroa



Photo: Mauricio Figueroa

Photo: Raúl Gutiérrez



A destroyed church in Santa Tecla.

## Walking Through an Avalanche

by Kristen Barker

Life is fragile. Life is uncertain. Life isn't always fair. One moment a person is casually chatting with a loved one and in the next moment, the victim of boulders screaming down a hillside, ending one's conversation, one's dreams, one's life. One minute a person is eating lunch with their family and the next their whole suburb is swallowed up in a horrific mudslide. There is simply nothing fair or certain or sensible about it. Nor is there anything fair about a ten-minute difference in departure time on the #79 bus on Saturday, January 13, meaning the difference between life and death. I was one of the lucky ones, who happened, by chance, to leave ten minutes later than those who perished a few kilometres up the Pan American Highway as boulders and landfalls mixed with water from natural springs and pools forming a lethal muddy combination that rushed onto the

road, covering and smothering all that came in its path. I was one of the lucky ones who happened to leave ten minutes earlier than those who perished a few kilometres behind me in Santa Tecla.

In spite of being in one of the hardest hit areas of the country at the time of the quake, live I did, *gracias a Dios*. And I stepped off my bus, seeing collapsed hillsides, enormous trees, and gigantic boulders covering the expressway in front of me. I joined hundreds of other people leaving their buses, walking forward in disbelief. In stunned silence, in a state of bewilderment, we walked towards the boulders, trying to register the magnitude of the disaster that had just taken place. Slowly, it began to dawn on us that in the middle of this mess and destruction, we were somehow alive. Silent prayers of gratefulness escaped from our lips coupled with urgent prayers for

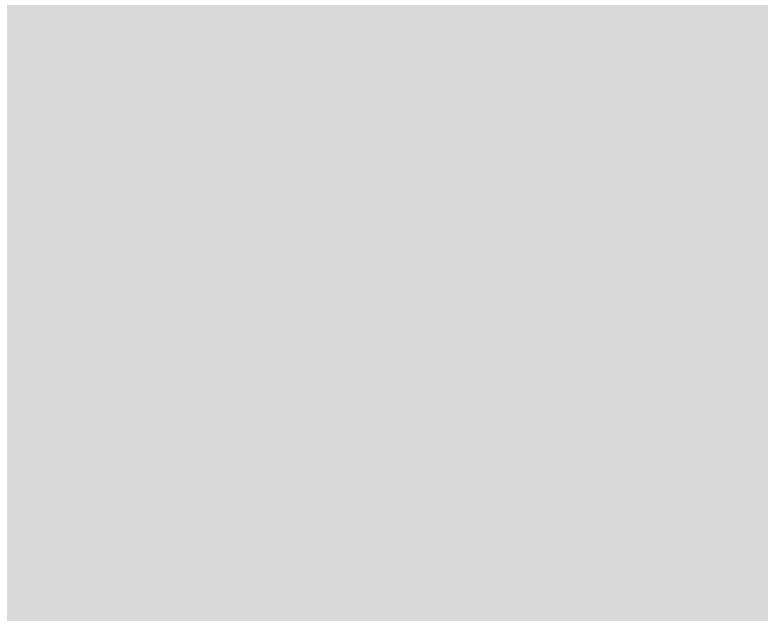


Photo: Rauli Gutierrez

*Boulders which fell onto the principal highways killed many who were travelling in their path.*

Soon helicopters and Red Cross volunteers were on the scene, directing us to enter a coffee plantation and wooded area off of the road. We entered, hundreds of us, trying desperately to make our way through the rubble to get in contact with our loved ones, to see how they fared, and to let them know that we were all right. We walked for 7 hours, climbing over boulders larger than me. We navigated the treacherous route, making paths that didn't exist before. We saw houses that had completely collapsed and met people who were working rapidly to unearth their loved ones. Together we helped one another make our way through the tall grasses and steep cliffs, carrying children and elders from time to time, and taking people who were injured or worn out from the walk to any house that was still standing. We communicated through shouts, alerting one another to where people had died, where paths were impassable, and where mud slides continued. Some people left arrows etched in the dirt road to indicate the pathway. People, many of whom had lost homes themselves, offered our rag tag group of travellers their precious water as we continued through this seldom travelled land. We walked forward, not feeling hunger, concentrating intently on the goal at hand: reaching our families. Sometimes we sang. Not knowing how our family members fared, we did whatever we could to diminish our fears and horrific images. I walked

the last three hours beside a tailor from the Salvadoran town of Armenia. He tried to keep our spirits up, reminding me how we should focus on the positive, having this chance to walk through this beautiful, little-known part of El Salvador that is bursting with canyons, cliffs, and lush greenery.

Occasionally we talked about our fears of what disasters might be awaiting in our communities. At 6:30 p.m. we emerged from the woods and merged back on to the Pan American Highway. He got in a bus headed to Armenia, while I walked the remaining 30 minutes to Jardines de Colon. I arrived weary, covered in dirt, but into the welcome arms of my family there, who somehow managed to get all of their arms around me simultaneously in a much anticipated hug that I won't soon forget. Tears streamed down the faces of Elsa, Yani, Henry, Javier, and I. My companion from Armenia was not so lucky. I was to learn the next day that over 81% of his community had been destroyed, that there were at least 19 people confirmed dead, with more missing. What horrors people have seen here, what indescribable losses people have felt. Whole communities have been buried. Life is fragile and so uncertain. But life is stronger than death. Although it is clearly true that a human life is no match for huge boulders that come crashing down, the human spirit knows no bounds. A tremendous destructive energy has been released in the earthquake, creat-

ing physical barriers, road blocks, and obstacles. This same energy is being harnessed creatively, dissolving boundaries that have existed between people and revealing profound webs of solidarity. In Jardines de Colon, for example, the differences and tensions between Evangelicals and Catholics that have separated people in

*Clearing away landslide debris.*

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**What horrors people have seen here, what indescribable losses people have felt. Whole communities have been buried. Life is fragile and so uncertain.**

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the past have been rendered unimportant in the face of this crisis. Evangelicals and Catholics alike worked feverishly to unearth the six people buried by the quake in the coffee plantation behind the community.

I've recently come to the conclusion that it is difficult, if not nearly impossible, to feel alone in this country. Although technically I was alone when the quake hit, groups of people took me in during the long, 7-hour walk. We were all in it together,

helping those who struggled during the journey, staying with those who fell, figuring out ways for us all to move forward and get out unharmed.

There is something amazingly comforting about knowing that you are not alone, that there are people in your neighbourhood looking out for you, that there are people in your country who care, and that there are people around the world sending prayers and food and medicine. When one feels the love and support of people, the most devastating situations become somehow more bearable. Life is stronger than death.✚

*Kristen Barker is a CRISPAZ volunteer from Cincinnati, Ohio. She works for the Centro de Paz (CEPAZ) and lives in the rural community of Jardines de Colon.*

## An Intense Walk at Las Colinas

by Raúl Gutiérrez

The two-week TV coverage of the avalanche that killed more than 400 people at Las Colinas was shocking. But standing right where the landslide began changes your sense of life forever. My visit to Las Colinas occurred two weeks after the first *terremoto* or earthquake. I had learned of the casualties and the 270 houses destroyed, I had seen survivors being rescued by relief volunteers, but I felt strongly impacted when I was standing before this mixture of mud, dirt, twisted iron, broken bricks and pieces of appliances thrown everywhere.

Our journey to Las Colinas began at 11:45 a.m. (two CRISPAZ team members were with me). Obtaining police authorization to visit the sight was quick and easy. There are a couple dozen police officers keeping watch over people's belongings—the few that remain.

Escorted by a policeman, I reached the few houses that were still standing. I settled my sight at the top of the hill and followed the path of the avalanche down to the destruction that was left behind. That was close to 500 meters. Nothing remains standing. Mud and dirt are the only things you can see. There was no smell of decay as I had expected. Army soldiers had spread hundreds of pounds of lime to fight

any possible epidemic. Human and animal bodies are suspected to remain buried under half a million cubic meters of mud and dirt that fell from the Balsamo Mountain range.

I can't recall if the noonday sun was as strong as it usually is, nor can I remember if it was a

written sign on a piece of plywood: "Familia Ortega-Urquilla. Here stood the house of my great family . . ." Four people died at that spot. The father, the only survivor of this family, was at work during the quake. Nothing was left of the Urquilla's home.

As I moved further down the hill, I spent a few minutes looking around, thinking about the immense fear these families must have felt as they saw the avalanche coming down, taking everything in its path, including their own lives. They had run out of their houses as they felt the tremor begin. A few seconds later, everything was changed.

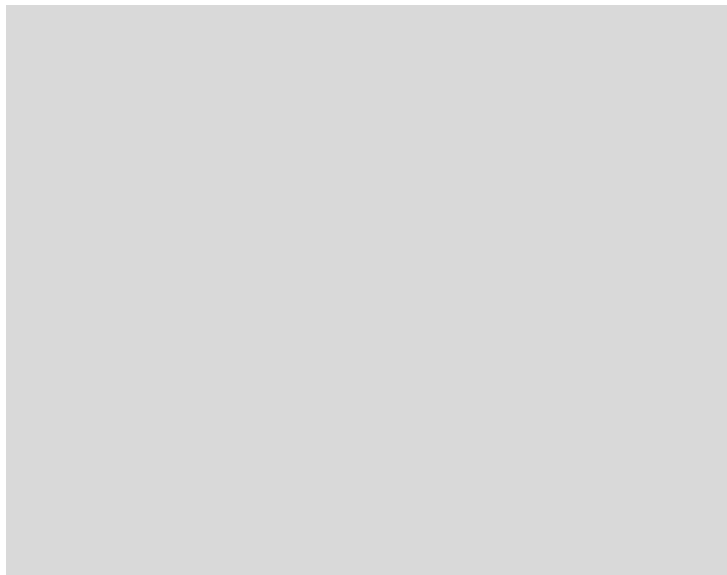
### Standing on a grave

On the right side of the hill there is a slightly-damaged house. The house had a few broken windows and lot of mud in the garage. Receipts, a photograph, and other papers were lying outside the door. Whoever lived there had a bit of money. As I turned to look at the mountain of dirt I was standing on a few minutes before, I realized how wrong I was. The layer of dirt was only a few inches thick; under that lay the roof of the house. The avalanche had taken the second floor and any other upper construction that the house might have had. Going down the stairs was not an easy

hot day . . . it must have been. The atmosphere in Las Colinas kept me in a state of astonishment. Tara, Jeanne and I would only share a few words while attempting to understand what had happened. I climbed up to where the first devastated houses were located, several meters up from the bottom of the hill, and looked down. I had a few flashbacks of the TV images that I had seen a few days before.

I started down the hill very slowly. It was 12:30 p.m. Twenty meters down from where I was standing I found a hand-

Photo: Raúl Gutiérrez



task because of the dirt, broken glass and a smashed stove at the bottom. Although the bedrooms and bathroom had not been largely damaged, the air was heavy. Heavy not because it was hard to breath, but rather because it was hard to imagine that people could have died there. A broken bathroom mirror was the last thing I saw. I was ready to leave.

As we walked down the hill of Las Colinas, we spent a few more minutes looking inside some of the partially intact houses. The garages and the front parts of the second floors of a long line of houses were completely gone. Most of them had been emptied, but there were a couple of houses that still contained their possessions. In one of those houses we saw the photograph of a recently-graduated young boy sitting on a small bench right at the front door, further inside a dinning table, a microwave and toaster oven. On the wall is a clock. The fateful time of that unforgettable Saturday, January 13<sup>th</sup>, 2001 remains intact: 11:34 a.m. I know that I will never forget this time, this date, not only because it was the first time I had lived through an earthquake, but because on the day of my birthday, many of my fellow Salvadorans lost their lives.✚

*Raúl Gutiérrez, a Salvadoran journalist, worked with the CRISPAZ team in El Salvador as editor for the past two issues of Salvantet.*

## Hope Amid the Rubble

by *Bill Van Lopik*

On January 22 a group of CRISPAZ board members, staff, and volunteers traveled out to the community of Joya de Ceren located just northwest of San Salvador. We brought two pick-up loads of food supplies and bedding for survivors of the January 13 earthquake. Even though I had previously traveled to many communities throughout El Salvador over the course of the last dozen years, this trip was different. This was the first time that I had ever witnessed the destruction caused by a massive earthquake. It was heartbreaking to see people's homes and lives reduced to a pile of rubble to be swept out into the street. It was saddening to think that so many families in this community who already had so few material possessions were now forced to survive on even less. Looking at fallen houses, washed out farmland, and cracks in the ground was a new and sobering experience for me and one that I will not soon forget.

However, I saw a spirit and attitude among the people of Joya de Ceren that was very familiar to me. It was an attitude that I had seen many times before among Salvadorans after suffering previous hardships. There were families already starting to rebuild their houses, undaunted by their lack of building supplies and unwillingly to wait for outsiders to bring donated material before beginning to rebuild their homes. I talked to families who refused to receive material aid until their neighbors who were hit harder up the road were taken care of first. I saw four families—who all lost their

homes—decide to share a large piece of plastic and all live under it until their individual homes could be rebuilt. I saw young people from surrounding communities delivering supplies to their fellow Salvadorans who had lost everything. Our group ate lunch with a gracious family who refused to allow us to leave the community until we accepted their offer of sharing a meal together. I saw children smiling and playing together even though their toys consisted only of sticks and rocks. My short experience at Joya de Ceren prompts me to reflect on who really are the needy in this situation. There is no doubt that the rural folks of El Salvador are in desperate need of material assistance and emotional comfort. However, I am constantly humbled by the fact that so many of us from the north are in need of the compassion, unselfishness, fortitude and communal spirit exhibited by the people of Joya de Ceren.

The book of Nehemiah talks about the walls of Jerusalem lying in rubble and in need of reconstruction. Nehemiah could have just as well been talking to Salvadorans as he was to the Israelites when he said "The God of heaven will give us success. We his servants will start rebuilding . . ."✚

*Bill Van Lopik, from Grand Rapids, Michigan, is a member of the CRISPAZ board of directors. Bill, who is a geographry teacher at Calvin College, worked with the Christian Reformed World Relief Committee in El Salvador from 1987 to 1992.*



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## Reflections Pertinent to the Earthquake

by Jon Sobrino

*On January 13, an earthquake shook El Salvador. The next day I received several calls, especially from Spain, asking how things were and what they could do. I couldn't give them many specific answers, but a few reflections occurred to me "pertinent to" the earthquake, if you will. I put these thoughts now into a somewhat more organized and deliberate form. The reader will notice a variety of emotions; many of them are the obvious ones. Perhaps she or he will also notice a few more personal emotions: the anger that it's always "the same" and that "the same people" are always the ones who suffer; the hope that some day it won't be that way; and, a kind of reverence for the lives of the poor, before, during and after catastrophes.*

Another terrible tragedy has occurred in El Salvador. A powerful earthquake has caused deaths that are being counted in the hundreds now, but may well end up being counted in the thousands. The number of injured are even greater, and the number of homeless are greater still. Tens of thousands of people have had their homes destroyed. They are sleeping outside, suffering through the cold of the night with their many small children. The earthquake has also left them

**The scenes are terrifying.  
There is inconsolable pain and  
grief for the dead. Entire families  
have disappeared.**

the anguish of an uncertain future—uncertainty as to how and where they will live in the upcoming weeks, months and years. Added to that is the fear that they feel—sometimes to the point of panic—when the earth begins to shake again. Some areas, where people have been evacuated, are desolate. In other areas, the homeless are living in crowded conditions, piled on top of each other. The scenes are terrifying. There is inconsolable pain and grief for the dead. Entire families have disappeared. "Our neighbor lost five children," one says. "The house caved in on everyone in the family," says another. As the days pass and we receive more news from the other provinces, the conviction grows that this catastrophe has truly been a big one, much greater than we had at first thought.

What is said above is enough to describe a great tragedy, a great suffering. In the days

to come we will hear the statistics: deaths, injuries, people who have disappeared, destruction, overall losses. Now, three days after the earthquake, we offer some brief reflections on what has really happened: what it asks of us and—though it sounds paradoxical—what it offers us.

**1. The Tragedy of the Poor.** In this country, just living—surviving—is a heavy load to bear. Officially, half of the population lives in poverty or extreme poverty. Of the other half, a good majority lives with serious burdens and difficulties, all of which are aggravated by these catastrophes. In 1986 another earthquake leveled the country. Two years ago, it was Hurricane Mitch. And we can't forget the 15 years of repression, war, massive exodus and destruction.

Just living, then, is a heavy load. But not everyone carries the same weight. As always, the poor majority bears the greatest share of the burden. The earthquake has destroyed many houses, but primarily the ones made of *bajareque*<sup>1</sup> and adobe, the places where the poor live because they can't afford to build with cement and steel. Landslides have buried people and houses—in this case also lower-middle class housing—but they also bury the poor, because it is only on those inhospitable hillsides, not in flat and fertile land, where they are able to plant. The same thing happened during the war. The immense majority of those who suffered the repression and those who died in the war from one side or the other were poor. And so it goes.

The earthquake is not just a tragedy then. It is also an x-ray of the country. It shows that as a great majority, it is the poor who die, the poor who are buried by landslides, the poor who have to flee with the few things they have left, the poor who have to sleep in the open air, the poor who anguish about the future, the poor who find immense stumbling blocks when they try to rebuild their lives. Undoubtedly others also suffer when earthquakes occur. But in general, when the scare is over, they repair what has been damaged, return to normality and continue living—some of them surrounded by the same luxuries they have always had.

Earthquakes, like cemeteries, reveal the sinful inequalities of a society and, at the same time, show their deepest truth. Some graves

<sup>1</sup> *bajareque*—housing material of mud and sticks.

are sumptuous, great pantheons and luxurious marble monuments in the best locations. Others are almost without name and without crosses. They are crowded in small places and remain anonymous. They are the majority. Earthquakes remind us of cemeteries and tragically set the scene for the parable of Jesus: "There was a very rich man who feasted every day. And at the foot of his table there was a poor man named Lazarus who waited in the hope that crumbs would fall from the table . . ."

**2. The Injustice that Shapes the Planet.** Tragedy has natural causes, but its

unequal impact is not due to nature, but rather to what we human beings do to each other and with each other. This is the tragedy that shapes our planet in a massive, cruel and lasting way. Tragedy is in large part the work of our hands.

It is illusory to appeal to the safety regulations required in home building when the poor do not have the resources to comply with those regulations. And if you go to the root of the matter, it is insulting that dignified housing has not been achieved—and is not even close to being achieved—for the majority of people of the world when we have a proliferation of impressive buildings, highways and hotels and airports. This is true in El Salvador as well.

According to experts, in this celebrated millennium that has begun—the millennium of globalization—two billion human beings do not have a house in which they can live with a minimum of dignity and security. And when Gustavo Gutiérrez wants to shake up the complacency of this world of ours, he asks this simple question, "Where will the poor sleep in the twenty-first century?" "Capitalism was born without a heart," says Adolfo Pérez Esquivel. It has spent more than a century building frightful shacks and hovels that fall, mocking the poor who lose their houses every 20 years.

But capitalism also mocks the experts. For example, ecologists and technicians, Salvadorans and foreigners alike denounced beforehand the danger of deforesting the Balsamo Mountain Range. But the construction companies turned a deaf ear and built hundreds of houses there. And what was bound to happen happened: the earthquake caused a landslide, approximately 270 houses were buried under four meters of dirt, and almost a thousand people died. Apparently the tragedy that the earthquake brought on was not due only to deforestation, but deforestation did contribute. The following day, President Flores made an appearance at the scene of the tragedy in one of those visits that leaders make that sometimes really are heartfelt but sometimes are just one more thing to check off their list. People approached him, surrounded him, booed him and insulted him—a very unusual occurrence. Finally, a government official had to step between the TV camera and the

crowd so that the scene wouldn't be filmed. Seeing how people acted, we get a sense of their anger and pain.

One last reflection along this line. Every fifteen or twenty years there are earthquakes in the Central American region. But the tragedies they cause don't seem to teach us much or help us efficiently avoid or minimize the tragedy of the next one. Since the time of the 1986 earthquake, we have not sought a solution to the generalized situation of poverty, nor have we advanced very effectively in the prevention and alleviation

**Tragedy has natural causes, but its unequal impact is not due to nature, but rather to what we human beings do to each other and with each other. This is the tragedy that shapes our planet in a massive, cruel and lasting way. Tragedy is in large part the work of our hands.**

of the consequences of inevitable tragedies. In the fifteen years between the last earthquake and this one, the country has invested a lot of money in improving the weaponry of the armed forces and the technology of the banking system. But we continue to use picks and shovels to dig through the rubble, especially in the remote villages and hamlets.

The tragedy has been great for the poor. Today we talk about the tragedy but soon it will disappear from the scene and be replaced by other interests—the same interests as always. People are already starting to talk about whether the earthquake will reactivate the economy or not. It's like thinking about how to divide the possessions of a deceased family member before the person is even buried. Those who own the country are trying to palliate the damages the earthquake has caused, but they are not very worried about how to guarantee the future of the lives of the poor—their houses, their belongings. And it seems normal to us for things to be this way.

Because of this, the earthquake continues to project the word of Yahweh at the beginning of history: "What have you done to your brother?"

**3. The Holiness of Living.** It is easier to write about tragedy and evil than it is to write about life and kindness. But though briefly, let us say that life continues in the midst of tragedy, pushing and pulling and moving with force. The parade of people, walking or riding in rickety vehicles, with bundles on their heads, children by the hand: this is the most fundamental expression of life, of the desire to live. This life bursts forth from the best of what we are and what we have. Poor people—sometimes very poor and with little knowledge—put everything they are and everything they have at the service of life, and they do it because frequently it is about all they can do.

Here in the third world, because of centuries of experience, the poor distrust the government, government officials and the authorities, even though there always are some good and responsible people among them. The poor know that they have human rights. In the times of catastrophes, they know they have the right to assistance and aid. If aid

comes to them it is, of course, well received. And when it doesn't arrive, they protest if they can because it has not arrived. But they don't expect much. That's why their primary response is another one. They put their strength and their ideas at the service of life. In the midst of tragedy, the strength of life makes itself felt and, in spite of it all, allows the enchantment of being human to be felt.

And, together with the impulse of life itself, the force of solidarity also arises. Aid has come and will continue to come from many places just as it has in past years. Rescue experts, doctors and engineers have arrived. . . They offer a great service and they give encouragement, and they deserve our very grateful thanks. But I refer now to a more primary solidarity and to talk about it, I return to the Balsamo Mountain Range.

There weren't many excavating machines at hand in order to uncover bodies. Besides, it would have been dangerous to use them, because as they removed rubble, they would also cut bodies in pieces. So long lines of men, passing buckets of dirt to each other, set about removing thousands of cubic meters of dirt and disposing of it elsewhere. They've been at it for days and the exhaustion is palpable. But they continue to search for bodies, and they are hoping for the miracle of finding a body that might still have some life in it. With them are the stalwart emergency aid workers who have come in from other countries. This is the very essence of solidarity: to look for other human beings, to find them alive or to bury them with dignity if they are dead.

And in this very primal solidarity, women are always and unfailingly there with the most basic of all solidarity: taking care of children amid the rubble, making and distributing what there is of food in the camps for the homeless, always encouraging others with their presence, tirelessly, relentlessly. They are the ultimate example of the persistence of life.

**This is the very essence of solidarity: to look for other human beings, to find them alive or to bury them with dignity if they are dead.**

I like to think that in that very primal decision to live and to give life, something like primordial holiness appears—one that doesn't ask whether it is virtue or obligation, if it is freedom or need, if it is grace or merit. It is not the holiness recognized in canonizations, but a pure heart can still appreciate it. It is not the holiness of heroic virtues, but rather that of a truly heroic life. We don't know if these poor who clamor to live are holy intercessors or not, but they do move our hearts. They may be holy sinners, if you will, but they comply notably with the primordial vocation of creation: they are obedient to God's call to live and to give life to others, even in the midst of catastrophe.

It is the holiness of suffering that has a different—but more primary—logic than the holiness of virtue. It may sound a bit overstated, but seeing these poor, perhaps we would repeat what the centurion said in seeing the crucified Jesus: "Truly these are sons and daughters of God."

**4. The Compassion That Saves Us.** Inside the country, and especially outside the country, many are asking what they can do. Some want to know how to send aid so that it will actually get to the people who need it and not into the pockets of the corrupt. They want to avoid repeating the experiences of the past when governments and militaries have pocketed the generosity of many people of good will. Others ask, perhaps with a skepticism justified by past experiences, if the aid will be of use and for what. Finally others ask which aid is the most efficient and the most necessary. I won't answer these questions specifically. Rather, I want to offer some reflections on the fundamental attitude (at least as we see it from here) that leads to assistance with creativity and generosity, determination and faithfulness.

In the first place, it is necessary to be affected by tragedy, not to shrink from it or to try and soften it. This doesn't mean promoting masochism or demanding psychological impossibilities. It has to do with a first moment of honesty with what is real. To run from tragedy, in subtle or blatant ways, is part of trying to escape the reality of our world. We need to be clear that unless we stay and make a home in reality, we can't help anybody—not anyone other than ourselves and not ourselves. Allowing ourselves to be affected, to feel pain when faced with lives that have been cut short or threatened, to feel anger against the injustice that is behind the tragedy, to feel also the shame that we have ruined the planet and that we are not doing anything to make it better—all of these things are crucial to helping us know how to help in times of tragedy. And most importantly, these things can help us feel compassion and put it into practice, and this is what saves us.

In the second place, allowing ourselves to be affected by tragedy saves us, because it installs us in the truth and it helps us to overcome the unreal state in which we live. Because of this churches and universities will be doing something good when they analyze and proclaim the truth about these tragedies. And let us hope that governments, multinational corporations, armed forces and world banks will do the same, even though here our hopes fade or vanish completely depending on the case.

In this context, it is especially important for the media to take a "preferential option for truth," beginning with providing reliable information about reality and moving towards identifying the causes of this reality. The panorama that the media offers is often discouraging. How many millions of dollars a football player might earn is news—and scandalous news at that—but this fact is not the most real news in our reality. It's just a factual, scandalous, and attention-diverting anecdote in a world that is dying of hunger. The "news" becomes "reality" when what athletes, singers and movie stars make is compared with what human beings are trying to live on in Africa or in Bangladesh or in the miserably poor community of Guadalupe that was destroyed by the earthquake. That's when we learn a lot about comparative wrongs, about injustice and inhumanity. Making this comparison is something that defies the imagination to the point that it produces a sense of vertigo. But, above all, it translates into a question

that we can not silence: "Is a world like this a human world?"

Tragedy has, then, an immense educational potential. If we analyze and do not cover up its truth, it introduces us to the truth of the world and to our own truth. It isn't easy. Even in the midst of the earthquake, in El Salvador we talk much more about what has happened in the cities than what has happened to remote villages and hamlets. But we need to look at them. As Ellacuría said, "If the First World wants to know what it is like, it should look at the Third World." In the same way, we could also say: if we want to know the truth about the capital city, we should look at the villages and hamlets.

In the third place, allowing ourselves to be affected by tragedy can generate solidarity. It often happens that a family misfortune helps to unify the family. "*Felix culpa!*" we used to say. In fact, sometimes misfortune is the *only* thing that can unite a family. Or in other words, if not even suffering unites a family, then there is no solution. The thing is that in human beings there are always reserves of kindness; they are dormant sometimes, but they can be activated by the suffering of others. We are not always and completely selfish. An earthquake in El Salvador, a famine in Calcutta, the AIDS epidemic in Africa—these things can help to generate conscience in the human family.

Among the suffering crucified people there is something that attracts and convokes, something that can take us out of ourselves, and that is the starting place of solidarity. So, along with the ethical sense of obligation or along with overcoming guilt feelings, the deepest and most decisive thing is also present: the sense of connection to other human beings. Concrete solidarity comes later and it is surely needed: clothing, food, tents, medicines, money, technical assistance of all kinds, debt forgiveness . . . But all of this, its warmth, its strength—all of what will always be a part of solidarity—comes from having seen something good and humanizing in being close to the victims of this world. And that's when the human miracle happens: the mutual accompaniment, the giving and the receiving of the best that we have. And the greatest miracle—loving each other like members of one family. Christians say it in its most radical form: to love each other as sons and daughters of God. The miracle of the shared table occurs then, the joy of being part of the human family.

**5. God and Hope.** In El Salvador there is a proliferation of different kinds of religiosity, but as a whole it is a religious country, even more so in times of catastrophe. There are some fanatics who say that the earthquake is a punishment from God. After the 1976 earthquake in Guatemala, the archbishop at the time said that it had been caused by the sins of priests. Others, however, speak of God with gratefulness: "Thanks to God we're alive." They speak with hope: "God willing, we'll get through this." And with a kind of submission, in order to find meaning in the catastrophe, they say: "May God's will be done." These are phrases very much like other typically Salvadoran phrases. To say *Primero Dios*, or "God first" is a way of saying "only God can help us. We can't expect very much from humans."

There is another less religious phrase that also shows how the poor understand the meaning of life: It is *a saber*, or "who knows?" That means that there's not much logic in reality that makes the future predictable. At least there is no logic that works to their benefit.

Here we don't often hear that question that leads to the classical theodicy: "God either can't or doesn't want to prevent catastrophes. Either way, He doesn't come out looking too good." The question, nevertheless, remains: "Where is God?" Jesus asked the same question, and Paul had the audacity to say, "on the cross." These days some have said, "God is in the Cafetalón," the refuge for those who have been left with nothing.

There is no logical or convincing answer to the question of where God is. Without getting into it now, let us say that God is also crucified. Bonhoeffer and Moltmann have said it very well in Europe. Here, Ellacuría also said it briefly but profoundly. Without a doubt, the answer to the question about God can only be decided in life. If hope comes from the ultimate mystery, it also comes in times of catastrophe. If hope doesn't die, that is. To illustrate this, let us end with the following anecdote.

Several churches have been destroyed in the earthquake, including the Church of El Carmen in Santa Tecla where I live. People cried to their parish priest in pain, "Father, we don't have a church anymore!" And the priest, Salvador Carranza, said to them, "We have been left without a church building, but not without the Church. We are the Church and it's up to us to keep it alive."

Years ago in the time of the historical earthquake of war and repression, Monseñor Romero used to say: "The day that the forces of evil take away this wonder (the radio station), let us realize that they haven't done us any harm. On the contrary, we will just become more like living microphones, and we will speak God's words everywhere we go."

These words are rhetorical, but they are clear and true. They serve to encourage the Church during difficult times, but they also serve to encourage the people in circumstances like the ones we are living in now. The words point in an extraordinary way to what is fundamental. The biggest tragedy is the destruction of what is human in a people. The greatest solidarity is to help to rebuild it. The greatest hope is to keep walking, doing justice and loving tenderly.

Has this died in El Salvador? We don't believe it has, but it needs to grow. In this sense, we hope that people of solidarity will help to rebuild houses, but especially that they will build up the people. We hope they will help to rebuild roads, but especially that they will help create ways to walk the roads of life. We hope they will help to rebuild churches, but especially that they will build up the people of God. May solidarity give hope to this people, because with hope, people will find a way to help themselves. And these people will return tenfold, in inspiration and encouragement, anything they receive.✚

*Portal Koinonia*, January 16, 2001  
Translated by Kathy Ogle, EPICA

## Earthquake Relief: Recovery for El Salvador

Heartfelt thanks for all of the support you have sent for earthquake relief! With some million and a half people left homeless we are facing an enormous task. But we can make a difference! Already we have helped to meet the immediate needs of emergency food and shelter. Now begins the second phase of constructing temporary housing for affected families.

We need your help. Since the quake hit El Salvador, CRISPAZ has worked to provide food and shelter for two rural communities: Jardines de Colon and Joya de Ceren. In the coming days CRISPAZ will join with other local organizations to provide materials for safe, provisional housing in these communities. This can be provided at a cost of \$600 per family. We urge you to take part in this reconstruction process. Please send your donation to CRISPAZ, 1555 Massachusetts Avenue, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 02138.

Be sure to earmark your check for "earthquake relief."

*If you would like to be added to our email update list, please send your request to [pazsal@navegante.com.sv](mailto:pazsal@navegante.com.sv)*



## CRISPAZ Summer Immersion Program

The CRISPAZ Summer Immersion Program offers an intensive learning and service experience in a poor community in El Salvador. This year, participants will have the opportunity to work directly with communities that have been affected by the earthquakes.

Summer immersion participants will live with Salvadorans and accompany them in their efforts to rebuild and to go on with their daily lives and work.

Additionally the program offers orientation, weekly reflections and personal formation.

**Dates for the 2001 Summer  
Immersion Program are  
June 4 to August 17**

*For more information about the program including a complete list of requirements, application materials, and costs, contact us:*

CRISPAZ USA: 617-354-9645, [crispaz@igc.org](mailto:crispaz@igc.org)  
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