

The pastor must not flee Speaking to economic justice

J. Nelson Kraybill

Maria from my congregation in Indiana reported during Advent 2013 that the body of her twenty-one-year-old nephew Roberto had been found in the Arizona desert.¹ The young man was from Maria's hometown in Honduras, making his way to *El Norte* in search of a living wage and a stable society. Crossing the desert undocumented, he broke his ankle in an isolated place and ran out of water before he could get to help.

The family needed to raise thousands of dollars to get the body back to Central America for burial. Since neither Maria nor most

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of her relatives in Elkhart have documents, they could not travel to Honduras for the funeral and had to grieve here.

More tragedy visited the family on the same week that Maria got news of Roberto's death: her twenty-seven-year-old cousin in Honduras was murdered, the victim of gang activity or drug traffic retribution.

On the Sunday after Maria got all this news, I had planned to begin my pastoral prayer with the text, "Make straight in the desert a highway for our God." I had not anticipated when I prepared for worship that just before prayer I would share news with the congregation of a young man dying in the desert. The confluence of ancient prophecy and present tragedy shook me to the core.

Who is responsible?

It is too simple to suggest that the United States alone is responsible for such suffering among Latin American peoples, but my country has not always been helpful. I wear clothing and buy products produced in Latin America and elsewhere at salaries far

below minimum wage in my homeland. In the name of democracy, and sometimes even in the name of Christianity, my country has tried to destroy governments in Latin America that threatened the access of North American businesses to natural resources and cheap labor.

Trapped on lower rungs of a global economic and political ladder, some impoverished people in Latin America turn to unhappy alternatives for survival. Some get involved in narcotics trafficking for drugs to be sold in North American cities, including Elkhart. Gangs emerge in Latin America as unemployed people seek power or identity in violent associations. Millions desperate for opportunity or a stable society risk their lives to come illegally across the border into the United States.

Hosted in Latin America

Four years ago, before heading back into pastoral leadership, I spent a month in intensive Spanish-language instruction in Quetzaltenango, Guatemala. I wanted both to improve my language ability and to have sustained contact with people in a developing country. For two hundred dollars a week I was hosted—lodging and meals—in a private home. The fee I paid included four hours daily of one-on-one language instruction with a teacher who had a master's degree in linguistics. It was cheaper for me to study and be hosted in Central America for a month than to live at home in Indiana.

Even as a pastor on church worker salary, I was a wealthy visitor in a country where the average per capita income is \$240 per month.² The household where I stayed always had a nearly empty refrigerator; the family lived too close to the edge financially to stock food in advance for more than a day or two. An adult son in the household was working undocumented in New York—and regularly forwarded money to Guatemala that would allow him upon return to build a house for his wife and children who remained in Central America.

My language teacher took me on a trip across Guatemala aboard *camionetas*—brightly painted, smoke-belching public buses that people in Central America use daily. These are recycled American school buses retired from carrying schoolchildren in *El Norte*. “Guatemala is the rubbish bin of the United States,” my

teacher said matter-of-factly. “We use your old buses, cell phones, appliances, and computers.”

The pastor should not flee

Civil war devastated Guatemala from 1960 to 1996, killing more than 200,000 people, and it was not just a local feud. Guatemala was one square of a global chessboard on which empires competed for political hegemony and access to cheap resources.

A martyr from that war captivated me, and I wanted to see where he lived and died in Guatemala. I traveled to the indigenous Mayan village of Santiago Atitlán, on the edge of Lake Atitlán in the central highlands. Nestled in stunning beauty

between volcanoes, Santiago Atitlan was an epicenter of violence when fratricide tore apart the nation.

Inside the austere Catholic church in Santiago Atitlán, the gentle eyes of Father Stanley Rother gaze down from a large photograph. Below the picture is a quote from this Oklahoma native who spent thirteen years ministering in the maelstrom of civil war: *El pastor no debe huir* (The pastor must not flee).

Below Father Stanley Rother's photo in the Catholic church in Santiago Atitlán is a quote from this man who spent thirteen years ministering in the maelstrom of civil war: *El pastor no debe huir* (The pastor must not flee).

The story behind Rother's midnight martyrdom in 1981 goes back at least to 1952, when Jacobo Arbenz was president of

the country. His government decided that United Fruit Company—a North American enterprise—could no longer monopolize farmland to raise bananas for export when many Guatemalans were hungry. Vast tracts of land had been *given* to the fruit company by a previous Guatemalan government in exchange for building a railroad—a railroad that the fruit company then monopolized to export their products. Without taking land already in production, Arbenz expropriated United Fruit Company properties that were lying fallow, and distributed farms to 100,000 landless peasants.

The octopus of economic reach

With imagery reminiscent of the beast in Revelation 13, some

journalists of the era referred to United Fruit Company as *el pulpo* (the octopus) because its tentacles were everywhere. The fruit company had close connections with the Eisenhower administration in an era when many Americans saw communism as a global threat. Not surprisingly, there was a military coup in Guatemala in 1954, orchestrated by the Central Intelligence Agency. Decades of dictatorship followed. Peasants lost farms that Arbenz had expropriated for their use. Resentment and poverty boiled into revolt in 1960, followed by thirty-six years of civil war.

Indigenous (Indian) people—40 percent of the population—were the poorest in Guatemala. Many received land under Arbenz, and some joined the armed resistance. During the 1982–83 presidency of “born again” General Efraín Ríos Montt—a man championed by American televangelist Pat Robertson as a Christian hero—the government responded with breathtaking brutality. Scores of indigenous villages were wiped off the map, with thousands of men, women, and children massacred. The message of Ríos Montt’s *frijoles y fusiles* (beans and guns) campaign among indigenous peoples effectively was, “If you are with us, we’ll feed you. If not, we’ll kill you.”³

A prophet’s bold stand

Father Rother was not a political activist, never endorsed violence, and did not align with the rebels. But he had been assigned as pastor among the dispossessed and suffering people of Santiago Atitlán, and resolved to stay through the turmoil. When twenty members of his congregation disappeared, murdered by rightwing death squads, Rother started a fund to support their families.

Anyone supporting or identifying with the poor in that politically volatile situation was in danger. Even “shaking hands with an Indian has become a political act,” Rother once wrote in a letter to friends.⁴ Warned that he was on a death list, Rother briefly returned to Oklahoma, but came back to Santiago Atitlán just before Holy Week in 1981. *The pastor must not flee.*

At midnight in July of that year, masked gunman entered the rectory, found Rother, and shot him dead. By dawn a thousand Tzutuhil Mayans gathered in restive silence in front of the church. A Carmelite sister, sensing volatility in the situation, led grieving townspeople in singing resurrection hymns.⁵

Be part of a better future

Part of my pastoral prayer on the week Maria got bad news was, “God, forgive us as a nation for taking much of this continent from indigenous and native peoples, then telling them they cannot come in because the land is ours now. Forgive us for buying cheap clothing made by people who do not receive a living wage.”

Neither I nor my congregation is directly to blame for poverty and violence in Latin America, and guilt mongering has little effect. But personal connection to economic and political suffering in another country awakened me and my congregation. We might be part of a better future. We might lobby for immigration reform. We might be willing to pay more for bananas or shirts so international companies can provide adequate salaries in Honduras.

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We might share the benefits of democracy, health care, and education with other nations rather than pedaling arms.

Despite our professed political ideology as a nation, it did not matter half a century ago that President Arbenz of Guatemala was democratically elected. When he no longer served American national interests, the United States had him removed. We might contact lawmakers and insist that foreign policy consider what is best for people in distant lands, not simply what will protect our economic interests. We might recognize that the United States, Canada, and a few other

highly industrialized countries collectively manage imperial interests that sometimes shade into idolatry and greed.

Empires bring good and bad

Since the dawn of recorded history, empires have been a reality, and they bring good along with the bad. United Fruit Company built railroads, worked to eradicate malaria, and often paid the highest wages in rural Guatemala. But *wealth* went to stockholders in North America. Just enough wealth went to Guatemalan elites to get them to pacify their own people. This pattern of empires using local indigenous rulers to serve the interests of empire goes

back to biblical times. In Jesus's day it was the Herod family pacifying and subduing the Jewish people on behalf of Rome.

Chilean author Pablo Neruda, in his 1950 poem "La United Fruit Company," uses scathing sarcasm to depict how international companies extended empire into his country:

Cuando sonó la trompeta,
estuvo todo preparado en la tierra,
y Jehova repartió el mundo
a Coca-Cola Inc., Anaconda,
Ford Motors, y otras entidades:
la Compañía Frutera Inc.
se reservó lo más jugoso,
la costa central de mi tierra,
la dulce cintura de América . . .

*When the trumpet sounded
everything was prepared on earth,
and Jehovah gave the world
to Coca-Cola Inc., Anaconda,
Ford Motors, and other corporations.
The United Fruit Company
reserved for itself the most juicy
piece, the central coast of my world,
the delicate waist of America . . .*

Biblical empires

Empires of Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, and Greece all appear as prominent actors on the stage of Old Testament history. In the New Testament, the single prominent international power is the Roman Empire. Rome appears as a harlot in the book of Revelation, and its empire is a beast. The harlot city is "fornicating" with kings of the earth, drawing them into illicit economic, military, and spiritual alliance.

When the author of Revelation anticipated the collapse of the "harlot" Babylon/Rome and its empire, he gave a harsh summary of how the imperial economy worked: "All the nations have drunk of the wine of the wrath of her fornication, and the kings of the earth have committed fornication with her, and the merchants

of the earth have grown rich from the power of her luxury. . . . And in [Babylon/Rome] was found the blood of prophets and of saints, and of all who have been slaughtered on earth” (Rev. 18). In these phrases we see the shadow side of empire: a web of political, military, and economic power ends up killing saints and countless anonymous victims—saints such as Stanley Rother in Guatemala, victims such as Roberto in the desert of Arizona.

Empires dazzle

The Roman Empire was dazzling with its magnificent architecture, impressive administration, invincible army, and promise of economic opportunity. The much-celebrated *pax Romana* (Roman peace) brought a kind of stability to the Mediterranean world that millions welcomed—although there always was a veiled fist or unsheathed sword to accompany the *pax*.

The liturgical or patriotic expression of first-century collaboration with Rome was emperor worship. Herod the Great, even while magnificently rebuilding the temple to Yahweh in Jerusalem, was constructing centers of emperor worship in Palestine at Caesarea, Sebaste (Samaria), and Baniyas (Caesarea Philippi).

This is the paradox of empires: they typically espouse noble ideology or religion but also use brutal force to secure political and economic advantage. The “peace” of the Roman Empire, backed by divine emperors and legions of soldiers, ultimately led

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to the crucifixion of Jesus and destruction of Jerusalem. Lofty ideals of socialism, protected with machine guns, ended up with a *gulag* in the Soviet Union. Pursuit of democracy, safeguarded by the Central Intelligence Agency, led to the coup against a democratically elected president in Guatemala in 1954. Today troops from democratic and “Christian” Western powers occupy and subdue Iraq and Afghanistan, with the result that hun-

dreds of thousands have died.

Pope Francis

Recently the new bishop of Rome—the first from Latin America—stepped into the global limelight to address economic issues:

Just as the commandment “Thou shalt not kill” sets a clear limit in order to safeguard the value of human life, today we also have to say “thou shalt not” to an economy of exclusion and inequality. Such an economy kills. How can it be that it is not a news item when an elderly homeless person dies of exposure, but it is news when the stock market loses two points? . . . Today everything comes under the laws of competition and the survival of the fittest, where the powerful feed upon the powerless. As a consequence, masses of people find themselves excluded and marginalized: without work, without possibilities, without any means of escape (Evangelii Gaudium 53).

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I am accustomed to speaking out on peace issues. But am I ready to preach and act on matters of global economic justice that impinge upon my lifestyle or my retirement accounts? Can this pastor flee from speaking out about a growing gap between rich and poor?

justice that impinge upon my lifestyle or my retirement accounts? Can this pastor flee from speaking out about a growing gap between rich and poor in North America and around the world?

What am I willing to risk?

Paul the Apostle worked to bring economic sharing across international boundaries by getting relatively wealthy churches of Macedonia and Greece to contribute to an impoverished church at Jerusalem. Paul bases his argument for economic sharing on the incarnation: “For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was

rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich” (2 Cor. 8:9). Economic justice and sharing are linked to the theological core of Christian faith; they are not optional extras.

As my congregation responds to the deaths of Maria’s Latin American relatives—tragedies related to economic inequality—we also will consider Paul’s commitment to take risks to address

injustice. Paul made a risky trip to Jerusalem to carry the money gift, and ended up a prisoner in Rome after the disturbance his visit to Jerusalem caused. Most historians think Paul died when Nero killed Christians after the great fire in Rome in AD 64. Paul died because his missionary vision included economic justice.

What am I willing to risk for economic justice in service to the gospel? *The pastor must not flee.*

Notes

¹ Both “Maria” and “Roberto” are pseudonyms.

² World Bank estimate for 2011. See http://devdata.worldbank.org/AAG/gtm_aag.pdf.

³ Victor Perera, *Unfinished Conquest: The Guatemalan Tragedy* (Berkeley: University of California, 1995), 330. In 2013 a Guatemalan court convicted Rios Montt of genocide and sentenced him to eighty years in prison. *New York Times*, May 10, 2013.

⁴ Perera, *Unfinished Conquest*, 180.

⁵ John Rosengren, *St. Anthony Messenger*, 2006; online at <https://www.americancatholic.org/messenger/jul2006/feature1.asp>.

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