

Medardo Gomez  
Lutheran Bishop of El Salvador

*The following comes from an interview with Medardo in 1987. At that time El Salvador was in the midst of a twelve-year civil war that ended on January 16, 1992. It began when left-wing guerillas backed by Cuba attempted to overthrow a right-wing government controlled by wealthy landowners, which formed the Death Squad to root out the insurgents, leaving the vast majority of poverty ridden peasants caught in the middle.*

I am from the eastern zone of El Salvador. My mother is a primary school education teacher, my father a mechanic. I have three brothers and sisters. Since I was very small I had the desire to be a priest.

When I was finishing my secondary education, one of my friends invited me to church, and ever since I arrived at that church I felt it was something that was calling me for the future. After many months of being a member of the church, the pastor called me to talk with him. He said that he had observed me and asked if I was open to studying to become a pastor. I was really surprised. Somehow it seemed like he had known what my thinking was even though at that time I hadn't thought about becoming a pastor, and even though he didn't know that I had wanted to become a priest. He's the one who reawakened my desires. So I said yes.

I was only 18 years old when I went to Augsburg Lutheran Seminary in Mexico City in 1965. I studied in Mexico until 1970, when I married a Mexican woman who had graduated from the Baptist seminary. I was at first assigned to work as a pastor in Guatemala.

After two years, I was transferred to San Salvador. There we initiated the Lutheran Church of the Resurrection in 1972. With the brothers and sisters of this church, we have given ourselves to serve the people in the greatest need in our country.

We give this because, knowing the reality of our country, we have to make a decision. In whose favor are we going to work? Are we going to work in favor of the small number, the few who are powerful in the country, or are we going to work in favor of the immense majority of poor people in the country? Of five million people in the country, four-and-a-half million are poor. So we decided to work in favor of the people who are suffering the most.

This work we do is marvelous because at the very end you receive the satisfaction that it is God who has actually helped you and that Christ is the one who has been badly treated. This is the thinking that we went into our work with, and we knew for sure we were going to have problems. But at the very same time, we knew it was a service to God, a meeting with God, and so this really filled us with great strength to chose to work for the brothers and sisters in greatest need.

The war in my country has caused the rise of people who are in even greater need. These are the displaced people. These are the people who arrive from the areas of conflict,

who have seen the bodies and the soldiers and police. They have seen them kill. They have seen their loved ones killed.

And these displaced people, because of fleeing, and looking for refuge, are afraid to look to the institutions of the government for help. The only institution they look to for help is the church, because the church is the only place that is not going to put conditions on its help.

Upon offering them our services, they've given more to us, really, than we've given to them. We've learned with them that giving something in the name of God is very dynamic. It's so dynamic that we actually receive more than we give. This is what happened to us as the church. With the little we have done, we've received so much more, so much that the church in El Salvador has arrived to the point of having international recognition.

We haven't only risen in prestige on a national and international level but also in spiritual life. It is the great faith of the brothers and sisters we serve that has served us. These brothers and sisters are the ones who have greater authority to speak of God, to speak of faith, to speak of trust in God, to speak of hope. I say that they have even greater authority because God is with them. They depend so much on God, and they call to God day and night.

They call to God for their needs, for their problems, for their suffering. Despite having absolutely nothing, when they have problems and necessities, the one they go to is God. You really feel this dependence on God when you're with them. And for this reason, they teach others about faith. They teach others about spirituality. They teach me much more than I as a pastor could teach them in this sense.

It's been a tradition within Latin America that all of those who help the poor are accused of being communists in order to destroy the work of those who help the poor, especially the work that the church does. It's a work that tries to help people gain skills and overcome their conditions. For example, our church teaches people how to read and write. And we also conscientize them so that they think about their own dignity and their rights and their needs. We do this so that the people will be able to unite and organize themselves in their own communities.

Clearly this bothers the people who have power because when people are ignorant, they don't protest anything and they don't ask for anything. But when they know what their rights are, they begin to demand what they see as their rights. And this causes a problem for those who have power.

*Medardo engaged in ecumenical discussions concerning human rights with Roman Catholic Archbishop Oscar Romero from 1977 when he was appointed archbishop to 1980 when he was assassinated by the Death Squad. Romero was targeted after giving a sermon in which he called on Salvadorian soldiers, as Christians, to obey God's highest order and stop carrying out the government's repression and violations of basic human rights. (Romero was canonized in 2018.) Later that year four Roman Catholic missionary*

women were murdered. Ursuline Sister Dorothy Kazel and lay volunteer Jean Donovan, who were known as the “Rescue Squad,” traveling with Maryknoll Sisters Maura Clare and Ida Ford in a jeep disappeared and were later found dead. It was clear that Christians advocating basic civil rights for the peasants of El Salvador were targeted. Nevertheless, Medardo continued the work he began with Oscar Romero and promoted his memory across Lutheran communities at an international level.

The logic of God is not the same as human logic. And for this reason, the ones who persecute us are mistaken because they work with their logic. They believe that by killing, they are going to be able to destroy the work of God. But what they don't know is that it makes the work even stronger. They believe by criticizing and attacking the people, they're going to make them flee. But they don't know that this is the way to make the people even stronger. And that is what is happening in my case.

I was already committed in favor of the people when they started to persecute me. I was held in prison for four days—two days with the death squads and two days with the police. There was a moment when I was being held by the death squads that I was sure my death was certain. By holding me prisoner I became very afraid that the church would be destroyed because the newspapers were saying that I helped the guerillas. So when I got out of prison, I was sure I wasn't going to find anybody in the church.

*Medardo Gomez had been elected and consecrated the first bishop of the Salvadorian Lutheran Church—currently an ELCA companion church—in 1986. International protests pressured the El Salvador government to release Medardo.*

But when I came out, my great surprise was that the church was more filled than ever. And since then, it has continued growing, so much that we aren't able to attend to all the needs we should. The few days that had passed in the jail gave me greater strength and a greater commitment to God, so that I could completely dedicate my life now to the service of the church.

The virtue of a Christian is that even though the conditions are very bad, we always have Christian hope. It's Christian inspiration that really feeds us. We don't lose our hope. We don't lose our hope in spite of the fact that the logic of so many years of not seeing different conditions might make us to forget hope. We try to get a hold of this hope in the different things that happen.

The hope in the change of the people of God is really a beginning. But we realize that peace doesn't come unless we actually work for it, and for this reason we are working and doing something in favor of the search for peace. But Christian hope tells us that whether it be sooner or later, we can be sure peace will come.

*Medardo Gomez, Roman Catholic priest Ignacio Ellacuria and Baptist pastor Edgar Palacio joined together in working for peace in El Salvador.*

**Source:** Jim Wallis and Joyce Hollyday, *Cloud of Witnesses*, Orbis, 1991.