

A Font for Salamo

by C. David Burt

The rural village of San Juan, Salamo in the department of Jalapa, Guatemala, like many similar places in Central America has a legacy of violence and misery that has left many children fatherless and has contributed to the financial and political necessity for many to find their way somehow to the United States. It is because of this tragic situation that I found myself teaching some of these young people in the public schools of Boston. For two in particular, Domingo and Norme Vasquez, I became something of a surrogate father, and I struggled with them in their academic, personal, and legal problems until their eventual deportation back to Guatemala.

No matter what you think of the huge problem of illegal immigration in this country, there are many, like Domingo and Norme, who had a moral reason to escape, for otherwise they might have been killed. Their mother sacrificed almost all that she had, including most of her land, to pay “coyotes” to carry them to safety.

José Úrsulo Vasquez, their father, was a “campesino” who joined with Catalina Méndez, a young woman of the village of San Juan, Salamo to raise a family. He worked in the fields, and was given some land of his own. He grew corn and beans, and he raised cattle. He was also an Army commissioner who recruited young men to serve in the military. The Guatemalan Civil War was raging, but most of the trouble was in another part of the country. Nevertheless, the village was very poor. José and some other village men decided to go and talk with the President of Guatemala. They had to wait a number of days, but eventually gained an audience. After they returned, the Village got electricity, and José and a number of other men received backpacks containing medical supplies, and they were trained to respond in the case of medical emergencies.

In 1983 José Úrsulo Vasquez spent some weeks in jail accused of cattle rustling. A few days after he was exonerated, some trucks were heard approaching the village at night. Military men wearing masks entered the house. José, his brother, and one of his uncles were outside making hobbles for the horses. Catalina Méndez hid the children under the bed. The soldiers took José and the other men away, and they were never seen again. For weeks following this, the village was terrorized in a similar manner. All of the men in the paramedical group were killed, and even some teenage boys were killed in cold blood. Catalina would take her children out into the fields at night to sleep during this period because it was not safe to stay in the house. One by one, as they got big enough, she sent her sons on the dangerous trip to the north.

Catalina Méndez searched in vain for information about her husband, and her story is much like that of many other Guatemalan women widowed by the war, with all her hopes for a better life dashed to pieces. Without her sons, she could not manage the land, and she eventually sold most of it. She stayed in the humble village of El Salamo with her elderly parents, her two daughters and her only remaining son, Kike, who had been crippled by polio as a child. When I was told that she took care of the village church and liked to place flowers on the altar in memory of her husband, I knew that some day I would meet this courageous woman.

When Norme was deported, following a year of imprisonment in this country, during which time we fought to prevent his deportation, I visited Guatemala and went to see the village. I couldn't contain the tears in my eyes when I met Catalina Méndez, and as I gave her a framed picture of her husband which a fellow prisoner of Norme's had made from a photo using bits of gum, candy, and candles. I asked her to show me the church that she loved so much.

The old church of Saint John the Baptist was in ruins because a large tree fell on it, but the Catholics had built another church beside it. It is a simple cinder block structure with a metal roof, and it still has a dirt floor. There was a very active Protestant church in the village as well, and you could hear the loudspeakers and loud music everywhere in the village every evening. The Catholic Church was also open most evenings, and although there was no priest, there was a group of catechists who held services and gave instruction to the children. I attended one evening and heard an inspiring sermon given by Gerardo Nájera, one of the catechists. I remembered that Norme had told me that one of his childhood friends who had been killed was of the Nájera family.

The children of the village suffer from a lack of schooling and the need to work. The village school is in poor condition, and only provides six years of education. After that a student must go elsewhere and pay for continued education. This explained why most of the students I had in Boston could only barely read in Spanish. Only Kike was afforded further education by a religious order because he was a cripple. Now he is a teacher in a remote village school.

If you walk around the village, even today, you will find many children not in school. They are working, helping their parents in the bare necessities of life. For example, three times a day in every household, they make tortillas. Each household has a small silo to keep the corn. This is boiled in a pot over a wood fire. Then it is taken to a mill where the wet cooked corn is milled into dough called *masa*. If the mill is not working, they use a primitive indian *metate*. It is a common sight to see small girls, frequently barefoot, with a bundle of corn or masa on their heads either going or coming from the mill. The tortillas are made on a *comal*, a piece of sheet metal supported by stones with a wood fire under it. The amount of wood being burned in this way is excessive, and contributes to the deforestation and the poor quality of the air in the whole of Central America. Men, women and children can be seen walking along the highway bearing large bundles of firewood which they have gathered in the woods. The boys and girls work. All the men and women work, and there is a continual struggle for existence.

After I returned to the States from my trip, I decided that I wanted to give the church a baptismal font with pictures of children working, playing and studying. The architect of Our Lady of Walsingham Anglican Use Church in Houston Texas is Ethan Anthony of hdb/Cram & Ferguson in Boston. Domingo and I went to see him to discuss the ideas for the font. It turned out that he wished to contribute to the project and his firm would design it for free. One of his associates was Rafael Aycinena from Guatemala, and he had an uncle in Guatemala who would make the font from cast stone. Rita Strow, an artist who belongs to St. Athanasius Anglican Use Congregation in Boston made the drawings of the children.

In the middle of all of this, Domingo was deported too, leaving a newborn son, Joseph, named for his martyred father. Soon Mirna, a sister of the boys, made the dangerous trip across the desert in order to help with Joseph in Boston. Mirna is still in Boston helping the mother, Veronica, with the baby.

I sent the proposal for the font to Domingo and Gerardo Nájera in Salamo, and eventually received word that they did not like the idea of the pictures of the children; they wanted something more traditional. I had recently read Eamon Duffy's book, *The Stripping of the Altars*, and I decided that we should make a font with the seven sacraments. Rita drew a new set of pictures, and Rafael Aycinena came up with a design very similar to some of the pre-reformation fonts in English churches. Jesús Sagone in Guatemala started making the font.

When I learned that the font was finished, I decided to make another trip to Guatemala, because there was no plan for delivery to Salamo. The original idea was to have a bronze cover with the Canterbury Cross of the Anglican Use Association, but the

quote we received was too high. The cover would have cost more than the font itself. At the last minute I had a wooden cover made by Douglas Cooper, a boat builder in Falmouth. He did a beautiful job, and we put one of the pewter Anglican Use Association crosses in the middle as an ornament. With the first coat of polyurethane sealant barely dry, I threw it in my vestment bag along with my cassock and surplice and went off to Guatemala.

Domingo and Norme met me at the airport, and the next day, Sunday, we arranged for a pickup truck to move the font to El Salamo. Jesús Sagone met us at his stone yard, and there was the font. It weighs over seven hundred pounds. Nevertheless, we got it into the truck and later in the afternoon, into the church. It took a lot of Guatemalan sweat and only \$100 American dollars to do it. That evening we attended Mass at Monjas, the nearest town, and the priest agreed to come to Salamo on Tuesday to celebrate a Mass in memory of José Úrsulo Vasquez and Companions, and to bless the font.

On Monday we visited Esquipulas, a famous pilgrimage site in Guatemala where the “Cristo Negro” is venerated with great devotion. We brought back some holy water, and I added some holy water from the Holy Well at Walsingham, and this is what the priest used to bless the font and the people on Tuesday evening while I sang the *Vidi aquam* in English from the *Anglican Use Gradual*. I was permitted to speak to the congregation after the Mass, and I told the people of the village that the font was intended to be a breath of hope especially for those boys and girls who had lost their fathers in the violence of the 1980’s. There were close to a hundred people in the church and many others outside, possibly some of the Protestants, who showed great interest.

The village church of San Juan Salamo now has a beautiful baptismal font that is a monument to the seven sacraments of the Catholic Church. The cover has a plaque which says that it is given in memory of José Úrsulo Vasquez and Companions murdered in 1983. As far as I know this is the only memorial those men have in the village, and the font is certainly unique in all of Guatemala.

While the Catholic Church in that country is struggling due to a severe shortage of ordained clergy, the work of the catechists is a very hopeful sign. Churches are not being closed. On the contrary, they are open almost every evening. The sacrament is kept in reserve in the tabernacle on the altar, and extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion offer the sacrament once a week. The priest of Monjas, who has about twenty such villages to serve, celebrates Mass daily in his own church and in one or two of the villages. People have to line up outside the Rectory to see him when he has office hours, and there is little time for anything except pastoral counseling and the sacraments.



Baptismal Font in the Village Church of San Juan, Salamo, Guatemala

If any readers of *Anglican Embers* goes to Guatemala, take a side trip to San Juan, Salamo, near Monjas, and there in the village church you will see a baptismal font similar to what you would see in a medieval village church in England. The cover bears the Canterbury Cross of the Anglican Use Association.