Columns
Environment



Members of a delegation to El Salvador and Honduras sponsored by the SHARE Foundation and the Leadership Conference for Women Religious pray during Mass celebrated by Honduran Jesuit Fr. Ismael Moreno Coto, known as Padre Melo, on Dec. 11, 2022. (SHARE Foundation/Mark Coplan)



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I recently returned from a two-week trip to El Salvador and Honduras sponsored by the SHARE Foundation and the Leadership Conference for Women Religious. Our delegation of more than 42 people included college students, social justice directors and activists, leaders of agencies, environmentalists, university professors, church leaders, members of nongovernmental organizations, and women religious who are advocating for the marginalized. The age of participants ranged from their 20s to 80s.

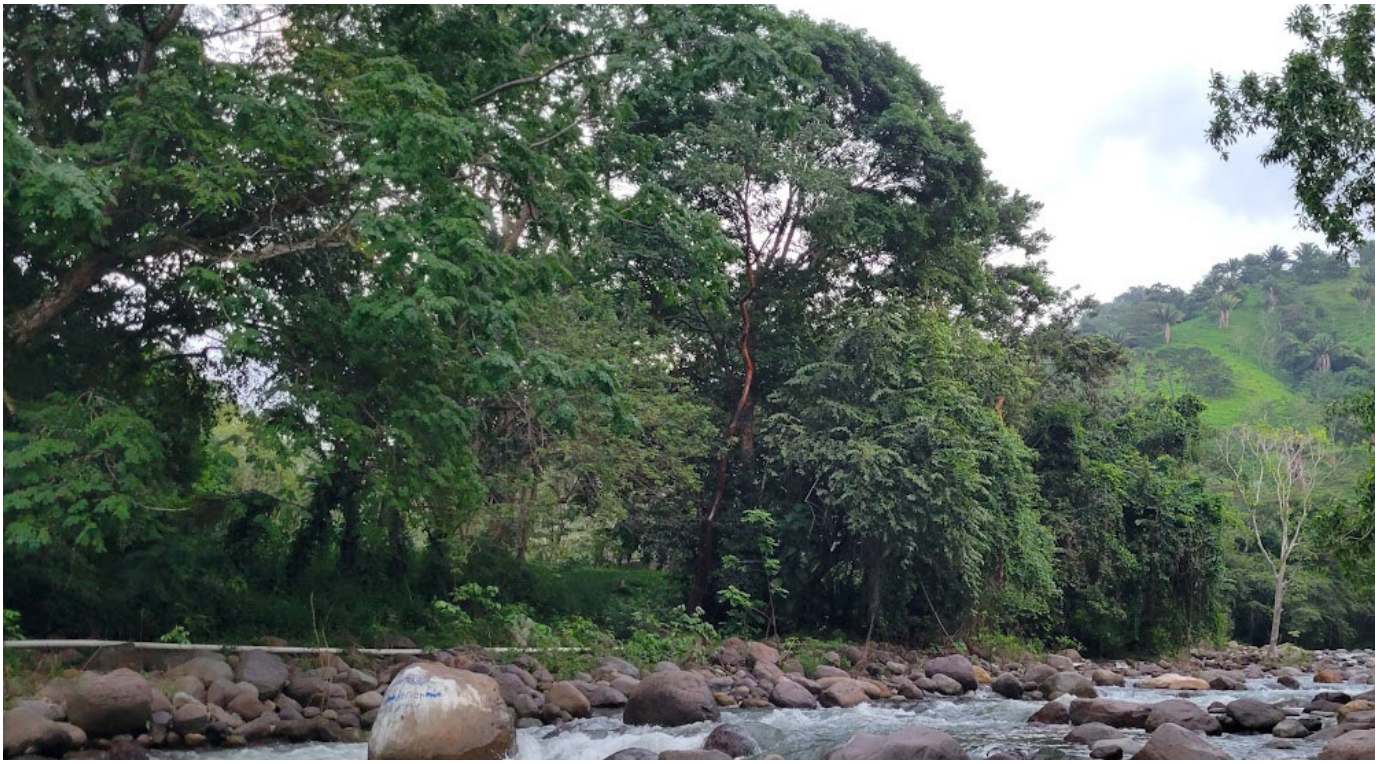
What we witnessed inspired me to pray the Beatitudes, from the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:3-12). May the world join in solidarity to be voices for the voiceless.

Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

We engaged with people having few options for what we would consider a mildly comfortable life, in stark contrast to the many U.S. citizens with a safe and secure life. I hold close the powerful words of the SHARE Foundation leader, Jose Artiga. He often repeated to us that we were there to accompany, to bring hope and lots of joy. The people welcomed us to be part of their hope-filled dream, to experience a piece of heaven while living in their country of origin where they wish to remain.

Blessed are the meek, for they shall possess the earth.

Meek does not mean weak, or standing by and allowing the rich and powerful to abuse people, land and water to enhance their own personal interests. Meek instead means to live in harmony with life and its processes. I listened, witnessed and grew distressed as I recognized that the people were having to form nonviolent communities to defend their land. How can land, rightfully belonging to the people, be taken without any consultation or compensation?



PVC pipe from a mine is seen along a stream. (Gabriela Cartagena)

Blessed are they who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

We recently received shocking news of the murders of two environmental activists, Aly Dominguez and Jairo Bonilla in Honduras on Jan. 9. While we were adjusting to this terrible news, we learned of the murders of another activist, Omar Cruz Tomé, and his father-in-law on Jan. 13. Sadly, these murders are not unique; they follow other murders, notably that of famed environmental activist Berta Cáceres in 2016.

Blessed are they that hunger and thirst after justice, for they shall have their fill.

Part of our delegation traveled in two pickup trucks across the San Pedro and Guapinol Rivers. Our anticipation peaked during the bouncy ride as muddy water splashed over the vehicles. We were greeted and given details of efforts by representatives of communities who live along the polluted rivers. The water defenders — some of whom were unjustly jailed for two years — continue to try to halt Lenir Pérez's Inversiones Los Pinares Mining Company from creating an iron oxide mine in Honduras' Carlos Escaleras National Park. The mine is an environmental disaster, contaminating the rivers that provide the communities' water and drain into the Caribbean Sea.

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall have mercy shown them.

Everyone's entire being would cry out for mercy if they visited the Campo Buena Vista Community in northeast Honduras. We walked through mud to a small church where Pastor Rita Santamaria explained how the intense rain from Hurricane Julia crippled the town with floods and landslides. The Ulúa River that borders the town overflowed and the riverbed had never been dredged by the government. Retaining walls are flimsy at best. We toured parts of the village damaged by the mud and water that had buried homes and people. A resident invited us to visit a family in a tiny home built on weak pillars. A young mother with wrenching tears explained that she watched her neighbor and the two children buried alive under the pile of mud that was visible next to her second-floor window.

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Blessed are the clean of heart, for they shall see God.

On Dec. 22, 2022, shortly after our departure from Honduras, Mauricio Esquivel, a member of the Tranvio Farm Cooperative and father of nine, was murdered. His life was dedicated to saving the land in the Aguán Valley, Honduras, so that the community could farm their land. The Dinant Corporation continues to violate human rights by displacing families and communities from their land, to profit from palm oil. While trying to negotiate land titles acquired in the 1970s, the peasants live with constant intimidation, evictions and loss of life. More than 150 laborers have been massacred since 2009. Yet, it is clear that these people have lived in constant faith and hope before the face of a personal God.

Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called children of God.

Many peacemakers witnessed to us throughout our journey. Honduran Jesuit Fr. Ismael Moreno Coto, known as Padre Melo, is a shining light. With his life at risk every day, he now has a guard. Padre Melo is founder of Radio Progreso, a voice for the poor and dispossessed. Share Foundation and LCWR's invitation for sisters to go on this delegation is an opportunity to be in peaceful solidarity with the people of Latin America. If we proclaim the paschal mystery to be the heart of Catholicism, our only option is to invite and join all to the table to break bread as leaders who engage the passion, death and resurrection.



Members of the delegation walk to church for Mass on Dec. 11, 2022. (SHARE Foundation/Mark Coplan)

Blessed are they who suffer persecution for justice's sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

It is impossible to return to the United States and simply live life as usual. Realizing that when we went to El Salvador, the State of Exception (suspension of habeas corpus) was in place. More than 60,000 people have already been arrested without access to due process, lawyers or family. The day we arrived in Honduras, the same State of Exception went into effect. The church and the entire world needs to cry out for the poor, who should not be forced to migrate to other countries.

In some noteworthy tweets Sen. Jeff Merkley (D-Oregon) and Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-Illinois) question what the U.S. is doing about the killings and threats against land and water defenders in Honduras, by paramilitary and security forces operating in concert with private business interests.

To provide assurance to the people of Honduras and U.S. Ambassador to Honduras Laura Dugo that the world is watching and cares, I will continue to call and email my senators, Dugo and the State Department. It is paramount that the license of Inversiones Los Pinares Mining Company be revoked, that Dinant Company be prevented from displacing peasants who have land titles in Honduras, and that there be a complete investigation of the murders of environmental defenders.

My body, mind and spirit call me to share this reflection; perhaps one more person will know the invitation to experience the blessing of the Beatitudes, to be in solidarity with and to respond to the cry of the poor.