
Faith Communities confronting extreme violence in Mexico: The importance of ecumenism in building alliances[1]

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Axis of Churches in Mazatepec, Morelos. Photo by: Aída Hernández

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I would like to share in this text a unique experience of building communities of faith and hope in the face of extreme violence in Mexico. I am referring to a citizen initiative that brings together relatives of disappeared persons and an ecumenical movement that has joined their searches. This is the National Search Brigade (NSB) created by relatives of disappeared persons in the face of one of the worst human rights crises in the contemporary history of Mexico. Recent official data reports 300,000 people murdered from 2006 to 2021, more than 90,000 missing people, 50,000 unrecognized bodies in graves under State custody, and 70,000 missing migrants.[1] In the face of this crisis, the families of missing persons who have become the conscience of society have been pivotal actors, showing us the inability of the State to provide security and justice to its citizens. Searching for their loved ones with their own means, they have built families united by sorrow, but also by hope: "Searching for our love ones, we find ourselves".

Since 2016, the organizations of relatives of disappeared persons have joined forces to search for their loved ones, through the National Search Brigade (BNB), which they define as "a model for searchers and an exercise of autonomy by groups of relatives to carry out citizen search tasks for disappeared persons" (see <https://www.facebook.com/brigadadebusqueda/>). In the first and second Brigades, the families toured the municipality of Amatlán de los Reyes, in Mexican state of Veracruz, and began to develop a model for citizen searches that includes visits to detention centers, hospitals, addiction centers, as well as searching for those who have died by locating clandestine graves. In January 2017, the third Brigade was carried out in Culiacán, in the state of Sinaloa, and schools, churches, community centers were also visited, in order to educate the population about tragedy of the disappeared. The NSB was growing and in January 2019 the fourth was held in the state of Guerrero, with the participation of two hundred people who visited the municipalities of Huitzuco, Chilpancingo, Iguala, Cocula and Taxco. In February 2020, the fifth brigade was carried out, in which three hundred people participated, with the cities of Papantla and Poza Rica, Veracruz as destinations. In November 2021, the brigade came to the state of Morelos, where I live, and I participated in its organization and logistics, asking for the support of various churches, civil organizations, and state institutions. I also accompanied the brigade in prisons and in forensic searches in the field, and as well as visits to schools and churches to make the population aware of the importance of a culture of peace. In this process I joined a work team that is articulated around spirituality and is known as the Axis of Churches. I share here some of what I learned on this journey.

[3] It is possible that what I share in this article—the features of a context marked by multiple types of violence and a particularly sinister “pedagogy of terror”—will appear at first to be a reality which has nothing to do with your religious communities in the United States. To prevent this impression from arising, I would just like to point out that the different types of violence that we suffer on both sides of the border, have all emerged within a shared context of under-regulated weapon markets and a globalized “culture of violence and militarism”. Many of the weapons that are used by organized crime and corrupt security forces that are colluded with them, who are behind the disappearance of people, have reached Mexico from the US. This globalized culture of death has crossed from the US to Mexico not only through the sale of military equipment, but also in the shape of one of the most violent cartels in the country: Los Zetas. This criminal organization is made up of ex-military elite personnel from Central America, who were trained for anti-insurgent operations in the U.S. Army School of the Americas (SOA) during the Cold War.

The strength of faith in the search.

Participating in the Axis of Churches within the context of the VI National Search Brigade, reasserted my convictions about the importance of faith and spirituality in strengthening the collective efforts of the relatives of disappeared persons. It was also a learning process around the fundamental importance of generating alliances among different communities of faith, which, despite our differences, share a commitment with those who experience the multiple violences implied by the disappearance of persons.

Those of us who have been brought up in fighting for social justice from a secular perspective have often distanced ourselves from institutionalized religious spaces. This may be due to our disappointment with church hierarcies, which have not been up to the task of accompanying those who have experienced multiple grievances in contexts of extreme violence(s). The churches, often immersed in a liturgy that does not look outside itself, and commit to the transformation of a world wounded by inequality, have lost many of their congregants and have turned themselves into spaces of deafness and silencing. Personally, many years ago I decided to break with the Catholic institutional spaces, where I did not find resonance to my own spiritual quests.



Beginning of the VIth Brigade in Catedral. Photo by: Richard Cisneros

It has been the mothers, wives, sisters of the disappeared persons who have once again shown me the way back to the Holy Ruah.[4] Their faith and their strength to look for all of the disappeared--men and women who they have 'adopted' as their sons and daughters--is for me another manifestation of the love of God. I have become aware of the fact that I had 'thrown the baby out with the bathwater' by renouncing communities of faith as a form of rejecting religious hierarchies. I confused institution church with spirituality and forgot that all men and women are the Church, and not only the clerics. Knowing the relatives and people in solidarity who come together in the Axis of Churches, I can witness in their eyes, in their words, in their silences and in their loving, and in their listening, the presence of the Divine force.

Maybe some of them are considered "rebels with a cause" within their own ecclesiastical communities, and maybe it is that rebellion against the status quo which unites us: a rebellion against the complicities of indifference and against disembodied rituality. Walking side by side with each and every one of them has filled me with political energy. It has reminded me the importance of faith as a driving force to continue struggling for a fairer world, and has strengthened my resolve to build communities of hope that confront the pedagogy of terror that has imposed itself on our communities and territories. These communities of hope are forging a pedagogy of love in order to rebuild the fractured social fabrics of our society.

I have been particularly inspired by the energy and commitment of a Catholic nun, Paola Clericó: her modesty, her unstoppable energy to build ecumenical bridges, to speak words of encouragement and to grant the hug of consolation. She made me regret once more that woman cannot yet be bishops in the Catholic Church.



Sister Paola Clericó in Tetelcingo. Photo: Cecilia Lobato

The ecumenical procession through the avenues of Cuernavaca, during the VII National Brigade, reconfirmed that the Church builds itself every time we remember that it is love which mobilizes our searches. As we march, we to shout together "Why do we search for them? Because we Love them!" (¿Por qué les buscamos? Porque les amamos!) We build this solidarity from the ground-up, constructing a community of faith and hope.

For me, the Gospel and the Word of God manifests itself in the accounts of Doña Mary, Vero, Lore, Doña Asuncion, Vicky, Angie, all of them relatives of missing persons. They are "Prophetic Voices", we are reminded by our Anabaptist friend Sandra Márquez as she explains me with patience in the face of my theological ignorance: what she means it that these heart-broken relatives manifest the presence of God on Earth.

[4] Hebrew word meaning "spirit" (Greek pneuma). It is used in biblical texts to refer to the Holy Spirit.



Procession in Cuernavaca of the VI Brigade
Photo: Richard Cisneros

In our journeys through the different churches it is believers-- Catholics, Seventh Day Adventists, Anabaptist Mennonites--who shake peoples' hearts, and remind the clerics in subtle ways that they have not been up to the task of confronting the human rights crisis that we face. They also remind them that it is never too late, that they can still change their ways, accompany them on their searches. At the same time they invite us to look inside ourselves for the humanity that has been lost with the normalization of violence(s).

By taking this spiritual energy to the prisons, they have also prayed for those who suffer myriad violences within the prison system--those who have been stripped from their families by a punitive system that punishes the poor and protects the powerful.

It was from a place of love that the mothers, sisters, and wives of the disappeared, spoke to the imprisoned persons and moved some of them to tears. They received, with an open heart, the poems, the songs, and the words of encouragement of the Sisters in the Shadow (Colectiva Hermanas en la Sombra)--an inmates' creative writing Project. [5] Women from this collective have been accompanying them from a distance in the prison. They also tried to understand the indifferent attitudes of those who choose not to confront their guilt and not face the risk of encountering the face of someone they had wronged. They were not harmed by the hostile gaze of some inmates, and they took with them only the prayers and the messages of those who shared their sisterly greetings.



Doña María Herrera and Lorena Reza of the Axis of Churches in Huitzilac
Photo: Cecilia Lobato

[4] For more information about this feminist Project visit <https://hermanasenasombra.org/>

But for me it was the processions at the clandestine graves of Tetelcingo and Yecapixtla, where the force of the relatives faith manifested in a more resounding fashion. In Tetelcingo, we nailed down a cross and sowed flowers in the hope of to new life where there had been death and to enshrine the ground where Israel Hernández, the brother of our friend Edith and Jessica Mercado, the little sister of Yadira and other 117 persons were found in this mass grave and were rescued from oblivion. Of these, 107 still wait to be identified and returned home.



Axis of Churches participating in the visits to the CERESO, in Cuautla. Photo: Aída Hernández

Just like the clandestine graves that I worked to excavate with the organization of relatives known as The Trackers of El Fuerte (Las Rastreadoras), the pits we encountered in this brigade became spaces of hope. Five years ago in my first finding in the North of Sinaloa, The Trackers taught me to exorcise fear. They transmitted to me the tenderness they feel before the anonymous dead. These are not bodies, or skeletons. It is not the body as evidence, but the body as person. These are the sons and daughters of someone, the husband or wife of someone or the father or mother of someone. They speak to them with tenderness, in first person. The strategies of dehumanization that treated this bodies as disposable and threw them in a barren field, are transformed by their voices and the prayers that re-humanize them.

These rituals repeat themselves in the sand mine of Mixtlacingo, in the municipality of Yecapixtla, where we encountered the remains of eight people, and we suspect there could be many more. Before arriving at the pits, in a mass in the atrium of the Church of Saint John the Baptist, we encountered a community wounded by violence. There we began to carry a cross that says: “In Searching we Find Ourselves”. Now it is Manqui with her white hair who is carrying the cross, the mother of a young man that disappeared in the North of Sinaloa. She is the one making a prophetic announcement.



Liturgic Act in the mass graves of Tetelcingo. Photography by: Cecilia Lobato.

It is with this same cross that we process around the pit of Mixtlacingo and stick it in the highest part of the sandbank, to accompany the exhumation process. In a loving ritual, the families converted this extermination field into a sacred space, addressing themselves to the bodies and souls of those who were wronged, promising them a safe return home. The dead found in Mixtlacingo are no longer forensic findings or skeletons, their lives and deaths have been dignified by these families who now pray for them and have already integrated them into their networks of care and compassion.



María Cleofas Lugo (Manqui) of The Trackers of El Fuerte en Yecapixtla. Photo: Aída Hernández



Nailing the cross in the graves of Yecapixtla. Photo by :Aída Hernández

Thanks to each and every one of the members of the Axis of Churches of the VI National Search Brigade, and to all the mothers, sisters and wives of missing persons, for teaching me, from a place of ecumenism, to re-encounter a path towards the love of God, to feel the strength of our faith and to reassert my commitment to the searching families, who, by searching, help us find ourselves.