

## **Enduring Hope: 500 Years of Prophetic Resistance to Military Empire**

Pax Christi USA gathering at the School of the Americas (SOA)

November 18, 2011

*“They shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.”*

- Isaiah 2:4

Scott Wright

As an introduction to tonight’s theme – “Enduring Hope: 500 Years of Prophetic Resistance to Military Empire” – I would like to lift up the prophetic witnesses of our time, those courageous ones who cry out against the violence, racism, and oppression of our day.

This morning, many of us gathered here tonight took part in a march to the Stewart Detention Center in Lumpkin, Georgia, about forty minutes from the School of the Americas here in Columbus. There we joined the mothers, children, and wives of 2,000 Latino immigrants detained in that prison for the crime of being undocumented in our country. They are part of the more than 400,000 immigrants detained and deported every year by the Bush and Obama administrations.

The Stewart Detention Center is one of hundreds of immigrant detention centers run by the Corrections Corporation of America (CCA), the same corporation that is subsidized by the federal government to run federal prisons in the United States. In less than 30 years, due to the “war on drugs,” the number of people in U.S. prisons has increased by six times, from 300,000 to more than 2 million, and most of them are people of color. At the same time, the number of immigrants in detention has tripled, from 10,000/day in 1996 to over 30,000/day, due to the “war on terror.”

I call attention to this tonight because the reality of mass incarceration is part of the military empire we face today. It is part of the war against the poor and people of color at home, and is sometimes referred to as “the new Jim Crow,” or “the new Juan Crow.” But I also call attention to this because of the immigrant mothers and children who spoke out so courageously today at the gates of the detention center. They are the prophetic witnesses of our time who call us to conversion, to mend our ways of violence and racism, and to work for justice and peace.

Tonight I invite us to remember another one of the great prophetic witnesses of our time – Rufina Amaya, the sole survivor of the El Mozote massacre in El Salvador.

This December 11 – the third Sunday of Advent - marks the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of that horrific event, when soldiers of the elite Atlacatl Battalion, trained at the School of the Americas (SOA), slaughtered nearly 1,000 people – more than half of them children – in El Mozote and surrounding villages. This is the very same battalion that killed the six Jesuits priests, their housekeeper and her daughter in 1989.



Seventy-five thousand people were murdered in El Salvador during a 12-year civil war, the vast majority of them by a military trained and funded by the United States. The United States – in addition to training thousands of Salvadoran soldiers responsible for the murder of Archbishop Romero, the six Jesuits and hundreds of massacres of civilians – also sent a million dollars a day in military aid to the Salvadoran government. To date, no one has ever been prosecuted for the deaths of Rufina’s husband and four children, nor the hundreds of others murdered in El Mozote.

Rufina was a dear friend to many of us gathered here tonight. In 1998, Rufina came to the gates of the SOA with her daughter Marta and brought tears to the eyes of twenty thousand people gathered there to close the school. Like all of us, she marched in solemn procession on that Sunday morning, leaving her cross and the names of her children on the fence of the gates of the SOA. For nearly 30 years, Rufina told and retold the story of the massacre of El Mozote. She viewed her survival as a miracle, and a call from God to bear witness to the awful crime that occurred that day.

Like a biblical Rachel – crying out in the wilderness of Ramah for her children who were no more – Rufina joined a long line of prophets and martyrs in the Americas – from the Dominican friar Antonio Montesinos who denounced the cruelty, racism and violence of the European invaders 500 years ago, to Archbishop Oscar Romero, who called on the United States and the Salvadoran military to put down their weapons and to stop the repression.

In a few weeks, thousands of Salvadorans and people from around the world will join together in El Mozote for the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the massacre, and to read the names of the victims memorialized on a wall with these words: “They have not died, they are with us, with you, and with all of humanity.”

Rufina died in 2007. Today, a huge banner with a beautiful photograph of her taken by Linda Panetta adorns the stage set up in front of the gates of the SOA. There, from the stage, the names of thousands of victims of the SOA are read each year, followed by a resounding “Presente!” from the people gathered to close the school. Rufina’s spirit lives on in all of us who remember her; it lives on in the witness of her people, and in the witness of solidarity of all of us who gather each year at the gates of the SOA to resist military empire and to cry out: “No mas! No more! to the crime against God, and the crime against humanity, that is war.

In the 30 years that have transpired since the massacre in El Mozote, the United States has continued to build a military empire – maintaining more than 800 military bases throughout the world, waging wars of choice in Iraq and Afghanistan, setting up a School for the Americas in Africa called AFRICOM, protecting transnational corporations and their pillage of land, water, gold, and other precious resources, and defending brutal military regimes throughout the world and in Latin America, including Guatemala, Colombia – and more recently, Honduras.

But there is hope – enduring hope – in the emergence of countless “Occupy Wall Street” movements for global economic justice, and countless social movements and “Arab Springs” for global justice and peace reminiscent of the non-violent movements in Eastern Europe that led to

the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of communism. There is hope, too, in survivors like Rufina and family members like her who continue to cry out against violence and for justice for their loved ones – the victims of countless wars across the globe.

One day soon, I hope, when the ancient dream of the prophet Isaiah for peace finally comes true – and it will come true, if we are faithful to God's promise – we can thank the Rufinas of the earth, and countless men, women, and children like her – victims of the violence, racism, and oppression that is war – for opening our eyes and hearts to the vision of God's peace in our midst. May we, too, be faithful witnesses, like them, for justice and peace.