News



Manuel Ramirez Guardado places a candle at the foot of a cross that bears his sister's name March 4, 2021, in Los Ramirez, El Salvador. A national organization attempted to recover the remains of his sister, Catalina Ramirez, assassinated in 1979, but none were found. (CNS photo/Rhina Guidos)



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Chalatenango, El Salvador — April 6, 2021
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The sun in March and April is unforgiving in the hills and mountains of El Salvador. The lack of rain and scorching sun puts much of the vegetation to sleep, painting a landscape of barren trees and plants, visual reminders of a Lenten season.

In this arid setting in the 1970s and 1980s, the government's armed forces, too, punished the landscape, but their target was people. In 1979, one of those targets in the hills near the village of Los Ramirez was Catalina Ramirez, a 30-year-old Catholic, active in her parish.

She loved to embroider. She had curly hair and an "eagle-like" face, said a niece who never met her. She also was an active member of a workers union, illegal back then and likely the reason she was dismembered in 1979, killed along with her father.

It has taken more than 40 years, but on March 4, she finally was given what remaining members of her family consider a proper goodbye.

Near a grove of mango and coconut trees, Fr. Manuel Acosta, a Catholic priest and head of the Commission to Search for Persons Disappeared in the Context of the Armed Conflict, known by the acronym in Spanish CONABÚSQUEDA, and Bishop Oswaldo Escobar of Chalatenango presided over an outdoor Mass for the repose of Ramirez's soul.

They were hoping to bury that day some of the woman's remains, which CONABÚSQUEDA made an effort to locate at the spot where her brother, Noé, remembers quickly burying what was left of his sister in 1979, but none were found. Back then, a simple burial for someone thought to be a "subversive" was unthinkable. Soldiers often left the bodies of those believed to be aiding or

participating with rebels on roadsides — a visual warning of what could happen.

But Ramirez's brother did not want that fate for his sister's body and did the fastest thing he could: He dug a hole where she was killed, close to a spring, and with his hands grabbed the parts he found and put them in.

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He was one of two younger brothers, now in their 60s, who shared tamales, pastries and coffee — a custom after a loved one's burial. He lit candles near a wooden cross bearing his sister's name and decorated with the abundant bougainvillea of the region. They spoke about Catalina Ramirez with love and shared the only photo they have of her — a black and white copy that one of her family members carried during the offertory.

"I feel happy, I feel a great satisfaction," said her brother, Manuel Ramirez Guardado, thanking the community for participating in Mass and sharing the afternoon with the family.

Such events of historic memory have become more commonplace and important in healing families as well as communities of faith battered during El Salvador's civil conflict, Escobar said in a March 30 interview with Catholic News Service.

The Mass remembering Catalina Ramirez was not about holding on to hate or feelings of vengeance, but about recognizing what happened during a dark period for the country, he said.

He reminded those who gathered for the Mass about a message to be found in Pope Francis' encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*: that even if those who were victimized could carry out the worst possible punishment on the perpetrators, it would not accomplish anything.

"Only when you open yourself to forgiveness, then you can quench your thirst for vengeance and your redemption begins," the bishop said.

Much like Christ, after whom El Salvador is named, the country has a lot of wounds, the bishop said, "and like Christ, it will rise only with the wounds of its history," adding that Scripture does not speak of a risen Lord whose wounds cannot be seen.

For some Catholic Salvadorans, however, many of those wounds have not healed, particularly for family members who have never been able to hold a goodbye for loved ones whose remains still are missing, absorbed by the mountains and hills or washed away by the seasonal torrents, which is what likely happened to Catalina Ramirez's body, said Acosta. But recognizing their lives and their deaths remains an important part of healing.

The church is doing its best, with help from organizations such as CONABÚSQUEDA, whose purpose is to investigate and determine what happened to adult victims of El Salvador's armed conflict, which left more than 75,000 dead and 7,000 to 10,000 disappeared, Acosta said.

"What the bishop said is true: These hills are full of burial grounds, full of people we call 'disappeared,' " Acosta told the crowd after the homily. "Our mountains radiate pain, but they also radiate a Passover, an Easter, and the only thing that's going to help us get there is peace and hope. From these mountains we can find what's necessary to move forward."

Though 40 years after the country's civil conflict began in earnest in 1980 seems like a long time to finally address El Salvador's pain, Escobar told CNS there's a special significance about that amount of time, and he said he found hope in events that recognize, finally, what happened to Catholics in places such as Los Ramirez.

"For 40 years, the people of Israel wandered in the desert," he said. "It's a Biblical amount of time and we can celebrate Easter, the triumph of life, in the context that it's 40 years after these events took place."