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Occupy our hearts

by Jocelyn A. Sideco

My life changed at 22. On Sunday, Nov. 21, 1999, I prayerfully "crossed the line" onto the property of Fort Benning, Ga., in an act of civil disobedience.

My act of resistance came out of a desire to live my life for and with others. Like other resisters, I wanted to draw attention to the actions of what was once known as the School of the Americas, a military training school located at Fort Benning and responsible for training Latin American insurgents U.S. military tactics.

I did not want more Central American lives to be slaughtered by their own military leaders trained on American soil paid for by American tax dollars.

I found myself being a witness and giving testimony to those numbed by violence and power. My step and our collective action brought to light the actions of our government on behalf of "our" best interest.

I took a risk with my life because I knew that others had done the same with even more severe consequences.

Five years prior I traveled to El Salvador with other bright-eyed and bushy-tailed high schoolers wanting to learn from people surviving a vicious civil war. Like many who have attended Jesuit schools, I grew a deep appreciation for the martyrs of El Salvador because I could relate to them. Priests living in residence at the Universidad Centroamericana (UCA) teaching philosophy, sociology, theology and ministering within the city and nearby towns sounded like many people in ministry I knew.

Nineteen of the 26 Salvadoran military men found guilty of massacring six Jesuits, their cook, Elba, and her daughter, Celina, all graduated from the (then named) School of the Americas located on the campus at Fort Benning in Columbus, Ga.

I couldn't stop thinking about how vulnerable some of my friends in ministry were.

So I crossed the line in protest of the school and its lack of responsibility for the atrocities many of their graduates were a part of and even to some degree, instigated.

During the annual November vigil hosted by School of Americas Watch, an organization founded by Maryknoll Fr. Roy Bourgeois to protest and monitor the activities of the military training camp, I walked onto Fort Benning with many others. Over the years, the annual protest hosted by SOA Watch has grown, with recent attendance estimated to be over 10,000.

In 1999, after a solemn memorial procession recognizing those who are believed to have been killed by people trained at the school, those of us crossing over slowly walked onto the base in two lines. When we were asked to stop, I collapsed to my knees in solidarity with many around the world who feel powerless when facing Goliath. I surrendered my life to God and to building God's kingdom of love, compassion, justice and peace right then and there.

Recent days have proven that Wall Street and corporate greed have pushed Americans to their limit. And now, many are protesting saying, "We are the 99 percent who will no longer tolerate the greed and corruption of the 1 percent."

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From 20 year olds to 80 year olds, this latest action wakes us up from the comfort of our own isolated realities and pummels us to the heart of the matter: the well-being of each human being. Can we live simply so that others may simply live?

Although this movement is leaderless, it is well-organized, organic, and participatory. Occupy Wall Street (occupywallst.org) is contagious. On Wednesday, October 5, there are at least 375 groups created with the same purpose in cities all across America and the world. Today, there are 617 such groups listed on their Web site.

Occupy Wall Street is for today's generation what School of Americas was for folks 10 and 20 years ago. Don't get me wrong, I am not denying that School of the America's is still a big issue. I would just suggest that there are formative first experiences we all have. And for the Millennials, Occupy Wall Street may be just that. For others, perhaps the Invisible Children (www.invisiblechildren.com) campaign has moved them to act in an effort to improve the quality of life for all people.

In its third week, Occupy Wall St. called for a college walk-out and got thousands of people to protest. This exponential growth from the handful who pitched tents on Sept. 17 tells us something: our quality of life is no longer acceptable.

This growing movement addresses a desire to build community and begs the question: how do we, as people of faith, approach the atrocities that affect us and others in a way that pleads for justice and stands with the least of these?

The United States Catholic Bishops published "Economic Justice for All: A Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy" in 1986. Now 25 years later, their message still rings clear:

"As Catholics, we are heirs of a long tradition of thought and action on the moral dimensions of

economic activity. The life and words of Jesus and the teaching of his Church call us to serve those in need and to work actively for social and economic justice. As a community of believers, we know that our faith is tested by the quality of justice among us, that we can best measure our life together by how the poor and the vulnerable are treated. This is not a new concern for us. It is as old as the Hebrew prophets, as compelling as the Sermon on the Mount, and as current as the powerful voice of Pope John Paul II defending the dignity of the human person.? (#8)

The bishops continue to say,

"The needs of the poor take priority over the desires of the rich; the rights of workers over the maximization of profits; the preservation of the environment over uncontrolled industrial expansion; the production to meet social needs over production for military purposes". (#94)

Our community of faith calls us to internalize these words, values, and moral stance so that we can be a life-giving expression of God's love and care to others today.

For me, I awoke to the needs of the poor when I crossed the line at Fort Benning. For others, they awoke when family members got laid off and could not pay medical bills.

Let our hearts and minds be occupied with the needs of the least of these so that our faith can cross the line into acts of justice and solidarity with firmness, confidence, and compassion.

[Jocelyn A. Sideco is a founding member of Contemplatives in Action, an urban ministry and retreat experience that began as a response to the needs in post-Katrina New Orleans and now continues as an online ministry offering spirituality resources for those working for justice throughout the world. Visit www.contemplativesinaction.org for more information.]

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