

OPINION

A Salvadoran resurrection

By Charlie Clements

SAN SALVADOR

AT THE Plaza Libertad today, inauguration day of President Mauricio Funes, I will be thinking back to Feb. 28, 1977, when security forces opened fire there on hundreds of unarmed civilians protesting a fraudulent presidential election. Less than a week earlier, Oscar Romero, then considered a priest of the privileged, had been installed as the archbishop of El Salvador.

Virtually unnoticed by the US press, that massacre prompted the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee to act, leading the first of 17 congressional fact-finding missions to the region. That first mission included a Jesuit priest, Robert Drinan, who was also a member of Congress from Massachusetts. Romero and Drinan celebrated Mass together in the unfinished cathedral, where Romero's decision to halt construction had recently angered the powerful of El Salvador. "Only when peace and justice are established and the hungry are fed, then we can resume building our cathedral," the archbishop explained.

By 1980, the diocese would document 1,000 Salvadorans a month dying or disappearing at the hands of government-sanctioned death squads. It would take the rape and murder of four American nuns that same year before El Salvador finally came to the attention of most Americans.

Romero's assassination in 1980, as well as the kidnapping, torture, and murder of several civilian leaders of the broad coalition known as the Democratic Revolutionary Front, ended more than a decade of nonviolent social change in El Salvador and marked the beginning of the 12-year armed struggle of the FMLN (Farabundo Marti Front for National Liberation).

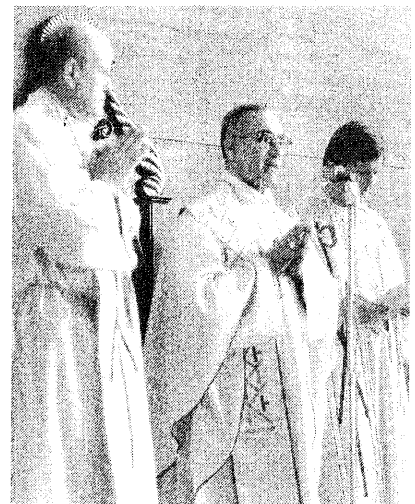
At the time, I was finishing a family-practice internship in California, where I treated many Salvadoran refugees. The dispatch of helicopters and US military advisers to El Salvador seemed eerily reminiscent of Vietnam and led me to volunteer to care for civilians. From 1981 to 1982 I worked in an area controlled by the FMLN, but was bombed, rocketed, or strafed daily by US-supplied aircraft. In Vietnam, pilots would have called it a "free fire zone."

I returned to the United States, testified in Congress, and traveled around the States, speaking mostly to faith-based audiences. In 1986 I was hired by the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee to continue its delegations to the region to help elected leaders understand the brutality abetted by US tax dollars. After a 1988 mission, Representative Connie Morela of Maryland and others began questioning the billions of dollars in US aid to El Salvador. "Is it directed to really helping the development of the country? Or are we just saying that on paper?"

When the war ended in 1992, I was a guest at the ceremony in Chapultepec, Mexico. As the guerrillas and generals signed the peace accords, I cried in relief, having experienced some of the horror of what was about to end. I also cried in sadness, thinking of the tens of thousands of innocent civilian casualties.

Those peace accords allowed the FMLN to form a political party of the same name. With the help of the United Nations and, to a more limited degree, the United States, the struggle, which was always about poverty and privilege, was transformed into a political conflict.

In January, the FMLN won a plurality in the National Assembly, and two months later the presidency. In his victory speech, Funes urged unity and reconciliation; he also committed his



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The Rev. Robert Drinan (left) and Archbishop Oscar Romero (center) during Mass in El Salvador in 1978.

government to Romero's "preferential option for the poor."

Funes also said one priority would be to strengthen relations with the United States. The attendance of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton at today's ceremony could signal how the United States, under the Obama administration, may be reshaping its relations with the progressive movement in El Salvador and perhaps in Latin America.

Weeks before he was murdered, Romero said, "If they kill me, I shall arise in the Salvadoran people." Many, both here and in the United States, believe that in this election Romero did, indeed, arise — in the ballots of the Salvadoran people. Yesterday, at a Mass in the cavernous, unfinished concrete Metropolitan Cathedral where Romero is buried, I wondered if a time will come, under President Funes, for it to be completed.

Charlie Clements is president and CEO of the Cambridge-based Unitarian Universalist Service Committee and was an Air Force pilot in Vietnam.