A bishop who has compared the abuse being inflicted on immigrants by the US government to the suffering of Jesus on the Cross was himself an undocumented migrant fleeing poverty and political violence in El Salvador / **By MICHAEL TANGEMAN**

Bishop without borders

CATHOLIC STANDARD, MIHOKO OWADA

Bishop Menjivar leads a Memorial Mass for construction workers in Maryland

IT WAS IN THE MIDDLE of our interview that Bishop Evelio Menjivar-Ayala paused, remembering we were speaking nearly 45 years to the day from the infamous Sumpul River massacre in his native El Salvador. He was just nine years old at the time.

Born into a devout family of poor subsistence farmers in the village of Carasque, in the remote and mountainous terrain bordering Honduras in the department of Chalatenango, Evelio and the rest of the family, led by his mother, had gone fishing nearby at the Gaulzinga River, a tributary of the Sumpul, at a point just upstream from where the two rivers met.

"We saw a group of people hurrying across the river, carrying things, carrying bundles. And we said, 'What's going on?'" Menjivar recalls. Then, about 200 yards upstream, they saw armed government troops running across a narrow, suspended footbridge – soldiers rushing toward the village upriver and the civilian population fleeing downstream.

"We heard a big bombardment going on up above. And then we realised what had happened to the village up there," he recalls. "They had all been massacred … massacred."

The slaughter, begun that day in the village of Las Aradas, continued for 48 hours as at least 300 unarmed civilians – some say up to 600 – were brutally murdered by Salvadoran Army and National Guard troops armed with US-supplied weapons. They were assisted by paramilitary civil defence forces. Villagers were rounded up and machine-gunned, shot while trying to cross the Sumpul into Honduras, strafed by helicopter gunships, bludgeoned to death with rifle butts, stabbed and hacked to death. Paramilitaries tossed children and infants into the air, cleaving and decapitating them with machetes. No one has been prosecuted for the killings – justice grinds very slowly in El Salvador. But last week a former Salvadoran defence minister and two retired colonels were convicted of the murder two years later in Chalatenango of four Dutch journalists.

Today, 54-year-old Evelio Menjivar is an auxiliary bishop of the Archdiocese of Washington, which serves some 667,000 US Catholics in the nation's capital and surrounding suburbs. And when as a pastor he speaks of the Gospel imperative of accompanying the poor and the vulnerable, of welcoming strangers and those fleeing persecution and violence who seek refuge among us, Bishop Menjivar knows well of what he speaks – for he was once one of them.

Like so many others in El Salvador at the time, Evelio Menjivar grew up in an impoverished family of subsistence farmers that was only able to make ends meet by sending off his two older sisters from as young as 13 years of age to work as domestic servants in the capital, San Salvador. Chalatenango was relatively tranquil in his early years, the violence that would convulse his world only surfacing in the late 1970s, when the government began sending troops to repress poor farmers there who had begun to organise for fair prices and a living wage.

"THE CHURCH was very instrumental in helping the people to organise themselves," Menjivar explained, noting that "a sense of social awareness and a closeness, a conscious awakening" had begun within the Salvadoran Church following the watershed 1968 meeting of Latin American bishops in Medellín, Colombia. "People welcomed that and began to join different organisations and read the Bible from that perspective," he said. "Seeing faith from that perspective brings liberation, not only the salvation that religion offers you, but religion also offers you liberation from what oppresses you here on earth."

The response from El Salvador's economic and political elites was ferocious. The Sumpul massacre was but one of the earliest in a litany of atrocities carried out by Salvadoran military forces, sanctioned and underwritten during the 1980s by complicit US administrations in Washington. The brutality of the repression turned thousands of otherwise defenceless Salvadorans into recruits for the country's leftwing guerrilla movements.

In all, more than 75,000 people would be killed during the 12-year war, with another 8,000 disappeared and never accounted for. Atrocities against the civilian population were legion, with the UN placing blame in 85 per cent of those cases on the country's military forces. An estimated 500,000 Salvadorans fled to the United States before the conflict ended in 1992.

The Church's support for the poor made it a target for reprisals from the military and death squads operating with impunity. On 24 March 1980, Archbishop Óscar Romero of San Salvador was murdered, felled by an assassin's bullet while celebrating Mass just days after having called on the military to halt the repression. Then in December, American Maryknoll sisters Maura Clarke and Ita Ford, Ursuline sister Dorothy Kazel and lay missionary Jean Donovan were murdered by five National Guard troops.

In Chalatenango, the fighting between the military and guerrilla forces intensified along the Honduran border and repression against the local population increased until all civilians were ordered to leave the area in 1982. The Menjivar family moved to a distant town, with a parish, a priest, nuns and Sunday Masses, where young Evelio joined a church youth group and felt the first stirring of a desire to one day join the priesthood. He soon became

a catechist, a dangerous vocation in a country where the Catholic Church was being targeted – more than 20 priests, four nuns and hundreds of catechists were killed in those years.

As the bloody war dragged on, Evelio ultimately decided to flee the violence for the United States. It took him three attempts, journeying north from El Salvador through Guatemala and Mexico. But on his third try, he finally made it, along with his younger brother, crossing the US-Mexico border in the trunk of a car at Tijuana in January 1990 as an undocumented immigrant. He was 19 years old.

Menjivar has said he doesn't feel particularly proud at having crossed the border illegally. But at a time when migrants are increasingly branded as criminals and worse, he concedes his story is "a testimony that many people cross the border with good intentions". Those intentions quickly bore fruit, as he was granted refugee recognition under the Temporary Protected Status (TPS) programme, along with a work permit enabling him to earn his way at a variety of jobs – from office receptionist to janitor, painter and construction worker – all the while studying English and going to night school to earn the equivalent of a high-school diploma.

Moving to Washington in search of work, he became a leader in a parish youth ministry programme and entered a bilingual seminary in Miami, before spending several years studying theology in Rome. He was ordained a priest in 2004. After nearly two decades of postings in parishes in the Washington area, Menjivar was appointed auxiliary bishop of the archdiocese by Pope Francis in December 2022.

Long since a US citizen, Menjivar chafes when he hears migrants and refugees being tarbrushed as criminals. In an excoriating article in the archdiocese's *Catholic Standard* in Holy Week earlier this year, he wrote that the US needs "more Óscar Romeros today" to speak out against the Trump administration's "grievous assault on human rights and dignity" and compared the "abuse being inflicted on migrants and refugees" to the Passion of Christ.

"**NOT ALL IMMIGRANTS** are criminals," he told me. "Some are, but there is crime in every community," he says. "You can remove all the immigrants from the country, and there will still be crime – that's important to remember." In the current climate of immigration raids, arrests and deportations in the US, he says the migrant community in Washington and across the country lives in constant fear.

"People are very afraid to go out, they're afraid to go to work. But above all, there's this anxiety of not knowing what's going to happen," he says. "People are hoping to live their normal lives, but with all this stress, this anxiety, it's also causing mental illness, constant fear and anxiety, and even depression."

There is clearly a racial element and near-exclusive targeting of the Latin American immigrant community, he told me. "Racial profiling is used a lot. If they see you have whiter skin, they won't stop you," he says. "But if they see you with dark skin like mine, you're obviously a target."

The US Church should respond to the Trump administration's immigration policies by continuing to insist on respect for the human dignity of immigrants and refugees, he says, while working to tamp down the fears that inflame the negative rhetoric. At the same time, it needs to broaden its scope and to heed Pope Francis' call for an outward-looking Church, one "which is bruised, hurting and dirtied from being out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined".

"In recent years the American Church has become more withdrawn, more inward-looking," Menjivar told me. He sees great hope in the new Pope's choice of name, with its nod to *Rerum Novarum* – it is one of the early signs that Leo XIV intends to continue Francis' emphasis on the Church's social teachings. "He comes from that bruised, hurting Church," Menjivar told me, "one that has been an outgoing Church, a Church unafraid of mission and of accompanying the poor, and serving the poor, and preaching the Gospel there, and suffering repression together with the people."

"I hope there's a resurgence of that Church," he says, "a missionary Church – here in the United States and throughout the world."

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