

## The “Migrant Caravan” – Criminals and Terrorists, or “Exodus”?

Members of the North American Migration Commission (NAMC) and members of the Toronto SCJ community had a unique opportunity to learn about the “Migrant Caravan” ubiquitous in recent news from someone with a unique insight into the situation. Not only did Francisco Rico Martinez live in El Salvador throughout the brutal civil war of the 80s, but he actually knew Archbishop (now Saint) Oscar Romero, and later worked for the organization founded by Romero before his martyrdom.

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*We had come to Becoming Neighbours to see their new office and hear from someone who has both been a refugee and dedicated his life to advocating for and ministering to them.*

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Francisco Rico Martinez is introduced by Fr. Peter McKenna and speaks at Becoming Neighbours

Francisco has been committed to social justice as long as he can remember. A student activist in Romero’s time, five of Francisco’s friends had been “disappeared” – kidnapped by government soldiers or right-wing death squads never to be seen again.

Some background is necessary...

In the 1980s El Salvador was ground zero of the United States’ “cold war” on communism. The 2% who controlled coffee exports were rich; everyone else was poor. After a disputed election, a right-wing junta took control of the government and military in 1979, and death squads began operating with impunity. Targeted were not only rebel Marxist guerrillas, who were relatively few, but labor unionists, students, and Church advocates for the poor. Often the only reports of torture, disappearances and massacres came from missionaries. Religious communities in the United States joined human rights groups in calling for an end to US military aid, and established “sanctuaries” for Salvadorans and other Central Americans fleeing violence in the region but denied asylum here.

Determined to avoid a Salvadoran version of the Sandinista triumph in Nicaragua, the administration of President Jimmy Carter (1977-81) provided massive military aid to the repressive government, and our government denied and helped cover up some of the worst human rights abuses in Latin American history. The aid continued to flow despite the assassination of Romero and the murder and rape of 3 US Catholic nuns and a lay church worker in 1980, the massacre of the entire village of El Mozote in 1981, and the murder of six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper and her daughter in 1989, to name only the most infamous cases. In all, over 75,000 civilians died at the hands of government forces from 1980 to 1992.

The intensity of the repression provoked massive migration. By the mid-1980s, nearly one-fifth of the population of El Salvador was living in the US. Francisco and his wife Loly were among them. They came to Canada in 1990 with their two children; a third was born soon after their arrival. Formally trained as a lawyer and economist, Francisco worked as a lawyer at *Tutela Legal*, founded by Archbishop Romero to work for human rights in El Salvador. He is past president of the Canadian Council for Refugees, and has been recognized for his work with the William P. Hubbard Race Relations Award of the City of Toronto and the YMCA Peace Medallion. Together with Loly, he is Co-Director of the FCJ Refugee Centre in Toronto, sponsored by the Faithful Companions of Jesus, a Roman Catholic women's religious congregation. The Centre offers an integrated model of refugee protection, settlement services and education, including shelter for women and their children. Peter McKenna, SCJ, Ministry Director of Becoming Neighbours, has known and worked with Francisco for years and invited him to speak with members of the NAMC, who were in town for a meeting, with members of the Toronto SCJ community, and other Becoming Neighbours staff and volunteers.

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*Francisco's presentation consisted of a number of slides of the "Migrant Caravan" we've all read about and been told by our President to fear as an "invasion." In fact, Francisco told us, it should not be called a "caravan" at all, but an "exodus."*

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This exodus has been driven by poverty, violence and desperation. Most of its people come from Honduras and Guatemala, which have a history similar to that of El Salvador and with it make up the so-called Northern Triangle, a region currently considered one of the deadliest in the world, with a [rate of violent deaths](#) higher than that of some war zones. This "invasion" began on October 12, when a group of about 160 Hondurans set forth from the town of San Pedro Sula — which in the first half of the decade was often referred to as the "[murder capital of the world](#)" — in hopes of arriving to present themselves for asylum in Mexico or the United States.

Seventy-five miles and two days later, the caravan was more than 1,000 strong, and by October 15 about 1,600 Hondurans had amassed at the border with Guatemala. On October 22, as the caravan regrouped on the Mexican side of the Mexico-Guatemala border, the United Nations estimated its size at 7,322 migrants. Since then, however, the numbers have shrunk as some sought asylum in Mexico, some gave up, and others took rides to shorten the 2,000 trip. Francisco noted that about 200 seem to have disappeared, and could well be victims of human traffickers, the drug cartels, or gangs.

Why are they walking in such a huge group, he asked? There is safety in numbers. Not only has Francisco interviewed some of the walkers, but Loly is an on-site companion. When asked what they want, they almost always say “to work...” and talk about the United States as a “promised land.” As he shared these pictures, he asked whether these looked like the faces of terrorists, murderers, gang members and rapists... What became readily apparent to both Francisco and Loly is that the people on the exodus are on a journey, to which they believe God has called them, and on which he is leading and sustaining them. They are a deeply religious people, who who have surrendered their lives and their future into the hands of God.





Mexico City has been more welcoming than the United States to the exodus, which arrived on La Dia de Los Muertos, the Day of the Dead. Rather than soldiers, it sent an ombudsmen to hear their stories, and dedicated their Day of the Dead parade to the refugees and those who had died on this and other journeys to the north. Church people have offered food and shelter.



But, Francisco said, most of their stories will likely never be heard by anyone in authority, and few are likely to be granted asylum, despite the fact that even at the worst time of El Salvador's civil war "there was never an exodus like this."

After this moving presentation, we all wanted to know, “What can we do?” Francisco offered four suggestions:

- 1) **Pray.** Pray for the migrants, for the families and children, for peace in their countries, for justice for the poor, and for government officials who will show God’s mercy and compassion.
- 2) **Get closer to the exodus,** physically if you can (there are groups organizing caravans to support them), or at least by reading about the stories of those who are fleeing. (Pope Francis calls us to become a Church of “encounter,” both in terms of personal encounter with Christ and the need for shepherds to “live with the smell of the sheep.” – presentation of Austin Ivereigh to SHSST Pope Francis Symposium)
- 3) **Change immoral policies.** “It is not immoral to help humanity,” declared Francisco. The Church must continue to speak out and to do so even more strongly on a national level, and we must do whatever we can wherever we are.
- 4) **Work in your local community.** For most of us, that is where we can both encounter migrants and refugees and have the most impact on people’s lives.

The situation at the U.S./Mexico border is not an invasion, but rather the legacy of unjust foreign and economic policies that have driven people to desperation. What is the Holy Spirit calling us to do? What changes must we make?