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## HOW CAN THE CHURCH ADDRESS CONFLICT BETWEEN THE POWERFUL & THE MARGINALIZED?

*By Gerardo Corpeño*



**SCHOLARLEADER  
INSIGHTS**

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In April 1994, one of the most violent episodes in modern history took place in Rwanda. In 100 days, over 800,000 people were massacred, many of them with machetes. Journalist Ana Pais reported, “Those who survived the genocide... agree that the hostile rhetoric used for years by the ruling ethnic group, the Hutus, against the Tutsi was key in the violence that the former unleashed on the latter.” One witness noticed that, through its hate-filled broadcasts, a local radio station spread “gasoline all over the country little by little so that one day the whole country could catch fire.”

This last phrase captures not only what happened in Rwanda but what is happening now globally. The world seems to be catching on fire. This is true in my home country, El Salvador. After centuries of Spanish rule, decades of political and economic instability culminated in a bloody civil war. That war ended in 1992, but poverty and crime remain big problems. On top of those issues, El Salvador is polarized between those who see the current president as a kind of messiah who has solutions to all the nation’s problems and those who see him as a threat to democracy. Hostile speech from both sides fans the flames of hatred. Whether in the U.S. (where I am currently studying thanks to

SCHOLARLEADERS), or in El Salvador, or elsewhere, we are living in a divided world where we have lost the ability to listen to each other.

### The Disadvantage of the Advantaged

Listening to the other – especially those who are disadvantaged – has been important for the Church from its beginning. One feature of Pentecost was the miracle of languages. Some commentators point out that Pentecost reverses Babel: While Babel brought confusion through multiplicity of languages, Pentecost, through that same multiplicity, actually led to unity and mutual understanding. Justo González observes, “In order to have the multitude understand what the disciples of Jesus were saying, the Holy Spirit had two options: one was to make all understand the Aramaic the disciples spoke; the other was to make each understand in their own tongue.” Thus, González writes, Pentecost is “still a resounding no! to any movement within the Church that seeks to make all Christians think alike, speak alike, and behave alike.” Pentecost marked not the imposition of a hegemonic language but the miracle of understanding the language of the other.



*Gerardo Corpeño and family*

**Gerardo Corpeño** is originally from El Salvador. He lived in Guatemala for eight years, where he was a professor of Systematic and Latin American Theology at Seminario Teológico Centroamericano (SETECA) in Guatemala City. Now, his PhD research focuses on the implications of Christ’s cross for reconciliation in violent societies. After graduation, Gerardo hopes to return to Guatemala and resume teaching at SETECA so that he can contribute to the formation of Christian leaders throughout Latin America. He is earning his PhD with SCHOLARLEADERS *LeaderStudies* support.

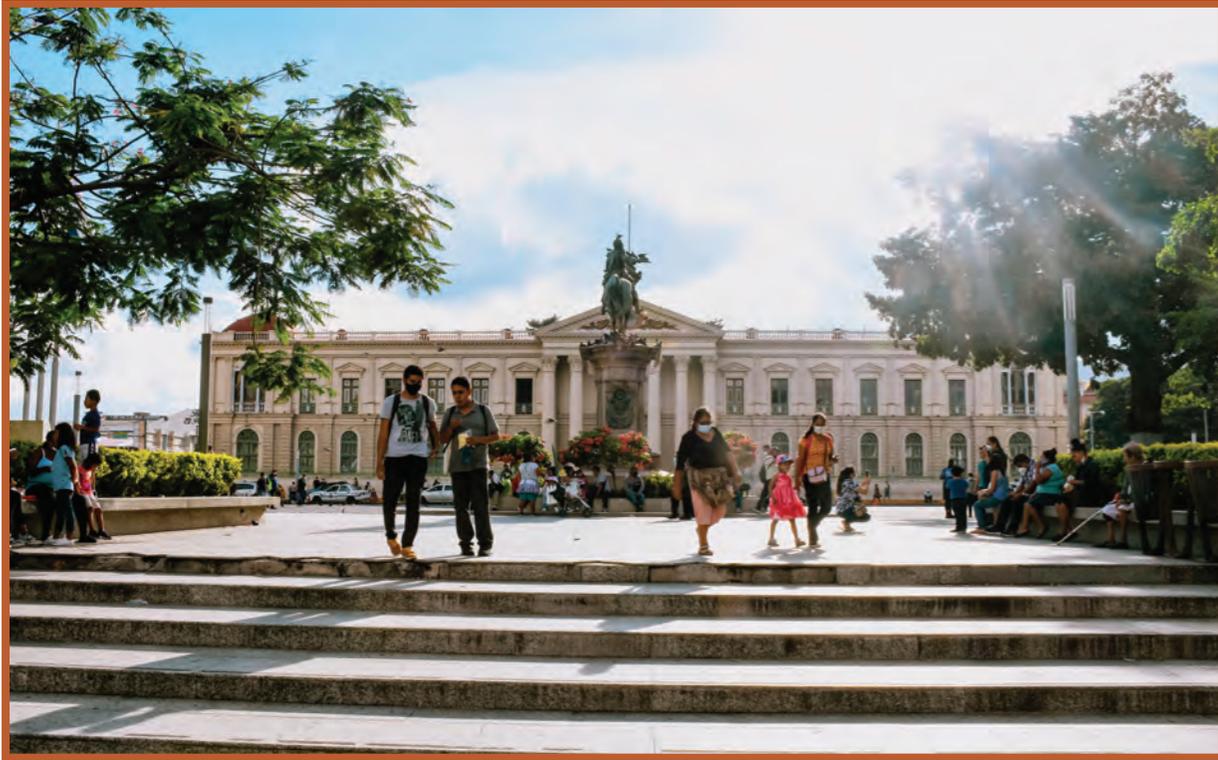


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Plaza Gerardo Barrios in San Salvador's city center.

But not everyone realized what was happening. Some interpreted this miracle as nonsense, as the disciples being drunk (Acts 2:13). González suggests that this negative reaction was probably because these people were Jews from Jerusalem who spoke the “official” language and therefore did not know what to make of the sudden diversity of tongues. González calls this the *disadvantage of the advantaged*. At Pentecost, some people – especially, perhaps, the foreigners who were used to being marginalized because they could not understand the official local language – were open to the miracle. Their very position as foreigners enabled them to hear the Gospel. By contrast, others missed the miracle because they were too used to being in power through language. They were not open to God’s surprising, incarnate grace that chose to speak to each person in her or his own language.

### A Leveling Event

In Acts, Luke not only describes Pentecost’s miracle of mutual understanding, he also explains why it happened. To the question, “What could this be?” (2:12), Peter answers that the miracle of languages fulfills Joel’s prophecy of the coming of God’s kingdom. As González writes, Peter points out that Pentecost was a *leveling event*: “[T]he Spirit will be poured out upon ‘all flesh’ (that is to say it will not be the exclusive prerogative of prophets or priests). This includes sons and daughters, young and old, slaves, both male and female.” The Holy Spirit levels status, empowering and acting through all, including those who are considered disadvantaged.

In Latin America, a historically Catholic continent, the recent growth of evangelicals has been both a blessing and a danger. Accustomed to being

marginalized for years, evangelicals now can be tempted to look for power, prestige, or privilege. Sadly, desire for power has tainted evangelicals who have gotten involved in Salvadoran politics. Participation in politics is not inherently wrong, but the desire for power that tramples the marginalized and ignores the community’s needs is dangerous. The story of Pentecost teaches Christians to behave otherwise. The Holy Spirit is a leveling power, a destroyer of privilege.

### Conflict within the Community

Despite the Holy Spirit enabling the Church to be a community of understanding and equality, the early Church was far from idyllic. One of the first conflicts occurs in Acts 6.

The early Church included two different groups: the “Hellenists” and the “Hebrews.” Both were Jewish, but while the latter were native Jews from Palestine who spoke Aramaic, the former were immigrant Jews from the diaspora who spoke Greek and had returned to live in Jerusalem. Conflict began when the diaspora Jews complained that the Jerusalem Jews were overlooking diaspora widows in the daily food distribution. These immigrant Jews discovered that even Christians were not immune to prejudice against migrants.

The apostles solved this conflict by designating seven deacons, “full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom,” to manage food distributions to all the widows (Acts 6:3–4). Remarkably, the apostles designated seven deacons who were *all Jewish immigrants from the diaspora*, as the deacons’ Greek names demonstrate. In other words, the apostles appointed migrants to care for migrants and non-migrants alike.

### Listening, Entrusting, & Empowering

This first internal conflict and the way in which the apostles solved it shows us what a community that listens to the other looks like. How should we handle conflict between a hegemonic group

(Jerusalem Jews) and a minority (diaspora Jews)? For true dialogue to happen, rather than a monologue by the dominant group, the apostles took fully into account the voices from the margins. As Kenner points out, “The community selects (6: 3, 5) and the apostles blessed (6:6) members of the offended minority group. As members of the minority, the new leaders could better understand the issues that caused the offense, as well as bring assurance that the minority’s voice was heard and trusted.”

I have regularly seen the Church today failing to follow the apostles’ model. In my experience, either the minority group is assimilated into the majority, or the Church takes a tribalist approach with “separate but equal” groups. The apostles didn’t take either of these options. Rather, they entrusted to these seven immigrants the entire task of distributing food to all the widows. The only requirement was that they be believers filled with the Holy Spirit and wisdom.

So an important part of the apostles’ wisdom for us today is to *listen to and incorporate* voices from the margins. This is what a community that listens to the other’s voice looks like. Are we willing to be humble enough to follow the early Church’s example, to be led by the Spirit to hear, trust, and empower the marginalized in our communities?



Photo credit: Melvin Chavez on Unsplash

A fisherman near a Salvadoran beach.