"The sacrifice is not too great for us — our people in El Salvador are far more courageous!"

Refugee René Hurtado speaks out on violence in Central America

Since the ARENA government took power June 1, there has been a dramatic rise in human rights violations in El Salvador, including the brutal killing of six Jesuit priests. Amnesty International and Americas Watch report that right-wing death squads suspected in this repression could not operate without the approval and collaboration of the Salvadoran government and military.

In response to this crisis, eight protesters (including three Salvadoran refugees) began a water-only hunger strike on November 23. On November 26, they issued this statement:

"We are people of faith from El Salvador and other Latin American counties. We mourn the deaths of the six priests and all those killed in El Salvador. In a spirit of prayer, we are conducting a hunger strike at the Cathedral of St. Paul and ask for the immediate end of all U.S. military aid to the government of El Salvador that is killing our people. At the same time we ask Archbishop John Roach to end his silence and join us in asking for an immediate end to U.S.military aid to El Salvador. In our country the Cathedral is a place where we can go to pray, take refuge, hold a hunger strike and express our needs. In our country the clergy are the voice of the voiceless. We invite all people of conscience to join us in prayer and fasting."

René Hurtado, one of this group, told his reasons in this exclusive interview December 1 at the St. Paul Cathedral. The interviewer is D. Perry Kidder, with Robert Spottswood recording:

DPK: Tell me about your childhood in El Salvador.
RH: My father worked in the countryside as a peasant for rich people. He was paid $1 a day, and that wasn't enough to feed the family, especially because almost one third of the income went to rent every month. He worked ten to twelve hours a day and we never had enough to eat; sometimes we ate only once a day, or twice when we were lucky. When I was eight years old, I wanted to go to school, but my father said I needed to work to help the family. I talked to my mother, and I cried. Finally my father agreed. But the sacrifice I had to make to go through elementary school was very difficult. I had only one pair of pants a year to wear to school. During the night my mother washed my clothes for me to go to school the next day clean. I used to work for a friend of the family and he paid me ten cents every other day. I gave it to Ma and she bought an egg. With one egg we ate—four of us—and it was nice to have an egg. When we didn't have eggs we ate tortillas with salt. Some time later we didn't have anything to eat, and my father went to work without eating—my mother wasn't able to gather anything, even for the little ones. That was painful. I was a very angry child—I didn't know against whom. I started to understand that life wasn't going to be fair; in childhood I understood that in the harshest possible way.

DPK: How about when you were a young adult?
RH: After finishing sixth grade, I was 14 years old. In 1974, I turned 15. In November I remember telling my father I was joining the armed forces, and he said, "You wasted already six years in school, not helping the family; we're starving—now you want to waste