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The contribution to the Loyola community of which I'm most proud is assisting in leading the Encounter El Salvador program over the last few years. I know the transformation that can occur in students who go on that trip because I was transformed when I went on the trip as a team member in 2003. There was one day from that trip that I will never forget.

Over the weekend in the middle of the trip, the Encounter El Salvador team visits a rural, very poor community and lives with host families. In 2003, the Encounter El Salvador team went to the village of Arcatao, in the northern region of Chalatenago (a department, which is like one of our states). There was a war in El Salvador in the 1980's, unfortunately mostly funded by the US government, and this town was one that was bombed by the Salvadoran government. The war was orchestrated by the rich and powerful of El Salvador, trying to keep the poor from rising up and demanding their rights as human beings. Arcatao has a very strong sense of community, and thus was targeted by the government and their army.

The main part of town is one square block, with a beautiful church in the middle of the square, surrounded by a bumpy stone street. On the outside of the square are some general stores and houses. As you leave town in any direction, there

are more very simple houses and families. On one particular Sunday, the residents organized a trip for us to walk up the closest mountain, called La Cañada. This mountain is where the community hid during the war when the village was being bombed, or when the soldiers would come in to their town. We left at 7:00 AM for the walk, and I hoped to get back by 10:00 AM since that is when the Mass started in the church, a huge community celebration in which I was excited to participate.

Our guide for the hike was a short, old man with a large cowboy hat and an even larger machete. We walked up a dusty path; it took us two hours to walk to the top, and once we made it, I enjoyed the view for a few seconds, and then I tried to rush everyone to start heading back. Having been raised as a good Catholic boy, I wanted to get to Mass. But our guide was in no hurry; he just walked back and forth as I got more and more frustrated. I thought that every minute wasted up here (although the scenery was beautiful) meant it was more likely I would miss Mass. Finally the guide stopped walking and pointed down to the ground and started crying. He had found the graves of his best friend and his brother, whom he had buried when they were killed during the war. I had almost missed it – in my hurry to follow the rules of going to church on Sundays, I had ignored a man in pain, a man in need of comfort. I had not been focused on being with the person right in front of me.

At the top of the mountain, one of the students asked if we were still in El Salvador, or if we had crossed over into Honduras, thinking it would be cool to add another country to their personal list of visited countries. Our guide said he

didn't know, but he asked what difference does it make? Of course, he was right. We were on top of one mountain in the middle of lots of other mountains, and somewhere someone had drawn an arbitrary line splitting the mountains up into two sides. But standing there, we could see that the mountains could not be split, and the people on one side of the mountain are the same as people on the other side of the mountain. Standing in the midst of God's awesome beauty of nature, I could see that lines on a map are meaningless to Him.

I realized I was going to miss Mass, but I was ok with it. I had just been taught some great life lessons by a simple Salvadoran peasant (a "campesino" as they are called there). On our way back down the mountain, I stepped on a round rock and it rolled, causing me to fall. I was ok as I quickly bounced back up. I just had a small bump on my leg where I hit a rock when I fell. Our guide used his machete and went whack-whack-whack and quickly I had a walking stick. We made it down the hill to see everyone already out of the Mass. I looked at my leg, and it had swollen up terribly. I got some ice, and then we met the priest who said Mass. He said he was going to say Mass at the next community over, and he would give us a ride if we wanted to go. Those of us who had just completed the hike gladly accepted his offer.

At Mass during collection, I pulled out a \$20 bill to add to the plate (in El Salvador they use US currency). They started the collection on the other side of the church, and as each person made their contribution, I could hear a clink-clink with each donation. Down one row, clink-clink. Up the next row, clink-clink. I became very self-conscious. I folded the twenty in half, then half again. Clink-clink. Soon, the twenty

was in a tiny ball. I was the last one to contribute, and I could see a pile of coins, mostly pennies and nickels and a few dimes, along with a couple of dollar bills that I was pretty sure were put in by other members of our delegation. I was embarrassed to toss in my twenty-dollar bill, easily more than doubling the entire collection. For me, \$20 is fun money – money to go out to dinner, or see a movie. I can easily donate it to a church. Yet I was the LEAST generous person out of all the people in that building. You hear the story in the Bible of the poor widow who contributed two copper coins to her church, and how Jesus explains she was the most generous one there, but I didn't expect to see that story come to life in modern times. And even though I had more than doubled the collection, I was the only one who did not make a sacrifice when giving to the collection. That all occurred in one day, so it was a pretty spectacular day. Events like that happen all the time in El Salvador. These types of lessons make the trip worthwhile and make me want to go back and then share these experiences with other members of the Loyola community.