

Dear friends,

The pastoral care request that first introduced me to Virginia Laparra came on Ash Wednesday, March 2. This new-for-me ministry activity has pushed me far outside my comfort zone and stretched me greatly in my own lifelong journey of faith.

“Leslie, several of the women who have been imprisoned are not Catholic. Could you make a pastoral visit to them in the prison?” read the WhatsApp message from my friend, Claudia, from the Protection Unit for Protection of Human Rights Defenders in Guatemala (UDEFEUGUA).

“The four former prosecutors and a former leader of the International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG) are in Mariscal Zavala prison. If you can arrange a date, one of the lawyers will accompany you. The purpose would be to pray with the women in a liberating manner ... and ... to bear witness afterwards.”

Claudia continued: “Could anyone else go with you? And ... could your church in the USA make a pronouncement about what you see?”

I noticed that my heart was beating more rapidly.

I have never set foot in or near a prison in Central America, so I felt a bit anxious. I responded: “I will see who else might be able to go with me.”

**March 8:** Claudia announced, “The warden gave permission for your visit!” Claudia then put me in contact with a legal team worker to coordinate the visit.

**March 9:** Jenny, a law student with the Protection Unit, picked us up. Wearing a light blue Protection Unit vest, Jenny spoke on our behalf at each guard point, shepherding us through the process. We checked in, had our IDs scanned, our names recorded in large ledgers, and stamps inked onto our arms.

Once we reached the isolation compound adjacent to the men’s prison, we checked in again, reporting the names of the three women we were there to see; with our special pastoral permission, all four of us were allowed in.

We approached a separate, low cinder block building with three cells, each with a slot in the solid metal door for sliding in a tray of food, and a metal flap that could be propped open to allow in a small amount of sunlight. The second cell was unlocked for us. Inside, we faced three women in their 30s.

We introduced ourselves as Presbyterian pastors and elders. Two of the three prisoners quickly described their own histories with specific Presbyterian congregations in Guatemala. One of the incarcerated women had attended the same church with one of my visiting companions in their youth. The two embraced, talked in soft voices, wept and prayed together.

We learned that Paola and Aliss had previously worked with the FECCI in the Guatemalan attorney general’s office. Aliss had recently resigned, believing that conditions no longer allowed her to carry out her work freely or with integrity. Days later, she learned of a warrant for her

arrest. When she presented herself voluntarily to the authorities, she was immediately arrested, arraigned and taken to prison.

The third woman, Virginia, had dared to bring [four different sets of charges](#) of wrongdoing against a judge in Quetzaltenango; it was clear that her arrest was an act of vengeance. She told us that on the day of her arraignment, the judge arrived with seven armed bodyguards, while Virginia was led into the courtroom with only her lawyer. Meantime, no observers (neither the Protection Unit workers, nor even United Nations representatives) were allowed into the “private” hearing. Clearly, the entire process was intended to intimidate — and it had been very effective.

We shared a psalm and prayed with all three women. We told them we believe that they are being persecuted by a system that, as they fully know from their own lived experience, seeks to punish the just and let the guilty go free.

We also made it clear that we understand God to be a liberating God, who desires justice and who defends the righteous. God is with them. We affirmed our belief that God will not abandon them and that they will be vindicated.

We asked if they wanted to get any message out, and they wrote a brief note to be shared with our Presbyterian siblings in the U.S.:

*“We give thanks for the support that you have shown us. We are being criminalized because of the work that we carried out. We are trusting, first in God, and also that we will have a transparent process. We request that you be alert and aware of our (legal) processes, because at the end of it all, it helps when there are no anomalies in the processes and when our human rights are respected. We respectfully request your prayers.”*

As we embraced and said our goodbyes, we promised to continue praying for each of them. I also promised to visit as long as any of them is still there.

That Friday, the judge for Aliss and Paola’s case declared that the charges against them lacked merit and thus should be dropped. They were finally released the following Monday.

**Tuesday, March 15:** Virginia is now alone; she appears shaken by having seen her four cellmates leave, while her own request for house arrest has been denied three times. Her family can only make the four-hour journey to the capital to visit her on Saturdays, so an ecumenical group coordinates the Tuesday visits with her for **March 22 and 29**. The only meals Virginia receives are those brought in from the outside, mainly fruit since most other food would spoil quickly. She is allowed outside for fresh air only one hour each day. She clearly feels very alone and vulnerable, and she frequently bursts into tears. I remember Claudia’s words: “She is very fragile.”

**Monday, April 4:** I am surprised to see an open letter from Virginia published in [the Guatemalan news](#).

In her letter, Virginia wrote that her “crime” was that, while she was a prosecutor of the FECCI in Quetzaltenango, she presented administrative complaints against Judge Lester Castellanos.

Reacting to the publication, Judge Mena recused himself from holding her preliminary hearing on April 18.

I asked Virginia why she would publish such a letter and risk her hearing being postponed. She said, “I’ve been trying to get Judge Mena to recuse himself and to disconnect from this entire process for the past four years! I had no idea that he would actually do so now.”

Virginia said that as she was finishing a journal entry, describing what is happening and expressing her feelings about being in solitary confinement, an unexpected visitor appeared outside visiting hours: Jordán Rodas, the Human Rights Ombudsperson. Rodas urged her to allow him to share the journal entry as a public testimony. Believing that God was present in the process, Virginia permitted him to take the letter and publish it.

Although Judge Mena’s recusal has delayed her process, what I saw in Virginia’s eyes and face as she told the story struck me profoundly. The “fragile” person I first met on March 9 has become stronger and more confident during her incarceration. While she is still emotional as she expresses her deep longing to be reunited with her daughters and family, she also embodies a fierce determination, strength and clarity that are growing with each passing day.

“I was in prison and you visited me.” Jesus Christ is being held prisoner unjustly in the person of Virginia Laparra — and in others throughout Guatemala whom I have yet to meet. Even as I go to visit Virginia to take her a word of comfort — “You are not alone,” “God is with you,” — I also always come away with my own spirit strengthened and encouraged, for I have seen the face of God in her.

Leslie

***‘And when was it we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did to me.’ — Matthew 25:39-40***