A Time of Desert and Temptation

*Editorial Radio YSUCA*

In biblical terms, the desert is a place of trial because of its inhospitable nature. This is how it is depicted in the emblematic narratives of the decades-long pilgrimage of the Jewish people, as well as in the 40 day journey of a certain Jesus of Nazareth. In both cases, the conditions were very difficult: there was hunger, lack of water, and moments of desperation. And so the desert is also a place of temptations. In one instance during their wanderings, the people of Israel succumbed under the difficulties and thought that in the idolatry of a golden calf they would find a solution to their suffering. The desert is such a place of trial that God’s own son was tempted there, though Jesus Christ did not succumb to the easy exits that were proposed to him.

In El Salvador today we can say that we are lost and wandering in the desert. We are enduring very difficult conditions. The UN has us listed in the dishonorable first-place globally in terms of violence. The economic crisis shows no sign of abating, and as if that were not enough, we have just recently suffered a tragedy because of the rains, which was exacerbated by the poverty, and confirms that we are the most vulnerable country in the world. We repeat: we are living in a time of the desert in El Salvador. And as in all deserts, as we endure great trials, we feel tempted to seek exits that seem good, but in the long-run will worsen our situation.

One of the major temptations that we as a country are exposed to pertains to insecurity. It is undeniable that delinquency—and in particular the homicide-rate—has become the primary preoccupation of the Salvadoran people, and precisely for this reason, the situation is frequently addressed from the angle of electoral-politics. The numbers are so overwhelming and the scenes so powerful that people are crying out, demanding—with due right—that something forceful be done against delinquency. And it is from here that the major temptation has its roots, both for the country as well as for the government. There are voices that advocate the militarization of security, something that many people have no qualms about supporting. More than one legislative representative has suggested the creation of a special corps, and some have suggested that it might be convenient to put at the helm of the Security and Justice Ministry (and even the National Civil Police), a career military officer, under the theory that with an iron fist, with military discipline, the situation of insecurity would substantially improve.

Those who think in this manner are mistaken. It is not of a capricious whim that we are against the military; it is because their constitutional function and their preparation are not adequate for the sphere of citizen security. There is an abundance of examples throughout this and other continents that demonstrate that repression is not the best solution to halt the advances of delinquency. No need to go farther than our recent history to see that this is not the path. In so far as Francisco Flores’ plan de *Mano Dura* and Antonio Saca’s *Super Mano Dura*, like the unprecedented use of the military on the
part of Mauricio Funes, have failed in their fight against delinquency. And this failure is of such a nature that today we are at the top of violent countries. Repression is not the best deterrent for delinquency. The first deterrent is the swift and correct application of the law; when this does not occur, a climate of impunity begins to coalesce that further encourages delinquent acts.

History has also shown us that repression without prevention does not work. Of course we need to apply as much repression as the situation demands, but in a parallel manner we need to implement all the prevention that is possible. Without the convergence of the two, there will be no possibility of success in the fight against delinquency. If anybody does believe this truth, they ought to turn their eyes towards cities like Bogota, Rio de Janeiro, and African urban centers that have been able to reduce insecurity implementing non-repressive measures. For example, the programs that allow the development of conflict resolution skills without turning to violence have been able to reduce juvenile violence in the cities of the United States. There is no doubt that we live in the times of desert. For this reason we have to be weary of giving in to the temptation of repression and militarization of the country. The more desperate we feel, the greater the danger of falling to the temptation. The ascendance of a general accused of multiple violations of human rights to the presidency of Guatemala and the recent exhibition of military power during the marches in honor of the bicentennial make more pressing the danger of seeking redeemers among the military, or worse yet, that one of them believes to be a chosen one to save us from the violence. Until now, the emphasis by the governments has been on repressive measures, and prevention has not gone beyond the rhetoric. Until now, we have not yet made a dent in organized crime, and impunity continues. As long as these two facets are not addressed (impunity and prevention) we will continue lamenting the lack of success in this struggle. If we succumb to the temptation of believing that the solution to delinquency is in militarizing the institutions responsible to fight it, we will end up worshiping a golden calf.