

Intreview with Digna Ochoa

Speak Truth to Power : by Kerry Kennedy Cuomo

I am a nun, who started life as a lawyer. I sought a religious community with a social commitment, and the protection of human rights is one of the things that my particular community focuses on. They have permitted me to work with an organization that fights for human rights, called Centro Pro, supporting me economically, morally, and spiritually. This has been a process of building a life project, from a social commitment to a spiritual one with a mystical aspect.

My father was a union leader in Veracruz, Mexico. In the sugar factory where he worked, he was involved in the struggles for potable water, roads, and securing land certificates. I studied law because I was always hearing that my father and his friends needed more lawyers. And all the lawyers charged so much. My father was unjustly jailed for one year and fifteen days. He then disappeared and was tortured—the charges against him were fabricated. This led to my determination to do something for those suffering injustice, because I saw it in my father's flesh.

When I first studied law, I intended to begin practicing in the attorney general's office, then become a judge, then a magistrate. I thought someone from those positions could help people. After I got my degree, I became a prosecutor. I remember a very clear issue of injustice. My boss, who was responsible for all of the prosecutions within the attorney general's office, wanted me to charge someone whom I knew to be innocent. There was no evidence, but my boss tried to make me prosecute him. I refused, and he prosecuted the case himself.

Up until that time, I was doing well. The job was considered a good one, because it was in a coffee-producing area and the people there had lots of money. But I realized that I was doing the same thing that everyone did, serving a system that I myself criticized and against which I had wanted to fight. I decided to quit and with several other lawyers opened an office. I had no litigation experience whatsoever. But I was energized by leaving the attorney general's office and being on the other side, the side of the defense.

The first case I worked on was against judicial police officers who had been involved in the illegal detention and torture of several peasants. We wanted to feel like lawyers, so we threw ourselves into it. Our mistake was to take on the case without any institutional support. I had managed to obtain substantial evidence against the police, so they started to harass me incessantly, until I was detained. First, they sent telephone messages telling me to drop the case. Then by mail came threats that if I didn't drop it I would die, or members of my family would be killed. I kept working and we even publicly reported what was happening. The intimidation made me so angry that I was motivated to work even harder. I was frightened, too, but felt I couldn't show it. I always had to appear—at least publicly—as if I was sure of myself, fearless. If I showed fear they would know how to dominate me. It was a defense mechanism.

Then, I was kidnapped and held incommunicado for eight days by the police. They wanted me to give them all the evidence against them. I had hidden the case file well, not in my office, not in my house, and not where the victims lived, because I was afraid that the police would steal it. Now, I felt in the flesh what my father had felt, what other people had suffered. The police told me that they were holding members of my family, and named them. The worst was when they said they were holding my father. I knew what my father had suffered, and I didn't want him to relive that. The strongest torture is psychological. Though they also gave me electric shocks and put mineral water up my nose, nothing compared to the psychological torture.

There was a month of torture. I managed to escape from where they were holding me. I hid for a month after that, unable to communicate with my family. It was a month of anguish and torture, of not knowing what to do. I was afraid of everything.

I eventually got in touch with my family. Students at the university, with whom I had always gotten along very well, had mobilized on my behalf. After I "appeared" with the help of my family and human rights groups in Jalapa, Veracruz, I was supported by lawyers, most of whom were women. The fact that I was in Veracruz caused my family anguish. At first I wanted to stay, because I knew we could find the police who detained me. We filed a criminal complaint. We asked for the police registries. I could clearly identify some of the officers. But there was a lot of pressure about what I should do: continue or not with the case? My life was at risk, and so were the lives of members of my family. After a month of anguish, my family, principally my sisters, asked me to leave Jalapa for a while. For me, but also for my parents.

I came to Mexico City. The idea was to take a three-month human rights course for which I had received a scholarship. I met someone at the human rights course who worked at Centro Pro, one of the human rights groups involved on my behalf. One day he said, "Look, we're just setting up the center and we need a lawyer. Work with us." I had never dreamed of living in Mexico City, and I didn't want to. But I accepted, because the conditions in Jalapa were such that I couldn't go back. Two really good women lawyers in Jalapa with a lot of organizational support took up the defense case I had been working on. This comforted me, because I knew the case would not be dropped—I had learned the importance of having organizational backup. So I started to work with Centro Pro in December 1988. Since I began working with the organization, I've handled a lot of cases of people like my father and people like me. That generates anger, and that anger becomes the strength to try to do something about the problem. At work, even though I give the appearance of seriousness and resolve, I'm trembling inside. Sometimes I want to cry, but I know that I can't, because that makes me vulnerable, disarms me.

At this time, because of what happened to me, I needed the help of a psychoanalyst, but I wasn't ready to accept it. The director of Centro Pro prepared me to accept that support. He was a Jesuit and psychologist. For six months, I didn't know he was a therapist. When I found out, I asked him why he hadn't told me. "You never asked," he said. We became very close. He was my friend, my confessor, my boss, and my psychologist, too, although I also had my psychoanalyst.

The idea of a confessor came slowly to me. In Jalapa, I had been supported by some priests. When I first "appeared," the first place I was taken was a church. I felt secure there, though as a kid, I had never had much to do with priests, besides attending church. To me they were people who accepted donations, delivered sacraments, and were power brokers. It made an impression on me to see priests committed to social organizations, supporting people.

Since I've been at Centro Pro, we've gone through some tough times, like the two years of threats we received beginning in 1995. Once again it was me who was being threatened. My first reaction was to feel cold shivers. I went to the kitchen with a faxed copy of the threat and said to one of the sisters in the congregation, "Luz, we've received a threat, and they're directed at me, too." And Luz responded, "Digna, this is not a death threat. This is a threat of resurrection." That gave me great sustenance. Later that day another of my lawyer colleagues, Pilar, called me to ask what security measures I was taking. She was—rightfully—worried. I told her what Luz had said and Pilar responded, "Digna, the difference is that you're a religious person." And I realized that being a person of faith and having a community, that having a base in faith, is a source of support that others don't have.

Now, some people said to me that my reaction was courageous. But I've always felt anger at the suffering of others. For me, anger is energy, it's a force. You channel energy positively or negatively. Being sensitive to situations of injustice and the necessity of confronting difficult situations like those we see every day, we have to get angry to provoke energy and react. If an act of injustice doesn't provoke anger in me, it could be seen as indifference, passivity. It's injustice that motivates us to do something, to take risks, knowing that if we don't, things will remain the same. Anger has made us confront police and soldiers. Something that I discovered is that the police and soldiers are used to their superiors shouting at them, and they're used to being mistreated. So when they run into a woman, otherwise insignificant to them, who demands things of them and shouts at them in an authoritarian way, they are paralyzed. And we get results. I consider myself an aggressive person, and it has been difficult for me to manage that within the context of my religious education. But it does disarm authorities. I normally dress this way, in a way that my friends call monklike. That's fine. It keeps people off guard. I give a certain mild image, but then I can, more efficiently, demand things, shout.

For example, one time there was a guy who disappeared for twenty days. We knew he was in the military hospital, and we filed habeas corpus petitions on his behalf. But the authorities simply denied having him in custody. One night we were informed that he was being held at a particular state hospital. We went the next day. They denied us access. I spent the whole morning studying the comings and goings at the hospital to see how I could get in. During a change in shifts, I slipped by the guards. When I got to the room where this person was, the nurse at the door told me I could not go in. "We are not even allowed in," she said. I told her that I would take care of myself; all I asked of her was that she take note of what I was going to do and that if they did something to me, she should call a certain number. I gave her my card. I took a deep breath, opened the door violently and yelled at the federal judicial police officers inside. I told them they had to leave, immediately, because I was the person's lawyer and needed to speak with him. They didn't know how to react, so they left. I had two minutes, but it was enough to explain who I was, that I had been in touch with his wife, and to get him to sign a paper proving he was in the hospital. He signed. By then the police came back, with the fierceness that usually characterizes their behavior. Their first reaction was to try to grab me. They didn't expect me to assume an attack position—the only karate position I know, from movies, I suppose. Of course, I don't really know karate, but they definitely thought I was going to attack. Trembling inside, I said sternly that if they laid a hand on me they'd see what would happen. And they drew back, saying, "You're threatening us." And I replied, "Take it any way you want."

After some discussion, I left, surrounded by fifteen police officers. Meanwhile I had managed to record some interesting conversations. They referred to "the guy who was incommunicado," a term that was very important. I took the tape out and hid the cassette where I could. The police called for hospital security to come, using the argument that it wasn't permitted to have tape recorders inside the hospital. I handed over the recorder. Then they let me go. I was afraid that they would kidnap me outside the hospital. I was alone. I took several taxis, getting out, changing, taking another, because I didn't know if they were following me. When I arrived at Centro Pro, I could finally breathe. I could share all of my fear. If the police knew that I was terrified when they were surrounding me, they would have been able to do anything to me.

Sometimes, without planning and without being conscious of it, there is a kind of group therapy among the colleagues at Centro Pro. We show what we really feel, our fear. We cry. There's a group of us who have suffered physically. On the other hand, my religious community has helped me manage my fear. At times of great danger, group prayer and study of the Bible and religious texts helps me. Praying is very important. Faith in God. That has been a great source of strength. And I'm not alone anymore. As a Christian, as a religious person, I call myself a follower of Christ who died on the cross for denouncing the injustices of his time. And if He had to suffer what he suffered, what then can we expect?

For years after my father was tortured, I wanted revenge. Then, when I was the torture victim, the truth is that the last thing I wanted was revenge, because I feared that it would be an unending revenge. I saw it as a chain. Three years after coming to Mexico City I remember that a person came to tell me that they had found two of the judicial police officers who tortured me. The person asked if I wanted him to get them and give them their due. At first, I did have a moment when I thought yes. But I thought about it and realized that I would simply be doing what they did. I would have no right to speak about them as I am talking about them now. I would have

been one of them.

I rarely share my own experience of torture. But I remember talking to a torture victim who was very, very angry, for whom the desire for revenge was becoming destructive. I shared my own experience, and that made an impression on him. But if we don't forgive and get over the desire for revenge, we become one of them. You can't forget torture, but you have to learn to assimilate it. To assimilate it you need to find forgiveness. It's a long-term, difficult, and very necessary undertaking.

If you don't step up to those challenges, what are you doing? What meaning does your life have? It is survival. When I began to work, when I took that case in which they made me leave Jalapa, I was committed to doing something against injustice. But there was something else that motivated me, and I have to recognize it, even though it causes me shame. What motivated me as well as the commitment was the desire to win prestige as a lawyer. Thanks to the very difficult situation that I lived through, I realized what was wrong. What a shame that I had to go through that in order to discover my real commitment, the meaning of my life, the reason I'm here. In this sense, I've found something positive in what was a very painful experience. If I hadn't suffered, I wouldn't have been able to discover injustice in such depth. Maybe I wouldn't be working in Centro Pro. Maybe I wouldn't have entered the congregation. Maybe I wouldn't have learned that the world is a lot bigger than the very small world that I had constructed. Thanks to a very difficult, painful experience for me and my family and my friends, my horizons were broadened. Sometimes I say to myself, "What a way for God to make you see things." But sometimes without that we aren't capable of seeing.