

Guide to El Salvador

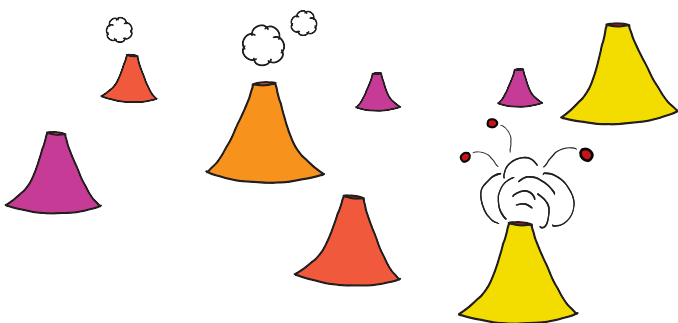


- Population:** 6.2 million. Another 2.5 million live abroad, due to the civil war and, more recently, poor economy, natural disasters and high levels of violence
- Currency:** US dollar
- Languages:** Spanish (official), Nahuatl
- Religions:** 50% Catholic, 36% Protestant, 14% other religions or none
- Land size:** 21,041 sq km (slightly larger than Wales)
- Average age:** 26 years (UK: 40 years). It is a country of young people
- Economy:** The money sent home by emigrants is equivalent to 17.1% of El Salvador's GDP (Gross Domestic Product)
- Main exports:** Coffee, sugar, shrimp, textiles, chemicals, electricity

Sources: CIA World Fact Book; UNDP El Salvador.

LAND OF VOLCANOES

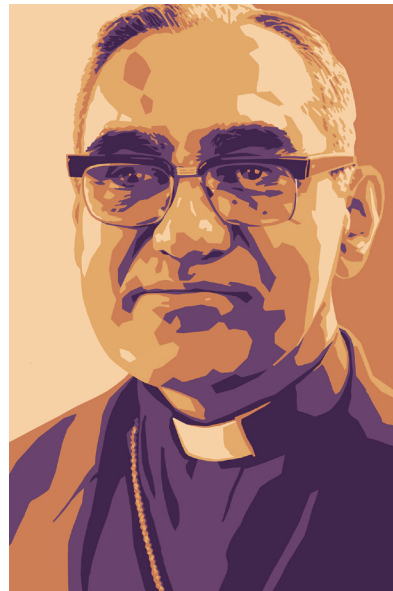
El Salvador sits on the Western coast of Central America alongside the Pacific Ocean. Its spectacular landscape includes lush, green forests, sparkling lakes and beautiful beaches. On either side of a central plateau there are two mountain ranges. The northern range, called the Sierra Madre, borders Honduras. The southern range includes more than 20 volcanoes. Lots of coffee is grown in the fertile soil around the volcanoes. El Salvador has a tropical climate and is prone to hurricanes.



HISTORY

El Salvador gained independence from Spain in 1821. There was extreme inequality under the Spanish conquerors and this continued into the twentieth century. The country was ruled by the so-called "14 families" who owned most of the land and industries, while most people lived in poverty.

CIVIL WAR



During the 1970s, the wealthy used the army to violently oppress those living in poverty who were demanding their human rights. Tens of thousands were tortured, killed or disappeared. The most outspoken defender of the people living in poverty was Archbishop Oscar Romero of San Salvador. The United States Government tried to portray the conflict as a struggle

against communism and it defended the army as the violence descended into civil war. The war lasted until the United Nations brokered a peace treaty in 1992.

See our film and find out about Oscar Romero at:
cafod.org.uk/secondary/romero

ISABEL

Isabel is 17. She lives in a very poor neighbourhood on the outskirts of El Salvador's capital city, San Salvador. Isabel lives with her mum, sister, aunt, cousin and great-grandmother in a one-roomed house by the side of a disused railway track. She is a happy person, saying that the three things that inspire her to stay positive are her family, her friends and God.

GANGS IN EL SALVADOR

During the civil war, many people fled from El Salvador to the United States. As illegal immigrants, they struggled to find work and many ended up in prison, where gangs were common. When the war ended, the US sent the prisoners back to El Salvador. They brought gang culture with them and it flourished as one way to survive with no job, no home, no family support and no access to social security.

A DIVIDED AREA

Three gangs have divided up the area where Isabel lives, restricting everyone's movement. There are often gun fights. Isabel says that when she wants to go any distance with friends from her area, even though they are not in gangs themselves: "...if we can't go in a car then we don't go out at all — because as soon as the gangs see them, they say things, they shoot, they beat them up." Numbers attending the local school have fallen because young people are afraid to cross the boundary between the gangs' areas.



“There have been neighbours who have been shot just because they were passing by.” Isabel



A young leader directing activities at the Saturday project.

A SAFE SPACE

CAFOD's local partners — the Sisters of St Clare — live and work in Isabel's area. Seven years ago, she joined their project based at the local high school. Young people, trained as leaders, invite children and other young people to attend on Saturdays. In this safe space, they can take part in arts, craft and sports activities. Isabel teaches modern dance. There are also group sessions led by a psychologist, teaching skills such as dealing with conflict and giving opportunities to discuss local issues.

“We work with the next generation so that when they get to our age they'll say to themselves, 'Let's change things in our country'.” Isabel



Gang dilemma

DISCUSSION:

- How do you think Isabel feels when moving around the area where she lives?
- What activities do you enjoy that Isabel cannot easily do?

(Teacher/leader — please add appropriate questions to meet your groups' needs, eg. if they have gangs in their local areas).

ROLE CARD:

Gustavo is a young person living in poverty in an area of San Salvador divided by gang conflict. The only safe space to meet other young people is a Saturday project run by the Sisters of Saint Clare. When he was a baby, Gustavo's dad became an illegal migrant to the US looking for work and no-one has heard from him since he left. Gustavo's mum works long hours in a factory and is rarely home. Few young people in his area find jobs — as soon as employers hear the address they say they have no work.

Gustavo has the option to join a gang. What do you think he will choose to do, and why?

ENLARGE, PRINT AND CUT OUT ONE SET PER GROUP

A: "Other people in my area fear the gang members."	H: "The gang is involved in criminal activities – I could end up in prison."
B: "If I make a life outside of gangs, I'll give hope to others that normal life is possible here."	I: "Through the gang I could get money for food, drink, clothes and maybe, eventually, even a house."
C: "If I belong to the gang they may protect me in dangerous areas."	J: "Gang life sounds more exciting than sitting at home afraid to go out."
D: "If I join the gang, I won't ever have to study again."	K: "If I join a gang my mum will never forgive me."
E: "If I stay on at school, I will be able to study hard and learn all the things I long to know."	L: "Joining the local Saturday project could teach me leadership skills that may help me to get a job."
F: "The gang could become my family, replacing my own broken family."	M: "Members of rival gangs might shoot me, or shoot those I love; we could be killed."
G: "As a Catholic, I've always been taught that violence is wrong."	N: "If I join the gang, I'll never be allowed to leave."

GROUP ACTIVITY: After reading the role card, each group sorts Gustavo's reflections into 'for' and 'against' joining a gang, then sorts each pile in order of the strength of the argument. Groups feed back, giving reasons for their choices. If you have more time, you could 'hot seat' Gustavo, his mother, a friend, etc.

DECIDE TOGETHER: Which are the strongest reasons for and against Gustavo joining the gang? Why? What will help him to make a good decision? How will his decision affect peace in his local area? What can your class/youth group do to help build peace?



Read about the work of CAFOD's partner and watch the film at cafod.org.uk/secondary. Write a letter from one of the sisters to Gustavo explaining how your project can help him.

Bright symbols of hope

After learning about El Salvador's civil war and the gang violence that is common in some areas of El Salvador, you might expect El Salvador's religious art to be sombre. Not at all!

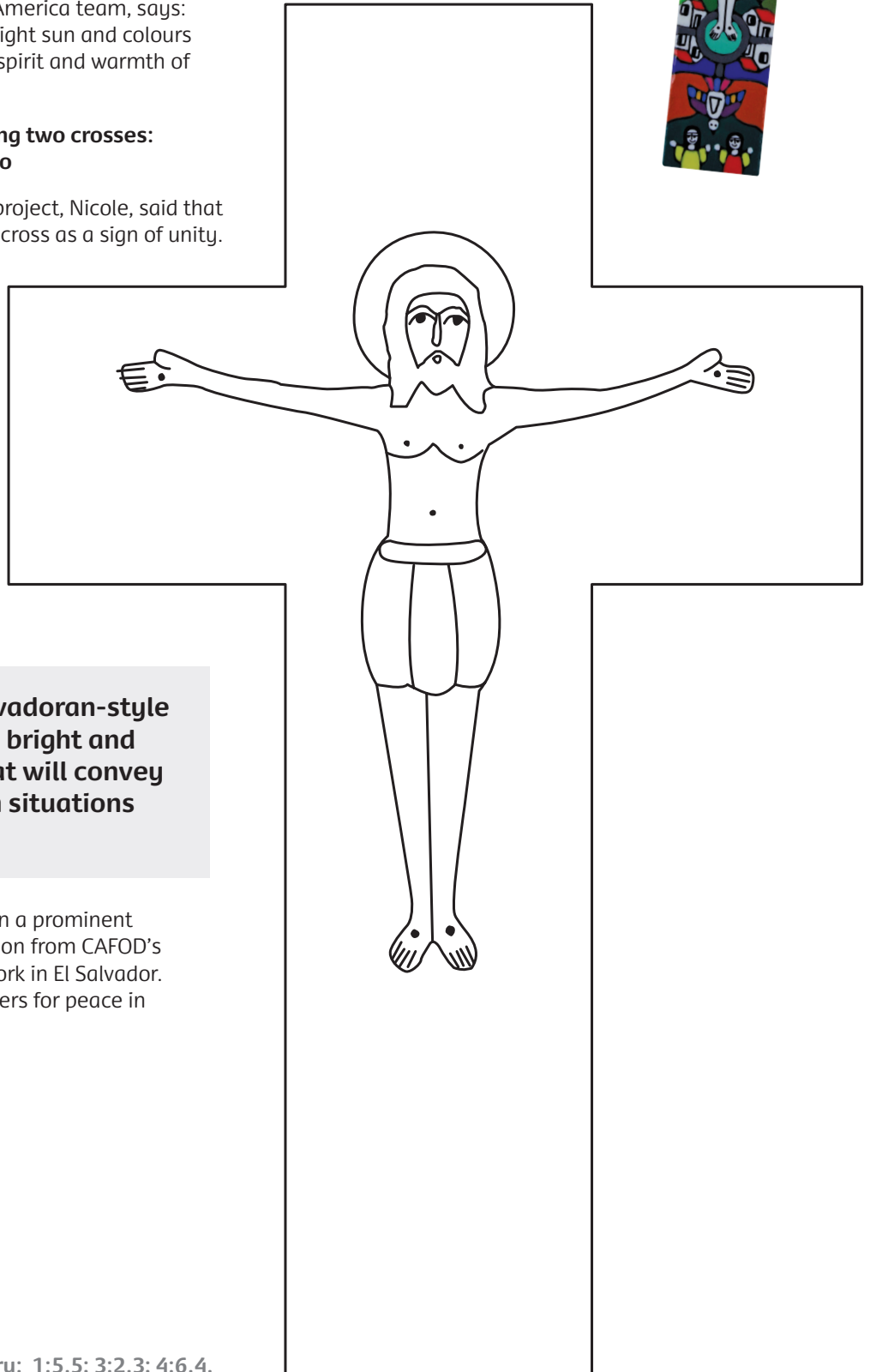
Salvadorans have a tradition of producing very colourful crucifixes. The bright decorations have a figure of Jesus at the centre but also include images of the local community set in local landscape.

Clare Dixon, from CAFOD's Latin America team, says: "The bright colours convey the bright sun and colours of El Salvador but also the joyful spirit and warmth of its people."

Watch a clip of Isabel, describing two crosses:
cafod.org.uk/secondary/romero

A young person at the Saturday project, Nicole, said that lots of people are painted on the cross as a sign of unity.

- What do you think she meant by this?
- What are the links between unity and peace?
- Why is the cross a symbol of hope?



Design your own El Salvadoran-style cross. It should contain bright and appropriate images that will convey hope to people living in situations of conflict.

Display your finished crosses in a prominent place. You could add information from CAFOD's website about our partners' work in El Salvador. Invite people to add their prayers for peace in the world.

Links to RE Curriculum Directory: 1:5.5; 3:2.3; 4:6.4.