

# More Casualties of War

By Pamela Adams Vaughn

When Fr. Don Doll, S.J., journeyed to El Salvador this past summer to document the Jesuits' work in this war-ravaged land, he knew some of what he would encounter:

The sunlit garden at the University of Central America that had been defiled 10 years ago by the murders. The Jesuit residence that easily had yielded to the boots and weapons of thugs. The simple rooms, still haunted by the slayings, one of which Fr. Doll would occupy.

But the Creighton Jesuit also would encounter face-to-face a different casualty of war — and one person's efforts to tell its truth and to put the past to rest.

Former Jesuit classmate Fr. Jon Cortina, who was away from his home the morning of Nov. 16, 1989, when his six Jesuit house-mates, their housekeeper and her 15-year-old daughter were slain, had unearthed another terrible business of the civil war in El Salvador: the murdering of parents and abduction of their children to sell in adoption in the United States.

"He found a wound in many families that wouldn't heal," Fr. Doll said of Fr. Cortina on his

video that resulted from the journey. "As part of the army's scorched earth policy, children of the opposition were abducted from the battlefield by soldiers and falsely labeled war orphans. Many were channeled into a corrupt and lucrative adoption business."

One such victim was Ernesto Sibrian, then 2 years old: His mother was murdered by soldiers as she clutched Ernesto to her breast. The bullet that killed his mother ricocheted through Ernesto's arm in the process. His 6-year-old sister, Lilian, could only watch in horror. Then, cradling Ernesto, she ran with him to the river.

Soon, soldiers were separating the two children, claiming that Ernesto would be taken to a place for orphans, to be cared for, with other children. That was the last his family would see of him for 13 years, though they would search for him tirelessly. The Sibrians' efforts to find

Ernesto inspired Fr. Cortina to begin a grassroots movement to locate the war's lost children.

Meanwhile, Kathleen Cassidy, a New Jersey social worker, adopted Ernesto in good faith from El Salvador in 1984. She renamed her 2-year-old Peter, raising him in Princeton, and thinking all along that her son was a war orphan. Then, Fr. Cortina's group called.

His adoptive mother, Kathleen, was troubled. "I needed to calm myself on the whole issue," she told Fr. Doll, especially the fear "that this would mean that he wouldn't be my son."

Soon, she and Peter were traveling to El Salvador to meet her son's family of origin.

The results of that meeting were many. Peter said that the journey put him in touch with his "deep roots," a heritage that acknowledges his part Salvadoran origins, "and that no matter — even if you do live in the States, you will always have a place here." Peter returned in the summer of 1999 for a visit to his original family on his own.

His mother Kathleen added

that Peter, "living in Princeton as a teenager (doesn't have) all that much opportunity to see how other people live and to know how different things are in (his) world.

"And (now, Peter's) had that opportunity in a pretty significant way," she said of his meeting the Sibrians. "And I think it's changed him. It's changed him in a way that can only be better."

Fr. Doll, who journeyed to El Salvador in 1990 on the first anniversary of the Jesuit slayings, said returning with a video camera nine years later enabled him to share the Sibrians' and Cassidy's stories with a much wider world, thanks to Ted Koppel and *Nightline*, which aired the video in November.

Fr. Doll believes such journeys and their telling drive to the heart of yet another truth: "the absolute need we have for a saving and compassionate God." ■



**Fr. Doll's video *Finding Ernesto* appeared on ABC's *Nightline* in November. At the age of 2, Ernesto Sibrian was abducted by El Salvadoran soldiers, who murdered his mother, and was adopted in the U.S. as a war orphan.**