

Shameless Theology

S2:04 - Faith as Costly Love with Rev. Rhina Ramos

Rev. Alba Onofrio | 00:08

Welcome to Shameless Theology, a space for honest, courageous conversations with queer, trans, and feminist people of faith and our allies. This podcast is brought to you by Soulforce, who is an international organization working to end the religious and political oppression of LGBTQIA plus people and all marginalized people by breaking open the ideologies of white Christian supremacy. I'm Reverend Alba Onofrio, also known as Reverend Sex. I'm the executive director at Soulforce, and I am honored and delighted to be your host as we dive into the thick of it.

This season is exciting because it goes deep on the ideas of our brand new book called *Spiritual Violence, Religious Phenomena That Defile the Faith*. Together we'll learn new concepts like spiritual trauma, religious abuse, spiritual terrorism, white Christian supremacy, and spiritual violence. Together we name the harm, not as abstract theories, but as lived realities. But we don't stop there because theory work is only as good as the path it leads to healing, and we'll be doing plenty of that too. These conversations are part idea session, part theological reflection, and part testimony.

You'll hear stories of resilience, liminality, code switching, theological imagination, and a kind of dogged persevering hope that refuses to let go of the sacred, even when our institutions fail us. Whether you're here because you have questions, or because you are healing, teaching, leading, or simply trying to make sense of your own experience, you are so very welcome here. You are not alone on this journey. Now let's get down to business, and pleasure, with Shameless Theology. Today I'm excited to share with you a conversation with a beloved *sinvergüenza*, Reverend Rhina Ramos.

Rhina is someone that I just adore and also admire very much. She brings light and joy to the community around her. She has been an advocate and an activist who has spent years on the front lines of the fight against spiritual violence and injustice. Rhina is the co-founder and leader of the only Spanish-speaking, queer-led United Church of Christ congregation in the country called *Ministerio Latino*, and it is a wonderful congregation that offers spiritual and material support to newly arrived immigrants, as well as healing and affirming spaces for queer and trans people.

Her journey to this moment in her calling is truly fascinating. She arrived in the U.S. as an undocumented immigrant child who made a deal with God to keep going to church if her family could only arrive safely. Well, she kept her part of the deal. She has been seeking deep faith and always has been willing to ask the really hard questions. When she couldn't find herself reflected in the churches around her, she worked to build one where others could find safety, the same safety that she had been searching for.

Today we'll get to hear a little bit of that story. We'll also hear stories about the effects of spiritual violence happening in our country today. We'll consider what we can do to resist and prepare, and what work is ours to do and when we find ourselves on the front lines or not yet. Rhina also reminds us to take care of ourselves, to celebrate, and to find joy wherever we can for heaven's sake. I'm delighted to introduce you to my dear friend, Reverend Rhina Ramos.

Hi, Rhina. Welcome to Teología sinvergüenza, now in English called Shameless Theology. I am so excited to have you here because you were one of our very first guests when we started this six years ago in Spanish. You were, I think, guest invitation number one, and you've been our number fan since then. So I am so excited to have you today in English.

Rev. Rhina Ramos | 04:18

Yes, I'm very happy to join. Yes, definitely, the kickoff conversation was so great, and then I just couldn't wait for the next episode with all the people you brought from all over Latin America.

Rev. Alba Onofrio | 04:37

Yes, we really got our whole community involved. Okay, so we'll start as we always do. Will you please tell us a little bit about yourself and your relationship to this concept of being a sinvergüenza? I know that for folks who maybe don't speak Spanish, that's a new word for them. So maybe you could tell us what you know or what, when we say sinvergüenza, what does that mean to you and what's your relationship to it?

Rev. Rhina Ramos | 05:02

Shamelessly is my second name, and it's just this idea that you are very free in your way of exploring the world, and the way of exploring ideas and growing and engaging, and you are not rigid, and you dare to be blasphemous, because blasphemy, you know, is a good thing sometimes to enrich life, I mean, the concept of blasphemy sometimes is by religious authorities, and then if you dare to do it, it's that you are challenging very established ideas. So sinvergüenza to me just means a lot of freedom to be.

Rev. Alba Onofrio | 05:55

I love that you're saying that as you're wearing a collar, like you, for our guests who aren't watching, who are listening, I'm like, you look like a pastora very clearly, and for you to be like, sometimes you just have to be a little blasphemous. I kind of love that.

Rev. Rhina Ramos | 06:14

Yeah, take your clothes off in the pulpit. That's what sinvergüenza means, and I mean, spiritually.

Rev. Alba Onofrio | 06:23

Yes, yes, of course, of course. But was sinvergüenza always a positive thing for you?

Rev. Rhina Ramos | 06:32

No, well, no, because being named sinvergüenza meant somebody who wasn't Christian enough, right, that wasn't abiding by the rules, wasn't proper. But now that I embrace it, it's all good.

Rev. Alba Onofrio | 06:51

So tell us a little bit about where you come from and how you got to this particular place of Sin Vergüenzura, because now folks will know you as a pastor, a leader of Ministerio Latino, as somebody who accompanies queer and trans folks who are in detention, who is a central part of the community, who is queer, who has a beautiful wife, lovely family. But how did that trajectory from where you started get you to here? You have a new book out that tells a little bit about your origin story.

Give us all of the juiciness around any of those. What is that?

Rev. Rhina Ramos | 07:30

All of that.

Rev. Alba Onofrio | 07:31

All of that trajectory to Sin Vergüenzura, what did that look like?

Rev. Rhina Ramos | 07:35

Yeah, to come to Sin Vergüenzura, to shameless behavior, I really had to break free from fundamentalism, Baptist fundamentalist, from the God. My idea of God was of a God that was very authoritarian and very, very judging every movement that you did. My grandma was a devout Catholic to the point of always praying the rosary at least three times a day. She was constant prayer with the rosary. And so my upbringing was already of a God that is watching you, but not watching you with love, watching you to punish you.

And then I moved to the States and after promised God that I was going to come back to be a good Catholic, if God help us across the border safely, we ended up in Long Island, New York, where I tried to do that. I tried to follow my promise to God. The priest, you know, said, just come back to church and all the answers that you have because I had many answers and I wanted to have a conversation with him. Just come to church.

All your answers will be answered by listening to Mass. And I was a 14 year old, so, you know, I still was going to do it because I promised God that if God will help us cross the border, which was a very dangerous adventure or journey, I was going to come back to confessing and everything else that good Catholics do. But as fate had it, we moved into a apartment complex that was next to a Baptist church. And one day I spotted my bilingual teacher going in there.

And it was somebody I like and trust. So I asked her, what happens in that church? She said, oh, just come 3 p.m. on a Sunday. And I entered the church and never left until I came out for 10 years. And that was a church that was engaging with some of my questions. At least I will open the Bible by myself and be in Bible study. And so it responded to that need I had to get good with that, but at the same time, be curious.

And so also it was a church of Salvadorian immigrants like myself. A lot of people arriving in the 80s, 80 percent of the congregation was Salvadorian. And so it gave me a sense of community. I had nowhere else in the U.S. as I reached at that time. So, of course, it was going to be a place where I wanted it to stay. And I was growing up in that church. Also was giving opportunities of leadership. I was part of the youth group.

I preached. I gave testimony. Yes. I went out evangelizing in bus stops and talking about religious terrorism. I was terrorizing people because I will come up to them and I will I will I will talk to them close to their face and say, have you received Jesus, your Lord and Savior? Have you thought of your eternity?

Rev. Alba Onofrio | 11:23

I have done that also. I'm ashamed to say.

Rev. Rhina Ramos | 11:26

Yeah, that should be shameless because you cut into people's space, you know. But once you do that, once you do that, you can do any type of community organizing. I always say that was great training for the rest of my life. So that was my growing up. And as you mentioned, the book is a lot about that. The journey north, my idea of God transforming of my openness to accepting the fact that I was lesbian and I was a queer person and a person of faith.

And it's all there in the book titled In My Heart a Volcano.

Rev. Alba Onofrio | 12:14

Yes, I love that title for your book, because that is so much how I know you as someone whose heart is alive and on fire and passionate and leads from the heart and with the heart and without without shame, without trying to hide who you are. But what you just telling that story about the church that you grew up in, I think that points to something that we've been having conversations around in our community is that for so many of us church, especially if we're children of immigrants or if we are in a rural community or somewhere where church is the hub, that when we come out in a place that we know is not going to welcome us or hold us because of the theology of that church, often I think it gets missed the double loss that happens because we not only lose our church community and sometimes our family of origin.

But so many people talk about how church is that connection to home culture, to home language, to home familiarity when they are in diaspora here in the United States. So I wonder, I heard I heard you talk about what it was like to be in that community and how precious that community was. And you said all the way until you came out. And I wonder if that was your experience also, that part of what makes coming out and recognizing who we are is what we have to leave behind when we come from communities where so much of culture and family is held in church space.

Was that true for you?

Rev. Rhina Ramos | 13:46

Yes, that was definitely true for me. And one of the things that made it really hard to come to terms with, I am a lesbian and a Christian, and I knew that community wasn't going to be embracing of that, especially I had married in that church. I was married to a Salvadorian man who I was married to for seven years. And so we were an ideal Christian couple, a deacon, the wife of a deacon. And it was going to test the foundation of everything people believe we were.

Rev. Alba Onofrio | 14:25

Yes.

Rev. Rhina Ramos | 14:25

And their own, probably their own identities. And so I became the person, the villain, the person who had left the home, didn't leave the home, but who was going to break the home and who was going to take a different path. Even though we didn't come out to the council of the church, I did talk to them because we were going to divorce and we hold leadership roles. And so we had to tell them. And I remember it was already a rumor.

Why? Why was the divorce happening? Because there is always people who are very interested in praying for you, praying for you publicly and spelling a chisme. Please help that brother who's having an affair. Dios mio, have him repent. And so, you know, that was going on already. People knew my business.

Rev. Alba Onofrio | 15:30

Yeah.

Rev. Rhina Ramos | 15:31

And then the pastor said, so have you thought of your eternal life when we were informing him that we were separating? And I said, and I don't know how or why I said this, but I said, well, I just want to trust God's grace. I didn't know that I entirely believe it, but that has been so true. God's grace has been so expansive, so limitless and so wonderful to me. And I'm glad I kept that. That was all I was going to do.

Trust God's grace.

Rev. Alba Onofrio | 16:14

Amen. So I know that between that moment and the moment that we find ourselves in now where you're known nationally, internationally, as this social justice warrior and faith leader in our community, there was a whole other career path. You were, you know, some of us, many of us come from very legalistic, religious backgrounds where there are many rules and you follow the rules. And as you said, God is there to punish and judge and to tell on us or Jesus is there to tell on us or the angels are there to tell on us.

And I feel like law lends itself to that very narrow, rigid. These are the rules that you have to follow because they are the rules. And now I see you being on the other side of the coin saying like, wow, actually we follow God and rules and laws are supposed to be just. So some of the advocacy I see you do, particularly with the trans community and immigrant, queer, Latina communities, feels like it's saying more of we need to be about the spirit of the law and particularly God's law rather than the law of the land and being really rigid about these are the rules because they're the rules.

Will you tell us a little bit about that journey from law to religion and how you moved in that direction?

Rev. Rhina Ramos | 17:38

So my first career is as an attorney. I was a labor law attorney and graduated in Long Island from Hofstra University and practice labor law for five years. But actually, I practiced labor law for immigrant workers and I was at a worker center and nonprofit. So because it was happening in in that kind of setting, the type of law I practice was very community for community center and it was for the underdog and it was to bring wages back like this, a revolucionaria.

So, yeah, there is no way that I always being the one that's going to go after you if you're running, if you are trying to take advantage of somebody.

Rev. Alba Onofrio | 18:31

Yeah.

Rev. Rhina Ramos | 18:32

So that's what I was doing. And I was lucky enough to be nurtured and really formed professionally by the person, Jennifer Gordon, who founded this workplace project is called Who Believed in Organizing as a Tool of Empowering the Community. So that was my beginning as an advocate, like campaigns, community organizing, know your rights training. So everything was integrated. It wasn't just let's win your case, let's bring your wages back. It's like, OK, now how do you learn to protect your rights to be paid over time?

And, you know, we were taught that to to workers. I will run the trainings. We will collect information to make laws happen so that they protect the workers. And we will rally in front of employers, homes and restaurants. Good trouble. To bring the wages back, because sometimes court means nothing to them. You know, laws are limited, totally limited. So I believe the workplace project of Long Island, New York was the cradle of everything that I needed to learn and how, like, you know, complex problems are and just answer one way, the legal way.

No, no. You have to have different angles on how to do it.

Rev. Alba Onofrio | 20:02

Yes. OK, so then how did you get from there? Because I can see you doing that all day, every day. How did you get there to being a faith leader?

Rev. Rhina Ramos | 20:12

I completely burned out after five years of fighting cases of exploitation and listening day in, day out about the domestic employee who hadn't been paid for years with the promise of a green card or the construction worker. I really couldn't do it anymore. And I was sober now that I will start calculating wages all in my in my sleep, you know. And it was it was a time when it was like, OK, I need to change careers, interests. And I was thinking of going back to school, probably for a degree in writing.

I wasn't sure. And then Jennifer Gordon, my mentor and atheist Jewish woman, lesbian, said, well, faith has always been important to you because you saw my coming out, my struggle. She says, why don't you go for a theology degree for divinity school? I didn't know that existed. So I was still in New York. I went to visit Union Theological Seminary in New York City. I sat at a class where they

were discussing the idea of God post World War II. I was fascinated.

I couldn't get enough of what they were discussing. And I was like, wow, they're going to go back to graduate school. It got to be for something that makes me feel like this. It has to be something like this. And that's how it happens. And so I applied to Union, got in Union, but at the same time, I got to California for a job with International Solidarity with El Salvador. And I thought, OK, I'm going to postpone this seminary thing for a year.

I'll get to it. And then I applied to seminary here in California and got a full tuition right at the Pacific School of Religion. And so I'm like, you know, I'm staying. You don't pass on an opportunity like that. And so I stay and during seminary, I will get the vague idea of maybe I could be a pastor. But then I would think, no, pastors are like perfect people who never like fall from their faith. They are so much different from my broken humanity.

Yes. Until the professor said, well, I want to invite you to take some feminist theology. She detected that my God was very male. My God, tenía botas, pantalones y bigote. Bueno, podría ser gender non-binary, pero.

Rev. Alba Onofrio | 23:13

But at that time, a God with a mustache was definitely male in your mind.

Rev. Rhina Ramos | 23:18

Si, in my mind. And so I started taking those classes and still not convinced ordination was for me. Graduated from seminary five or six years went by when I started again thinking about it. And then somebody pointed to the United Church of Christ because I had never worshipped in English. All my religious life had always been in Espanol, but I couldn't find an Espanol church that was open and affirming and queer center. So somebody pointed out to the United Church of Christ.

I started attending a multicultural church here in Oakland. I remember I was like, I'm not going to be really part of this church. So I would like go to the service and get out, you know, get out. I will not stay for coffee hour. I was being, yeah, antisocial, you know, and I guess I'm an extrovert. I don't know, but I wasn't connecting until, you know, one of the pastors wanted to have a one on one with me. She learned more of my story and she said, we need to put you in ordination track.

And I said, well, if that is to happen, it's for me to start the first Spanish speaking church that is LGBTQ center. That's how it's going to be. And then she totally believed in that. And the two co-pastors started just like being behind the whole thing. And then I had to go back to seminary to take UCC policy, UCC history, because I hadn't done it at the beginning. I had to go all the steps for ordination. And then on 2012, I was ordained a United Church of Christ minister.

And believe me, that day, I was so happy. I was so happy. I was like, if I die now, it's OK. I've done what I needed to come to do in this world and done. Like it felt like perfect, perfect.

Rev. Alba Onofrio | 25:22

Yeah, that's so beautiful. I wonder, listening to you talk, it feels so relevant to this moment. I wonder if you could answer the question for us. What does it mean to you in 2026? What does it mean to you to be a faithful person in this political moment, in this world context? I feel like so many of us feel like the world as we know it is coming to an end. It's an apocalypse of sorts. And that question, I think, is really pivotal of what does it mean to be faithful in this moment?

You who've been willing to ask hard questions and go through many iterations of what it meant to you to be faithful to who you are, to the call to God. What does it mean to you now?

Rev. Rhina Ramos | 26:12

As simple as it may sound, it means to be loving. I mean, and no love that is romantic love, but love that pushes you to do whatever it takes to defend one another. I mean, what's the greatest love that to give your life for your friends, right? That's what the verse says. When you are willing to love with all your might and be ready to that call of defending your loved ones. Maybe this is why it's so difficult to understand, because it's all about love.

And sometimes when we hear this, we just miss it. We think that, you know, it's too simple to talk of this deep love that moves us to do what's right, to do justice, to make sure we open our hearts to those who are hurting more than us or we provide their basic needs. We hide them, even if that means that we are going to be arrested.

Rev. Alba Onofrio | 27:27

Will you talk a little bit about the context of what I hear you saying? I totally have heard others be like, yeah, it's not that simple. And I hear you saying, no, it's not simple to love others deeply and meaningfully and at a very high cost, sometimes for ourselves. And you talk a little bit about this in your book. I wonder if you will talk a little bit about what it means to you having come from El Salvador and having such close connection to being Revolucionaria and that family legacy.

What does that mean for what you see happening right now in the United States, particularly as an immigrant and particularly with our communities that are being targeted? Do you see parallels that we should be paying attention to? Do you see courage that we should be emulating? Do you see what are the lessons from where you come from that you are bringing to this moment that we should know and hear from you?

Rev. Rhina Ramos | 28:27

I was visiting D.C. the year of the second term inauguration. The inauguration had just happened. I think it was last year. It just feels so long. It feels like forever. I visited an Anglican church in Maryland where the pastor, a Salvadorian pastor who had been a contemporaneous person with San Romero de America. He had known him.

Rev. Alba Onofrio | 29:02

Your favorite santo.

Rev. Rhina Ramos | 29:04

My favorite santo is right here.

Rev. Alba Onofrio | 29:08

Always with you, behind you.

Rev. Rhina Ramos | 29:10

The Padre Vidal, that's his name. He's amazing. He's amazing. So this is what he had done on inauguration week. He had organized the moving of five different families into safe homes because they could have been targeted and taken away. So he organized churches and allies to bring these people into other homes. And he had taken the guardianship of 15, one five, 15 kids in case their parents got deported. And I was like, how in the world, like you give so much of yourself that you will be willing to parent all of these kids in need?

That's the type of love I am talking about. You suspend your arms and you love.

Rev. Alba Onofrio | 30:08

Yeah, I feel like we're in a time where so many folks in the U.S., particularly those of us who were born here or who don't have memory of where we come from before the U.S., feel like we're living in a moment where it's like, this is unprecedented, this can't be possible. There's all, like, I think we're now deep enough in that it, that the disbelief or the frozenness of this can't be true has mostly worn off to the reality that this is very true.

But I do feel like for those who have come from other countries, that it's not that unbelievable. It's like, no, this is real, this can happen here. I think I've seen a lot of pictures circulating of, like, here is the women of parliament in Iran in the 70s or whatever, those kinds of images. It's like, a society can change incredibly quickly with the right political conditions around authoritarianism. And so I think there's so much for us to do to listen to folks who have come from places that have dealt with dictators and have dealt with repressive regimes and authoritarianism, because I think there's so many lessons to be learned there in our resistance.

Do you think that's true?

Rev. Rhina Ramos | 31:33

Yes. Yeah. Once you have lived in other parts of the world that is not the U.S. where you have experienced revolutions and, you know, things can change and repression can make people rise up.

Rev. Alba Onofrio | 31:48

Yes.

Rev. Rhina Ramos | 31:49

Which I think is going to happen. It happened in Minnesota. We saw the size of people just not putting up with this, how beautifully it was and continues to be. They are ready. Maybe it might be one city at a time. I think what sometimes is hard here in the U.S., which is the mother of capitalism, is that we get very comfortable. I am very comfortable. I like my wine. I like my wine tasting. I like my massages. It's going to be a struggle to try to keep that up.

Yes. You know, we get to a level of comfort. Yes. And a society that tells us that, yeah, we can access all this and we forget to the people that are accessing all that. Yes. And so in order for us to

revolt, we're going to have to be ready to give something up. Yes. Something has to give. We cannot always stay in the comfort. Yes. And so that, I don't know how that is going to happen, but it's a test for us these times.

Yes. It's so privileged to have some of the stuff. I'm talking about myself, who have a right to a different socioeconomic level, you know, that guarantees me health access.

Rev. Alba Onofrio | 33:31

Yes.

Rev. Rhina Ramos | 33:32

A blue passport as a U.S. citizen. Those things, you know.

Rev. Alba Onofrio | 33:36

Yeah. And I think when people ask me what can I do at this moment when I feel like I am insulated from what's happening on the front lines, one is to be educated to believe people when they tell you what's happening when you see it with your own eyes on social media or other platforms. And the other thing I think that feels really on top is exactly what you said, which is being ready. What does it mean for me to be willing when that time comes?

Whatever that time may be. It may be somebody being kidnapped while you're at the grocery store. It may be something happening at your kid's school. It may be something happening on your front lawn. It may be a national campaign that you choose to be a part of. But what does it mean as a person of faith to center what you believe and what your ethics are and be ready to say yes? Because sometimes I think when the opportunity happens, it happens and it feels so fast that we miss it.

But if we're ready, I think there's a spiritual orientation toward being ready to love our neighbors or to be willing to say, this is a privilege that I have had or have access to or a comfort that I have that when it comes time, I am choosing now ahead of time that this is what I will do or this is how I will be willing to offer what I have to our collective struggle. And that alone feels like it takes some spiritual reckoning with the ways that being in capitalism and in the U.S.

and in all of our privilege directly conflict with what it means to be a Christian, I believe.

Rev. Rhina Ramos | 35:18

You know, we have been promised the Holy Spirit, right? We have been promised as who believe in Christ. We have been promised we are not left alone and we're going to have this guidance. And I think the more akin we are to the voice of the Holy Spirit, we'll be ready. Whatever that is, because we never know what's going to be asked of us.

Rev. Alba Onofrio | 35:45

Yes.

Rev. Rhina Ramos | 35:46

But I think the Holy Spirit will have a say.

Rev. Alba Onofrio | 35:50

Yes. Amen. Amen. I wonder when you think about the communities that you're a part of and where you're doing your work in the world. When you think about what is the example that we're putting into the world or what is possible or what is it that we're fighting for? What is it that we are struggling for? Part of our work is to name the harm and to name the violence. And so I think it's very clear the economic violence, the physical violence, the terrorism that's happening to our communities who are targeted.

Which is pretty much everybody in one form or another. And this season, we're talking about concepts from the spiritual violence book that Soulforce just put out around spiritual violence and spiritual trauma. And I know that you've accompanied a whole lot of folks who have been in detention, who have been fearful of detention during the pandemic. I remember you collecting basic money for people's basic needs just to keep families alive when everything was shut down. Will you talk a little bit about your experience with folks and accompanying people through different kinds of spiritual trauma?

Particularly that intersection of being immigrant and maybe undocumented or being in a family of mixed status and also being LGBT. Tell us a little bit about what that has been like for you and how you would name or talk about spiritual violence or spiritual trauma, the result of spiritual violence.

Rev. Rhina Ramos | 37:22

At Ministerio Latino, we see the whole gamut of people who grew up in Pentecostal churches to people who have been agnostic, don't know where they stand with religion. And it's so interesting how they integrated. For one aspect, the community is giving them or another, you know, sometimes. And one thing we have established is that we don't start our meetings with prayer. We start our meetings with breathing meditation to center ourselves because prayer has done some damage to people. Sometimes people have been praying to stop being queer.

And so, you know, so it's more inviting for us to have a setting where people get in touch with their breathing and that centers them. And that from there, we go to all the aspects of our service. And we do end with prayer, prayer from the community on what is in people's hearts. But for us, that's important for the opening up, you know. Because as I said, as you said very well, too, is that spiritual bruising is still there. And there was a trans man we had to rescue from a very unsafe housing situation.

He was at a housing shelter that was harassing him for being a trans man. He was being put roommates that were really driving him to the edge. We organized, you know, a whole network of support here in San Francisco. We went to get him at the house, got him a room. We got him some fundraising to have once he left that shelter. And he was shaking when he got to the car. I remember him shaking. And then he says, I never thought it was going to be a pastor who helped me out of that place or help me in general.

Because the church was terrible to me. My mother is a pastor and my mother disowned me. And, you know, didn't know that we were doing it because it's a human being that needed us, you know, a fellow queer person. But we didn't know we were dismantling some harm. We were transforming his idea of who a pastor is. So we've seen that. We've seen that, you know. So, yeah, it's deep once you start working with people.

Rev. Alba Onofrio | 40:23

I've heard so many testimonials over the years of people who have credited you with being that light and that hope, even with folks in detention. And on the other side, in our community, there are these moments that are so sacred and special that you also get to witness and consecrate like weddings. Will you talk a little bit about what it's like in the life of a queer pastor to be holding sacred space for people in their worst moments, some of the hardest times, but also in the most joyful times that most of us growing up would have never imagined that our weddings could be celebrated in a church or by a pastor, particularly those of us who speak Spanish, that feels even more distant.

And so those are some of my favorite moments of being a pastor. Will you share a story of that time, of the other side?

Rev. Rhina Ramos | 41:22

Sure. No, no. We also celebrate, and that is important to celebrate, you know, for your sustain and the via cruce and the Good Friday. Resurrect for God's sake.

Rev. Alba Onofrio | 41:34

Yes, for God's sake.

Rev. Rhina Ramos | 41:37

Bring life to this. So in December, we celebrated the baptism of somebody who approached me because they are non-binary. And also they bring Cuban spirituality. I don't know how it's called.

Rev. Alba Onofrio | 41:59

Yeah. Santeria. Like a santeria. Uh-huh.

Rev. Rhina Ramos | 42:03

They had that. They were bringing that, but they also wanted to connect with their Christian ancestry, abuelitos. And so we tailored a baptism that brought his padrino from this other tradition.

Rev. Alba Onofrio | 42:22

Wow.

Rev. Rhina Ramos | 42:23

So that also was acknowledged, that he wasn't taking sides one thing over the other, that everything was integrated. He was seen in the eyes of divinity for all that they were.

Rev. Alba Onofrio | 42:39

Yes.

Rev. Rhina Ramos | 42:40

For all that they bring, for all of what they believe. And somebody told me afterwards, I know we were inclusive, but I didn't know we were that inclusive.

Rev. Alba Onofrio | 42:51

I was like, well. Yeah. Because that's what has to happen for so many of us, right, is that we are asked to leave one part. It's fine to be in the U.S. as a worker who's picking the fields or building construction or cleaning houses, but you have to leave all of the other pieces of you at the door. You're just a worker, a laborer. Or if we're queer, it's like, okay, we'll accept you in church, but you have to be ashamed of being queer or trans.

You have to leave your partners at the door. All of these things and what you're talking about in this wildly inclusive is being whole beings and being loved and honored and celebrated as whole beings. Yeah. I love it so much. What is the thing that's on top for you right now when you're thinking about the work of right now, the work that is most alive, most present? What is on top for you as we move on out of this interview into the world?

What is that?

Rev. Rhina Ramos | 43:51

Yeah. So, you know, I know it's almost cliché to talk about self-care, but last year, I hit a dark patch. There was a moment in two, three months where I was in a place where I was questioning everything and thinking, does it make a difference, anything I do? This is too big. This is too much. We are going to die. Yes. I know that feeling. Pushing myself out of bed every day because I was like, it makes no difference. You know, I just go with it.

One step in front of the other. Started doing some changes, reading more at night, less screen time. A few of those things, you know, watching what I was consuming in terms of information. So right now, for me, when I feel the shadow coming, first, I acknowledge that if it comes, maybe I need to welcome it. It needs to happen. I need to feel it. And then the other is, OK, what's going on? What's triggering it? And I be very attentive to it because I had to last for the long run.

I had to last for more of this. And so I'm being very attentive, attentive to body and mind and spirit because that was a hard time to feel so hopeless. Hopeless, hopeless. It was a hard time. I couldn't recognize myself. I couldn't recognize myself. Yeah, I guess. Yeah, but not to the level where things lose meaning.

Rev. Alba Onofrio | 45:40

Yes. Yeah. Oh, I've heard that same narrative around like it's just too big. We can't even wrap our minds around it. And that being attentive to who we are, what is true, what are the are we making the conditions for our own hopelessness worse than what is because there's so much there's so, so much. So I am grateful for that centering that feels like centering and grounding because we are in this forever. What long beyond when we're alive and and further.

And so we want to be in it as long as we can and pass off what we can to the next. We always end our interviews with the same question around who are your ancestors or what is the body of people knowledge chosen family blood family who are those people that you go to reference this that you go to over and over again when you need that fortification of your own spirit, your own purpose and soul and call in the world.

Who do you come from in that way.

Rev. Rhina Ramos | 46:44

Most recently is being women writers and poetry. I, you know, Salvadoran poet Claribel Alegría. Yeah, that right. Very simple and sometimes funny poetry. And sometimes not funny, but revolutionary poetry. But that's giving me so poets and ancestry. Yeah, that Claudia Lars. I also audio book Gioconda Belli. Nicaraguan writer. One book I read during that patch that time when I was getting inspiration was a book called The Country Under My Skin. And in the book, she talks to Gioconda Belli was very well off growing up in Nicaragua, but then becomes part of the clandestine movement of the revolution, Nicaraguan and she talks about being part of that questioning how the revolution was happening.

The contract, the contract revolution and and the question she had about those male leaders that won the revolution, but it's still the manage of power was questionable. And, you know, I ended the book, but she never regret that the time she spent in the sacrifices to me living in exile for for what she believed. And then I thought, so maybe this is it. We live in revolution. Maybe we'll never be a time of complete freedom, but we will live in revolution, always trying to push who oppresses out.

So that was a good reminder.

Rev. Alba Onofrio | 48:40

That's beautiful. That's also heavy, though, to think that we would be in conflict, like political conflicts in our country for so long. When you think about that over the long haul. Do you feel like it is that being attentive to self and recentering and regrounding that helps us continue? How do we how do we stay? My hope is that we will get it right one day.

Rev. Rhina Ramos | 49:08

It's like, OK, one day we were like, OK, we finally fought enough to know what was the right way or the more communal way. And our new generations will know how to help the planet more than we have. And, you know, and so the hope is that there will be a moment. But that there will always be resistance is hopeful, that there will always be a heart of people willing to fight for freedom is hopeful. That there is not always the way of the oppressor is hopeful.

More than just being in conflict, that there is always people who believe we all deserve dignity.

Rev. Alba Onofrio | 49:54

Yes, I think that's part of why I adore you so incredibly much, because I feel safest and happiest when I'm around other people who I know that no matter what the conditions are, that the commitment to freedom, to liberation, to safety, to well-being, to dignity are stronger than whatever moment that we face together. And that is something that I feel like I can trust 100 percent with you, that your commitment to dignity as a way of being as a promise of God is always going to be true no matter what situation we're in together.

So I just want to thank you for this time. Thank you for being here.

Rev. Rhina Ramos | 50:41

Thank you.

Rev. Alba Onofrio | 50:42

I admire you.

Rev. Rhina Ramos | 50:43

Thank you.

Rev. Alba Onofrio | 50:43

I love you. I adore you so much.

Rev. Rhina Ramos | 50:44

I love you, too.

Rev. Alba Onofrio | 50:46

Thank you so much for your time. Come to El Salvador with me this year. Yes, everybody. Let's go.

Rev. Rhina Ramos | 50:52

Okay.

Rev. Alba Onofrio | 50:53

Yeah, yeah. Yes.

Rev. Rhina Ramos | 50:56

Thank you so much. Blessings. Love you. Bye.

Rev. Alba Onofrio | 51:04

What an inspiring conversation with such a beautiful human. I am so thrilled that we were able to share that conversation with you. You know, in her advocacy work as a lawyer, Rhina learned that complex problems have more than one answer and that the legal system is not the only option when we're trying to get change. This approach reminds me so deeply of the serpent dove, which is Soulforce's emblematic mascot kind of creature. We pull from the image of Matthew, where Jesus talks about being innocent as doves and cunning as serpents.

So we just remind you, as this episode reminds me, that making choices and solving problems creatively is something that we can do while being wise as serpents and yet gentle as doves. So as we continue to exist in a world that is incredibly violent, it is my hope that we can go out with the spirit of the serpent dove and find ways to create change and hold on to a community that offers us both strength, resilience, and rest. Early in her story, Rhina shared that she didn't imagine herself becoming a pastor because she believed that good pastors had to be perfect.

And so many of us feel the weight of being the exemplar, the one that represents. Rhina's struggle to find hope when surrounded by vast injustice. I think that's something that almost all of us can relate to right now. And her willingness to be honest about that struggle, to show us how we can feel it, honor it, embody it, move through it, or at the very least carry it with us. That is what allows us to have a genuine connection to a faith that speaks to rather than ignores our reality and our bodily humanity.

And my goodness, if that doesn't make a good pastor, I don't know what does. Conversations like this one are exactly what our book hopes to inspire. To look around us, to name the harm, to figure out how we can resist and respond to the attacks on our human dignity and how do we find the work that is ours to do. She reminded us today that in order to change, we must be willing to be uncomfortable. That we have to be able to stay in the fight for the long haul.

And how do we take care of ourselves so that we're able to do that? So that's my question for you today. What does that look like for you, for your community, for your people? How do we stay strong and stay together? Thank you for spending time with us today on this episode of Shameless Theology. I hope you found it both provocative and helpful on your own journey toward healing. These conversations are part of Soulforce's ongoing effort to name harm, honor our lived experiences, and imagine faith beyond violence.

If you want to go deeper, you can find a link to our new book called *Spiritual Violence, Religious Phenomena that Defile the Faith* here in the show notes. You can also find more information on our website at soulforce.org, where you can download free theological resources designed to support individuals, faith leaders, and communities who are navigating religious harm and spiritual reconstruction. If something in today's dialogue resonated with you, maybe it stirred something and settled something or helped you find language for your own story, then you have found yourself in the right place.

Consider sharing this episode with someone who might need it and follow along for future conversations and supplemental content. Whoever you are and wherever you find yourself in this time, questioning, grieving, rebuilding, or reclaiming, I am so grateful that you are here. May your theological imagination remain ever alive, and may you find spaces that honor your full, blessed humanity. With hearts ablaze and spirits unyielding, until next time, I'm Rev. Sex, and this is Shameless Theology.