

« Contemplativus in actione iustitiae » – the Jesuit martyrs of El Salvador

On 16 November 1989 soldiers of the Salvadorian army brutally assassinated six Jesuits together with the cook and her daughter. A few days after the fall of the Berlin wall this provoked an international outcry. The most renowned among them was Fr. Ignacio Ellacuría SJ, Rector of the Central American University and a prestigious liberation theologian. He wanted to make the university an actor of social change in El Salvador. This provoked resistance and hatred from the powerful minority of the rich landowners. They were supported by the US government who wanted to keep control over El Salvador against a leftist guerilla.

El Salvador constitutes a case study of the renewal of the Society of Jesus after the Second Vatican Council. In the 32nd General Congregation in 1974/75 the Jesuits redefined their mission in today's world as struggle for faith and justice. This conference will summarize in a first part the spiritual and theological foundations of this renewal. Then special attention will be given to Archbishop Oscar Romero, canonized by Pope Francis in 2018, as a model of a commitment for human rights and justice out of faith.

To express the intimate relationship between contemplation and justice Ignacio Ellacuría coined the concept of « contemplativus in actione iustitiae ». This leads to an enlarged understanding of martyrdom not only out of « hatred of faith » but also of « hatred of justice ». Part of the legacy of Ellacuría is the vision of a new world civilization which must start from the poor and which he called « a civilization of poverty ». This vision will be further developed in relation with Pope Francis' Encyclical Letter « Laudato si » as a « civilization of shared frugality ».

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