

Contemplation, Mission and Jesuit Martyrs in El Salvador

----Companions of Jesus in El Salvador

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On March 24, 1980, Oscar Arnulfo Romero, Archbishop of San Salvador in El Salvador, was killed while celebrating Holy Mass because he spoke out against injustice towards the poor and political repression amid an intensifying war between leftist rebels and government and right-wing forces in El Salvador. Huge crowds gathered to attend his funeral, but forty people were killed by snipers (Zraick, 2018).

On Nov 16, 1989, the world was shocked to learn that eight people were murdered on the grounds of the Jose Simeon Canas University of Central America (UCA) in El Salvador (Sobrin, 1990, p. xi). According to the report of United Nations Security Council, full and substantial evidence demonstrated that Colonel Guillermo Alfredo Benavides in the highest level of El Salvador military, with possible approval by the president of the country (p.47), gave the order to a unit of elite “antiterrorist” force notorious for its record of human rights abuses, to eliminate all suspected of sympathizing with the leftist rebels and intellectual authors of the uprising. After finding Father Ignacio Ellacuria, S.J. and five other Jesuits asleep in their community residence, the troops rudely forced them outside, had them lie on the lawn, and then scattered their brains with machine-gun fire (Ellsberg, 2001, p.499).

Aside from Ignacio Ellacuría, S.J., other murdered Jesuits priests were Ignacio Martín-Baró, S.J., Segundo Montes, S.J., Juan Ramón Moreno, S.J., Amando López, S.J., and Joaquín López y López, S.J., national director of the “Faith and Joy” catechetical movement. All of them taught at the university, fought for the faith and for justice for the poor, and were leaders for a nonviolent, negotiated settlement to the more than twelve year-long civil war in El Salvador.

Another two victims were Elba Ramos—The cook and housekeep for the priests in the community and Celina Ramos—Elba’s sixteen-year-old daughter. Ironically, both Elba and Celina, frightened by the street fighting outside, had chosen to stay at the university because they believed that, since the military had imposed a 6:00 pm curfew and had surrounded the grounds, they would be safe (Ellsberg, 2001, p.499). After the brutal killings an international cry arose from diplomats, heads of state, religious groups, and the human rights community to find the perpetrators of the crime. Loyola Productions produced an amazing video [*Blood of the Martyrs*](#) (Kriesi, n.d.).

Why were Jesuits brutally killed? What had they done? For some years, the military and the ruling elite regarded Jesuits of the university as a thorn. This was not because they supported the rebels, but because they had consistently condemned the injustice and repression that led and fed the bitter civil war, and because they had sought to promote a negotiated settlement to the conflict. Father Ellacuria, the rector of the university, had done much to advocate national negotiations and dialogues. He also had earned the enmity of the military command with his frequent denunciations of their reign of terror and his frequent criticizing of the injustices in El Salvador (Ellsberg, 2001, pp.499-500).

What was the identity of those Jesuits? What was their mission? Father Ellacuria and other Jesuits were neither communists nor the intellectual “brains” of the “Communist” movement, as wrongly identified by right-wing propaganda. In fact, they were Jesuit priests and servants of Christ’ mission (Society of Jesus, 1995, p.18) who tried so hard to live out the teaching of Jesus and the church’s “option for the poor” (Ellsberg, 2001, p. 500), and the 32nd General Congregation’s spirit and mission of “serving faith and promoting justice” in 1975. As a result, thirty-two Jesuits, including Father Rutilio Grande, S.J. (Mawhinney, 2002) and six other Jesuits

martyrs in El Salvador, were murdered and paid the price for their mission, all in the third world from 1975 to 1990 (Sobrino, 1990, pp. viii-ix).

How could they contemplate and do their mission of Christ in that serious situation? Inspired by the spirit of “preference for the poor” (Locatelli, 2009, p.14), and impelled by the love for God and the poor, Ellacuria as a theologian had often articulated the meaning of faith and the gospel from the perspective of poor and connected with Yaweh’s suffering servant—Jesus who has suffered so much and even offered his life for the people. Hence, for Ellacuria, the task of the Christian was not simply to contemplate the mystery of suffering, but to “take the crucified down from the cross” to join them in mutual compassion and effective solidarity (Ellsberg, 2001, p. 500). Thus, to be a Jesuit was to be a contemplative in action, to do what Jesus did and to love what Jesus loved.

What it is to be a companion of Jesus today? It is to engage, under the standard of the Cross, in the crucial struggle of our time: the struggle for faith and the struggle for justice which it includes (Society of Jesus, 1977, p.401). No wonder Spanish born Father Segundo Montes, S.J., the rector of the community, had spoken for all of his Jesuit brothers about their decision to remain with the people in El Salvador with the risk of losing their lives. During an interview: he said: “This is my country and these people are my people...The people need to have the church stay with them in these terrible times—the rich as well as the poor. The rich need to hear from us, just as do the poor. God’s grace does not leave, so neither can we” (Ellsberg, 2001, p. 500).

Six Jesuit martyrs in El Salvador contemplated, did mission for the Christ and for the people and even offered their lives. But more and more Jesuits volunteered to continue the mission there.....

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