

THE JESUIT MARTYRS OF EL SALVADOR

The six Jesuits who were killed by a military death squad on the campus of the Jesuit University of El Salvador (UCA) on November 16th 20 years ago were typical of many of the others working in the country at the time. Five had been sent to Central America as “missionaries” from Spain during the early years of their training. Ignacio Ellacuría left his native Vizcaya as a second-year novice at the age of 18. During the 40 years he lived and worked in the region, he became identified with its people and problems. Like missionaries elsewhere, he adopted local citizenship. The same was true for Segundo Montes, superior of the small community where they lived, and for Ignacio Martín-Baró, at 47 the youngest of the group.

The other two Spaniards had mainly worked outside El Salvador, in one of the other five countries which make up the Jesuit Province of Central America. Amando López had been rector of the Central American University in Managua, Nicaragua, from 1979 to 1982 and had only been teaching in the theology faculty at the UCA for six years. Juan Ramón Moreno was an even more recent newcomer from Nicaragua where he had edited *Diakonía*, a bi-monthly review of spirituality. Before that he had been novice master in Panama of the then vice-province from 1968 to 1973.

The exception was Joaquín López y López, at 71 the oldest member of the group, who was born and bred in El Salvador. For many years he taught in the Jesuit secondary school in San Salvador, the Externado San José. Recently he had become national director of *Fe y Alegría*, a network of semi-vocational schools for the poor in marginalised rural or urban communities. Started in 1945 by a Venezuelan Jesuit, *Fe y Alegría* was already operating some 350 such schools in 12 Latin- American countries.

As the six murdered Jesuits went through their training and started to work among the people, they became more and more aware of the injustice of a system which favoured a few at the expense of many. They also began to realise it could not be squared with the Gospel they were ordained to preach. In the mid-seventies they started to teach these truths to their pupils at the Externado San José. They were immediately accused of being subversive by many parents and alumni. A long and bitter polemic broke out during which they were denounced to Rome as Communists, underwent a formal enquiry and saw many parents remove their sons from the college.

Then on the 12th of March 1977, the Jesuit Rutilio Grande was assassinated by a death squad together with an old man and a 15-year-old boy,

as they were on their way to celebrate Mass in the village of El Paisnal where he had been born. Living among and working for the landless peasants of the region, a week before he had preached a sermon protesting against the expulsion of Fr Mario Bernal, the diocesan parish priest of Apopa. In it he said: "It is dangerous to be truly Catholic. It is almost illegal to be an authentic Christian in our society, in our country. The world around us is based on an institutionalised disorder before which the very proclamation of the Gospel is subversive... I fear that if Jesus were to cross the border....they would crucify him again, because they prefer a Christ of mere buriers and undertakers. A Christ dumb, without mouth, who can be carried in procession through the streets. A Christ with his mouth muzzled.... That is not the Christ of the Gospel, the young Christ, 33 years old, who died for the most noble of causes"

Four months after, an extreme right-wing group known as the "White Warriors" issued a death threat against all Jesuits in the country unless they left within one month. It was at this time that the slogan "Be a patriot: kill a priest" was daubed on many walls in the city. Inspired by the example of Rutilio, the Jesuits to a man decided to stay though for some of them this meant going into hiding. The very same Jesuits who were killed at the UCA had to leave their house and seek protection outside the capital. César Jérez, the provincial of the day, already on the top of a hit-list in his own country of Guatemala, was obliged to sleep in different places for his security.

The American Jesuit Robert Drinan declared in a statement to the United States Congress after an official visit to El Salvador: "In El Salvador we saw an unrepentant government dominated by the military, perpetuating terrorism and a persecution of religion seldom if ever seen in any nation in the Western hemisphere within living memory." And he had no doubt what the principal reason for this was: "the domination of a tiny ruling class which deepens the despair of people struggling to undo the institutionalised violence that keeps them poor, oppressed and voiceless."

The Jesuit University of Central America, where five of the six assassinated Jesuits worked, was dedicated to the same struggle for a more just society. In the early eighties both the campus and the Jesuit residence were frequently attacked with bombs and machine-gun fire. This was because the university represented a direct threat to the authorities not only through its teaching, but also its publications. ECA, the best known, was edited by Ignacio Ellacuría with Segundo Montes and Ignacio Martín-Baró on the editorial board, but all of them aimed to give a voice to the voiceless and many attempts were made over the years to silence them, including bombing the university printing press.

The assassination of the six Jesuits and their two co-workers, the house-keeper and her daughter, were shocking at the time but, given their work, hardly surprising. At their funeral, the then Jesuit provincial in El Salvador, Fr “Chema” Tojeira, had this to say: “Our Jesuits were working for a peace built on the rights of the poor. In death they have shared the fate of so many poor Salvadorans, assassinated because they sought liberation through peaceful means. We are in no doubt that the reason for this assassination is the commitment to peace and justice made by our priests. The statement of our present archbishop that the same hatred that killed Monsignor Romero has now massacred our brothers is for us absolutely true and evident.”

It was my privilege to have known the six Jesuits who were killed and to have worked with three of them. But I agree with Fr Tim McMahon, an American Jesuit and ex-Provincial of the Missouri Province, who also lived and worked with them, and declared recently: “The world might call them martyrs and saints, but the Jesuits slain that night would be horrified by it.” He knew them better than to call them saints. Father Amando López would fall asleep in an easy chair watching horrid Hong Kong martial arts movies. Father Juan Ramón Moreno was the single most boring teacher Father McMahon ever had. They were ordinary people, each with their faults, and it is likely that five of them, together with Julia and Cecilia, were only killed because the soldiers, who were after Ellacuría, had been ordered to leave no witnesses.

But there can be no doubt that their martyrdom opened the eyes of the authorities, including the American Embassy, and contributed more than any other event to the peace treaty which put a final end to a brutal civil war that had cost the lives of more than 70,000 people, mostly civilians, women, children and the aged. It is probably for this reason, and as an act of public atonement for past errors, that Mauricio Funes, the current President of El Salvador, is awarding the six martyrs on their 20th anniversary with the National Order of José Matias Delgado, the highest award the country can give.

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