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The Six Jesuit Martyrs of El Salvador – Thirty-Five years on.

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Introduction

This article discusses the six Jesuit priests and two women who were murdered thirty-five years ago in San Salvador. The murdered Jesuits were Joaquín López y López, Juan Ramón Moreno, Amando López, Ignacio Martín-Baró, Segundo Montes and Ignacio Ellacuría. The two women were Julia Elba Ramos and Celina Ramos. The murder of the six Jesuits and the two women on the 16th November 1989 was in the context of a brutal civil war in El Salvador (1980-1992). A significant feature of this civil war was a series of violent and often deadly actions against clergy and religious in the Catholic Church. Political repression of the rural and urban poor had characterised life in El Salvador since 1932, but the government under the leadership of General Molina in the mid 1970s began to target leading members of the Catholic Church. The deaths in 1989 were preceded, notably, by the murders of Fr Rutilio Grande SJ, his sacristan Manuel Solorzano and young assistant Nelson Lemus on March 12th, 1977. They were murdered when driving to El Paisnal to celebrate mass. After these deaths, on June 20th, 1977, the right-wing death squad the 'White Warriors' threatened to kill any Jesuit who did not leave the country in thirty days.¹ While Fr Grande was one of the first of many priests to be killed in El Salvador, Fr Ignacio Martín-Baró, one of the six Jesuits who would be murdered in 1989, understood the murder of Fr Grande to be more than just the elimination of a priest. He considered this a physical and symbolic attack on the preferential option for the poor that had been adopted by many of the priests in the archdiocese of San Salvador.²

Fr Rutilio Grande SJ, Manuel Solorzano and Nelson Lemus were declared to be beatified on 22nd January 2022 (along with Franciscan priest Cosme Spessotto who was murdered in El Salvador in 1980). These deaths had a transformative effect on Archbishop Oscar Romero who publicly denounced the treatment of the poor and fiercely opposed the persecution of the people of El Salvador. He was assassinated while celebrating mass on 24 March 1980. He was beatified on 23rd May 2015 and canonised on 14th October 2018. Four American female missionaries were murdered on December 2nd, 1980. Maura Clarke and Ita Ford (two Maryknoll sisters), Dorothy Kazel (an Ursuline sister) and Jean Donovan (a lay missionary). The four women were raped, killed and buried in shallow graves.

The six Jesuits who were murdered were based at the Universidad Centroamericana Jose Simeon Cana (UCA) in San Salvador and were deemed by

the government armed forces to be subversives, especially Fr Ignacio Ellacuría. The UCA was founded in 1966 and was conceived to be a privately-run University in El Salvador. The oligarchy in El Salvador provided substantial financial support for the establishment of the UCA and expected it to be a counter to the perceived Marxist and revolutionary ideas of the University of El Salvador.³ However, the oligarchy soon became disillusioned and antagonistic towards the UCA. This happened when the Jesuits began to openly side with the people and adopted a position of political opposition to the government after the killing of at least thirty-seven students at a demonstration in 1975. This article will provide a concise overview of the lives of the two women and the six Jesuits. The lives of the six Jesuits demonstrate their commitment to the poor and oppressed in El Salvador. This was expressed in their approach to school education, higher education, politics and pastoral activity.⁴

Julia Elba Ramos and Celina Ramos

Julia Elba Ramos (1947-1989) had been the cook and housekeeper for the Jesuits for four years. Her fifteen-year-old daughter Celina Ramos (1973-1989) was a high school student who attended José Damian Villacorta Institute in Santa Tecla, El Salvador. She had completed the first year of business studies and planned to get engaged in December 1989. The two women lived in a little house at the entrance to the university. On the night of the murders, they asked if they could stay at the Jesuit house for safety. Similar to the plight of the two people who were murdered with Fr Rutilio Grande their deaths were deemed necessary because there could be no witnesses allowed to survive.⁵

The Jesuit Martyrs

Joaquín López y López (1918-1989) was the only one of the six Jesuits to be born in El Salvador, in 1918. He joined the Jesuits in 1938 and following his education he began teaching at Externado San José, a Jesuit school in San Salvador in the late 1940s. He was to enjoy a long association with the school. He helped to found the UCA in El Salvador, principally in lobbying for legislation that would allow the establishment of a private university (UCA) and in raising funds for the purchase of the land for the university. He was also instrumental in bringing the Fe y Alegría (Faith and Joy) foundation to El Salvador in the late 1960s. Fe y Alegría is a network of Jesuit run schools that educate the poorest children in Latin America and the Caribbean.⁶ He was suffering from cancer when he was murdered.

Juan Ramón Moreno (1933-1989) was born in Villatuerta, Spain and entered the Jesuits in 1950. He was ordained a priest in 1964 in Kansas. He worked in

Nicaragua and El Salvador and participated in the literacy campaign in Nicaragua in the 1980s. He was sent to the UCA in San Salvador in 1985. At the time of his death, he carried a number of responsibilities: novice master, professor of theology and vice-director of the Archbishop Romero Center. He also assisted at a Jesuit church in Santa Tecla and worked on a literacy campaign for internally displaced persons in a village called Santa Lucia. It is reported that he yearned to work as a parish priest.

Amando López (1936-1989) was born in Cubo de Bureba, Spain in 1936. He joined the Jesuits in 1952. After his studies he was sent to San Salvador in 1970 to teach in the San José de la Montaña Seminary. After a few months he was appointed Rector of the seminary. He introduced a new way of thinking about the seminary: he worked to raise the academic levels and insisted on treating the seminarians as adults. When the students in the seminary started to protest about the unjust structures in El Salvador and the collusion of some leading members of the Church, the bishops ensured the Society of Jesus were removed from the seminary in 1972. Fr López was sent to direct the Colegio Centro America in Managua in Nicaragua in 1975 and was appointed as Rector of the UCA in Managua in 1979. He returned to San Salvador in 1984 as professor of theology and philosophy and as coordinator of the philosophy degree at UCA. Besides his academic work, he served as a priest on the weekends in Tierra Virgen, a poor suburb of San Salvador.

Ignacio Martín-Baró (1942-1989) was born in 1942 in Valladolid, Spain and entered the Jesuits in 1959. Part of his novitiate was spent in Santa Tecla in El Salvador.⁷ After studies in Ecuador and Columbia he returned to El Salvador in 1966 to teach at the Externado San José. In 1967 he began teaching philosophy and theology at UCA. That year he went to Europe to study theology and returned to El Salvador in 1970 to complete these studies. His great interest in psychology led to him acquiring a Masters' degree and doctorate in the subject in Chicago and he returned to the UCA to lecture and become the head of psychology in the early 1980's. His work was a response to the violent oppression of the people and the inequalities that existed in terms of wealth, education and access to medical care. He viewed this within the backdrop of the inhumane violations of human rights that were occurring throughout Central America as a whole citing, for example, the massacre of the indigenous people in Guatemala.⁸ When confronted with the oppression and the effects of the oppression of the people, his academic response was to follow the preferential option for the poor and develop a 'liberation psychology' for El Salvador. This was a psychology influenced by the ideas of Paulo Freire and Gustavo Gutiérrez.

He established the University Institute of Public Opinion, welcomed initially by the ruling elite for being progressive, scientific and prestigious. However, he designed surveys that generated results identifying the injustices in El Salvador. The results refuted many aspects of the government narrative of the positive lived experience of the vast majority of the population. He noted that in terms of the propaganda campaign during the war in El Salvador there were acts of terror perpetrated by all sides. He also worked as a priest in the poor rural parish of Jayaque, outside of San Salvador.

Segundo Montes (1933-1989) was born in Valladolid in 1933 and joined the Jesuits in 1950. He spent the next thirteen years studying in Quito and Innsbruck, punctuated by periods of teaching at the Colegio Externado in San Salvador. He was ordained priest in 1963. His working life was spent between the Externado and the UCA. Fr Montes founded the UCA Institute of Human Rights in 1985 and was the director until his death.⁹ He attacked the persistent violation of human rights in El Salvador and publicly questioned why very few people were held accountable for these violations. He also took a longer-term view of the growth in poverty in El Salvador. He argued that this was not simply caused by the civil war but had been a feature of the society before the civil war. His research focussed on the displaced persons, refugees and migrants in El Salvador. Fr Montes was appointed the superior of the university community in 1984. He was the parish priest of the parish of Cristo Resucitado in the Quesaltepec colony from 1984 and was fifty-six when he was murdered.

Ignacio Ellacuría (1930-1989) was born in Portugalete in the Basque country in Northern Spain in 1930. He entered the Jesuits in 1947. After one year of the novitiate, he volunteered to help establish the first Jesuit novitiate in Central America. He studied in Ecuador and Innsbruck (Karl Rahner was a major influence), He was ordained in 1961 and studied philosophy in Spain. He was sent to work in the UCA in 1967 and would become Rector of the university in 1979, a post he held until his death. In his work in El Salvador, he was resolutely on the side of the forgotten and spoke out publicly and fearlessly against the repressive regime.¹⁰ As Rector, he had a very clear vision of the role of the UCA: it was a university with a gospel preference for the poor. This does not mean that only the poor studied at UCA. The university existed for all, but the university had to be critically aware of the plight of the poor and the necessity to protect their rights. The university should be a site that empowers with knowledge and skills and, where necessary, must be a voice for the voiceless. He articulated this in his conception of the three main aims for the university: teaching, research and *proyección social* (*social projection* which is social

outreach or service). Ellacuría understood these three aims to be interconnected. He was the main target on the sixteenth of November 1989.

Ignacio Ellacuría, Ignacio Martín-Baró and Segundo Montes, who were all Spanish, had lived and worked in San Salvador for some time and had closely identified with the people and the serious challenges they faced.¹¹ One of the features of their work was close social analysis that explored the distribution of power and wealth and the economic structures that led to the oppression of the vast majority of the people of El Salvador. At that time, according to Martín-Baró, three out of every four children were suffering because of deprivation and approximately half the adult population was illiterate. These three were the first names on the hit lists of Jesuits who were accused of being responsible for the violence or for collaborating with the FMLN (National Liberation Party). Martín-Baró is quoted as commenting to North American Colleagues that, 'In your country it is publish or perish. In ours, it's publish *and* perish'.¹²

The effect of the deaths of 1989

The deaths of the six Jesuit priests and the two women had a deeply profound effect on the Catholic Church, on Catholics in America, on the world-wide network of Jesuits and on the understanding of the mission of Catholic Higher education, especially in America. The three interconnected aims of the university, articulated by Ellacuría, have been influential on contemporary thinking about the aim and purpose of Jesuit universities, especially the focus on social projection or outreach. This is highly resonant with the view of Peter-Hans Kolvenbach SJ, the Jesuit Superior-General, who quoted and referenced the ideas of Ellacuría in some key speeches. Fr Kolvenbach has argued that the purpose of Jesuit education is to produce 'men and women for others'. This is sometimes configured as 'men and women for others' *and* 'men and women with others'.

The deaths of the six Jesuits were also to be very influential on the life and theology of Jon Sobrino. Jon Sobrino was a member of the Jesuit community in UCA and was a close friend of Ellacuría and the others, but at the time of the murders was delivering a short course on Christology in Thailand. He was informed of their deaths and came to the chilling realisation that his whole community had been murdered. Sobrino dedicated a number of works to reflecting on the lives and deaths of his Jesuit brothers. He described these men as very hard working and attending to a wide variety of tasks: teaching, preaching, saying mass, writing, administration, retreats, talks and interviews. Sobrino considered them men of spirit and this was demonstrated in works

rather than words. They were men who were committed to a spirit of service. They enjoyed a close relationship with Archbishop Romero and his successor Archbishop Rivera Damas. Nevertheless, their quite distinctive and prophetic role in the Church of El Salvador was not always appreciated by members of the hierarchy of El Salvador and other parts of Central America. These bishops were suspicious of the theology of liberation as espoused at UCA and openly critical of the Jesuits. Despite this opposition from members of the Church, and the ever-present death threats, they remained steadfast in their work and commitment to the people of El Salvador. This is exemplified in comments about the martyrs by Jon Sobrino:

These martyrs do not want revenge, nor are they interested that justice be brought about for them. What they want is peace and justice for El Salvador through the best means left to achieve them.

Thirty-five years after the deaths in 1989, the Jesuit martyrs are remembered for their commitment to the gospel of Jesus Christ and to the people of El Salvador and their legacy continues to grow.

¹ Lassalle-Klein, R. (2014) *Blood and Ink. Ignacio Ellacuría, Jon Sobrino and the Jesuit Martyrs of the University of Central America*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books.

² Martín-Baró, I. (1995) *Oscar Romero: Voice of the Downtrodden. Introductory Essay on Romero, O. Voice of the Voiceless*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books.

³ Montgomery, T.S. (1995) *Revolution in El Salvador. From Civil Strife to Civil War*. Boulder: Westview Press

⁴ Some of the biographical details are taken from *Biografías de los mártires UCA*. <https://uca.edu.sv/biografias-de-los-martires-uca/>

⁵ Sobrino SJ, J. (1990) *Companions of Jesus. The Murder and Martyrdom of the Salvadorean Jesuits*. London: Cafod.

⁶ Klaiber SJ, J. (2013) *Fey Alegría in Peru: solidarity and service in Catholic education. International Studies in Catholic Education*. 5 (2) 144-160.

⁷ Gaztambide, D.J. (2010) Martín-Baró, Ignacio. *Encyclopedia of Psychology and Religion*. Springer. 542-544.

⁸ The Jesuit Assassinations (1990) *The writings of Ellacuría, Martín-Baró, Segundo Montes, with a chronology of the Investigation*. Kansas City: Sheed & Ward.

⁹ Sobrino SJ, J. (2003) *Witnesses to the Kingdom. The Martyrs of El Salvador and the Crucified Peoples*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books

¹⁰ Gutiérrez G. (2014) *The Cost of Discipleship*. In Ashley, J.M., Burke SJ, K.F & Cardenal SJ, R. (eds) *A Grammar of Justice*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books

¹¹ Campbell-Johnston SJ, M. (2009) *The Jesuit Martyrs of El Salvador*. <http://www.romerotrue.org.uk/documents/other/jesmartymcj2009.pdf>

¹² Mishler, E.G. (1996) *Foreword*. In Aron, A. & Corne, S. (eds) *Writings for a Liberation Psychology. Ignacio Martín-Baró*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.