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Life and Legacy: The Jesuit Martyrs in El Salvador

By Stephen J McKinney

Jon Sobrino, the Jesuit priest, was teaching a short course on Christology in Thailand in 1989 when he received a call on the night of the sixteenth of November. He was informed that something terrible had happened in his Jesuit community and he was asked to phone the Jesuits in London. He phoned London and was told that his entire Jesuit community in San Salvador, El Salvador, had been murdered. This included the housekeeper and her daughter. He struggled to come to terms with this as they were, in his own words, his community, his family, his brothers. He also kept asking why he was still alive. He has spent a great deal of his life, along with other influential Jesuits, keeping their memories alive. The six Jesuit priests and two women who were murdered thirty-five years ago in San Salvador were Joaquín López y López, Juan Ramón Moreno, Amando López, Segundo Montes, Ignacio Martín-Baró and Ignacio Ellacuría. The two women were 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. 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. The six Jesuits who were murdered all had some connection to the UCA (Universidad Centroamericana Jose Simeon Cana) in San Salvador and many also worked at the Externado San José, the local Jesuit high school. Fr Joaquín López y López (1918-1989) taught at Externado. He brought 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. Fr Juan Ramón Moreno (1933-1989) held several responsibilities: novice master, professor of theology and vice-director of the Archbishop Romero Center at the UCA. Fr Amando López (1936-1989) was professor of theology and philosophy and coordinator of the philosophy degree at UCA. Fr Segundo Montes (1933-1989) worked between the Externado and the UCA. Fr Montes founded the UCA Institute of Human Rights in 1985 and was the director until his death. Fr Ignacio Martín-Baró (1942-1989) became the head of psychology in the UCA in the early 1980's. Fr Ignacio Ellacuría (1930-1989) was the President of the UCA and a public intellectual.

Fr Ignacio Martín-Baró was a psychologist who trained in America and studied the effects of the oppression of the people of El Salvador. One of the features of his 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 Fr Martín-Baró, three out of every four children were suffering because of deprivation and approximately half the adult population was illiterate. The civil war had a crippling effect on the poor: they were the ones forced to fight and they suffered the most in the economic crisis caused by the war. He was heavily influenced by the preferential option for the poor and developed a 'liberation psychology'. He was particularly concerned with the impact of warfare on children and young people and their future development and position in society. This included the children who had been conscripted to fight and those who had volunteered in sheer desperation. He was anxious about their long-term mental health.

The murder of the six Jesuits and the two women took place within a period of prolonged social unrest, and a campaign to target clergy and religious in the Catholic Church which resulted in many deaths. Notably, this included the murders of Fr Rutilio Grande SJ, (and his sacristan and young assistant) on March 12th of 1977 and Archbishop Romero and three religious sisters and a lay missionary in 1980. In the period between 1980 and 1992, a crippling civil war raged in El Salvador between the government military forces and the National Liberation Party (FMLN). On November 11th, 1989, the FMLN commenced a major offensive on the government forces of El Salvador. As part of this offensive, the FMLN launched a series of attacks on the capital city, San Salvador. In response, Colonel René Emilio Ponce, the chief of staff of the government armed forces, authorised the elimination of the leaders of FMLN and those who were identified as key supporters. One main target was Fr Ellacuría, considered by the military to be involved in subversive movements. Fr Ellacuría, as President of the (UCA), was publicly outspoken about the oppressive military regime, even before the civil war. He was highly critical of the Government's role in the civil war and the intervention of the United States, and he had the full support of the Faculty at UCA. He and the UCA were equally quick to condemn the violent activities of the FMLN. Troops from the Atlacati Battalion were ordered to eliminate Fr Ellacuría and leave no witnesses. When the six Jesuits and the two women were assassinated, Fr Ellacuría was the main target.

The UCA was named after a Salvadoran priest, José Simeon Cañas. He was a congressman in the Constitutional Assembly, and he obtained the abolition of slavery in Central America in 1824. The UCA was founded in 1966 as a privately-run University in El Salvador. This meant it was a distinctive type of university and very atypical. It was owned by the state but was a not-for-profit public university. Further, it was not an official Catholic university and, as such, was not accountable to the Vatican, local Church leaders and not even to Jesuit superiors. It was accountable to a Board of Directors. Nevertheless, the mission of the UCA was underpinned and inspired by Christianity and the enactment of the preferential option for the poor. This does not mean that only the poor could study at UCA. The university was available for all, but the university had a responsibility to be critically aware of the predicament of the poor, protect their rights and, where necessary, be a voice for the voiceless.

Fr Ignacio Ellacuría had a distinct vision of the aims and purposes of a Christian university. He understood the university to have three main aims: teaching, research and *proyección social* (*social projection* which is social outreach or service). Fr Ellacuría understood these three aims to be interconnected. He also understood the university to have a crucial role in the fight against the oppression of the poor, the marginalised, the non-persons. His focus on the non-person is consistent with the thinking of Gustavo Gutiérrez who also referred to the 'absent ones' and the 'anonymous'. These people exist in concrete history but have been excluded from the historical narratives by the privileged and the oppressors, effectively excluded from history. The theology of Fr Ellacuría was heavily influenced by Archbishop Romero, Rutilio Grande, Jon Sobrino and by the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius. One of the key ideas of the theology of Fr Ellacuría was to take the crucified people down from the cross. Like Jesus, they are innocent victims. The crucified people were, and are, crushed and crucified by oppressive actions and structures.

There are several ways in which the legacy of the six Jesuit martyrs can be viewed. The brutal murders shocked Latin America, North America, the Jesuits and the worldwide Catholic Church. This caused North Americans to question and challenge the US 'intervention' in El Salvador and Central America. Further, Fr Ignacio Martín-Baró and Fr Ignacio Ellacuría were both well-known

academics. Liberation psychology, closely connected to liberation theology, strives to give voice to those who have been denied a voice and seeks to understand the experiences of the non-person. It has continued to be employed as an approach to psychology and, in recent years, been used to good effect in feminist theology. The ideas of Fr Ignacio Ellacuría on the Catholic university have had a profound effect on discussions about the aims and mission of Catholic Higher education in America. His theology was to influence Jon Sobrino, especially the focus on taking the oppressed people down from the cross.

The final comments belong to Jon Sobrino. He described the six Jesuits as very hard-working men. They delivered talks, led retreats, wrote, worked at the university in administration and teaching, and some also worked at the Jesuit High school. Many of them worked in poor parishes at the weekends in El Salvador, or in the outskirts. They were Jesuits who dedicated their lives to service. They closely identified with the people and the serious challenges they faced. These six men all remained steadfast in their work and were committed to the people of El Salvador.

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