

LESSONS FROM

El Salvador

A justice of faith animated by wisdom and hope

Author Paul Locatelli, SJ, former president of Santa Clara University and now the Society's secretary for higher education at the Jesuit Curia in Rome, reflects on the martyrdom of the six Jesuits and two women in El Salvador in 1989. He draws lessons from his memories of the time and the people that apply to Jesuit education.



IGNACIO ELLACURÍA, S.J.
9 NOVEMBER 1930 – 16 NOVEMBER 1989

by Paul Locatelli, SJ

Ignacio Ellacuría, the martyred president of the University of Central America, was my first contact with the Jesuits of El Salvador when, in June 1982, he came to Santa Clara University to receive an honorary degree and speak to the graduates and the university community. With concise, prophetic eloquence he expressed the need for a justice of faith:

“A Christian university must take into account the Gospel preference for the poor. This does not mean that only the poor study at the university; it does not mean that the university should abdicate its mission of academic excellence—excellence needed in order to solve complex social problems. It does mean that the university should be present intellectually where it is needed: to provide science for those who have no science; to provide skills for the unskilled; to be a voice for those who do not possess the academic qualifications to promote and legitimate their rights.”

In the mid 1980s, during the height of the civil war in El Salvador, I began traveling to that country. Jesuits there often sent us into the villages—in zones of conflict—to listen to and learn from peasant families living in dirt-floored one- or two-room shacks. Their stories starkly contrasted with the rhetoric of Salvadoran politicians and the U.S. embassy staff who evaded questions or offered vanilla-coated statistics about the war against communism.

Stark reality

The reality was Rosita and her family, whose village was in a war zone. One night she was fleeing government troops who randomly shot into the dark. She ran from the gunfire in the middle of the night, carrying her youngest. When she finally got beyond the gunfire, she imagined her limp baby was sleeping from exhaustion only to discover a bullet had killed her daughter, saving Rosita's life. When I asked her how she felt about soldiers who now live in the neighborhood, her response surprised me. She said all were trapped in a war not of their making, that it was now time for forgiveness and reconciliation, a time to be grateful for peace. Rosita was the good news of the Gospel in so many ways: to for-

give as God forgives us, to serve and not to be served, to be poor in spirit and fact, to sacrifice for her children, family, and neighbors.

There are countless similar stories. Salvadoran peasants know how to live a life of faith, and they never seem to lose hope in the grace of God's love. They still believe in the martyred Archbishop Romero as one who has risen from among them and is a symbol of justice and hope not yet realized. To this day, you see large prints of Romero and other martyrs, both religious and peasants, hanging in village and community centers. Reality has taught them much, and we have a lot to learn from them about the realities of life and about God.

Their stories shed new light on the meaning of Ellacuría's commencement address. He gave us concrete ways of implementing the spirit and reality of Vatican II, the 1968 Episcopal Conference of Latin America in Medellín, the 1971 World Synod entitled *Justice in the World*, and several “faith and justice” decrees of Jesuit general congregations. Ellacuría also taught us about the justice of liberation contained in the Exodus event, the ancient prophets, and the life of Jesus Christ.

Poverty still too prevalent

Though the war ended almost two decades ago, the rigid class system persists in El Salvador, with roughly half the population subsisting below the national poverty line. Many live in abject poverty, lacking clean water, let alone medicine or education. The poorest 20 percent receive 2 percent of the national income while the richest 20 percent receive 66 percent.

Ellacuría was the most visible spokesperson for justice at the time, and Jesuit Jon Sobrino, who escaped death only because he was out of the country, was his close friend and collaborator. Sobrino and I became friends, and in June 1989 we invited him to receive an honorary degree from Santa Clara. In November he visited us for a few days before flying on to Thailand. We walked through the same Mission Gardens where I later heard the horrific news about the night of November 16. On his way back from Thailand, a small delegation met him at San Francisco's airport to invite him to stay



JUAN RAMÓN MORENO PARDO, S.J.
29 NOVEMBER 1933 – 16 NOVEMBER 1989



ARMANDO LÓPEZ QUINTANA, S.J.
6 FEBRUARY 1936 – 16 NOVEMBER 1989



IGNACIO MARTÍN BARÓ, S.J.
7 NOVEMBER 1942 – 16 NOVEMBER 1989



JOAQUÍN LÓPEZ Y LÓPEZ, S.J.
18 AUGUST 1918 – 16 NOVEMBER 1989

at Santa Clara until his provincial could foresee a safe return home.

Each evening over the next four months, Sobrino and I would meet for a glass of sherry and conversation. Even in those dark days, his wisdom, humor, and hope for the liberation of a crucified people gave vitality to his intellectual work. Jon asked for a computer and wrote *Compañeros de Jesús. El asesinato-martirio de los jesuitas salvadoreños*, published in a Latin American journal of theology. Then, in March 1990, he and I and a delegation from Santa Clara University traveled to San Salvador in time for the tenth anniversary of the martyrdom of Archbishop Romero.

What impressed me about Ellacuria was his humility, his quiet but strong presence, his sharp intellect, his sense of joy, hope, and humor, and his great smile. But it was Sobrino who made the point that to fully understand Ellacuria, you need to know more than who he was as a university president, theologian, or Jesuit. Rather, you needed to know him as a person for whom the reality of the poor and their liberation from injustice, sin, and death was integral to who he became.

No canonization

Sobrino's *Ignacio Ellacuria: the Human Being and the Christian: Taking the Crucified People Down from the Cross* notes that we should not canonize Ellacuria, for that would distance him and his purpose in life from us. We should simply acknowledge he is among the many thousands of peasants and others who gave their lives in prophetic service for the liberation of the persecuted and the poor. This anniversary prompts five lessons for Jesuit education:

The first would be to put the Jesuit university at the service of society, according to Teresa Whitfield, author of *Paying the Price: Ignacio Ellacuria and the Murdered Jesuits of El Salvador*. "Ellacuria and his colleagues saw the importance of

the intellectual skills of teaching and research, but also added a third activity that he called social projection: meaning, the university must 'transform and enlighten the society in which it lives.'" She further quotes Sobrino as saying that the university must put "itself at the service of the Kingdom of God from an option for the poor."

A Jesuit college, which becomes a *persona* analogous to its graduates, needs to put its intellectual talents, resources, time, and energy in service to society as an agent of justice and human rights.

Visions

A second lesson for Jesuit education would join the visions of Ellacuria and former Jesuit superior general Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, who articulated the ideal of a "well-educated solidarity" learned through contact and concepts. Our students, Kolvenbach wrote, "must let the gritty reality of this world into their lives, so they can learn to feel it, think about it critically, respond to its suffering and engage it constructively. They should learn to perceive, think, judge, choose and act for the rights of others, especially the disadvantaged and the oppressed."

This integration of "where you stand" and "what you see" demands that we stand with one foot in the library and one foot in the social reality of the poor among us—children abandoned on city streets, women trafficked for sex, human dignity violated . . . the list goes on. Our graduates need to acquire compassion for the innocent suffering and to become intellectually and morally curious about why this is happening. They need not live with poor, but they do need to stand with them for their benefit.

The price

Third, Romero, Ellacuria, and many others paid the price with their lives by speaking for the transformation of an unjust sociopolitical system. Graduates of Jesuit schools are not expect-



SEGUNDO MONTES MOZO, S.J.
12 MAY 1933 – 16 NOVEMBER 1989



ELISA JULIA RAMOS
3 MARCH 1917 – 16 NOVEMBER 1989



CELINA YANKET RAMOS
27 FEBRUARY 1915 – 16 NOVEMBER 1989

ILLUSTRATIONS BY STEVE KROEGER

ed to pay such a price. Yet, prophetic speech (which often makes the comfortable uncomfortable) happens when intellectual excellence is animated by the Jesuit ideal of faith *and* justice. Why speak? The Jesuits' 35th general congregation makes it clear: All people are sacred and deserving of a future with dignity, and all need to be part of a process of integral human development, liberated from injustice, and reconciled in community, with creation and with God.

Act justly . . . love wisely

Lesson four would be that a Jesuit education should invig-

orate the courage to act justly and love wisely. It will not bother others if our graduates' desire is to make all the money they can or if they get caught up in the hedonism, moral relativism, and consumerism of today's culture. But is that what a Jesuit education means? Love provides the orientation and rhetoric for acting justly, with wisdom and hope. Love moves the heart and mind but also challenges graduates of Jesuit education to use their talent, intelligence, and education to provide science for those without science, skills for the unskilled, voices for those without academic qualifications, all to promote their human rights and dignity. Imagine the impossible and aspire to do it.

New realities, contexts

And the fifth lesson is that we must be ever alert to the new. Reflecting on the 20th anniversary of the eight martyrs and on El Salvador provides many lessons, but we need always to awaken ourselves to new realities. Globalization is a new context; one that calls on us to realize our interconnectedness as one human family on this very fragile planet Earth. In some instances, globalization can be just another name for economic or cultural imperialism. But a Jesuit education needs to equip our students with an understanding of how to live in and humanize our globalizing world as well as to equip them with the knowledge, skills, and sensibilities to use new technologies and means of communication wisely to devise new ecological ways of caring for our planet, new ethical ways of doing business, and just ways of living together as one human family, especially benefiting the neglected and suffering.

As we reflect on the six men and two women in El Salvador whom we celebrate, let it be an occasion of gratitude for our gifts along with the vow to use our knowledge wisely, to hope constantly, to imagine a new world order, and to fashion a more humane, just, and sustainable world—and always with a sense of humor. **C**



Jesuit Schools, U.S. Congress Honor El Salvadoran Martyrs

Students and staff from many Jesuit schools—John Carroll University in Cleveland, Brebeuf Jesuit Prep in Indianapolis, and the University of San Francisco among them—gathered at Ft. Benning in Georgia, calling for the closure of the School of the Americas and commemorating the deaths of six Jesuits, their housekeeper, and her daughter twenty years ago.

Le Moyne College in Syracuse, the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Massachusetts, Cheverus High School in Portland, Maine, and Creighton University in Omaha were just a few of the many Jesuit schools that commemorated the 20th anniversary of the crimes with events on campus, including vigils, liturgies, and speakers.

Fordham University students were among those who traveled to El Salvador for commemoration events at the University of Central America, where the killings took place.

The murdered Jesuits had “dedicated their lives to advancing education in El Salvador, protecting and promoting human rights and the end of conflict, and identifying and addressing the economic and social problems that affected the majority of the Salvadoran population,” read a resolution passed by both houses of Congress in late October that honored the Jesuits.



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