



Today's El Salvador Lives on Hope

Decades after murders, Jesuits in El Salvador
strive for justice and reconciliation

by Peter Feuerherd

What happens now? That was the question Jesuits around the world asked after the murder of six of their fellows and two of their lay helpers in November 1989 at the University of Central America (UCA) in San Salvador.

In the Bronx, Fr. Dean Brackley, SJ, a theology professor at Fordham University, first got word from a fellow Jesuit's phone call.

"Dean, are you sitting down?" the Jesuit cautioned. "They just killed the Jesuits at the UCA."

Brackley had visited the UCA and knew that this was a shattering event, a catastrophe. There were few countries where Jesuits have influenced mod-

ern history more than in El Salvador, a New Jersey-sized nation of six million people. Some wondered if the legacy would continue in the Central American nation. Could the Jesuit presence overcome the threat of political murder?

That was then. Today is a very different scene at the UCA. Two decades later, the Salvadoran Jesuit legacy, centered at the UCA, still lives. Ten thousand students are educated on impeccably manicured grounds. It now looks like any placid college campus amid palm trees in sunny southern California or Florida. When students take a walk to eat at the Burger King outside the campus grounds, they pay for their meals in U.S. dollars, the currency of

the country. In the late afternoon, as the evening breeze relieves the tropical heat, students take a break, gathering in informal groups, making plans for the evening, chatting and flirting as on any other campus. But the scene was far from placid in 1989.

Brackley had, by the time of the murders, twice visited his fellow Jesuits at the UCA. He knew their names—Ignacio Ellacuria, Segundo Montes, Juan Ramon Moreno, Amando Lopez, Ignacio Martin-Baro—all Spaniards with many years of service in El Salvador, and Salvadoran Joaquin Lopez y Lopez. (The UCA Jesuits are also quick to recognize the two women who were killed, Julia Elba Ramos, the cook for young Jesuits studying theology who



lived near the UCA, and Celina, her 15-year-old daughter, murdered because the soldiers wanted to eliminate any witnesses. They had, tragically, decided to stay the night at the Jesuit Residence because they felt that the encroaching war had made their own home unsafe.)

“I remember it affected me more than I would have ever thought,” Brackley notes.

The atrocity visited upon the Jesuits, historians say, marked the beginning of the end of widespread political violence that began in the 1970s. The U.S. Congress—which had sent millions in aid to the Salvadoran military at the height of the Cold War—had had enough, and quickly curtailed assistance. At the same

time, the demolition of the Berlin Wall signaled the end of the Cold War, and the overarching ideology of anti-Communism had little relevance anymore.

After a final guerrilla offensive in El Salvador failed to reach its goal of taking over the capital, both sides were willing to talk peace. It had been a long and costly civil war. An estimated 75,000 were killed, most of them civilians, and most of those, it was later determined by international investigations, at the hands of the ruling government and its military supporters. They included scores of church workers, including three U.S. religious and a laywoman, as well as Archbishop Óscar Romero, who

were targeted because they defended poor people and also urged those in the military to stop killing the innocent. But those warnings went unheeded.

“Kill a priest, be a patriot,” a well-distributed sign advised during the height of the death squads.

There were numerous cycles of violent repression, perhaps the most famous beginning with the murder of a Jesuit, Fr. Rutilio Grande, a rural pastor whose death in 1977 inspired his friend, Archbishop Romero, to become more outspoken. That cycle continued with the archbishop’s murder in March 1980 as he celebrated Mass in a simple hospital chapel next to his residence. The day before, the archbishop had told soldiers



to disobey immoral orders to kill civilians. Later that year, three nuns from the United States and a laywoman missionary were murdered.

The violence continued, culminating in the murder of the UCA Jesuits nearly a decade later.

At the time, volunteers from all over the Jesuit world offered their services as replacements. The UCA needed American Jesuits, because they would be less likely to be targeted by the military. They needed to know Spanish, have an understanding of the struggles of the poor in Central America, and have academic experience.

Brackley, who before joining the theology department at Fordham Univer-



*During the commemoration of Archbishop Romero's assassination, tens of thousands marched through the streets chanting **iViva Romero!***

El Salvadoran President Funes offered the country's highest honors

A young boy rests against a statue of Archbishop Oscar Romero while listening to President Mauricio Funes deliver his speech before a March 20 march in San Salvador. The march honored the 30th anniversary of the archbishop's death. Along the march route, people hold up posters of those killed during El Salvador's civil war.



sity ministered to poor Spanish-speaking communities in the South Bronx, thought he qualified and applied to his provincial.

For the next 20 years, Brackley taught theology at the UCA. He was joined, at first, by Jesuits from Canada, Spain, and Mexico, and later by fellow New York Province Jesuit (the late) Fr. Charles Beirne.

After the Jesuit reinforcements arrived in El Salvador, there were occasional crude threats, but Brackley and his fellow Jesuits largely discounted them. The murders in 1989 were seen, even by those in the military, as a colossal blunder, causing the army to lose credibility and outside support.

“It was the crime that wouldn’t go away,” says Brackley.

As has been true throughout the history of the Society of Jesus, the spilling of the blood of Jesuit martyrs did not destroy their witness. Brackley, besides teaching theology, spent a number of years as a pastor. He had long known the statistics about the grinding poverty of El Salvador, but those figures came alive for him after he ministered at a poor rural parish and was asked to baptize a withered baby dying of hunger. At the UCA, focus is on book-learning combined with study and work on the problems of El Salvador, a country wracked by poverty—two-thirds of the people live in poverty—and by violence. (While



to the memory of the slain Jesuits in a ceremony last year.

political violence has abated, thousands are murdered each year, many by gangs in the thriving business of illegal drugs, making the country one of the most dangerous in the hemisphere.)

Despite this hellish background, today's El Salvador lives on hope.

During the 30th anniversary commemoration of Archbishop Romero's assassination this past March, tens of thousands marched through the downtown streets of San Salvador, chanting "¡Viva Romero!" They gathered for Mass outside the cathedral, the same spot next to the Salvadoran legislature where, after Romero's funeral, shots rang out from the roof, killing dozens.

This anniversary event was different. The march featured an address by President Mauricio Funes, elected in 2009 and the first Salvadoran chief of state to formally recognize the contributions of Archbishop Romero. He has formally apologized for the government's role in his murder. While the local archdiocese pursues the case for formal canonization, it is clear that Romero is already a popularly declared saint in El Salvador. His likeness is seen on murals and walls throughout the city and countryside. In the poorest of homes, there are usually few possessions. Yet there is often a framed picture, near the family photos, of the slain archbishop.

"This marks a before and after in the history of El Salvador," Bishop Gregorio Rosa Chavez, auxiliary bishop of San Salvador, said after the march.

It is not, however, a hope born without struggle.

At the Mass in the cathedral where Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, retired archbishop of Washington, D.C. spoke, security guards were present, brandishing firearms. Fireworks exploding outside the cathedral during the Mass made visiting foreigners visibly nervous, although few Salvadorans paid them much mind.

It's on street level where a sense of crisis is most apparent. It's a well known fact that the gangs continue to rule the streets once dark sets in.

Fr. Joaquin Melendez, pastor of Our Lady of Guadalupe Church, says peace and reconciliation are not possible until there is accounting for the atrocities of the civil war. In the legal process for the murder of the Jesuits, nine lower-level soldiers were accused, only two were convicted, and these were later released after the amnesty in 1993. The killers of Archbishop Romero, the North American women martyrs, and thousands of others have never faced justice. It is widely believed that the forces behind the killings remain prominent in Salvadoran political and economic life.

"The intellectual authors of the crime are still on the loose," says Brackley about those responsible for the murder of the Jesuits.

The Jesuit approach to reconciliation and justice is articulated by Fr. Jose Maria Tojeira, SJ, a Spaniard with long experience in Central America as provincial and now UCA rector. He retains a high media profile in El Salvador and is frequently quoted on social and political issues.

Tojeira's focus is on "Truth, Justice and Reconciliation," a total package upon which the country can build. He has criticized the blanket amnesty because it never allowed for an airing of the evils done during the war. Brackley agrees, citing the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius as a model. Forgiveness only happens, he says, when sin is first openly acknowledged. Still some, including

church leaders, argue that more investigations will only open old wounds.

"But the wounds have never closed," Brackley says.

"We are not in favor of vengeance, but the truth has to come out." Forgiveness, he says, "has to do with relationship. It won't happen until we face the truth, and then accept forgiveness and healing so we can move beyond trauma."

Still, today there's more reason than ever in the sorry recent past of El Salvador to hope that true reconciliation can happen. Visitors at the airport are now greeted with a full mural of Archbishop Romero, a work formally commissioned by the government. A national holiday was declared in his honor. The Jesuits who preached the option for the poor are now an officially exalted group, a far cry from the bleak days of the war. In an abrupt change of pace, President Funes offered the country's highest honors to the memory of the slain Jesuits in a ceremony late last year. The medals presented by the government are proudly displayed at the UCA museum.

"It's hard to overestimate the change that has taken place. We have not overcome poverty, but we are beginning to overcome fear," says Brackley.

The intractable rich/poor gap in the country has yet to be tackled. The drug gangs still seem to operate with impunity. The future for many Salvadorans who live in poverty remains bleak. Yet change is in the air. The day after the bleak time of the murders of the Jesuits has arrived. A small band of the Society of Jesus continues teaching and ministering, overcoming persecution and death in the only nation dedicated to the Savior of the world. While Resurrection is still longed for, Christian hope continues. **C**



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