

‘BE A PATRIOT: KILL A PRIEST’

Michael Campbell-Johnston

The slogan that gives this article its title, which was daubed on the walls of El Salvador’s capital during its civil war, took on a terrible actuality when the entire Jesuit staff of the University of Central America, except Jon Sobrino, who happened to be abroad, were murdered. Who were these priests? Why were they killed? And what is their legacy? The man who was at that time Jesuit superior of the British province, and was himself in El Salvador for three years before being called to London, answers these questions. This article was originally published in the British Catholic weekly, The Tablet, a few days after the murders.¹

IN SOME WAYS THE SIX JESUITS who were killed in El Salvador last week were typical of the other 65 working in the country, and of Jesuits anywhere else for that matter. Five of them 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 eighteen. During the forty years he had 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 our Central American University in Managua from 1979 to 1982 and had only been teaching in the theology faculty at the UCA for six years. Juan

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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 *Fé y Alegría*, a network of semi-vocational schools which provide an education for the poor in marginalised rural or urban communities. Started in 1945 by a Venezuelan Jesuit, *Fé y Alegría* now operates some 350 such schools in twelve Latin American countries.

When I first travelled through Central America, 26 years ago, I remember visiting El Salvador and staying in the Externado San José, whose spectacular chapel had just been built and was the architectural talk of the town. It is now the only remaining part of the original buildings, which were otherwise totally destroyed in the 1986 earthquake. The school was traditional and typical of Jesuit educational institutions anywhere: with high academic standards, strict discipline, and a clientele drawn from the middle or upper-middle classes. But, beneath an apparently tranquil surface, things were beginning to stir. At the time I commented, in what now appears to me a somewhat pretentious travelogue, on the appalling social and economic



The Colegio Externado San José in 1986

inequalities between 'the very small wealthy, sophisticated and much-travelled upper class and the very large, desperately poor and illiterate lower class'. I went on to note that this constituted:

... the principal challenge confronting the Church in Central America and unless the latter can gear itself to meet this challenge, a readaptation calling for a number of profound and perhaps painful changes, there would seem to be little hope of a peaceful, let alone Christian, future.

The changes came with a vengeance at the 1968 Medellín conference when the bishops of Latin America, renouncing the Church's traditional role as a pillar of the establishment, committed it and themselves to work in solidarity with the poor: 'This solidarity means that we make ours their problems and their struggles, that we know how to speak with them.' This commitment, they went on, had to take concrete form,

... in criticism of injustice and oppression, in the struggle against the intolerable situation which a poor person often has to tolerate, in the willingness to dialogue with the groups responsible for that situation in order to make them, understand their obligations.²

Bold words which, in the following years, began to be put into effect, timidly in some places, not at all in others, but with growing conviction and courage in a few.

Violence Escalates

It was not long before the powerful and wealthy began to react. Already in the late 1960s Nelson Rockefeller, after a whirlwind tour of twenty Latin American countries in as many days, reported that the Catholic Church was adopting a new stance that threatened to endanger United States interests on the continent. A later document, the Santa Fe declaration, which was instrumental in determining the policy of the first Reagan administration towards Latin America, was much more explicit. It identified liberation theology as a growing threat to the geopolitical interests of the United States in the region

² Medellín documents, 'Poverty of the Church' (CELAM, 1968) n.10, at <http://www.shc.edu/theolibrary/resources/medpov.htm>.

and called for an all-out campaign to combat it and discredit its supporters by whatever means. These included the promotion of right-wing evangelical sects charged with the specific task of undermining the work of the mainline Christian Churches. Within the different Latin American countries themselves, waves of persecution succeeded each other as national security states tried to tighten their control over peasant organizations, workers' unions, agrarian reform movements and any other groups attempting to build a more just society. Arrest, torture, banishment and assassination became common events: the list of new 'martyrs for social justice' grew longer and longer as the Church increasingly threw in its lot with the poor and oppressed.

At their conference eleven years later in Puebla, the Latin American bishops renewed their commitment by formally making 'a preferential option for the poor'.³ Denouncing the luxury of the few as an insult to the misery of the masses, they called for changes in the social, political and economic structures in the region and the right of workers and peasants to shape their own future and form organizations to promote their interests. It was at the same conference in Puebla that Fr Pedro Arrupe, then General of the Society, was asked the following question at a meeting with the press:

A bishop from El Salvador has said that the Jesuits are responsible for the violence in that country, thus associating himself with the accusations and threats the Society of Jesus has received from the Salvadorean government. What do you think of them?

Exactly the same question is being asked now, ten years later. Fr Arrupe answered:

All of us Jesuits, in El Salvador and elsewhere, are against violence, and in this sense we are following the example of the hierarchy and the bishops in working for those peasants and other deprived people who are really suffering very much.

He went on to explain that a commitment to work for greater justice in the world was an essential part of a Jesuit vocation and was bound to lead them into difficulties with those who support, and are

³ Puebla documents, 'A Preferential Option for the Poor' (CELAM, 1979).

supported by, the *status quo*: 'To defend justice in the world is really to proclaim a sign of contradiction.'

This background is essential for an understanding of what has taken place in El Salvador, not only during the past week but also over recent years. As the six murdered Jesuits went through their training and started to work among the people they became more and more aware of the



Mural at El Paisnal

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-1970s 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 12 March 1977 the Jesuit Rutilio Grande was assassinated by death squads, together with an old man and a fifteen-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, over there by Chalatenango, they wouldn't let him through. Here at Apopa they would arrest him ... they would accuse him of being rebellious, a foreign Jew, confused with exotic and strange ideas, opposed to democracy, that is to say, to the interests of the minority Without doubt, brothers, 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.⁴

Price of Solidarity

Four months later, 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 of 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 last week 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 University of Central America, where five of the six assassinated Jesuits worked, is dedicated to the same struggle for a more

⁴ Rutilio Grande, Apopa sermon, Spanish text available at <http://www.marxists.org/espanol/tematica/elsalvador/grande/1977/feb/13.htm>.

just society. In the early 1980s both the campus and the Jesuit residence were frequently attacked with bombs and machine-gun fire. This was because the university represented a direct challenge to the authorities, not only through its teaching but also through its publications. The three best-known are *Estudios Centroamericanos* (ECA), whose principal editor was Ignacio Ellacuría, with Segundo Montes and Ignacio Martín-Baró members of the editorial board; *Proceso*, a weekly information bulletin especially designed to help popular groups follow events in the country; and *Carta a las Iglesias*, edited for basic communities and other Christian groups by the well-known theologian Jon Sobrino, a member of the same Jesuit community but fortunately out of the country at the time of the massacre. All these publications aim to give a voice to the voiceless and many attempts have been made over the years to silence them, the last being a bomb attack on the university printing press only two months ago.

The assassination of the six Jesuits and their two co-workers is shocking; but scarcely surprising. After all they are doing no more than joining the 70,000 people, many of them civilians, old men, women and children, who have died in the ten-year-old war in El Salvador. This point was clearly made by Fr 'Chema' Tojeira, the present Jesuit provincial in El Salvador, in his public statement after the event:

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 Salvadoreans, 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 which killed Monsignor Romero has now massacred our brothers is for us absolutely true and evident.

Fifteen years ago, when the Jesuits were discussing their new commitment to 'promote justice as an indispensable part of the service of the faith', Fr Arrupe warned them in prophetic words of the consequences of such a choice:

It is necessary that our congregation be truly conscious that the justice of the gospel should be preached through the cross and on the cross. If we intend seriously to work for justice, the cross will immediately appear, frequently accompanied by bitter pain. For,

although we be faithful to our priestly and religious charism and work prudently, we shall see those rise up against us who perpetuate injustice in today's industrial society, who otherwise are sometimes considered very fine Christians and often are our benefactors or friends or even relatives, who accuse us of Marxism and subversion, eventually cease to be our friends, and consequently take away their former backing and financial assistance.

But, if we wish to remain true to the gospel, there can be no going back on this choice either for the Jesuits who now remain in El Salvador or for Christians faced with injustice anywhere. The Jesuits in El Salvador certainly intend to continue working for and alongside the poor. I have no doubt that they will have the courage to make their own the words of Archbishop Romero a few months before his own assassination:

I am glad, brothers and sisters, that our Church is persecuted precisely for its preferential option for the poor and for trying to become incarnate on behalf of the poor. And I want to say to all the people, to rulers, to the rich and powerful: if you do not become poor, if you do not concern yourselves for the poverty of our people as though they were your own family, you will not be able to save society.

Michael Campbell-Johnston SJ was the Jesuit General Fr Arrupe's right-hand man during the 1970s in developing the social apostolate world-wide. He then worked in El Salvador for some years, coordinating the work of the Jesuit Refugee Service in Central America, before being recalled to Britain to serve a term as Provincial. For the last few years he has been parish priest in St Francis of Assisi parish in Barbados. He is likely to return to the UK in 2010, and is currently preparing a selection of four decades of his annual letters for publication.