THE MARTYRS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL AMERICA

Twenty Years On

Clare Dixon

FOR A CERTAIN GENERATION one of the defining moments of the twentieth century was the assassination of John F. Kennedy in November 1963. As a small child at the time, I have only the vaguest recollection of this event. But the massacre of the six Jesuits and their two women co-workers on the campus of El Salvador's University of Central America (UCA) in November 1989 stands out for me as a defining moment, and it is one which has remained with me. Its juxtaposition with another world event—the dismantling of the Berlin Wall was begun just one week previously—brought into sharp focus the struggle of people living under very different forms of cruelty and oppression to build a new and better kind of society.

The Events of 1989

In the early hours of 16 November 1989, a US-trained army commando unit entered the campus of the UCA and brutally murdered six Jesuits and two women who were sleeping in a tiny sitting-room attached to their residence. The six Jesuits—who literally had their brains blown out—suffered in a most immediate way the consequences of putting their intellects and talents in the service of what they described as the 'crucified people' of El Salvador. The Jesuit martyrs were Ignacio Ellacuría, 59, an internationally known philosopher; Segundo Montes, 56, head of the sociology department and the UCA's human-rights institute; Ignacio Martín-Baró, 47, a pioneering social psychologist who headed the psychology department and the University's public opinion institute; the theology professors

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Juan Ramón Moreno, 56, and Amando López, 53; and Joaquín López y López, 71, founding head of the *Fé y Alegría* (Faith and Joy) network of schools for the poor. Joaquín López—known as Padre Lolo—was the only native Salvadorean, the others having arrived long before from Spain as young seminarians. Julia Elba Ramos, the wife of a caretaker at the UCA and the cook for the Jesuit seminarians living nearby, along with her daughter Celina, 16, were killed to ensure that there would be no witnesses. Ironically, the women had sought refuge from the noise of gunfire near their cottage on the edge of the campus.

The killings took place during a major guerrilla offensive in the civil war which scourged the country throughout the 1980s. With combat raging around the capital, the Salvadorean military hoped to pin the murders on the guerrillas. When this proved impossible, the Salvadorean and US governments collaborated in a cover-up to shield the Salvadorean High Command which had ordered the killings. To this day the high-ranking officers involved have never been formally accused, let alone held accountable.

Bad news travels fast and, even in 1989, in the days before e-mail and text messaging, word of the killings reached Europe around lunch-time on 16 November, just a couple of hours after the discovery of the massacre when the overnight wartime curfew was lifted at 6.00 a.m. Julia's husband, Obdulio, was the first to find the bullet-riddled bodies of the priests and of his wife and daughter; he raised the alarm with the Jesuit Provincial, José Maria Tojeira, before collapsing with grief and shock.

Meanwhile at Vauxhall, in South London, people were gathering for a meeting of the British Refugee Council's Committee for Latin America, consisting of representatives from human rights groups, aid agencies, the Home Office, and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO). I was due to chair the meeting that afternoon but, just as we were settling down to start the agenda, a telephone call came in from the El Salvador Human Rights Committee to break the terrible news. Shock, incredulity, panic, horror, confusion: there was a whole range of emotions and reactions. I ran, in a daze, to telephone my colleagues at CAFOD (the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development) to let them know of the killings; and we agreed that I should stay at my meeting to ensure we could get the FCO representatives to draft a government statement condemning the criminal actions of the Salvadorean army.

This was Britain under the Conservative government led by Margaret Thatcher, and while church and human-rights groups had lobbied successfully to stop the export of British military equipment to El Salvador during the years of repression and civil war, the sympathies of the government were clearly allied to those of US presidents Reagan and (later) Bush in their crusade against the 'communist threat' in Latin America. The FCO indeed issued a statement that same day, in which they expressed the British government's regret that the guerrilla offensive had been the cause of the deaths of the Jesuits and their two assistants. Although an eye-witness in the care of the Jesuit Provincial had confirmed that the murders were committed by army troops—the UCA was surrounded by military barracks and command posts—the British government sought to blame the deaths on the opposition FMLN (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front) guerrillas. This example of complicity with the forces of repression was part of a regrettable pattern of British foreign policy towards Latin America in the period. At the same time, individual British diplomats serving in El Salvador, notably Iain Murray, risked their own personal safety and diplomatic positions to ensure safe passage out of the country for opposition politicians whose lives were under threat.

When I returned to CAFOD's offices later that afternoon, amidst the stunned grief of colleagues and constant activity to put out press releases and field calls from the media, we were interrupted by an urgent phone call from Thailand for CAFOD's director, Julian Filochowski. It was Eamonn O'Brien, a Columban priest and close friend of CAFOD who ran the Irish Church's Faith and Justice study programme for missionaries in Asia. Eamonn had heard a midnight news bulletin on the BBC World Service and was ringing for further details. Jon Sobrino was the invited speaker on his study course and Eamonn wanted to be able to give him the news the following morning. Against Eamonn's protests that Jon was exhausted after his long journey from El Salvador and was sleeping, Julian finally convinced him to wake him up and get him to the phone. The conversation which followed was recorded in moving detail by Jon in his reflection 'Companions of Jesus' which he wrote as a tribute over the following days.[1]

[1] See Jon Sobrino, 'Companions of Jesus', in *Companions of Jesus: The Jesuit Martyrs of El Salvador* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1990), 3–58.

There is no doubt that the deaths of that day—among the 70,000 civilian killings in El Salvador during the 1980s—marked the beginning of the end for the USA's military intervention in Central America and bankrolling of repressive regimes. International revulsion, particularly in the United States itself, made the UCA murders into the crime that would not go away. Public opinion, galvanised by religious and civic leaders, was outraged that US-supplied weapons and an elite brigade of soldiers trained in the US had extinguished some of El Salvador's finest intellectuals—and missionary priests at that. The scandal—and subsequent attempts at a cover-up—helped to speed up the negotiations which put an end to the war in 1992 and, by discrediting the Salvadorean military who ordered the massacre, to consolidate the peace.

I knew every one of the six murdered Jesuits: CAFOD provided support for their *proyección social*—social outreach—work, which ensured that their university was not an ivory tower but was directly relevant and useful in addressing the dramatic challenges of Salvadorean society and serving the urgent call for justice for the impoverished and oppressed majority of Salvadoreans. I had worked with them for almost a decade, and was privileged to consider a number of them to be friends. This fact alone made the circumstances of their murder an overwhelmingly shocking personal blow and loss. But, more universally, their untimely and horrific deaths, as well as their lives, still speak to us today about the world in which we live, perhaps even more eloquently now than then.

Remembering the Martyrs Today

Our Church is rooted in the memory of Christ's sacrifice for humanity, a sacrifice which was echoed by the deaths of the UCA Jesuits. So, for El Salvador, and for Catholics and people of faith around the world, keeping alive the memory of the martyrs of the UCA is, twenty years later, a means of renewing and strengthening our own commitment and faithfulness to the Church's mandate to work for justice, for the better kind of society for which they struggled and for which they died. The Jesuits are interred under the image of Archbishop Oscar Romero, who had been assassinated by a death-squad gunman nine years before. In the nearby UCA chapel we are reminded that:

The chapel at UCA

> To be a Jesuit today … is to engage, under the standard of the Cross, in the crucial struggle of our time: the struggle for faith and that struggle for justice which it demands.[2]

In a recent reflection on Archbishop Romero, Pat Jones reminds us that, in the Church's tradition and teaching, there are two central elements that make a martyr. A martyr is someone who gives his or her life willingly in defence of Christian faith, not actively seeking death but recognising and accepting that the path being followed may lead to it. And secondly, a martyr is someone whose life is taken by oppressors or tyrants who hate the Christian faith. In Romero's death, those of the UCA martyrs and many other twentieth-century martyrdoms, we see that classical tradition broadened. The commanders of the 'security' forces in El Salvador, who were responsible for the deaths of

[2] General Congregation 32, decree 4, in *Jesuit Life and Mission Today: The Decrees of the 31st–35th General Congregations of the Society of Jesus* (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2009).

thousands of Christians, did not necessarily hate the Christian faith as such; but they violently resisted its implications and its claims. The tyrants we have in today's world are different from those of earlier times; they do not persecute Christians because they hate the faith itself, but because those who follow the imperative of their faith to struggle for justice and defend human rights get in their way. And so too today's martyrs are different in response; it is not to defend doctrine that they die, but because they see completely and fully what it means to live out the same pattern of life as Jesus, in concrete words and action in their particular location. As Jon Sobrino points out, it is not hatred of the faith that brings about their death, but hatred of justice.[3]

What it means to live out the same pattern of life as Jesus

The question that UCA martyrs posed was: 'Where would Jesus be in the El Salvador of the 1980s?' The question that their memory leaves us with today is 'Where would Jesus be in the world of 2009?' What would he be asking of us in today's world? Remembering the martyrs reorientates us to what is happening in our world today, and asks us to pray, to speak and to act.

Thankfully, not all of the intended victims of the UCA massacre were present in the Jesuit professors' modest dwelling in the early hours of 16 November 1989. Not only Jon Sobrino but Rodolfo Cardenal, who also lived in the campus residence, were, by some stroke of chance, out of San Salvador that day and were spared to be able to carry on the work of their martyred colleagues and bear witness to their lives and their legacy.

We are fortunate, and I am grateful, to be able to draw on the writings of these 'survivors' and their work over the years to follow in the path of the martyrs. Others too, such as Juan Hernandez Pico, like Jon Sobrino a Basque transplanted to Central America, and Dean Brackley, one of the Jesuits who answered the call to continue the work of the lost professors of the UCA, have been rich sources of thinking and reflection about the UCA martyrs. I have drawn heavily upon the guidance of these 'witnesses of the witnesses' in seeking to express just why their deaths, and their lives, continue to speak to us and inspire us to confront the challenges of today's world.

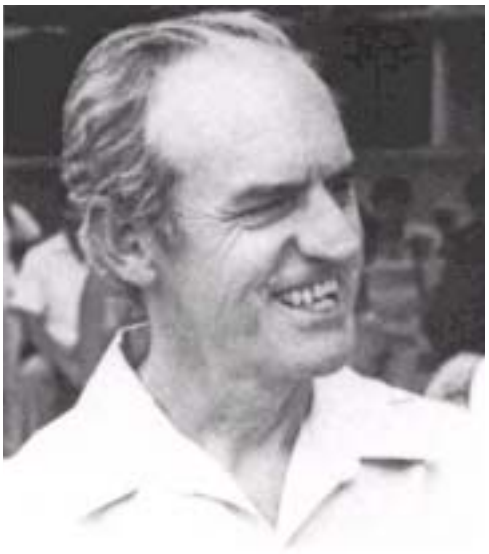
[3] See Jon Sobrino, *The True Church and the Poor* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1984), 175.

When I first met Ignacio Ellacuría, in Managua, Nicaragua, in early 1981, he was counting the days until he could return to his role as rector of the UCA in war-torn El Salvador. As we jostled to get seats amidst an enthusiastic crowd at a folk concert it was hard to imagine that this charming and mischievously humorous man could have enemies who plotted his death. A close collaborator and advisor of Archbishop Oscar Romero, Ellacuría was in Nicaragua because his Jesuit colleagues had persuaded him to leave El Salvador for safety when the death threats against him from the ultra-right became an almost daily occurrence. He made a reluctant refugee and soon after we met he was to return to his home at the university in San Salvador in the midst of the paramilitary death squads' 'Be a patriot: kill a priest' campaign.

It is perhaps a miracle that he survived so long. Other priests before him had been threatened and assassinated in El Salvador yet, since Archbishop Romero, none had been quite so vilified and hated by the extreme right. The abuse poured on him by the Salvadorean élite—the so-called 'oligarchy'—the armed forces and their associated death squads sought to portray him as a committed Marxist and the brains behind the FMLN guerrilla movement. He and his fellow Basque Jon Sobrino were routinely savaged in the press and described as *la maldición vasca*—the Basque curse. Their residence was attacked on several occasions by the bombs and bullets of death squads.

Yet 'Ellacu' was no hardline political propagandist. For those who knew him well, he stood out primarily as a man not just of the Church but of God. 'There are only two important things in life', he would say, 'God and Athletic Bilbao'. His faith and hope in the midst of so much suffering and bloodshed were a source of inspiration and consolation to thousands of ordinary Salvadoreans who fell victim to government-sponsored repression and civil war. Often he was to remind his friends that, as a Christian, he was bound to live every day with hope and with the resurrection, but with a wry comment that 'We just have to understand the theological distinction between hope and optimism'. He would say that we live by 'faith, hope and love, but the greatest of them is hope'.

Ignacio Ellacuría's public profile as a social and political analyst sometimes overshadowed his brilliance as a philosopher and teacher. The international press reporting on the war in El Salvador would come to him for his acerbic, incisive and objective commentary on



Ignacio Ellacuría

the social and political crisis in his adopted homeland. Yet few journalists appreciated that he was an outstanding theologian: *Freedom Made Flesh* and *Conversión de la Iglesia al reino de Dios* [The Conversion of the Church to the Kingdom of God] are just two of his works.[4] In addition, he was the world's foremost authority on the Basque philosopher Xavier Zubiri, as well as a close friend and collaborator; Zubiri regarded Ellacuría as his adoptive intellectual son and heir.

Ellacuría used his position in the university as a platform from which to speak to all who would listen; the US embassy listened, the army listened and the opposition FMLN listened—even if they did not like what they were hearing. I recall his performance at a public address in an upscale hotel, surrounded by a well-heeled, politically hostile audience. With consummate charm and eloquence, Ellacuría set forth his belief that dialogue, national reconciliation and real democracy were the only possible way forward and hope for El Salvador. Such concepts were anathema to his audience yet, at the end of the meeting, he was mobbed by an enthusiastic crowd whose prejudices had been overwhelmed by the strength of his case and the passion and transparency with which it was put.

Under Ellacuría's leadership, the UCA established an international reputation as a centre of academic excellence. He and his Jesuit colleagues who shared his fate put all their efforts into creating a new kind of university. Then, and now, the UCA was considered the foremost centre of learning in the country, indeed in the entire Central

[4] See Ignacio Ellacuría, *Freedom Made Flesh: The Mission of Christ and His Church* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1976) and *Conversión de la Iglesia al reino de Dios* (San Salvador: UCA, 1985).

American region. Yet this pursuit of excellence was not for its own sake but 'in service of the people of El Salvador'. The explicit Christian inspiration of the university brought with it the obligation to be a beacon of truth in a land of nightmarish distortion and horror.

The Jesuits of the UCA not only spoke the truth as individuals, but also worked tirelessly to ensure that the academy was underpinned by the study and understanding of what they called the 'national reality'. They strove to put their skills at the service of the people of El Salvador, presenting the people with an image of their country undistorted by the media or by conflicting ideologies. In a country of violent repression, with a profound social gulf between the super-rich élite and the destitute, the Jesuits of the UCA became what Ellacuría called the 'learned voice of the voiceless'. As Dean Brackley says, they sought countless ways to unmask the lies that justified the pervasive injustice and the continuing violence; and they made constructive proposals for a just peace and a more humane social order. And that is what got them killed.[5]

The UCA martyrs also stood for a different kind of society. Ellacuría was an eloquent advocate for what he called a 'civilisation of poverty' rather than a civilisation of wealth. He would also call it a 'civilisation of work' to replace 'the prevailing civilisation of capital'.[6] In seeking to build a civic coalition for peace and dialogue known as 'the third force' he accurately foresaw that the building of this new kind of civilisation would not be primarily the work of governments but of civil society, whose different sectors have to organize and look towards new social models beyond the antagonistic poles of communist collectivism and capitalism. In this, Ellacuría believed, 'the poor with spirit' would play a privileged role.[7]

Today, this aspiration confronts our financial crisis, in which the poorest people in the world are paying the price of reckless economic policies aimed at the enrichment of the few despite the impoverishment of the many. The call of the Roman Catholic Church

[5] See Dean Brackley, 'Higher Standards for Higher Education: The Christian University and Solidarity' available at http://onlineministries.creighton.edu/CollaborativeMinistry/brackley.html.

[6] Ignacio Ellacuría, 'Utopia and Prophecy in Latin America', in *Towards a Society that Serves Its People: The Intellectual Contribution of El Salvador's Murdered Jesuits*, edited by John Hassett and Hugh Lacey (Washington, DC: Georgetown UP, 1991), 73.

[7] Ellacuría, 'Utopia and Prophecy', 60.

in Britain to 'live simply, sustainably and in solidarity'[8] echoes the injunction to build a civilisation of poverty which places the poor at the centre rather than at the margins of public life and of economic policies and structures, and which puts these policies and structures at the service of people and not vice versa. The poor of the world, in our own society and in the global South, offer us a chance of conversion and of salvation.

Besides the Jesuits of the UCA two poor women, Julia Elba and her daughter Celina, also died. Jon Sobrino says that he has often been asked whose death was more significant, that of Ellacuría or that of Julia. While the Jesuits' deaths recall that of Jesus in the name of suffering humanity, Julia's and Celina's were one with the deaths of millions of the poor who die unrecognised and nameless—the deaths of the crucified people themselves. As Jon Sobrino said: '*Extra pauperes nulla salus*'—outside the poor, there is no salvation.[9] But what does this mean for us and for the poor around us: the migrants in the 'jungle' refugee camps of Calais, the crucified peoples of the Democratic Republic of Congo, Afghanistan or El Salvador itself? What does it mean for those who die the quick death of the bullet or the long, slow, agonizing death of hunger and want.

In El Salvador there is no doubt that the UCA martyrs, among so many other martyrs, make the Church credible in today's world: particularly for the poor who have no faith in other institutions. The Jesuits' work was based on understanding reality—above all the core issues of life and death, justice, and grace versus sin. It is continued by the UCA in countless ways: through its radio broadcasts (which set the standard for bringing the voices of poor and excluded communities into a wider public arena), its human-rights institute, its pastoral centre, and its involvement in national debate. This practical engagement with the suffering world seeks not only to understand, but to serve and to help transform. In a recent report of the United Nations Development Programme, it was stated that the social situation in El Salvador was dire, but would be incomparably worse were it not for the role played by the UCA.

[8] See http://www.livesimply.org.uk/.
[9] See Jon Sobrino, *No Salvation Outside the Poor: Prophetic-Utopian Essays* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2008).

Year on year the anniversaries of Archbishop Romero and the Jesuit martyrs draw ever bigger crowds to vigils and commemorations. Every day, people make pilgrimage to the holy sites of their martyrdom: Salvadoreans from every walk of life and foreign visitors from around Latin America, the US and Europe. In the Church in Latin America there exists a strong conviction that the promotion and protection of human rights is, or should be, the fundamental driving force—the *eje vertebrador*—behind the social and pastoral action of the Church. The promotion of justice is not an optional adjunct to the Church's mission but at the centre of its prophetic role.

In October 2009, just prior to the twentieth anniversary of the UCA martyrs, I attended a meeting of the justice and solidarity department of the conference of Latin American bishops (CELAM). The final declaration emerging from the meeting makes this justice imperative very clear:

> Guided by the light of the Holy Spirit and encouraged by our faith in Jesus Christ, we gather in the City of Guatemala, enlightened by the memory of those who, in this great region, have given their lives in the defence of human rights, especially our pastors Oscar Arnulfo Romero, Juan José Gerardi and so many other martyrs. In the great and honourable task of defence and promotion of human dignity we are illuminated by the Word of God, the magisterium of the Church and the testimony of pastoral agents who have given their lives in the region in the search for the respect and defence of human rights. We proclaim, along with our pastors, that 'the Catholic Church in Latin America and the Caribbean, despite the deficiencies and ambiguities of some of her members, has given the testimony of Christ, has announced his gospel and offered its loving service particularly to the poorest, in an effort to promote their dignity, and also … to promote justice, human rights and reconciliation. This has allowed the Church to be recognised by society, on many occasions, as an instance of trust and credibility'.[10]

In today's Central America the wars which characterized the 1980s are over, but the societies that have emerged from them are far from what was envisaged by the martyrs of the UCA or by so many others whose lives were lost in the pursuit of greater justice. Extremes of

[10] Spanish text available at http://www.celam.org/principal/index.php?module=Contenidos&func=viewpub&tid=4&pid=183.

wealth and poverty and the concentration of power in the hands of a tiny élite remain widespread, and democracy is highly insecure in a number of countries. In Honduras today the Jesuits who run an independent community radio station in El Progreso are the victims of vilification and death threats because of their outspoken rejection of the military coup of 28 July 2009. In Nicaragua authoritarianism and the slide towards dictatorship seem unstoppable. There are some sparks of hope: there is a chance of something different in El Salvador. Since 1 June 2009 a new government, headed by President Mauricio Funes, has started to put in place some of the basic principles for which the martyrs died: reconciliation, social justice and respect for human rights. As a former student and professor at the UCA, and a former teacher at the Jesuit high school, Funes has the best chance in decades of committing the country to the option for the poor for which the martyrs gave their lives. The obstacles cannot be underestimated, but this may now be the greatest opportunity for those who have inherited the UCA to contribute not only a prophetic voice but also the creativity and ideas which would be a fitting and faithful tribute to the memory of the martyrs.

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A Prayer by Juan Ramón Moreno

Break me Lord
Break my body
My heart
My whole life.
Break me
into Bread for sharing.

Break me,
But bless me beforehand.
So your blessing
Turns me into Bread,
Food,
Love and Service
For others.

Break me Lord
Even though my body is crushed
Break my selfishness
Break my interests.

Break me Lord,
After blessing me
So that I am made Bread
Bread for your People
Bread for your Crucified People
Of Latin America.