

AN EMPTY TOMB

Pamela Hussey

In an article from March 1991, Pamela Hussey reports on the anniversary Mass in San Salvador which celebrated the lives and deaths of the six Jesuits and the two women killed by the Salvadorean army. 'A year after the assassinations, the voice of the martyrs continues to resound powerfully in El Salvador and in the international community.' Twenty years on that voice is still with us.¹

JON SOBRINO, SPEAKING at Heythrop College two months after the murder at the University of Central America (UCA), San Salvador, of six of his Jesuit colleagues and friends and two women workers, said he was not so much interested in walking round corpses or in investigating their cases, as in keeping the memory of the martyrs alive and continuing their work for justice and peace in El Salvador.

Those of us who had the privilege of being present at the first anniversary events at the UCA experienced these not as a memorial of death but as a celebration of life, of resurrection. The horror of that early morning of Thursday 16 November 1989, when Ignacio Ellacuría SJ, Ignacio Martín-Baró SJ, Segundo Montes SJ, Amando López SJ, Juan Ramón Moreno SJ, Joaquín López y López SJ, Elba Ramos and Celina Ramos were brutally murdered in the Jesuit residence, had given way to peace, tranquillity, acceptance, pride and even joy. As a North American Jesuit put it, 'Suddenly I realised I was visiting an empty tomb'.

Place of Martyrdom

Sitting in the peaceful Romero chapel, one had only to turn one's head to see through a grille the small house and garden which, a year ago,

¹ This article originally appeared in *The Month* (March 1991), 101–103.



The memorial garden at UCA

had been invaded by soldiers who dragged their victims out on to a small lawn and shot their brains out. On the left of the altar simple bronze plaques mark the six tombs (the two women are buried in their home town).

Leaving the chapel, one goes through a gate to the garden, tended by Obdulio, the husband of Elba and father of Celina. The house is empty and quiet—used during the day, it is not now considered safe for people to sleep there at night. The bedrooms are off a long narrow corridor. For some reason, the body of Juan Ramón Moreno was dragged into Jon Sobrino's room (he was in Bangkok at the time) and left on the floor. A book fell out of the bookcase into the pool of blood: it was Moltmann's *The Crucified God*.

The small patch of lawn where the priests had been shot was peaceful. Obdulio has planted a rose garden there: six red roses for the Jesuits, two yellow ones for his wife and daughter. Obdulio himself is completely without bitterness. 'God cares for us', he said, 'I just go on, doing what I can'. During that week people came, individually or in

groups, to stand silently round the rose garden, thinking their own thoughts.

Celebrations

Before his death, Archbishop Romero said, 'If they kill me, I will rise again in the people of El Salvador'. And the people of El Salvador—and indeed people all over the world—have kept his memory alive. So it is now with the eight martyrs of the UCA. The university review *ECA* (*Central American Studies*) comments in an editorial: 'A year after the assassinations of the UCA, the voice of the martyrs continues to resound powerfully in El Salvador and in the international community'.

The week-long celebrations of the first anniversary were exceptional, both in their duration and in the numbers from all over the world who came to take part in them. The 5.30 Mass each day became an occasion for happy meetings and greetings. Jesuits from everywhere, representatives of international agencies, bishops, priests, sisters and, from all over El Salvador, the poor—those for whom the murdered Jesuits were not in the first place academics but beloved pastors, known to many by their weekend work in parishes. Someone commented:

The base communities wanted very specially to be present in these celebrations, for the poor are those who show most gratitude. They do not forget those who helped them in life, and they never forget those who give their lives for them. This is what most impressed me: the incredible love and gratitude of the poor for their martyrs. They expressed it with simple songs, flowers and offerings, but what they expressed through all this was love and gratitude.

Representatives of the families of the five Spanish-born Jesuits came from Spain and were overwhelmed by the warmth of the welcome extended to them and the outpouring of esteem and love for their dead. One of the relatives said, 'I have to tell you in all sincerity that I do not understand very well what it is to love God, but here in El Salvador I can understand very well what it means to love one's brothers and sisters'.

The different groups preparing the liturgy each day—the religious of El Salvador, the base communities, the UCA itself, other Christian

Churches—made full use of music, symbol and testimony, and each Eucharist became the occasion for personal reminiscences and anecdotes, some touching, some humorous.

Three major lectures were delivered to packed audiences in the auditorium: José Maria Castillo SJ spoke on 'Martyrdom for the Kingdom of God', Jon Sobrino SJ on 'The Legacy of the Martyrs of the UCA', and Rodolfo Cardenal SJ on 'The Inspiration and the Spirit of the UCA'.

The UCA printing press, so often destroyed by bombs, worked at full stretch to produce publications relevant to the event, including posthumous works by Ignacio Ellacuría, Juan Ramón Moreno and Segundo Montes, and a 457-page collection of testimonies and reflections, *Martyrs of the UCA—16 November 1989*. (Cf. also *In Memoriam: The Jesuit Martyrs of El Salvador* published by CIIR, 1990.)

The UCA campus was alive with people on the night of 15–16 November as hundreds poured in from cooperatives, factories, repatriation settlements, parishes and the countryside to remember their martyrs. The vigil began with a procession through the pathways of the campus and continued with the sharing of memories, the showing of videos about the Jesuits and Monseñor Romero, times of reflection and prayer and song in the chapel—and through the night a continuous pilgrimage to the site of the massacre. Early in the morning, at the time of the murders, they celebrated a Eucharist. At the moment of the petitions, a woman from the countryside with her baby in her arms, prayed 'for our brothers the Jesuits, that the Lord may give them strength as he has given it to me, whose two children were killed by a bomb, so that they may not fall into despair and sadness'.

Anniversary Mass

The open-air Mass on the 16th, the actual anniversary, was attended by over 5,000 people from every level of Salvadorean society, with a large international representation. Eighteen bishops and two hundred priests concelebrated, wearing simple red stoles with a cross and the date, 16 November. The chief celebrant was Monseñor Arturo Rivera Damas, Archbishop of San Salvador. He it was who, on the morning the bodies were discovered, said that the deed had been done by the same people who had murdered Archbishop Romero and 70,000

others. He was surrounded by bishops from Brazil, Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras, Canada, the USA, England (John Rawsthorne of Liverpool), Ireland (Eamon Casey of Galway), France and Germany. Sadly, only half the bishops of El Salvador, not including the president of the Bishops' Conference, attended. Large pictures of the eight martyrs and a poster carrying the simple question 'How long ... ?' (Revelation 6:10) dominated the scene.

The irreparable loss to the people of El Salvador, especially the poor, to the Salvadorean Church and to the UCA itself was keenly felt at this Eucharist and was symbolized by the placing on the altar, by representatives of the families, of vessels containing blood-stained earth taken from beside each of the bodies.

The Challenge of Martyrdom

In his homily, the Jesuit provincial, Fr José Maria Tojeira, referred to the other martyrs commemorated on 16 November, the Jesuit martyrs of Paraguay, who in their time exemplified a bold synthesis between the gospel and new models of social organization of the Indians. The Jesuits of the UCA, in their turn, had achieved a synthesis between faith and justice, between academic reason and service of the poorest, a service watered, like that of their predecessors, by blood. Fr Tojeira spoke of the challenge that the life and death of the Jesuits had offered to the first world, which, he said,

... cannot be content with fine words spoken from its position of comfort, while relations between the rich countries of the north and the huge impoverished majorities of the south are a fraud, spawning injustices and inequality. The solidarity of the first world will not be authentic if it limits itself to supporting us, the Jesuits, who have a voice, prestige and international connections, while marginalisation, poverty and injustice continue to hit the plundered and anonymous masses of the under-developed peoples.

The voice of the poor was heard loud and clear at the Mass. The responsorial psalm was read by a peasant who had recently learnt to read and who haltingly, but without embarrassment, led the huge congregation through the psalm and was rewarded by a burst of applause. The bidding prayers gave an opportunity for some of the many who had come in from the countryside (walking for hours) to share

their memories and petitions. One of them introduced herself as coming from ‘the Community of Saint Ignacio Ellacuría’—a spontaneous and popular canonisation.

In fact, many places, in Spain as well as in El Salvador, have been named after one or other of the martyrs, who are thus firmly placed geographically in the countries of their birth and their adoption. As Jon Sobrino said in his lecture,

... our martyrs made an option, first of all, to live in the true Salvadorean reality. This was their fundamental option for the poor, the Christian demand of the gospel and the ethical demand of the historical reality.

Faithful to this reality in life, in death they are present in music and song, in poetry and prose, in posters and paintings. Place names recall them, 16 November is their day. They have become part of Salvadorean culture, part of its geography, part of the national and international calendar.

‘What does it mean to be a Jesuit today?’ is the question inscribed over their tombs. And the answer is taken from the documents of the 32nd General Congregation of the Society of Jesus:

To commit ourselves beneath the standard of the cross in the crucial struggle of our time, the struggle for faith and the struggle for justice which the faith itself demands. We shall certainly not work for the promotion of justice without having to pay a price.²

Pamela Hussey SHCJ has been a sister of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus for nearly sixty years. She was born in Buenos Aires in 1922, and during the Second World War travelled to Britain to join the Women’s Royal Naval Service. In 1981 she joined the Catholic Institute for International Relations (CIIR, now known as *Progressio*), and in that capacity made many visits to Central and South America. In 2000 she received the MBE for services to human rights in Latin America. She retired from CIIR in 2007, and now lives in retirement.

² See General Congregation 32, decree 4, n. 46, 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).