

11-30-2008

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Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "The Jesuits of El Salvador, 1989; Why They Were Murdered, Why Justice Was Never Done, and Why Justice Will Not Be Done." (2008). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/9664>

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The Jesuits of El Salvador, 1989; Why They Were Murdered, Why Justice Was Never Done, and Why Justice Will Not Be Done

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Category/Department: El Salvador

Published: 2008-11-30

On Nov. 16, 1989, six Jesuit Priests, their housekeeper, and her daughter were murdered in a savage attack that has found its place in the history of El Salvador's civil war as one of its most notorious events. The anniversary was marked in Spain with the filing of a criminal complaint in the Spanish High Court (Audiencia Nacional de Espana) against then President of El Salvador Alfredo Cristiani Burkard (1989-1994) and 14 members of the military for their roles in the murders and in the subsequent cover-up. The complaint was filed by the San Francisco-based Center for Justice and Accountability and by the Asociacion Pro Derechos Humanos de Espana. Spanish law permits such indictments anywhere in the world. Meanwhile, there has been negative reaction to the Spanish tactic in the Salvadoran government and in the Catholic Church.

The complaint in Spain fell mainly on Cristiani for his complicity in the cover-up and on Gen. Rene Emilio Ponce for crimes against humanity, murder, and state-sponsored terrorism. The indictment of Ponce and the other military officers was for direct involvement in the killings. The crimes have gone unpunished all these years, quashing in the minds of many any hopes of justice. In 1991, two officers were convicted of the crimes, but under the terms of the 1993 Amnesty Law, they were set free. It was Cristiani who decreed the amnesty. The Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACHR) found the amnesty unconstitutional and recommended its revocation and a reopening of the case, but El Salvador has never complied (see NotiCen, 2000-05-04).

The media reporting at the time called the priests the most prominent victims of violence in the country since 1980, a year that saw the slayings of eight leftist politicians, three US nuns, a US Catholic lay worker, and Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero, shot as he celebrated mass. It was surmised that the slayings of the Jesuits and the two women were preceded by torture and that they took place amid a massive army attack on positions taken and held by guerrillas in their own massive offensive just a few days before. A sign left near the bodies said, "The FMLN [Frente Faribundo Marti para la Liberacion Nacional] has executed the spies who turned on them. Victory or death. FMLN." This was regarded as an obvious deception.

The murdered priests were Ignacio Ellacuria, 59, rector of the Universidad Centroamericana (UCA); Ignacio Martin-Baro; 50, UCA vice rector; Segundo Montes, 56, sociology professor; Armando Lopez, 53, philosophy professor; Joaquin Lopez y Lopez, 71, and Juan Ramon Moreno Pardo, both directors of university-affiliated programs. The two women killed were Julia Elba Ramos, 42, a cook, and her daughter Cecilia Ramos, 15.

The story from a Jesuit perspective

In a 2003 Master's thesis, former Jesuit Ignacio W. Ochoa, who was at la UCA at the time, discussed the rationale for the murders and presented the context in which they occurred. Ochoa at first concluded it was done by perpetrators who did not foresee either the transcendence of the act or how it would eventually weaken the institutional power of the military. That theory had some currency at the time, but he rejected it. Another theory Ochoa said was held by some journalists was that "it was the left itself, trained in Machiavellian methods by the Jesuits, who had killed them." These remarks had their roots in Rector Ellacuria's position regarding the creation of a third political force to help loosen the political grip of both the armed forces and the FMLN.

Ellacuria had, since 1981, advocated including the general population in a dialogue between the sides that would eventually lead to an end to the war, but neither the Army nor the guerrillas could be shaken from the idea of total victory by military means, and neither side embraced the prospect of making the significant concessions that such a solution would necessitate. These theories about the motives for the killings held sway among analysts, with even some FMLN supporters seriously considering the possibility of leftist culpability, but they soon gave way to the facts as national and international investigations "unveiled the Salvadoran Army's direct guilt" in the crime, wrote Ochoa.

Ochoa attempted to build a rationale out of the seemingly contradictory framework in which the Jesuits worked in El Salvador. The predominant view of the church from what he called the past was that the business of the church is purely spiritual (*Civitas Dei*). From that view it follows that members of the church "are nothing more than distributors of the sacraments, allied with the dominant classes that control the state." This was clearly the preferred view among the rulers of El Salvador up to the revolutionary period. But a thread that Ochoa traces to Pope Pius XI in 1931 in the encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno* provided a basis for a different kind of practice with the statement, "We want to refrain from condoning the practices of some adherents of private property who, with their manner of interpreting the use of and respect for property, are putting this institution in danger more than those who oppose them."

That slender strand was fortified with the movement toward human solidarity emerging from the Cold War with Pope John XXIII. Expounding a social mission through *Mater et Magistra* in 1961 and *Pacem in Terris* in 1963, Ochoa says, the idea solidified that "human kind has never had such abundance of richness, economic possibilities and capacities, and still, there is a great part of the world population suffering with hunger and misery, and countless illiterate people. Man has never had such a sharp sense of liberty than today, and yet new forms of social and psychological slavery continue to be born." From these observations came a social mission that, wrote Ochoa, "opened an alternative option of organization for the poor in Latin America."

Ellacuria was one of the organizers of that option, writing, "If politics is understood to mean incarnating the gospel message in the processes of history and...denouncing oppressors and those who do violence to the people, calling sin sin and grace grace, then the Church has been involved in politics." So it was that Ellacuria and the other priests were a locus of influence for the emergence of a liberation theology in which, as Brazilian theologian Leonardo Boff described, base communities created themselves. People began to notice the structural character of their problems so that "their

marginalization is seen as a consequence of elitist organization, private ownership, that is, of the very socioeconomic structure of the capitalist system."

Incorporating dialectical materialism

As this was unfolding, this new popular church was running deeply afoul of the official church in Rome and of the right wing in El Salvador as the Jesuit project took on more of the trappings of Marxism, beginning with Jesuit Superior General Fr. Pedro Arrupe saying in the presence of the conservative Pope John Paul II at the Latin American Bishops Conference (Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano, CELAM) in Puebla, Mexico, in 1979, "Some hold that certain elements of the Marxist analysis are useful for examining our society. This does not mean defending the Marxist ideology, but studying its positive elements, which may exist in other ideologies and religions." But it did mean adoption of Marxist dialectical materialist methodology to understand and confront class struggle in Central America.

For Ellacuria and the Jesuits in El Salvador, it meant turning the academic apparatus to the service of the poor. "The university should embody itself intellectually among the poor to do science on behalf of those who don't have science, be the learned voice for those who don't have a voice, the intellectual backing to those who, in their very reality, hold truth and reason, but lack the intellectual arguments that justify and legitimize their truth and reason," wrote Ellacuria. In short, the university should, as Ochoa put it, "be in service to critical thought about Salvadoran reality and the social forces that impacted it." The UCA thus became that very instrument. Ellacuria established the Centro de Reflexion Teologica, which eventually achieved global status for its impact on theological thinking. He edited Revista de Estudios Centroamericanos (ECA), the journal of the UCA political line. M

Meanwhile, Juan Ramon Moreno Pardo, one of the six, published Revista Diakonia, a highly respected liberation-theology journal that outlived its creator. Aside from publications that brought international scrutiny to El Salvador, the university undertook support for land reform that brought pressure from powerful private-sector groups on the government. The ultraright was inflamed. The UCA lost its government funding. The government expelled a couple of Jesuits from the country during this period.

In 1977, the Jesuit Rutilio Grande, parish priest of Afuilares, was assassinated. He was a land-reform advocate and community organizer in the style of Brazilian educational theorist Paulo Freire. After that, the Army went after other Jesuits and other religious workers, deporting, detaining and harassing them in an atmosphere sparked by radio announcements and leafleting with the message, "Be a Patriot. Kill a Priest." Ellacuria met all this with a series of newspaper articles, *The Jesuits in the Presence of the Salvadoran People*.

In it, he raked the oppressors over the coals and challenged, "It is clear that the church is changing, and it is clear that the Jesuits, as part of the church, have changed. These changes have been small but effective. The fundamental aspect of the change consists of the decision to serve the country's majority." The government, pressed by rightists who firmly believed the Jesuits were a guerrilla front, responded with more expulsions. Jesuits from El Salvador joined other revolutionary

movements in the region, Ochoa wrote, the Ejercito Guerrillero de los Pobres (EGP) in Guatemala, the Frente Sandinista de Liberacion Nacional (FSLN) in Nicaragua. Within El Salvador, they joined the elements that would eventually coalesce into the FMLN.

Despite the pressure to leave, Ellacuria stayed, rising to the position of rector of the UCA in 1979. He continued to believe that social reforms would come only with the negotiated participation of rightist political sectors and the armed forces. Ellacuria still had relationships with these people, in part because many of them had studied at the UCA and had him and the other Jesuits as professors. Ochoa writes that he had frequent contact about the political situation with President Cristiani.

Those on the right who maintained a commitment to military victory against the revolutionaries still had a use for the Jesuits. As The Toronto Star pointed out at the time, "Responsible conservative opponents may have resented these Jesuit intellectuals, but many recognized that the priests served as a conduit for dialogue between the government and the rebels and acted as a moderating influence." Capitalizing on these mitigating factors, by 1985 the UCA was able to establish the Catedra de la Realidad Nacional, where representatives of many sectors gathered to discuss various aspects of the political situation and the prospects for a formal dialogue. Many of these events were televised and broadcast, giving the Jesuits a wider platform to promote their "third-force" concept of civil-society inclusion.

By 1987, this idea had gained international attention, and Costa Rica's President Oscar Arias (1986-1990, 2006-present), who would go on to win a Nobel Prize for his efforts, engaged the other Central American presidents in meeting to draw up a document (Esquipulas II) calling for negotiation not only in El Salvador but in every country of the isthmus. But even as this process went forward, the scheme that gained Arias a prize and Ellacuria and company a bullet was far from reality in El Salvador. Neither side was pleased with the idea of losing at the bargaining table what they were convinced they could win on the battlefield. The Jesuits continued to press and, by 1989, were making some headway, as some in the FMLN began to doubt they could create a successful one-party society and some on the right began to see daylight between the civil line of Cristiani and the unbending militarism of death-squad leader Army Maj. Roberto D'Aubuisson and had begun to appreciate the difference.

Critical mass, the end

But war is war. The right mustered attacks on the popular sector and its organizations, in addition to prosecuting combat with guerrilla forces. In apparent response to the bombing of a union headquarters, the FMLN launched a massive and highly effective offensive on Nov. 11, 1989, taking in succeeding days most of the national territory, including the capital. Officers interviewed later testified that, with the Army off balance and the prospect of losing outright, top military leaders decided to kill the UCA Jesuits in an attempt to stage an event that would return to them the upper hand.

A witness testified that Col. Guillermo Alfredo Benavides, director of the Salvadoran Military Academy, said at the Nov. 15 meeting, "This is a chance to go after [FMLN sympathizers]. I have the UCA in my sector." Whereupon, he was given the order to proceed. It was Benevides who was

convicted of the murders in 1991 and sentenced to 30 years, only to be released two years later by the terms of the 1993 Amnesty Law. Despite repeated death threats, some even broadcast on the radio, the Jesuits declined to hide, believing, wrote Ochoa, "It would be irrational for the military to risk the international repercussions of direct violence against them." Within hours they were proved fatally mistaken.

Also proved mistaken in the years since were any and all who believed that the crimes against these six Jesuits and the two women would be adjudicated. There are still two churches in El Salvador, and the conservative one is very much in the ascendance now. Archbishop of San Salvador Fernando Saenz has come out strongly against the Spanish indictments. "I fear that opening this case in the courts of another country will not help us in the process of internal reconciliation," said the prelate. Saenz defended Cristiani and recalled his historic role, saying, "One must remember that ex-President Cristiani was key in the resolution of the armed conflict in our country. With his signature he put an end to the years of war; he ordered the international investigation of the crimes that were perpetrated in the UCA. I consider that taking all this into account could help to move forward in a process of reconciliation."

Saenz agrees that the Jesuits' deaths rise to martyrdom, but argued, "There are many cases of injustices and of crimes of the past war committed by both sides." It is also the official UCA position and that of its current rector Fr. Jose Maria Tojeira not to participate in the Spanish case. "We respect whatever other initiative that might come from the families of the Jesuits, but we will not participate in judicial activities that transcend the Salvadoran legal framework or the international obligations derived from pacts or treaties signed by El Salvador," said Tojeira. One of those pacts is the 1993 Amnesty Law that pardons the atrocities committed in the 1980-1992 civil war that left 75,000 dead and many thousands more disappeared.

Tojeira, nevertheless, said he welcomed the Spanish case. His statement cannot be taken as opposing legal action. "Justice heals wounds; it doesn't open them," he said, adding, "To claim otherwise is an outrageous ideological distortion." But he was counting on a sovereign solution, saying he hoped "El Salvador's justice system will work."

-- End --