"Contemplativus In Actione Iustitiae" – The Testimony Of The Murdered Jesuits Of El Salvador

"对行动正义性的思考"
——萨尔瓦多遇害耶稣会士的证言

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Abstract

On the evening of 15 November 1989, the El Salvadoran army leadership gathered and decided to take out the alleged "heads" of the insurgency (cf. Doggett, 1993). A special commando group was sent to the José Simeón Cañas Central American University (UCA) run by the Jesuits. The soldiers dragged the priests out of their apartment, forced them to lie face down in the grass and shot them at close range. Besides Ignacio Ellacuría, the rector of the university, they were Segundo Montes, Ignacio Martín-Baró, Amando López, Juan Ramón Moreno and Joaquín López y López. The cook Elba Ramos and her daughter Celina had to die because the soldiers had been ordered not to leave any witnesses of the massacre.

Why were the six Jesuits and the two women killed? The shortest answer can be read on the gravestone in the university chapel. Here the most important mission of the Jesuit community in our present time is described, as it had been formulated by the 32nd General Congregation in 1975: "What is it to be a Jesuit today? It 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 includes." (General Congregation 32: 1975) With this basic directive the Jesuits wanted to respond to worldwide injustice as the most urgent challenge in our times. Prophetically, however, the General Congregation also predicted: "We will not work for justice without paying a price." This sentence is also engraved on the tomb slab.

The purpose of this paper is to serve as a memorial to the Jesuit martyrs of El Salvador, so that we may be challenged to deepen our understanding of martyrdom and its significance for overcoming our massive indifference to the sufferings of the poor and the marginalized throughout the world.

THE CASE OF THE JESUITS

The Jesuit murders became a political issue of the first order. At first the army and the government tried to blame the guerrillas for the crime. But this edifice of lies quickly collapsed. For the first time the army was on the defensive. A Salvadoran officer once said that during the years of war against the guerrillas nothing had harmed the army as much as these murders ordered by the army itself. Last but not least, it was the moral indignation at this crime in US public opinion that finally contributed to a change in the US government's El Salvador policy[1].

Under the auspices of the United Nations, peace negotiations began in April 1990. The Peruvian Alvaro de Soto led these negotiations as representative of the then UN Secretary General Javier Pérez de Cuéllar. Looking back he emphasized the key importance of the Jesuit murders for the negotiations: "The Jesuits had to lose their lives to cause the moral indignation that kept the Salvadoran forces on the defensive and forced them to make concessions at the negotiating table, without which lasting peace probably would not have been achieved. The investigation of the murders and the negotiation process were interwoven like a fugue worthy of Bach; it seemed inspired by heaven" (de Soto, 1998). These negotiations led to a comprehensive peace treaty signed in January 1992, but little of which was subsequently implemented.

In September 1991, there was a trial in San Salvador in which, for the first time in the country's history, eight soldiers and officers sat in the dock. However, only two of them were convicted, and in the Spring of 1993 they were released as part of a general amnesty. Although it is now clear that the entire army leadership was involved in the planning of the massacre, the crime has not yet been solved. After all efforts to reopen the trial in El Salvador had failed, the Spanish human rights organization APDHE and the Centre for Justice and Accountability (CJA) handed the case to the National Court in Madrid in November 2008. Judge Eloy Velasco took up the case, based on the universal jurisdiction that exists under the International Criminal Code when crimes against humanity are involved (Human Rights Watch, 2009). Moreover, five of the six murdered Jesuits came from Spain.

In El Salvador, justice and reparations remain to be seen. But the Salvadoran people have their own forms of remembrance. Resettlements of refugees after the civil war were named after the murdered Jesuits. Their pictures can be found in many churches and huts. Where they were murdered, roses bloom today. Their grave in the university church, like the rose garden cultivated in their memory, became a place of pilgrimage. Every year on the night of their anniversary in November thousands gather on the campus of the university. They sing, pray and celebrate their martyrs.

SCIENCE AT THE SERVICE OF THE POOR

The best known of the six murdered Jesuits was Ignacio Ellacuría,[2] who was born on 9 November 1930 in Portugalete in the Basque Country. In 1947 he entered the novitiate of the Jesuits in Loyola and in 1948 he was sent to the newly founded Central American novitiate in Santa Tecla in El Salvador. From 1949 to 1955 he studied classical languages and philosophy in Quito, the capital of Ecuador. He then spent three years teaching philosophy at the Interdiocesan Seminary in San Salvador. From 1958 to 1962 Ellacuría studied theology in Innsbruck. Looking back, he particularly emphasized the importance of the lectures and seminars of Karl Rahner S.J. for his own theological development (cf. Maier, 2004). On 26 June 1962 he was ordained a priest by Bishop Paulus Rusch. In 1962 he began a philosophical doctorate at the Universidad Complutense in Madrid and wrote a thesis on the Basque philosopher Xavier Zubiri.

In 1967 Ellacuría returned to El Salvador and began to teach philosophy at the Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas (UCA), founded three years earlier by the Jesuits. In 1974 together with Jon Sobrino he founded

1 For an investigative report on the Jesuit murders and allegations regarding the US government's involvement in them, as well as subsequent changes in US policy toward El Salvador, see Morley (July 18, 1993).

2 For a basic outline of Ellacuría's biography, see Aguilar, 2015.

the *Centro de Reflexión Teológica*, which later became the *Centro Monseñor Romero* within the Faculty of Theology. In 1976 Ellacuría took over the management of the magazine *Estudios Centroamericanos* (ECA), which became the most important magazine of the country about political, social, economic and cultural questions. In 1979 he became rector of the UCA, making it his life's work to implement the Church's option for the poor[3] in a scientific-academic way.

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Ellacuría had come to the conviction that in the midst of the misery of the majority of the Salvadoran population crying out to heaven, science could not be done for the sake of science. The Central American University, as a university, was to advocate social reforms with the aim of a fairer social order. The university should become the voice of the voiceless. But it became more and more the target of the rich and the powerful.

Between 1976 and 1989, 16 bomb attacks were carried out against the university. Four times the printing house of the university was blown up in ruins. Here the books of the university's own publishing house and eight magazines are printed. Ellacuría quoted a Spanish poet, Blas de Otero, who, under the censorship of the Franco dictatorship, said: "They don't let people see what I write because I write what I see" (Galeano, 1997, p. 265).

The UCA was to be different from other Latin American higher education institutions financed by the rich upper class, where only the sons and daughters of the oligarchies received their education. It should not be an island of supposedly pure knowledge, like the palaces of the rich, islands of prosperity, delimited by walls to the outside, in a sea of social misery. A university so enclosed in an ivory tower inevitably contributes to the consolidation of unjust social structures. The UCA, as a university, should work for social change towards a more just social order.

In all this, Ignacio Ellacuría never left any doubt that the university must be a place of intellectuality and methodically developed rationality. He pointedly formulated it in various ways, arguing that a university that wants to have a changing effect on society does not need less, but more scientific rigour. In a lecture at Comillas University in Madrid in January 1989, he spoke of Salvadoran students who proudly told him they had thrown eggs during a visit by the Vice President of the United States. He told them not to throw eggs, but statistics. In other words, according to Ellacuría, the UCA scientist must work at his desk, but not from his desk. His scientific work must be based on the reality of the country and aimed at changing it.

As in any other university, teaching plays a central role for the UCA alongside research. Today it has more than 9000 students and more than 300 teachers. The aim is to shape the students into actors of social change. In addition to professional qualifications, the aim is also to teach them ethical and Christian values. The option for the poor is both the knowledge guiding premise and the practical objective of their scientific work. Once again, in the words of Ellacuría:

> "The university must incarnate intellectually with the poor in order to be

3 The Vatican's *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (2004) links the "option for the poor" with a basic principle of Catholic Social Teaching, namely, "the universal destination of goods" (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2004, pars. 181-184). Given the inequities apparent in the distribution of material resources, including access to all the things necessary for human beings to live securely with one another, this principle asserts that such a situation is unacceptable and contrary to the will of God. The preferential option for the poor is a practical response to this principle, mandating that care for the needs of the poor and vulnerable is a top priority in our dealings with one another, a hallmark of basic justice. The preferential option for the poor, as the *Compendium* explains, has deep roots in the Bible, as well as the traditions of Catholic moral theology.

> the science of those who have no access to science, the educated voice of those who have no voice. ... Because of this work we were persecuted hard. ... If our university had not suffered in recent years from the suffering and death of the Salvadoran people, it would not have fulfilled its university mission and made even less of its Christian orientation visible. In a world where falsehood, injustice and repression rule, a university that fights for truth, justice and freedom can be nothing but a persecuted university" (Ellacuría 1999, p. 226f).

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THE ONGOING STRUGGLE FOR JUSTICE IN EL SALVADOR

Ellacuría's vision of the university was consistent with the declarations issued by the Latin American Bishops' Conference (CELAM) approved at their meeting in Medellín 1968. In their effort to adapt the Second Vatican Council's decrees to the situation of Latin America the bishops recognized as the decisive challenge for the Church the misery of the great majority of the people living on the subcontinent crying out to heaven. They responded to their cry by formulating the "preferential option for the poor," to galvanize the Church's commitment to a renewal of faith and justice in Latin America. CELAM's work was also inspired by a rising new theology: the theology of liberation. In this perspective faith and justice were brought into a new relationship with each other. Christian salvation was no longer only a matter for the hereafter, but also for the here and now.

For centuries the church in Latin America- apart from a few praiseworthy exceptions - had stood in an alliance with the powerful and the rich. With the documents of Medellín this alliance was dissolved, alarming certain circles in both the Latin American oligarchies and the United States government. In El Salvador the struggle for justice was intensified. The smallest country of Latin America combines all the beauty but also all the tensions and contradictions of the continent. Traditionally, El Salvador was an agricultural country with coffee, cotton and sugar cane as its main exports. It was ruled by the proverbial "14 families." In 1932 the army crushed a bloody uprising of the peasants and agricultural workers: in the infamous "*Matanza"* (slaughter)[4] there were 30,000 deaths within a few weeks. Until 1979, the country was ruled by military dictatorships that built a makeshift democratic facade. In the wake of a surge in industrialization in the 1960s, trade unions, reformist opposition parties and student organizations were formed to push for land reform and social change.

In connection with the ongoing political struggle, a violent persecution of church workers and leaders broke out in El Salvador in the 1970s and 80s. Thousands of committed Christians, 18 priests, four nuns and Archbishop Oscar Romero fell victim to it. The first priest to be murdered together with two companions was the Jesuit Father Rutilio Grande in 1977. The process of beatification for the three is nearing completion. Grande had learned to read the Gospel as a liberating message with the people in the farming village of Aguilares. He often said in his sermons: "God does not lie in a hammock high up in heaven, but he is among us." Rutilio Grande's

4 For an historic account of El Salvador's struggle over the injustices of its oligarchy, and the significance of the massacre of 1932, see Lindo-Fuentes, et. al. (2007).

murder was decisive in transforming Archbishop Oscar Romero from a rather fearful and apolitical churchman to a prophetic defender of the poor (cf. Maier, 2015). This change also manifested itself in Bishop Romero's attitude towards the Jesuits. While he had previously kept a critical distance from them, Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino became his closest advisors during his three years as archbishop (cf. Maier, 2016).

But what does El Salvador look like today? Even 27 years after the signing of the peace treaty, the country's problems are still far from being solved. It is still in a difficult and fragile process of transition from civil war to real peace, from decades of military dictatorships to democracy, from extreme social polarization to national reconciliation.

THE AMBIVALENCE OF REMEMBRANCE

Jesus of Nazareth articulated the ambivalence of monuments erected by scribes and Pharisees in polemical sharpness: "You build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous, saying: If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have been guilty of the death of the prophets as they were. With this you yourselves confirm that you are the sons of the murderers of the prophets" (Mt 23:29-31). The remembrance of the murdered Jesuits of the UCA should inspire us to re-examine the question of justice in the global context of our world today. It is a question of overcoming the "globalization of indifference" which Pope Francis denounced in the face of the fate of the refugees drowned in the Mediterranean (Brockhaus, 2019). Pope Francis' comment resonates with what the great Jewish writer, Elie Wiesel, said in a speech: "I have always believed that the opposite of love is not hatred, but indifference. The opposite of faith is not arrogance, but indifference. The opposite of hope is not despair, it is indifference. Indifference is not the beginning of a process, it is the end of a process" (Elie Wiesel, 1986). Our contemplation of the martyrs' legacies is not for the sake of mere remembrance. The memory of the victims becomes real memory if it makes us sensitive to the present suffering of people and if it gives rise to a practice which transforms the structures of injustice.

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