

Remembering the Jesuit Martyrs

John Dear | Nov. 10, 2009 On the Road to Peace

Twenty years ago, on November 16, 1989, I was studying theology at the Jesuit community in Berkeley, Calif., when my friend Steve Kelly knocked on the door and asked if I had heard the news. I hadn't. He broke down telling me of the brutal deaths early that morning of six Jesuit priests at the University of Central America, the Jesuit university in San Salvador. I had known those Jesuits from my time in El Salvador in 1985, when I lived and worked in a refugee camp. I was shocked and grief-stricken.

Their deaths set in motion a series of actions that changed my life. Steve and I decided then and there to do something. We gathered friends, drove into San Francisco and held vigil at the Salvadoran Consulate. That night, we facilitated a large public meeting about the murders and our response. Over the weekend, we held prayer services and organizing meetings, and on Monday morning, nearly 2,000 of us gathered outside the U.S. Federal Building in San Francisco to demand an end to U.S. military aid to El Salvador. That day, 120 of us, including 18 Jesuits, were arrested and jailed for kneeling down and blocking the building's entrance. It was the largest Jesuit protest in U.S. history.

Soon we were organizing similar demonstrations at the nearby Concord Naval Weapons Station and joining the protests at the Federal Building in Los Angeles. Steve and I and a group of priests and Salvadoran women embarked on a 21 day fast for an end to U.S. military aid to El Salvador. Martin Sheen and I flew to D.C. to sit in at the rotunda of the U.S. Capitol Building. I helped organize a rally in front of San Francisco's City Hall with Jackson Browne, Bonnie Raitt and Kris Kristofferson that brought out 12,000 people. We worked tirelessly for an end to U.S. military aid, and I think our efforts made a difference. But the deaths of the Jesuit martyrs touched us permanently.

Twenty years later, I call them to mind and heart:

Segundo Montes. Head of the University of Central America sociology department, director of the new human rights institute, superior of the Jesuit community, Segundo worked every weekend with the poor in Quezaltepeque. He had a big red beard, and people called him "Zeus." "I consider it a duty to work for human rights," he once said. "It is the duty of every human being who has the sensibility and sensitivity to the suffering of people."

Ignacio Martin Baro. Vice president of the University of Central America, social psychologist, expert in the field of public opinion in El Salvador, he worked every weekend in the poor parish of Jayaque

Juan Ramon Moreno. Assistant director of the pastoral institute at the University of Central America, secretary of the Jesuit province, teacher of novices, he founded a Jesuit newsletter and set up a state of the art library in the new Romero Center which the death squads completely destroyed after killing the Jesuits. "The vocation of the church and of the followers of Jesus," he wrote "is to be the innermost recess of Christ's compassion."

Amando Lopez. Former head of the San Salvador seminary and of the Jesuit University in Managua,

Nicaragua, he worked every weekend among the poor in Soyapango. I remember having lunch with him once and asking him about his friend, Jean Donovan, killed in 1980.

Joaquin Lopez y Lopez. The oldest, he had recently been diagnosed with cancer. One of the founders of the University of Central America, he also founded "Fe Y Alegria," a network of 13 schools that served eight thousand impoverished Salvadoran children, as well as two clinics which served 50,000.

Elba and Celina Ramos. Elba was the cook of the Jesuit house of studies down the road. That night, she brought her 16 year old daughter Celina to the University of Central America thinking they would be safer there on campus during the rebel offensive. They had been sleeping in a parlor room next to the Jesuit house when the death squads stormed the community. A few weeks earlier, Celina told a classmate that she hated violence so much that she would never again even kill an insect.

Ignacio Ellacuria. The university president, a world renown theologian and philosopher, and well known public figure in El Salvador, he helped write Archbishop Romero's pastoral letters, envisioned a new type of Jesuit university committed to social justice, and in 1985, held a nationally televised open forum at the university where he methodically outlined, exposed and denounced the right wing government and its death squads.

Ellacuria was fearless and outspoken, a true prophet of justice and peace. He disturbed the so-called peace of the U.S.-backed regime, so the warmakers killed him. And they took no prisoners.

In other words, there was a reason they were assassinated. Their deaths were not an accident. The government knew what it was doing. Many think the Salvadoran president approved the assassinations a few hours earlier. He was using the same logic of violent deterrence that killed every martyr from Jesus to Dorothy Stang. But what these governments never understand is that nonviolent martyrs for justice and peace rise up in the people, pushing us to take similar risks for justice and peace, urging us to disturb the false peace, forcing us to speak out.

When our group of Jesuit scholastics met Ellacuria in 1985, he told us: "The purpose of the Jesuit university in El Salvador is promote the reign of God. But you can't be for the reign of God unless you are also publicly actively against the anti-reign." You are not truly for peace and justice unless you are also speaking out publicly and working actively to end war and injustice. That night, during a dinner for us, the university Jesuits showed us the bullet holes from the many attacks and bombing raids they had suffered over the years.

Twenty years later, El Salvador's war has subsided but its poverty and crime have increased. We've suffered through two wars on Iraq, September 11th, Afghanistan, Bush, Clinton, George W. Bush, and now Obama, and watched the steady increase of extreme poverty, global starvation, global warming and global violence. What can we learn from the Jesuit martyrs that will help us today? Recently, I spoke during a week-long commemoration at St. Louis University and offered a few possible lessons.

First, the Jesuit martyrs were concerned about the world as it really is, what they called "Reality," and the world they saw is the same world today--a culture of violence, war and empire. Today, the notorious El Salvador of war, poverty and unimaginable violence has become the world. The whole world has become El Salvador! Like the martyrs, we need to talk about it, name it and do what we can to stop global poverty, wars and violence. If we do, we might also reach the heights of El Salvador's spectacular saints, prophets, theologians and martyrs.

Second, the martyrs denounced war, poverty and violence as "social sin." They knew these tragedies were unjust, immoral and impractical, but they went further and named systemic injustice as a violation of God's will, as blasphemy and idolatry. We are all guilty of mortal sin by allowing billions to suffer under poverty, war and violence, they taught, and true repentance means working to eradicate these injustices.

Third, the martyrs call us to take sides--to side with the world's poor and marginalized, to live in solidarity with them as best we can. They challenge us to befriend the poor, serve the poor, learn from the poor, liberate the poor, defend the poor, struggle with and for the poor, and ideally practice a downward mobility that leads us to become one with the poor. That was the journey of Jesus and the Jesuit martyrs; it's our journey too.

Fourth, the martyrs teach us to move from charity to justice. Yes, we have to serve specific suffering people, as each of them did, but we also have to ask why the poor are suffering and impoverished. As we do, we join the struggle for social and economic justice. The martyrs teach us to connect the dots around the world and learn that the struggle is one.

Fifth, the martyrs call us to make a preferential option for peace and nonviolence. They urge us to pursue global disarmament for a global redistribution of wealth, and thus to herald a new world of nonviolence. They want us to make sure that no one ever takes up the gun again. Like Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemani, their blood, spilled in the garden in front of their house, cries out: "Put down the sword!" It says: the age of the death squads is coming to an end. The martyrs push us to resist and end the work of the ultimate death squads--in the Pentagon, Los Alamos, Livermore Labs, the SAC base, Creech AFB, Fort Hood, Congress and the White House.

Sixth, the martyrs call us to follow the nonviolent Jesus "as he carries his cross" in pursuit of God's reign of justice and peace. They spoke about the cross, wrote about the cross, and took up the cross as nonviolent resistance to war and systemic injustice. They knew from the deaths of their friends, including Rutilio Grande, Archbishop Romero, and Ita Ford, that the only way to radical social change is through the paschal mystery. Today, few speak about the cross. This anniversary reminds us that every Christian is summoned to take up the cross of nonviolent resistance to global injustice.

Seventh, the Jesuit martyrs demonstrate how every Catholic university, college, high school, retreat center, and parish could become a center for justice and peace. The University of Central America was the model Jesuit university. There was no other place like it in the hemisphere. I was amazed, as they toured us around in 1985, at their ambitious attempt to change national opinion and "reality." It was a training camp in peace and justice. Every course, paper, and department was aimed at the nonviolent transformation of El Salvador. Imagine if every Jesuit, Catholic, and Christian university today were aimed at the disarmament and transformation of the United States; if these universities refused to take a penny from the Pentagon, banned ROTC, taught nonviolence, required every student to labor on behalf of the poor, and became a school of justice and peace! Not only would we begin to change our society; we would start to match the example set by the martyrs.

Eighth, Ellacuria and the Jesuit martyrs call us to become prophets of justice and peace. They were not afraid to speak publicly and became fierce communicators. The right wing accused of them being political, but they understood their public stand for justice and peace as a requirement of the Gospel. They expected every Christian to speak out. They would not tolerate our silence, our fear, our apathy, or our false humility (which lets us off the hook). I'm convinced that Ellacuria and the other martyrs would want us to denounce our government's wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, our massive military budget, our funding of the occupation of the Palestinians, our failure to protect the environment, our nuclear arsenal, and our refusal to eradicate global starvation. They would want us to be the voice of the voiceless, to communicate with our people as best we can so that this militarism ends and those resources are spent instead on food, homes, healthcare, education, employment and dignity for the world's poor.

Ninth, the Jesuit martyrs remind us that life is short. Their blood calls us to wake up, practice a mature Christianity, use our talents wisely, and spend our days working on behalf of the world's poor. Their deaths warn us not to waste the precious time we have been given. They cry out: Seek God! Seek God's reign! Love one another! Serve the least, hunger and thirst for justice, and make peace while there is still time.

Tenth, Ellacuria and the Jesuit martyrs invite us to be people of true hope. They avoided the cheap hope so common in our comfortable, apathetic culture. Instead, the martyrs point us to the hope of Jesus on the cross, the hope that comes close to despair, the hope that pursues justice and peace even though it seems so futile. The martyrs teach us to place our hope in God, and so, to know that the outcome, the results of our work, are in God's hands. As we learn this hard lesson, we find the strength to give our lives too for a new world without war, poverty, nuclear weapons and global warming, whether or not we live to see the fruit of our work. We know it is God's work, and so we go forward in hope, even joy, because we know now that our lives have joined the cause of God.

"We are people of the Gospel, a gospel that proclaims the reign of God, and that calls us to try to transform this earth into as close a likeness of that reign as possible," Ellacuria wrote.

As we remember Ellacuria and the Jesuit martyrs, let's pledge to carry on their work, follow their Gospel example, share their prophetic mission, and practice their fearless faith and bold hope. As we do, we too will be blessed.

This week, John's new book, *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings*, appears from Orbis Books. With his other recent books, *A Persistent Peace* and *Put Down the Sword*, along with Patricia Normile's *John Dear On Peace*, it is available from www.amazon.com. For information, or to schedule a speaking event, visit: www.johndear.org.

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