

Liberation Theology and the UCA Martyrs

Twenty five years ago eight people were shot to death at the Jesuit university in the capital of El Salvador. Two of the eight were killed because those who had ordered the attacks had made it clear that there could be no witnesses -- so the assassins killed a housekeeper named Elba Ramos and her sixteen year old daughter, Celina. Elba was 42; her husband Obdulio was a night watchman at the university. Celina was in her first year of high school – she had recently given up basketball and the band in order to give more time to her rigorous classes.¹ The other six shot to death on the night of November 16, 1989 were Jesuit priests who taught at the UCA, the Central American University in San Salvador.

I'd like to say a few words about each of them before turning to the question of why they were killed and what their lives and deaths mean for us. Ignacio Ellacuría was the rector or president of the UCA; he was a philosopher who had published many books and articles and it was under his guidance that the University, which had been founded only a couple of decades before, in 1965, by well-off Catholic families, had turned its attention more and more explicitly to the unjust conditions of Salvadoran society. Ignacio Martín-Baró was academic vice rector at the UCA, taught psychology and had founded the Institute of Public Opinion, which polled the Salvadoran people in order to counteract government-controlled media propaganda. Segundo Montes was academically trained first in physics, and he taught physics for a number of years at the Jesuit high school, the Externado San José, before doing further study in anthropology and sociology which he taught at the UCA. When in the early '80s he'd heard from army officers

¹ For biographical information on the martyrs of El Salvador I have drawn primarily on Ron Hansen's *A Stay Against Confusion: Essays on Faith and Fiction* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), "Hearing the Cry of the Poor: the Jesuits of El Salvador," pp. 193-228, reprinted in *Santa Clara Magazine* (Fall 2014), pp. 14-24. Citations are from the reprinted essay.

who had been former high school students of his that there was a plan brewing already then to murder Ellacuría, him, and three other directors of the UCA, he told an anxious member of the UCA's staff, "What am I going to do? If they kill me, they kill me."² Later in the '80s, just a year before he was killed, a journalist asked if he had ever thought about fleeing the country and he said, "We are here not just as teachers and social scientists. We are also parish priests, and the people need to have the Church stay with them in these terrible times – the rich as well as the poor. The rich need to hear from us, just as do the poor. God's grace does not leave, so neither can we."³

Juan Ramón Moreno was librarian for the Center for Theological Reflection at the UCA and assistant director of the Oscar Romero Center which had recently been established. Earlier, he'd had a stint as interim rector at the Externado San José about which I'll say something in a moment. Amando López had been head of the Central American University in Managua, Nicaragua and, before that, had been put in charge at age 34 of San Salvador's diocesan seminary; he taught theology at the UCA. José Joaquín López y López was the only one of the six Jesuit martyrs not born in Spain; he was Salvadoran, born into a wealthy family that owned coffee plantations and a well-known dairy business. It was López y López who had gotten the funding from elite families and conservative politicians he knew to start the UCA back in the early '60s. As the UCA turned increasingly in the direction of liberation theology and to exposing the injustices of El Salvador's existing economic system, it offended the people from whom López y López had raised the initial funds to start the UCA. This put him in an awkward spot, yet he was general secretary to the UCA faculty for many years and accepted

² Hansen, p. 19.

³ Hansen, p. 19.

Ellacuría's invitation in 1988 to join the Jesuit community in their house on the UCA campus even though he knew there had been many death threats already against those living there.

These were the eight who died on November 16, 1989 – Ignacio Ellacuría, Ignacio Martín-Baró, Segundo Montes, Juan Ramón Moreno, Amando Lopez, and Joaquin López y López, together with their companions Elba and Celina Ramos. They were shot by members of a commando unit of the Atlacatl Battalion who had been given orders by the High Command of the Salvadoran military to kill Ellacuría and the other Jesuits who lived with him in the house on the UCA campus, and to leave no witnesses.

Why were they killed? El Salvador was in the middle of a Civil War that had been going on for almost a decade and had claimed the lives of more than 70,000 people. Like other Latin American countries, El Salvador had gained independence from Spanish colonial rule back in the 19th century, but power had continued to be concentrated in the hands of a few wealthy landowners, what in El Salvador were known as the “14 families,” while the mass of people, in particular the Amerindian indigenous people, were subject to an unjust and exploitative system of labor on the *latifundios*, or plantations. As populist labor movements gained momentum around the world in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Salvadoran peasants – *campesinos*—made attempts to organize. In 1932 there was an uprising, viciously suppressed, in an event remembered as the Matanza, in which between 10,000 and 40,000 *campesinos* were massacred. Rumblings for justice in El Salvador in the years and decades that followed were widely regarded as a threat to law and order by those who wanted things to stay basically the way they were – those who did not suffer from, and generally were not really even able to grasp, the extraordinary injustices built into their own society.

What the priests at the UCA did was to shine a light on these injustices in the existing system. In a very deliberate way, they took up the cause of the Salvadoran poor. To us sitting here this sounds good and reasonable enough: expose injustice, defend those who suffer from it the most. But at the time it wasn't so easy to see even this clearly. One of the things that made it difficult was that the ruling elite draped themselves and their policies in the language of defending Christian civilization. Those who were doing most to defend the rights of the poor, meanwhile, often invoked ideas borrowed from Marxism. If you weren't paying attention too closely or if you had your own reasons for wanting to believe the ruling elite's way of spinning things, you could suppose that the government was trying to hold society together and that the ones calling for change were trying to tear society apart. In this context the UCA Jesuits, who in their writings and public addresses openly denounced the sinfulness of the existing system of land ownership and political repression, were inevitably accused of being communist sympathizers. It didn't stop them, but it made them hated, by lots of people who if you went to school or hung out with them would seem like nice enough folks.

A feeling for what the atmosphere was like can be conveyed by an anecdote from Juan Ramon Moreno's experience as interim rector of the Jesuit high school, the Externado San José, back in 1972. He had been brought in specifically to see what was going on within the school, because parents had been complaining. These were upscale Salvadorans who wanted a good Jesuit education for their children and they were upset about some of the ideas their kids were picking up in the classroom and about field trips the kids were taking into areas of poverty, after which the kids were coming home with serious criticism of their own families' opulent lifestyles. When Moreno carefully investigated, as he was asked to do, what he found out was

that what the students were reading in their classes were not Marxist writings but papal encyclicals, and that the reason the students became so deeply upset after their field trips was because the conditions of poverty they had encountered were truly horrifying. This was not an answer the parents evidently were prepared to hear and Moreno was quickly driven out of his job at the prestigious high school, with the help of a government-controlled newspaper that maligned him publicly.⁴

The situation I've just described reflects a gradual and painful shift that was happening more broadly in the church in Latin America in the '60s and '70s and into the '80s and that continued to be met through all those years with considerable resistance at various levels. The church in its official positions and in the activity of its hierarchy during this period went from aligning itself with those who were in charge, the oligarchs and the government, to aligning itself voluntarily with those who were not in charge, the *campesinos*. It began to take up the cause of the peasants in their struggle for economic and political rights. In this process of taking the side of the poor in their struggle for a life of dignity in this world, the church made a choice very much like the one Moses had made when, after having been raised in the most elite strata of Egyptian society, he cast his lot with the Israelite slaves, and in so doing burned his bridges with the source of political power. The movement in Latin America known as Liberation Theology has as its basic principle the insight that the God of the Bible is a God who liberates – it is his will that human beings be liberated not only from their own personal individual sins, in order to have eternal life in the world to come, but also from the unjust social and economic structures of sin in this world, in order to have lives of dignity here and now. It's interesting

⁴ Hansen, pp. 19-20.

that the context in which Moses made his choice, his preferential option for the poor, was when he actually went out from the privileged world he'd grown up in and saw, first-hand, the suffering of those at the bottom of his society. It bothered him; it upset him -- to the point that he lashed out at one of the Egyptian oppressors and killed him. The Latin American church in taking up the cause of the oppressed *campesinos* in El Salvador did not resort to violence, by and large; a very small number of priests did actually take up arms, but that was not typical, and none of the Jesuits who taught at the UCA participated in or endorsed violent revolution. But they did see the need, as Moses had, to take sides in the circumstance of injustice that they saw was built into the very structure of Salvadoran society.

A central insight of liberation theology emerges here:

This is that you really don't know what's going on in the world around you, you don't know what reality actually is, until you have seen things from the point of view of those of us in the human community who are poor. Theirs is a point of view that is hidden from those who are not themselves in the position that the poor are in. Jon Sobrino, a faculty member at the UCA who would surely have died that night with his fellow Jesuits had he not been in Thailand teaching a course at the time, has written that "the most real reality...is the life and death of the poor."⁵

I want to pause on that observation in order to bring out what liberation theology at its heart is getting at. If it is true that, as Sobrino says, "the most real reality is the life and death of the poor," then making a conscious choice in one's own life to enter into the world of those of

⁵ Jon Sobrino, "Companions of Jesus," in *Companions of Jesus: the Jesuit Martyrs of El Salvador* (Maryknoll, NY: 1990), pp. 3-53, at p. 6.

us in the human community who are poor isn't so much a moral thing one does because one should, because one is somehow supposed to, like a chore or an externally imposed obligation – this isn't what drove the Jesuit martyrs. Certainly, the choice they made was a moral one, but at the deepest level, what they were doing wasn't about morality but about reality. They wanted to be in touch with the most real reality, the heart of reality. Why the Jesuits at the UCA had come to believe they had to enter into the world of the poor was because they had come to see that if they didn't, they were cutting themselves off from *what is*, from the truth of reality itself. Jesus is known to us in fact, in Christian tradition, as He who is, "ho ōn" (ὁ ὢν), sometimes translated as the Existing One, which comes from the "I am" of Exodus 3 when Moses asks God His name and God replies "I am who I am." This name of God has given decisive shape to the whole stream of reflection in the western philosophical tradition on the question of being. The question of being is the question of what is, and this from the biblical perspective is the same as the question of Who Is, that is, of God, the "I am who I am" with whom Jesus expressly identifies himself when in John's Gospel he says, "Before Abraham was, I am." (Jn. 8:58) Well, what Liberation Theology perceived with extraordinary insight and what it brought out in a more forceful way than had been done before was that this reality of God, this reality of Being, the truth of What is – the truth of He who is -- Jesus Christ, the Ho on -- is given to us through the poor human being. We can't get at this most real reality of what is, of the world and of God and of ourselves as human beings and of sin in order to be saved from it, unless we are in touch with those human beings among us who have the least. It is with them that we know Jesus precisely identifies himself when he says in Matthew's Gospel that when you care for one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you care for me.

I would argue that for most of us who may feel the pull of Jesus' invitation here, for most of us who feel again today the pull of the example of the Jesuit martyrs for whom the least among them was always the top concern, the problem – the thing that holds us back from following their example further than we do – really isn't that we are calloused and cold people but that we organize our lives in such a way that entering into the world of the poor to see the world as it looks from that vantage point isn't our priority. What we have been taught to want to do is to ascend to a height of success in our lives so that we can see how the world looks from there, from the vantage point of the wealthy and powerful. But Sobrino, in another passage, said of his fellow Jesuits at the UCA who were martyred that "[t]hey believed -- and experience confirmed it -- that more can be seen from below than above, that reality can be known better from the standpoint of suffering and powerlessness of the poor than from that of the powerful."⁶

What then follows, according to the Liberation Theology of the UCA Jesuits is that if we're not getting a glimpse of the world from below, we're living in a dream world; we don't know what's actually going on; we're susceptible to believing all sorts of lies, lies that gradually and ultimately deaden our spirit. The fascinating thing about this to me is that it doesn't work both ways: if you never know what the world looks like from the very top -- of success, or fame, or wealth, or whatever other exalted goals we usually organize our lives by -- that doesn't mean you're missing out on seeing the reality of what is, indeed the reality of He who is. But if you never know what the world looks like from below, from poverty and suffering and affliction, then you are in fact missing out on seeing the reality of what is, and the reality of He

⁶ Sobrino, p. 28.

who is. The view from below is “where it's at”. And the reason is that living in a dream world will kill you and living in reality will save you. If and when a whole society lives in a dream world, breaking out of it is no small task.

But where do we start – or if we already are on board of all of this, where or how do we take another step farther and deeper out of the dream world that kills us and into the reality that saves us?

I'm going to touch on three interrelated points in responding to this question in light of the Gospel that the Jesuit martyrs embodied in their lives and deaths.

The three points are this:

(1) We start by letting the suffering of others into our hearts on a regular basis; (2) we allow this priority of the suffering poor to guide us in our work, our careers; and (3) we recognize that we need help, a miracle really, if we are not to wind up either hating the poor who disappoint us, or hating the rich who don't seem to give enough of a damn, or hating ourselves for not being able on our own steam to sustain the loving commitment to Christ's command to serve the least of those around us.

(1) We have to let it in – the suffering of the poor. This is really a call to allowing ourselves the dignity of being a little serious about life. Why don't we do this more than we do? I would suggest that it isn't sheer greed for more and more money for ourselves, or anything quite so simple as that; it's more that to open ourselves to the reality of the experience of those among us human beings who are poorest is depressing to us. We don't know what we can do about it and on some profound level this does bother us, so we turn it all off; we check out. Our biggest temptation in contemporary America is to organize our lives and

our time around trivialities. If I've got a little time between classes, it's easier to click on what's trending with the latest Hollywood love affair or scandal than open myself to the suffering of one of my fellow human beings who is the victim of the effects of a policy that maybe one group of people have been pressing for and another has been saying is a terrible mistake. To read about that is depressing because it tells me that a human being is suffering and lots of others are arguing -- maybe it reminds me of my own parents fighting and I find it all distressing and annoying, and anyway I don't fully understand it and the article is long. So I click on what's trending. And the Hollywood scandal demands nothing of me; it has no claim on me, as the poor person victimized by injustice does.

But let's heed the warning about the long term. A whole life, decades after decades, of, in effect, clicking on what's trending rather than checking on our suffering neighbor near and far, will kill us; it simply and truly will destroy our spirit. So why not start putting different habits in place now. The discovery we make is what we almost always discover -- namely, that if we stick with the habit, it bears fruit. The discipline of choosing to turn toward my suffering neighbor near or far rather than away from him or her, even if it's by reading the newspaper, will, over the long haul, make a difference in my capacity to live an authentic Christian life.

(2) We allow the priority of the suffering poor to guide us in our career. The witness of the Jesuit martyrs in their work as university professors and administrators encourages us to understand that our concern for the poorest and most vulnerable among us should inform not only what we do in our spare time but how we approach our professional lives, our work. It's one thing to help out at the local soup kitchen, to stand literally shoulder to shoulder with those who are at the bottom of society economically, but if I then return the next morning to a

job that goes unthinkingly along with a system that makes the rich richer and the poor poorer, then I'm serving the poor with one hand and contributing to their oppression with the other. When we meet someone who says they're an economics major, our first thought tends to be – I'll confess that this is usually my initial reaction – that this is someone who will do well for himself or herself financially, and not attend all that much to the poorest among us. But this need not be the case. Econ. majors can – and we need them to – study their subject with a heart of compassion for those who are least among us. We need economists and finance experts who aren't merely going to try to get the most they can for themselves out of the system as it currently works but who will raise humane questions and criticisms about how we can make the existing system better, make it more fair, more conducive to the good of all rather than just a few. So, career decisions we make at every step in our lives, from what field to go into to what kind of job to pursue within that field to what specific issues to focus our energies on within our job – all of this will be different if the suffering of the poor remains the highest priority for us. Sobrino says of the Jesuit martyrs, "They did not think of work as a way of pursuing a career."⁷ They did their work with excellence but the goal wasn't to make a big splash personally; it was to serve those who most needed their service.

(3) We recognize that we need help . . . Jesus said "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing." (Jn. 15:5) I can resolve to be a good person, I can decide to make concern for others the organizing principle of my life, but my very faith in Christ discloses to me something about all my moral resolutions and all my determination to have love for others rule my life: it discloses

⁷ Sobrino, p. 11.

that without Christ I can't pull it off, not over the long course of my life. Paradoxically, my faith tells me not that *others* can't be good without the faith that sustains *me*: quite the contrary, my faith tells me that there exist others who don't even know God who nevertheless do His will (see Isaiah 45:4-7). Christ speaks to me not about others but about myself when He says, "Apart from me you can do nothing." So rather than simply resolve by my own will to love my neighbor and especially the neighbor most in need, I beg God to enable and empower and sustain me to love my neighbor in need, according to His will – to see who this is and what the need precisely is, to understand what I can do and when and how, and what my limits are, to oppose injustice with all my being while not hating the unjust, to love rich and poor alike as Segundo Montes did, to not become burned out and embittered by all the injustice I see, to keep the faith even through dark times when nothing seems to change, to accept myself even though I may suffer rather little compared to others. Often we think of faith as giving people courage in the face of the greatest visible dangers, and this was certainly true of the Jesuit martyrs, who endured death threats and bombs detonating more than once in the house where they lived, and who eventually offered the ultimate sacrifice of their lives. But the faith of the martyrs also enabled them to be preserved from all the invisible dangers of despair and pride and hatred I have mentioned that threatened them as well. According to Sobrino: "These men were ...believers, Christians. I do not mention this here as something obvious or to be taken for granted, but as something central in their lives, something that really ruled all their lives."⁸

To recognize that they depended on God enables us to look to the Jesuit martyrs in a way that doesn't allow us to stop at them, but to see through them, through their concrete

⁸ Sobrino, p. 15.

lives of Christian witness, to the love of God that fueled everything they did. The word martyr in its literal sense means witness – and it is to God’s love for humanity in the person of Jesus Christ that their lives and deaths bore witness and continue to bear witness today. May that same love animate us as we go forward strengthened by their example.