

AJCU Connections November Issue

By Thomas MacKinnon

Executive Director of the Pride Passion Promise Campaign at The University of Scranton

The Martyrs of the University of Central America and their influence 20 years later

Ignacio Ellacuria, S.J.

Ignacio Martin-Baro, S.J.

Segundo Montes, S.J.

Amando Lopez, S.J.

Juan Ramon Moreno, S.J.

Joaquin Lopez y Lopez, S.J.

Elba Ramos

Celina Ramos

This November marks the 20th anniversary of the brutal murder of six Jesuits, their housekeeper and her daughter in El Salvador. They were murdered at the University of Central America in San Salvador on November 16, 1989. The murders, carried out by government militants, were committed because the Jesuits of the University of Central America were voicing concerns over the atrocities of human rights violations being committed by the government. As this anniversary is marked, it might be suggested that it be a time for Jesuit colleges and universities to reflect on the impact of that day. This event occurred before nearly half of our current undergraduate students were born. Why should students be aware of this day? Why does it matter so critically 20 years later?

Simply put, it is because their lives and deaths express the very core of what we as Jesuit educators wish to instill in our pupils.

May 2008

The 12 of us gathered outside of the student center on the campus of The University of Scranton on an unseasonably cold May morning. It was 4:30 a.m., and we were beginning our journey to El Salvador as part of the University's International Service Program. For several months, we had been meeting as a team to prepare for the trip –spiritually, emotionally and intellectually. We shared our hopes and expectations for the trip and confided in one another our trepidation and uncertainty. Was it safe? How would we handle seeing poverty so up close and personal? Would we understand what we were seeing? Now the day was here, and we boarded the van for the two-hour drive to JFK airport and five hour flight to El Salvador.

It was a sultry afternoon in San Salvador as we stepped off the plane and walked across the tarmac. The heat was so intense that you could almost smell it wafting through the air. As a team, we were excited. We had been waiting for this day for nearly six months now. We made it through customs and were warmly greeted by our hosts for the week. Within hours, we found ourselves ensconced in the reality of El Salvador.

A few days into our trip, several of us were struck by a conversation we had with a woman living in the campo about 45 minutes outside of San Salvador. We had spent the last few days helping on a building project for the community. We were proud to be constructing a library, building on the progress of countless teams of volunteers who had preceded us. The

woman invited us to her home made of rusted aluminum and worn out ply-wood to thank us for coming to her community. We sat together as a group with her family, and she quietly began to speak to our group. "You can help build this library. I appreciate that. My neighbors appreciate that. Maybe someone here is a nurse or doctor and can help give us medicine. I would say thank you to that, too. But what makes me thankful to God is that you think I am important. You are here and you could be somewhere else. If you are here, I must matter. My family must matter." Perhaps some of us were caught off guard because we had been fixated on "the doing." Yet this profoundly poor woman told us what really matters. She took our presence as a show of love and importance, and that was what mattered so deeply to her and the others in her community.

The presence of the six Jesuits 20 years ago conveyed the same message. People matter.

Dean Brackley, S.J., a theologian and teacher at the University of Central America, suggests that Jesuit colleges and universities are called to "make reality our primary object of study." Father Brackley is just one of several voices from the University of Central America, including the martyred rector, Ignacio Ellacuria, who have led an international discussion on our calling to be in solidarity with the third world.

Twenty years ago, eight people in El Salvador were killed precisely because they were making reality their primary object of study. Their focus was more than mathematics, science, reading and all of the theory that goes with a traditional education. They were paying attention to what was happening in the world - in their case, right in their backyard- and speaking out about injustice. In essence, they were saying that they would not stand for the degradation to which they were witnessing.

For students at The University of Scranton, and other Jesuit and Catholic colleges and universities, the Martyrs of El Salvador remind us to be that same voice for the voiceless. We need to be present to the voiceless, to witness their struggle and to speak on their behalf.

We need to show them that we care, that they are important, that they matter. Service trips to El Salvador and other places with those in need are among the many ways in which we instill in our students the need to witness and act on behalf of those who cannot. Through courses imbedded with social justice issues to clubs and student organizations devoted to social justice causes, we, as Jesuit educators seek to touch the lives of our students in order to remind them of our need to help those less fortunate.

The University of Scranton has not forgotten the Jesuit Martyrs in its efforts. In a quiet grove, just a few feet from the Jesuit residence, lies a simple cross and prayer garden with the names of the eight engraved in a plaque. Martyrs Grove was dedicated in 2001 to serve as a reminder of the importance of their lives.

To commemorate the 20th anniversary of the University of Central America Martyrs, and to encourage members of The University of Scranton community to be "voices for the voiceless," University of Scranton President Scott R. Pilarz, S.J., has announced several campus events during the 2009-2010 academic year.

Among these are a lecture on the Influence of the Jesuit Martyrs by Rev. Rodolfo Cardenal, S.J., the former vice rector of the University of Central America. Scranton will also hold a campus-wide Mass to commemorate the Jesuit Martyrs of El Salvador and hold a Latin American Film Series commemorating the Jesuit Martyrs. In addition, Scranton Jesuits, faculty and staff will meet with students to discuss their recollection of hearing the news 20 years ago during a discussion session planned in November.

In January the President and his senior leadership team at Scranton will travel to El Salvador to witness first-hand the legacy of the Jesuit Martyrs. As a team, they will reflect on the conditions in El Salvador and bring back to The University of Scranton ways to animate on campus the living vocation of the eight martyrs.