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Reflections by a Convicted Bystander and a Companion of Jesus

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Martyr: Literally a “witness.” One who is put to death because of his or her faith in Jesus Christ.¹

Elba Ramos, Celina Ramos, Ignacio Ellacuría, S.J., Ignacio Martín-Baró, S.J., Segundo Montes, S.J., Juan Ramón Moreno, S.J., Amando López, S.J., and Joaquín López y López, S.J.

“No hay amor más grande que dar la vida por los amigos.” (John 15:13)



Martyrs' Memorial, Boettcher Commons, Regis University. Credit: Sean Gruno

November 14-17, 2014, El Salvador.

It was good to be back at the *Universidad Centroamericana* (the UCA) in El Salvador for a few days. Two Jesuit friends, Ignacio Martín-Baró, S.J. and Dean Brackley, S.J., had given most of their adult and ministerial lives to the people of that Jesuit university and to the people of El Salvador. So, this sojourn was personal as well as public; it was a pilgrimage to tally the personal joy and loss of friendships in the Society of Jesus that were terminated too early as well as a time to for me to stand in solidarity, in accompaniment of a people who have suffered so much. It was about renewing my deepest commitments to serve as a Jesuit university president with renewed courage and vigor.

Back in 1979, Nacho (Martín-Baró) and I were fellow graduate students at the University of Chicago. We lived in a Chicago six-flat with a dozen or so other Jesuits doing graduate studies. Nacho studied psychology; I studied English literature. He was finishing his graduate studies; I was just beginning.

Prior to starting his doctorate at the University of Chicago, Nacho had spent many years working at the UCA as a professor and as a priest. He was rigorous and tough, very tough. A great academic, he was finishing his doctorate in record time, much quicker than the average ten years it took at Chicago during those years. But Nacho quietly asked me one night after dinner and dishes if I would proofread his dissertation. I was deeply honored. He explained that while he was fluent in

English, he worried about nuances and “writing in English while thinking in Spanish.” I was happy to help and took the challenge. In an unspoken exchange, Nacho helped me navigate the perils of being a first-year grad student at a premier university. I will always be grateful.

Dean Brackley was also a graduate student at Chicago during the same years. He was still completing his course work for his doctorate in theology, so he was between Nacho the veteran and me the rookie. Years later, Dean and I became close friends when we worked in Jesuit higher education and served on the board of trustees at the University of San Francisco. Dean was brilliant and engaging, even charming. Dean lived out the Jesuit vocation when he asked to be transferred to the UCA after the martyrdom of Nacho, five other Jesuits, and Elba and Celina Ramos. Dean spent the rest of his ministerial life at the UCA.

Dean’s was the romantic idealism to Nacho’s hard-boiled realism. Through the years of knowing them, I came to know I needed both. That is the vocation of the Jesuit: to be a pragmatic romantic in the service of God and the Church.

All this was on my mind when we landed that day last November at El Salvador’s international airport. The days would be filled with international meetings, such as that with the John Joseph Moakley Charitable Foundation. Joe Moakley (1927-2001), was the U.S. Congressman who started the Congressional investigation into the U.S. and Salvadoran complicity in the deaths of the six Jesuits, their housekeeper, and her daughter in 1989. Since 2001, the Moakley Charitable Foundation has given scholarships to many students in need. Other meetings were with bishops and priests from all over Central America and the United States, two with U.S. Congressman Jim McGovern (D-MA) and finally with the Jesuit university presidents from around the world. More importantly, we all sensed that this twenty-fifth anniversary of the martyrdom of the six Jesuits, their housekeeper, and her daughter was not so much about remembering our friends and co-workers; rather, it was about teaching, helping this generation of students understand and take up the cost of discipleship at our schools. Most of all,

it was the students teaching me in return; they opened my mind and my heart. How do you talk about what has happened to your friends, something so brutal and terrifying? We found ways.

The time spent with the Regis University students, guided by Paul Burson from the Center for Service Learning, was enlightening, healing, and hope producing. The students, Zoe Vlastos, Michaela Marquez, Brayden Weninger, and Fatima Estrada Rascon, seemed to put their intellectual and emotional reserve aside. They dove deeply into the history, the politics, and most of all the people of El Salvador. One afternoon, I skipped yet another meeting and went with the students and Paul to a little village called Suchitoto. Arturo was our driver and he picked us up after Mass at the Cathedral. Paul guided us through some silent reflection and prayer on our drive; it was a pilgrimage within a pilgrimage. We began to share what we felt about what we had encountered thus far. For the students, reflections focused on the people, mostly women, who make their families function in a very dangerous and very poor country. It was clear that the conditions that led to civil war so many years ago, conditions the UCA Jesuits challenged, had not changed very much.

We arrived at the *Centro Arte para la Paz*, and visited with Sr. Peggy O’Neill, a remarkable and holy woman dedicated to making peace in a ravaged community. Peggy is a professor for Santa Clara University in their *Casa de la Solidaridad* Program. But more importantly, for nearly thirty years Peggy has been a source of solace and peacemaking through art and education in the village of Suchitoto. For Peggy, art is a door to remembering and healing, tallying and moving forward. That afternoon, after lunch, we went to one of her favorite places, the *Teatro Alejandro Cotto* for a piano concert by Evan Shinnars, a young student at the Julliard School in New York City. Evan played Bach for an hour to a very full house in a very small village. It was balm for hearts that remember the civil war and it helped heal what has been ruptured.

Our Regis students, Paul, Sr. Peggy, and Arturo our driver, and so many we met in El Salvador possess the toughness and the gentleness, the public stamina and the private rectitude to bring

some sense of progress and hope with a marginalized people. The visit gave some further form to my memories of friends and my desire to work for a more humane and just world as a Jesuit. My pilgrimage began as a journey to see where and how my two Jesuit friends spent their lives. It developed into the next right step as President of Regis University. I am grateful. HJE

Note

¹ Richard P. McBrien, *Catholicism*, rev. ed.(San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994), 1022.