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UNIVERSITY of



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NEWS RELEASE

UNIVERSITY OF DAYTON TO HONOR HUMAN RIGHTS LAWYER WITH INAUGURAL MONSIGNOR ROMERO AWARD APRIL 11

DAYTON, Ohio — In the early 1970s, Juan Méndez began his law practice by serving those who wanted to change the edicts imposed by oppressive military dictatorships. Initially, he represented trade unions working for labor reform, but quickly became involved in representing political prisoners.

As a result, he was arrested, tortured and placed in administrative detention for one and a half years by the Argentinean government. The ordeal only bolstered his sense of social justice and, more than a quarter-century later, Méndez continues to dedicate his legal career to human rights.

Méndez, a law professor at Notre Dame University and the school's director of the Center for Civil and Human Rights, will be at the University of Dayton on Tuesday, April 11, to accept the school's inaugural Monsignor Romero Award for Leadership in Service to Human Rights. UD's Human Rights Committee, which established what will be an annual recognition, will present the award to Méndez at 7:30 p.m. at the Mathias H. Heck Courtroom in Keller Hall.

The event is free and open to the public.

The award is named after Monsignor Oscar Romero, archbishop of San Salvador who was fatally shot while celebrating Mass in March 1980 for speaking out on behalf of the oppressed in his native El Salvador. In 1979 he visited the pope in Rome to present him with seven dossiers filled with documents describing human rights violations in El Salvador.

The Rev. James L. Heft, S.M., University professor of faith and culture at UD, will speak on the life of Romero.

The international award was created to honor individuals have made major contributions to human rights, "especially through their leadership and their overwhelming sense of justice," said Mark Ensalaco, UD's director of the international studies program and founder of the human rights committee.

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"If you look over the career of Juan Méndez, you can trace the evolution of the human rights movement in the Americas," Ensalaco said. "For more than 25 years he's distinguished himself as a defender, scholar and educator of human rights."

After his release from the Argentinean government, Méndez moved to the U.S. where he worked for the Catholic Church to protect the rights of migrant workers. In 1978 he joined the Lawyer's Committee for Civil Rights Under the Law in Washington, D.C., (now called Human Rights Watch) to help in the group's civil and human rights programs.

For the next 15 years, he worked with Human Rights Watch to help build the organization into "one of the most widely respected human rights organizations in the world," Ensalaco said. In 1994 he became general counsel of the organization.

Since 1996 Méndez has been executive director of the Inter-American Institute of Human Rights in Costa Rica where he teaches issues of human rights to police and military officers, lawyers, journalists, public officials and others throughout the Americas.

UD's human rights committee, which was formed in spring 1999, comprises a panel of faculty members who focus their teaching and research toward advocating human rights throughout the world. Among other things, the committee has entered into an agreement with the National Labor Committee — a U.S.-based nongovernmental organization that tracks labor practices in garment factories in Third World countries — that will allow UD students studying human rights to intern with the NLC and provide the organization with faculty resources, including research.

UD became the nation's first university to offer an undergraduate major concentration and a minor in human rights studies in December 1998.

- 30 -

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