



4 de Julio. La masacre de San Patricio.

Directores: Juan Pablo Young y Pablo Zubizarreta.

Lifting the Lid on an Unsolved ‘Dirty War’ Atrocity*

Tom Hennigan

A documentary about the massacre of five churchmen in 1970s Buenos Aires is also the story of an Irish community under pressure. Now its makers are bringing the film to Maynooth. **Tom Hennigan** reports

IN THE GRUESOME list of atrocities that scarred Argentina during its “dirty war” of the 1970s, the St Patrick’s Massacre, which struck at the heart of the country’s Irish community, was among the most shocking. In the early hours of July 4th, 1976, unidentified gunmen slipped into the parish church of San Patricio in the Buenos Aires neighbourhood of Belgrano and murdered three priests and two seminarians from the Pallottine Order.

Although Argentinians had become accustomed to death during the vicious struggle between government death squads and left-wing guerrillas, the killing of men in holy orders in a parish church in one of the capital’s smartest neighbourhoods stunned the country.

The Pallottines had come to Argentina from Ireland to provide for the spiritual needs of the Irish immigrants who went there in the second half of the nineteenth century to farm the recently opened pampas. In Argentina they remained closely identified with the Irish community, and two of the murdered priests – Alfredo Kelly (San Patricio’s parish priest) and Alfredo Leaden – were of Irish descent.

In the aftermath, the military government sought to blame left-wing guerrillas, though all the indications were that the murders had been carried out by a government-linked death squad. The Catholic Church largely remained silent. A judicial investigation went nowhere, and no one has ever been convicted of the crime.

Now an Irish audience will have a chance to see a new investigation into the massacre by two Argentinian film-makers. After a general release in Argentina and a tour of the international film festival circuit, *4 de julio* (*Fourth of July*) finally reaches Ireland on Monday [28th April 2008] with a 6.30pm screening in Maynooth University.¹ Directors Juan Pablo Young and Pablo Zubizarreta say they always wanted to show their film in Ireland, telling as it does the story of an Irish community. But even without the Irish connection, the film is a

fascinating insight into Argentina's dirty war and the complicity of the country's Catholic hierarchy and many of its citizens in the crimes of the military dictatorship.

Young is a descendant of Irish immigrants and his family lived in San Patricio parish when the massacre took place. Although he was a very small boy at the time, he still remembers clearly the image of his aunt crying afterwards.

Zubizarreta's family also lived in the parish and he too recalls the aftermath, with "all the people gathered outside the church, everyone silent". While they were shocked by what had occurred, most in the parish wanted to move on quickly.

"As was common at the time, many decided that if the priests had been killed they must have been 'involved' somehow," says Zubizarreta.

"The general response was not to seek revenge or investigate what happened, but instead forgive," recalls Young. This was an attitude the Catholic hierarchy encouraged.

But Zubizarreta's father and brother were part of a small minority who demanded justice for their parish priest and his colleagues. They daubed graffiti on walls by the neighbourhood's train station, demanding answers.

Although he did not yet know Zubizarreta, Young saw his father's slogans and the events of 1976 always stayed with him. In 2001, in film school, he staged a play about the massacre and invited along fellow student Zubizarreta. They discovered their mutual connection with the case and resolved to investigate it and make a documentary about it.

It took them six years. With no funding, they made the film in their spare time between jobs, begging and borrowing equipment from friends and colleagues. But today, they say this worked in their favour, as much new evidence came to light between the start of the project and March 2007, when they finally managed to finish it.

The result is a meticulous investigation which has none of the partisan rancour that still colours much of the debate in Argentina about the dirty war. In forensic, often chilling, detail the film attempts to discover who carried out the attack and, more importantly, why. The murders occurred during what was perhaps the worst week of the dirty war between the military dictatorship and left-wing groups.

Following the coup of March 1976, government death squads went on the offensive against the country's left-wing guerrillas and extended their net to round up anyone considered "subversive". Thousands disappeared, never to be seen again; others had their bodies dumped, mutilated, by the side of the road or in cemeteries.

The massacre in San Patricio took place amidst this maelstrom of violence. The movie attempts to understand why priests were targeted. After all, Argentina's Catholic hierarchy backed the military coup, whose guiding ethos was an extreme brand of Catholic nationalism. Some priests helped relieve through confession the consciences of military officers working on a conveyor belt of death at secret killing centres around the country.

While several prominent guerrilla leaders were of Irish descent, the Irish community, prosperous and conservative, was by and large a firm supporter of the military's efforts to prevent what it saw as the "Cuba-isation" of Argentina. But, as the movie shows, the dirty war revealed splits within the country's Catholic community. By the 1970s, many Argentinian Catholics were followers of liberation theology, the movement formulated by South American

theologians and widely popular in Latin America, which emphasised Christ's social teachings. The hierarchy saw liberation theology as creeping Marxism and, in fact, the country's biggest guerrilla group, the Montoneros, grew out of Catholic youth groups.

This was often seen as enough justification for the military's killers to target critics of the regime within the church. Shortly before his murder, Fr Kelly had denounced parishioners for attending auctions where the property of people "disappeared" by the military was sold off. As a result, several members of the congregation denounced Kelly as a communist, which in 1970s Argentina could be a death sentence.

It is therefore not surprising that many in Buenos Aires are uncomfortable about going over the events of July 4th once again.

"The church and many even in the congregation of San Patricio were not keen on the film," says Young.

In 2006 the primate of Argentina put the five murdered men on the path to sainthood, but he seems far less concerned with pursuing the killers through the courts, a course of action now possible following the lifting of an amnesty law for military officers in 2004. "Today the Catholic Church fights for canonisation. But it will not fight for justice," says Zubizarreta.

Obviously the film is not a substitute for justice. But thirty-two years after the events in San Patricio church, it does at least hinder the efforts of those who would rather forget the circumstances that led to the July 4th killings, or at least leave them wrapped in an uncomfortable silence.

Note

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- 1 The directors, Juan Pablo Young and Pablo Zubizarreta, land-rights activist and former St Patrick's priest Bob Kilmeate, and writer Eduardo Kimel, on whose book the film is based, were present at the event.

