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La Verdad Y La Justicia Witnessing Truth in the Service of Justice

La Verdad: A Witness to the Salvadoran Martyrs, by Lucía Cerna and Mary Jo Ignoffo

New York: Orbis Books, 2014, co-published with Santa Clara University. Paperback, 186 pages, \$20.00

Reviewed by **Theresa Ladrigan-Whelpley**

What are you living for? What would you die for? Few of us would say “the truth.” Lucía Cerna, a Salvadoran woman who worked as a housekeeper in the Jesuit Community at the Universidad Centroamericano (UCA) in San Salvador, chose to risk her life by speaking truth to power. As primary witness to the massacre at the UCA on November 16, 1989, Cerna testified to the reality that it was the Salvadoran military who carried out the killings. “My life changed in one moment.... I never thought my life would change. I just thought to tell the truth” (p. 90).

In *La Verdad: A Witness to the Salvadoran Martyrs*, a book jointly published by Santa Clara University and Orbis Press in commemoration of the 25th anniversary of the UCA martyrs, Cerna shares her harrowing life story in dialogue with her friend, co-author, and historian, Mary Jo Ignoffo. Cerna begins by recounting her childhood in a town outside of San Salvador, where she and her brothers lived with their mentally-ill grandmother and abusive grandfather, subsisting on the edge of the agricultural estate of one of the fourteen ruling families of El Salvador. “I think the people of

that town would say my family was the most poor of all. I will tell you why. I picked up garbage nobody wanted, but I needed it. We had hunger” (p. 3). After her grandmother died, Cerna began to work as a housekeeper in San Salvador and met and married her first husband. He worked as a gardener for another one of the fourteen land-owning families, but after his employer was kidnapped and killed by the guerrilla resistance, he became desperate for money, and Cerna notes: “he changed, first in the mind and then the face. Maybe he was depressed; I don’t know. But when his face changed to hate, I felt scared” (p. 22). Cerna recalls stories of her husband’s abuse and ultimate death and how he kept their two children from her. Cerna’s accounts of her own life, including the oppression and struggles of her family, echo the *realidad* of hundreds of thousands in El Salvador’s landscape.

In 1980, through the recommendation of her aunt, Cerna came to work as a housekeeper at Loyola Center, a retreat house near the UCA, and later at the UCA offices as well. Cerna notes how respected she felt by the Jesuits, how much they regarded the significance of her work and her humanity. “The priests appreciated my work.... They offered respect. Never before did I have that” (p. xxiv). When the civil war



left her village without power and water for several days in 1989, it was Cerna’s confidence in the Jesuits’ care that compelled her to seek refuge and support for her family at the UCA. The Cernas arrived the afternoon of November 15, 1989, and Padre Nacho [Ignacio Martín-Baró, S.J.] offered them space in an empty guest house on the campus.

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Book Review



Ignacio Ellacuría, S.J., urged in a commencement address he delivered seven years before his death: “What then does a university do, immersed in this reality? Transform it? Yes. Do everything possible so that liberty is victorious over oppression, justice over injustice, love over hate? Yes. Without this overall commitment, we would not be a university, and even less so would we be a Catholic university.”

Lucía Cerna (second from the left) engages in a campus dialogue with *La Verdad* co-author Mary Jo Ignoffo (far right), Professor Luis Calero, S.J., and director of campus ministry, Maria de la Luz (Lulu) Santana, at a November 2014 panel discussion at Santa Clara University. Photo credit: Max Westerman, Santa Clara University.

That night Lucía Cerna awoke to a tremendous uproar and loud shooting. She reflects: “My blood went cold, like ice.... Then Padre Nacho yelled...‘this is an injustice!’ Now I wonder if he was yelling...because he knew I was in that room and he knows me. He knew I would hear and I would tell. I would not let anything stop me from telling” (p. 83). Indeed, Cerna did tell what she saw from her open window that early morning under the full moon. However, after being whisked out of the country for her own protection, Cerna was interrogated for seven days in Miami by the FBI and a Salvadoran colonel, who withheld food from her and her family in an effort to press her into changing her story. The fact that the murders were strategically planned and carried out by a Salvadoran military which had been

funded, trained, and weaponized by the United States government in the name of anti-communism was not a welcome truth.

The Jesuits at the UCA were seeking to use the resources at their disposal to stand with those who were being oppressed and dehumanized by the ruling oligarchy in El Salvador. As we continue to discern how we are called to realize our mission as Jesuit, Catholic universities in the 21st century, the story of *La Verdad: A Witness to the Salvadoran Martyrs* reminds us that our work is urgent and the stakes are high. Seeking and living truth in the service of justice is risky business. But if the transformation of our world is the end for which we have been created, we will find strength and company in the witness of *La Verdad*. ■