

Homily for 20th Anniversary Mass of the Jesuit Martyrs of El Salvador

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In 1995, I and two hundred other Jesuits were walking across St Peter's Square on our way to meet Pope John Paul II. We were in Rome to make decisions about the life and mission of the Jesuits, and part of that process was to listen to what the Pope had to say to us. After the Pope had spoken, we were all to be introduced to him. I was wondering what to say in the five seconds and I found myself next to a lovely Jesuit poet from Guatemala. So I asked him what he was going to say to the Holy Father, and he said I am going to show him these. And he put his hand into his inside pocket and pulled out a velvet bag. So I asked him 'what's in there?' He said, these are the bones of Guataemalan peasant women who have been tortured and killed by the army in the hills to where they tried to escape, and the Pope's Bishops do not stand up for justice for these people. So I want to bring the bones to him personally....

In a very poetic and prophetic gesture, he reversed the usual pattern. Rome is used to sending out relics to remind us about the saints who have died. Here he was bringing the relics to remind the official Church about other deaths of which they might not be so proud.

Reminding, remembering, standing up these are all key words for what we are doing today. We are reminding ourselves of the names of people we need to remember as people who stood up for those they lived among, and the names of the two Salvadoran women who stand for all those tens of thousands of others who were killed in that small country disfigured by brutal violence. This crime of twenty years ago was part of a sequence which went back to 1977 when the first Jesuit, Rutilio Grande was murdered. Three years later, a Maryknoll lay volunteer, Jean Donovan and three religious sisters, Dorothy Kazel of the Ursulines, and Ita Ford and Maura Clarke, both Maryknoll sisters, were murdered in 1980, as was Archbishop Romero, shot while he was saying Mass, in a way that was a repetition of the slaying of Thomas A Becket, the murder in the cathedral. 'Who will rid me of this turbulent priest?'

For the Jesuit martyrs, it was not to be Murder in the Cathedral, but Murder in the University. It doesn't sound quite so powerful, does it? In fact, it sounds like an Agatha Christie that you probably wouldn't bother to read. But you'd be wrong. Somehow the opponents of Gospel Social Justice thought that if the message of justice was only spoken about in the Church from the pulpit, they could keep it nailed down. After all they had killed the Archbishop without any significant come-back. But they didn't know that Jesuits are called to express the gospel through every kind of ministry of the word. And these Priests at the University of Central America had the courage to speak the truth about the poor when to do that was fraught with danger. They did this from a university of Christian inspiration, as Dean Brackley (who was here last year) has said. In the classroom and in lectures they tried to let the truth appear, buried, as it was by the lies of

the government and the army. They used the weapons of the university, serious research, seminars, papers and publication among the world community of scholars and university teachers. They proposed public solutions to public problems. Shortly after their deaths the Pope wrote 'if need be, a Catholic university must have the courage to speak uncomfortable truths...which are necessary to safeguard the authentic good of society.'

This truth turned out to be so uncomfortable, that the cry went up again, *it is expedient that one man die for the nation, 'who will rid us of this turbulent priest?'* They killed the dynamic and charismatic Rector, Ignacio Ellacuria, the vice rector, Segundo Montes, (a sociologist and expert on human rights); Ignacio Martin- Baro (a creative social psychologist), Juan Ramon Moreno and Armando Lopez (both theologians) and Joaquin Lopez y Lopez (who ran the Jesuit network of education for the poor, *Fé y Alegría*). They killed Julia Ramos and her daughter Celina who had asked to stay in the Jesuit compound for safety, as the bullets were flying outside. Sadly, it was Julia's husband, Obdulio the caretaker, who found his wife and daughter and the Jesuits dead in the morning.

The Jesuits had all been taken out into the yard and were shot while they lay face down. Maybe their assassins were afraid to look them in the face, but maybe also, in making them lie down, they were saying you will no longer stand up to speak for people like Julia and Celina. Of course they were killing *people*, Ellacuria was regarded as particularly dangerous, but they were also trying to kill a *university*, by taking out its most prominent teachers and administrators.

In Central America, when someone was killed by the forces of oppression, there is a ceremony where their name would be read out, and someone would step forward and say *presente*. Or the whole congregation would say it together. The identity of the one killed is carried on in the life of another. When our brothers were killed, the call went out for people to come to the UCA (University of Central America) to carry on their work. People from all round the Society of Jesus came forward so that the work of the university could continue. And so it has, not without problems but it has continued.

The crucifixion of Jesus was an attempt not just to kill him, they wanted to annihilate him, reduce him to nothing, to make him forgettable, not worth remembering. People will move on to something else. But Jesus was God's way of saying *presente* to our broken and shattered world. God's remembering of Jesus is the resurrection, and we are reminded in the Mass of the death and resurrection of Jesus which was how he stood up and continues to stand up for us. He is waiting for us to step into the space created by his death and longing to hear us say *presente*.