

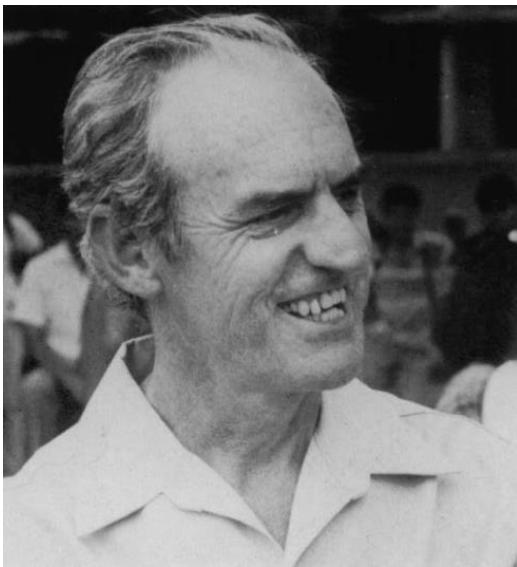
‘SAINTS’ OF THE WEEK II

Ignacio Ellacuria and Companions (d. 1989)

Jesuit Martyrs of San Salvador – Feast Day: 16 November

“What is it to be a companion of Jesus today? It is to engage, under the standard of the cross, in the crucial struggle of our time: the struggle for faith and that struggle for justice which it includes.”

(During the Civil War in El Salvador, four priests from our diocese were working in El Salvador – Fr Henry McLaughlin, Fr Tommy Greenan, Fr Tim McConville and Fr Basil Postlethwaite. They knew several of the Jesuits who were murdered)



On the morning of November 16, 1989, news photographers in El Salvador recorded a scene of abomination: the bodies of six Jesuit priests strewn across the garden lawn of the University of Central America. Those seeking a meaning for their deaths could look to the Latin American church's option for the poor or to the Jesuits' commitment to social justice. Indeed, they could look to the Sermon on the Mount. But the immediate context was the fratricidal war in El Salvador, which in November 1989 had reached a critical stage. For several weeks, the capital city of San Salvador was swept up in the most serious rebel offensive of the ten-year civil war. As fighting spread to the formerly insulated neighbourhoods of the rich, the military responded with panic and desperation.

On the evening of November 15, in a meeting of top military commanders (as investigations would later disclose), the order was given to eliminate all suspected sympathizers with the leftist rebels and to wipe out their "command centres" in the city. One of those present was Colonel Guillermo Alfredo Benavides. Within his sector of command lay the Jesuit-run Central American University.

Later that night, in the early morning hours of November 16, a unit of the Atlacatl Battalion, an elite "antiterrorist" force notorious for its record of human rights abuses, stole onto the campus of the university. The troops had been told that the targets of their operation were the intellectual authors of the uprising. After locating Father Ignacio Ellacuría, rector of the university, along with five other Jesuits asleep in their community residence, the troops forced the priests outside, had them lie on the lawn, and then their brains with machine-gun fire.

Aside from Father Ellacuría, fifty-nine, the other priests were Ignacio Martín-Baró, forty-seven, a psychologist and vice-rector of the university; Juan Ramón Moreno, fifty-six, a theologian; Amando López, fifty-three, a theologian; Segundo Montes, fifty-six, superior of the community; and Joaquin López y López, seventy-one, national director of the "Faith and Joy" catechetical movement. Unexpectedly, the troops also discovered a housekeeper, Elba Ramos, and her sixteen-year-old daughter, Celina. Ironically, the two women, frightened by the street fighting outside, had chosen to remain in the supposed safety of the university. They were also murdered.

For years the Jesuits of the university had been a thorn in the side of the military and the ruling elite. This was not because they supported the rebels, but because they had consistently denounced the injustice and repression that fed the bitter war, and because they had sought to promote a negotiated settlement to the conflict. The Spanish-born Ellacuría had emerged as a particularly effective and eloquent advocate of national dialogue. But he was also outspoken in criticizing the injustices endemic to Salvadoran society, and he had earned the enmity of the military command with his frequent denunciation of their reign of terror. As a result, he was often identified by name in right-wing propaganda as the intellectual "brains" of the "communist" movement.

Ellacuría and his fellow priests were no communists. They were priests who had struggled hard to live out the church's proclaimed *"option for the poor."* More specifically they had committed themselves to the vision of the Jesuits' 1975 General Congregation, which defined the Society's mission in terms of *"service of faith and promotion of justice."* As intellectuals, as well as priests, they had committed the university itself to this mission, believing that in a world of conflict a Christian university must stand for truth and with the victims of violence. Because of this stand, the university had become a frequent target of bombs and right-wing terror.

Ellacuría, the theologian, was increasingly moved to articulate the meaning of faith and the gospel from the perspective of the suffering poor. In an arresting phrase, he liked to speak of the *"crucified peoples"* of history. Thus, he compared the poor with Yahweh's Suffering Servant. In their disfigured features he discerned the ongoing presence and passion of Christ-suffering because of the sins of the world. In this light, the task of the Christian was not simply to contemplate the mystery of suffering, but to *"take the crucified down from the cross"* - to join them in compassion and effective solidarity.

Thus, the decade that began with the assassination of Archbishop Romero ended in this savage bloodletting. Romero had said, *"I am glad that they have murdered priests in this country, because it would be very sad if in a country where they are murdering the people so horribly, there were no priests among the victims."* Friends of the slain Jesuits felt it was significant that in their death they were joined by two humble Salvadorean women, representatives of the more than seventy thousand victims, mostly poor and anonymous, who had already died in that decade of war. So, in their deaths they joined their features to the face of the crucified people - victims of the same sin, witnesses to the same hope.

Segundo Montes had spoken for all his brothers when he explained to an interviewer his decision to remain in El Salvador: *"This is my country, and these people are my people.... The people need to have the church stay with them in these terrible times-the rich as well as the poor. The rich need to hear from us, just as do the poor. God's grace does not leave, so neither can we."*

See: Jon Sobrino et al., Companions of Jesus: The Jesuit Martyrs of El Salvador (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis, 1990).