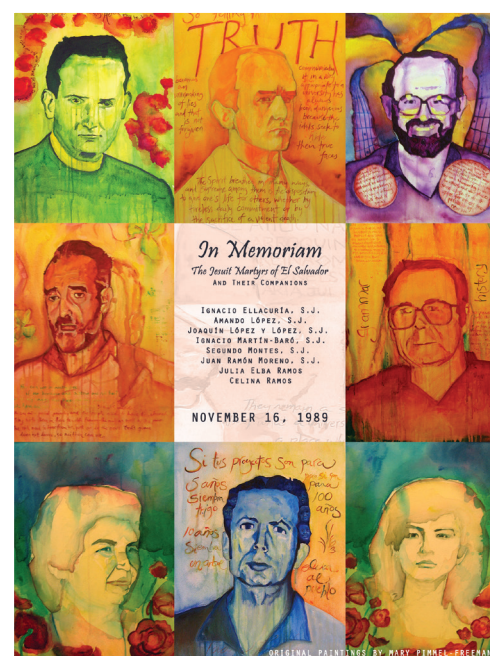




# A FAITH THAT DOES JUSTICE: THE HISTORY AND LEGACY OF THE JESUIT MARTYRS AND THEIR COMPANIONS

On November 16, 1989, Ignacio Ellacuría, S.J., Ignacio Martín-Baró, S.J., Segundo Montes, S.J., Juan Ramón Moreno, S.J., Joaquín López y López, S.J., Amando López, S.J., their housekeeper Elba Ramos, and her 15-year-old daughter Celina Ramos, were murdered at the University of Central America (UCA) in San Salvador, El Salvador during the civil war that ravaged El Salvador from 1979 to 1992. Nineteen of the 26 soldiers who committed the murders were trained at the U.S. Army School of the Americas (SOA) as part of American aid to the Salvadoran government and military.

The lives and loss of these martyrs have significantly influenced the Ignatian family in the United States and throughout the world. Over the past 30 years, Jesuit institutions have redefined what it is to be universities, high schools, parishes, etc. in light of the martyrs, discerning new ways of addressing issues of social justice.



**PICTURED //** (Above) Two of the Jesuit martyrs, Fr. Amando López, S.J. and Fr. Ignacio Ellacuría, S.J., are joined by community members Jon Sobrino, S.J. and Jon Cortina, S.J., and Bishop Rivera y Damas for Mass. (Below) On November 16, 1989, six Jesuits, their housekeeper Elba Ramos, and her daughter Celina Ramos were murdered on the University of Central America campus in El Salvador. Paintings by Mary Pimmel-Freeman.

**REFLECT:** What does it mean to be committed to justice? Who are examples of people in your own community who have fought for justice? How can we look to the Jesuit martyrs as a source of inspiration in our own work for social justice?





**PICTURED //** Coffee farming continues to be a major industry in El Salvador.

### SETTING THE STAGE: BEFORE THE CIVIL WAR IN EL SALVADOR

Before the civil war erupted in El Salvador, there were strong divisions between different social groups in the country including peasants, landowners, and the wealthy elites. In 1932, coffee farmers rose up in response to exploitation and were slaughtered by the Salvadoran military. Around 30,000 of these farmers were killed in what became

decades following. This unjust structure, however, allowed the economy of El Salvador to boom, especially in goods that were being exported to other countries. As the economy boomed, El Salvador saw the emergence of the middle class. These professionals, merchants, laborers, and students were quick

**“What unites us is the resolute decision to fight and our eyes are always set on the great objective of achieving a bright future of peace and freedom in our fatherland”**

*Salvadoran Guerilla*

called La Matanza. The wealthy elite owned most of the farmland in the country, and wanted to keep their power over both their land and their resources, so they allied themselves with the military. With the military and the wealthy elites allied, the ultimate goal was to maintain their political power over the peasants and farmers.

The bloody outcome of the 1932 uprising meant that peasants and farmers would continue to be exploited for their labor and repressed by the military for

to recognize and act upon political injustices, especially ones that had been happening in El Salvador for decades.

**REFLECT:** Where can you draw connections between Salvadoran society in the 1900s to our present-day society? Where do you see divisions present amongst social groups? Who holds power in your city, state, and in our country and how do they use that power?

### ON THE ROAD TO CIVIL WAR IN EL SALVADOR

As the 20th century continued, Salvadorans continued to challenge their government. In the 1970s, activist groups combined non-violent political organizing and armed resistance against the military. These tactics led many former coffee farmers and cotton growers to become guerilla soldiers. Guerilla soldiers fight, historically, in response to oppression and exploitation. They acted in resistance to national militaries, particularly when those militaries have been the source of their oppression.

By 1980, five of the key resistance groups organized themselves into the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN), named for one of the victims of La Matanza (see above section, El Salvador Before the War), eventually becoming the strongest guerrilla army in Latin America.

### TWELVE YEARS OF CONFLICT: THE SALVADORAN CIVIL WAR

From 1980 to 1992, civil war ravaged El Salvador, with more than 70,000 people killed. The war pitted the government and military against guerilla soldiers and ordinary

civilians suspected of supporting them. Fighting produced great violence, most of it waged by military forces intended to fight guerrilla soldiers and other revolutionaries.

**Of the estimated 75,000 killed in the civil war, a United Nations Truth Commission only attributed 5% of the total deaths to the FMLN compared to the 95% attributed to government security forces.**

Because the FMLN had organized the peasants, farmers, and other exploited groups to fight against the government, the Salvadoran military targeted the rural areas where they lived with the intention of preventing the spread of guerrilla warfare. A tactic in fighting guerrilla warfare was the use of military “death squads.” These death squads would attack rural areas suspected of supporting guerrillas and leave nothing behind, burning whole villages and murdering their inhabitants. For example, the military obliterated the village of El Mozote, where 800 villagers perished in gruesome deaths at the hands of death squads. Of the estimated 75,000 killed in the civil war, a United Nations Truth Commission only attributed 5% of the total deaths to the FMLN compared to the 95% attributed to government security forces.

**REFLECT:** What are the human consequences of war? How does war violate the human dignity of all persons? What are examples of “wars” raging today both locally and internationally?

### **THE ROLE OF THE UNITED STATES: U.S. INVOLVEMENT IN THE CIVIL WAR**

At the same time, the United States turned their attention to El Salvador in the hopes of stopping the influence and spread of communism. From the start of his presidency in 1981, President Ronald Reagan increased economic and military aid to the Salvadoran government. This aid included the training of Salvadoran military at the U.S. Army's School of the Americas at Fort Benning in Georgia. Some of the Salvadorans trained at

Fort Benning ultimately fought in the death squads that murdered thousands of Salvadorans during the war.

President Reagan argued that the \$4 billion in aid to El Salvador was a necessary strategy to strengthen the military, stop the spread of communism, and squash the enemy guerrilla soldiers. The U.S. government blamed the FMLN for human rights violations and downplayed the abuses committed by the Salvadoran government, going so far as to deny the existence of military-linked death squads like the ones who ravished El Mozote.



**REFLECT:** What role did the United States play in the Salvadoran Civil War? Why might there have been multiple perspectives on the role of FMLN and other non-governmental actors? What is your reaction to the role of the US military in El Salvador?

### **SPEAKING OUT AGAINST INJUSTICE: THE CATHOLIC CHURCH**

During the civil war, the Catholic Church and its clergy became important leaders in the struggle for social justice. The Church began to look at the Christian faith through the lens of liberation theology, a new way of framing the faith that advocated for people living on the margins of our society.

The Salvadoran government, however, worried that the actions of church leaders would threaten their power and stability. They had already seen the formation of peasant organizations, which often led to political protest. As a result, the military actively targeted the Catholic Church throughout the 1980s.

Before the civil war officially began, the military ordered the murder of Oscar Romero, who was shot while celebrating Mass. The next year, in 1981, Salvadoran



**“A church that doesn’t provoke any crises, a gospel that doesn’t unsettle, a word of God that doesn’t get under anyone’s skin, a word of God that doesn’t touch the real sin of the society in which it is being proclaimed - what gospel is that?”**

*St. Óscar Romero*

military forces gunned down and raped four American churchwomen, Sr. Maura Clarke, Sr. Ita Ford, Sr. Dorothy Kazel, and Jean Donovan. Both Oscar Romero and the four churchwomen walked with the marginalized of El Salvador and spoke out publicly against the injustices perpetrated by the government and military.

Through their work with the poor and marginalized in El Salvador, religious leaders, including the Jesuits, sought to address the long history of inequality and injustice in the country. Their ultimate goal was to work alongside communities in the fight for justice and transformation.

As president of the Jesuit-run Universidad Centroamericana (the UCA), Ignacio Ellacuría, S.J., and his colleagues were outspoken about the rights of the poor and about the military’s violence against Salvadorans. This sort of public criticism only intensified the government’s response. When the FMLN launched an offensive attack in the center of San Salvador in 1989, Colonel Rene Emilio Ponce handed down orders to search the university campus and, as a result, to execute the six Jesuits.

**REFLECT:** Why do you think these religious leaders were seen as a threat to the Salvadoran military and government? Where else in history have you seen people stand up for justice because of their faith? What does our Christian faith tell us about working for justice? How can the bravery of these people of faith inspire our work for justice today?

**EXPLORE:** St. Óscar Romero and the four churchwomen were radical voices for change in El Salvador. Spend some time learning more about their lives and legacy.

### THE MURDERS

On November 16, 1989, members of the Atlacatl Battalion, the same group that committed the atrocity at El Mozote, entered the Jesuits’ residence at the Universidad Centroamericana and killed six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper, and her daughter.

After the murders, the international community learned that nineteen



**PICTURED //** Fr. Ignacio Ellacuría, S.J. presents beside St. Óscar Romero. While Romero was martyred before the start of the civil war, the Jesuits and Romero were both strong advocates for human rights in the events leading up to the war.

of the 26 soldiers who committed the murders were trained at the U.S. Army School of the Americas (SOA) as part of American aid to the Salvadoran government and military. This tragedy not only brought awareness to the danger of speaking out against injustice but it also highlighted the connection between the U.S. military and the violence happening in El Salvador. We continue to honor the Jesuit martyrs today because of their lasting legacy in the pursuit of justice.

### FAITH IN ACTION: PEACE ACTIVISM

Although the Reagan administration provided almost \$4 billion in economic and military aid to the government and military in El Salvador, many in the United States opposed these practices and lobbied for reform of these policies. Throughout the 1980s, organizations advocated on behalf of the marginalized citizens in Central America and were soon recognized as part of a larger peace movement.

Sparked by the deaths of the Jesuit martyrs and their companions, throughout the 1990s, the Jesuit network and others began to convene at the gates of Fort Benning in Georgia, the home of the U.S. Army School of the Americas,



where 19 of the 26 soldiers involved in the murder of the Jesuits and their companions were trained, to call attention to the U.S. role in all of these deaths.

### THE LEGACY CONTINUES: IFTJ

As the gathering at Fort Benning grew, members of the Jesuit network convened the first Ignatian Family Teach-In for Justice (IFTJ) in 1997 under a “moveable tent,” envisioning a space for the network to address current and future justice issues. (IFTJ moved in 2006 from the tent to the Columbus Convention & Trade Center to accommodate growing attendance, and then again in 2010 to Washington, D.C., where it is still held today, allowing the Ignatian Family to gather in proximity to the U.S. capital to incorporate legislative advocacy as a method of working for justice.)

In the early 2000s the U.S. Jesuit Conference’s Social and International Commission developed a feasibility study to explore the idea of building on the energy of the Teach-In and the growing interest in a more explicit expression of the faith and justice mission of the Jesuits.

With positive feedback and a hunger for the idea of a Jesuit-Ignatian network that would work for social justice, the Ignatian Solidarity Network was founded in 2004. ISN was intentionally initiated as a lay-led independent non-profit organization that would work in partnership with the Jesuits and their institutions across the U.S.



**PICTURED //** (Above) Fr. Don MacMillan, S.J. joins Boston College students in protesting at the gates of Fort Benning (the home of the U.S. Army School of the Americas). (Below) Hundreds gather for the Ignatian Family Teach-In for Justice in its original home, a tent at the gates of Fort Benning.

**“The power of the gathering is reflected in the action of going to the gates of Ft. Benning and protesting the tragedy of the death of the six Jesuits and their two women companions, but much greater is that when these students and members of the Ignatian family return home, they are committed to changing unjust structures.”**

*Bob Holstein, Founder, Ignatian Family Teach-In for Justice*

**REFLECT:** What is the legacy of the Jesuit martyrs and their companions today? What can the Jesuit martyrs and all those who fought on behalf of the poor and marginalized in El Salvador teach us about our own call to work for justice? Where does injustice persist today? How are we called to act in response?

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