

Walking With the Poor Can Mean Martyrdom  
by Fr. John S. Rausch

Last November I made a pilgrimage sponsored by CRISPAZ, a faith-based organization promoting peace in El Salvador, to commemorate the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the six Jesuits martyred in San Salvador.

The Jesuits taught at the University of Central America during the Salvadoran civil war (1981-1992) and several of them actively promoted dialogue between the warring parties. Faithful to the Jesuit charism articulated after Vatican II, “witnessing to faith and promoting social justice,” UCA designed its curriculum around three principles: to study the social, economic and political reality of the impoverished country, to engage practically with the suffering world it sought to understand, and to take a principled stand on the crucial moral issues of the day including terror and torture.

A military death squad labeled the Jesuits the brains behind the rebels. On the night they were martyred the soldiers intentionally blew out their brains, shot up their books and set fire to the premises. To eliminate any witnesses, their housekeeper and her daughter were also murdered.

In a ceremony on November 16, the day marking the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the massacre, Salvadoran President Mauricio Funes bestowed posthumously the Order of Jose Matias Delgado, the country’s highest civilian honor, on the six Jesuits: Ignacio Ellacuria, Segundo Montes, Ignacio Martin-Baro, Amando Lopez, Juan Ramon Moreno and Joaquin Lopez. In his speech President Funes referred to them as “always on the side of human rights, democracy, or the tireless search for justice.” He added the recognition signified for him “the drawing back a thick veil of darkness and lies to let in the light of justice and truth.” The tribute represented the first time after years of denial that the government publicly acknowledged the principles motivating the Jesuit martyrs.

During the repressive years, those with access to the international media like the Jesuits and peace pilgrims from North America frequently used their eyes and ears to shield the vulnerable from political atrocities. CRISPAZ played its own critical role.

In promoting peace in El Salvador CRISPAZ saw its mission in the words of Archbishop Romero: “to accompany the people in their struggle for a new society.” During its 25 year history CRISPAZ sponsored over 300 delegations representing 4,000 Americans and placed over 150 long term volunteers in service projects throughout the Salvadoran countryside.

Our delegation saw the place where in 1980 the Four North American Church Women were driven two miles off the main road by soldiers. Maryknoll Sisters Ida Ford and Maura Clarke, Ursuline Sister Dorothy Kazel and lay missionary Jean Donovan served among the poor educating children, dispensing medicines and teaching skills for self-empowerment. They were raped and murdered.

Archbishop Oscar Romero, identifying with the poor, broke with the ruling elite and spoke against the violence of the military. Our delegation visited the chapel at the cancer hospital where Archbishop Romero was martyred while saying Mass. I saw his blood-stained chasuble and his clergy shirt bloodied on the left side. He preached his last sermon moments before his death on John 12:24–“Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies...” BAMB! One shot to the heart. One martyr.

Investigations revealed a majority of the Salvadoran military officers involved in these murders graduated from the School of the Americas where they learned the techniques of counter-insurgency from U.S. instructors.

The word “martyr” comes from Greek meaning “witness.” The history of El Salvador reminds us that witnessing to the truth and the God of truth can mean martyrdom by accompanying the oppressed and walking with the poor.