

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

### THE MASSACRE AT THE UCA

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*“They broke down that door and they entered in and pulled out the Jesuits. They brought them all out here, except for Padre Joaquín, who was sick. They assassinated him inside. And after they had them here, they fired.”*

“The UCA is a beautiful suburban university high up the slopes of San Salvador volcano, an oasis of civilized, affluent culture,” wrote McAllister.

It also is the site of one of the most horrific episodes of the country’s civil war: the gunning down by the military of six Jesuit professors at the university – known internationally as scholars, intellectuals, and outspoken critics of the army – as well as the slaughter of a housekeeper and her daughter.

The day of our visit we saw casually dressed students in jeans and short-sleeved shirts strolling to and from classes on tree-lined walkways curving around the university’s buildings and manicured lawns. Unlike the University of El Salvador, its sister institution, where students were actively recruited to engage in the hostilities, at the UCA many students, insulated by class status and residing in guarded enclaves of the city, were largely unaware that a civil war actually was taking place. “As if it happened in another country,” was the way Fr. Dean Brackley put it.

A handsome, lanky forty-six-year-old Jesuit, with a neatly trimmed beard and glasses, Brackley spent time with us explaining

the role of the university in El Salvador's ongoing struggles for peace and justice. Ordained in 1976 as a member of the New York Province, he obtained a doctorate in religious social ethics from the University of Chicago's Divinity School, taught at Fordham University, worked as a community organizer in the South Bronx, and when the call went out in 1989 to take up the causes of the slain Jesuits, he moved to El Salvador where he administered UCA's School of Religious Education and became known for his advocacy of "the church of the poor."

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It was late afternoon by the time we walked into the Centro Monseñor Romero building and turned down a long, narrow, white hallway, the walls filled with posters and pictures of Archbishop Romero and the assassinated Jesuits. In one framed set of photographs, Ignacio Ellacuría, the university rector, was in the top center; to his left Joaquín López y López, founder of schools for the poor; to Ellacuría's right was Segundo Montes, the chair of the sociology department; directly beneath Montes was Ignacio Martín-Baró, head of the psychology department; to his left were theology professors Armando López and Juan Ramón Moreno.

Another poster of the six Jesuits included photos of Julia Elba Ramos, the cook for the seminarians and wife of a caretaker, and her 16-year-old daughter, Celine Maricet Ramos, both murdered in a nearby cottage to ensure there would be no witnesses.

"You see books with their pages drilled by M16 bullets, shattered, bindings exploded," McAllister wrote later, describing the display cases in a small room at the end of a hallway inside. "You see what could be the debris of any professor's desk or pockets, and you see little glass cups, like dishes in a laboratory, full of dried blood and grass from underneath the bodies of the martyred."

Outside, behind the building, we stood behind a chain rope that kept visitors from trampling over small circular plots with pink, yellow, and red rose bushes commemorating the fallen Jesuits. We listened as Sinclair explained that the back of the building,

pockmarked and splayed with bullets the night of the slayings, had been refaced and painted white, and in a corner to the right under a tree we viewed the black marble plaque on a large boulder etched with the names of the Jesuits.

We were talking in subdued tones, when a young woman joined us. Sinclair introduced her as Lilia Suarez, a secretary with the University. "She will explain what happened," he said.

*Testimony of Lilia Suarez*

Among those who were here during the search was an ex-UCA student who was part of the Atlacatl Battalion. On November 16, probably between one and one thirty in the morning, the physical entry was through this gate here at the end of the walkway. But they also jumped over the fences back there. They encircled the area, because according to their own testimony, they didn't want the armed insurgents to escape.

They broke down that door and they entered in and pulled out the Jesuits. They brought them all out here, except for Padre Joaquín, who was sick. They assassinated him inside. And after they had them here, they fired. And then on the way out is when they discovered the two women. The order was "no witnesses," so they ordered the killing of the woman and her daughter.

After killing the people, they went into the offices here and destroyed the computer, typewriters, books, everything they could find. Most of them departed through the front gate, and left a little pamphlet there saying that the FMLN had done their justice. The next morning, the husband of the woman came and found the bodies. Julio, is a gardener here. The woman was the caretaker and cook. And then the investigation began.

"After they finished the steps of the investigation," Ventura commented, "closed chapter."

“The case is closed,” Sinclair agreed. “It’s just a question of whether the Truth Commission wants to resurrect it again. According to criteria for cases by the Truth Commission, cases that have been judged and finalized judicially will not be brought up. There’s a lot of argumentation that says they didn’t get the intellectual authors of the crime. That is, the High Command.”

“Were they in uniform?” asked Sacco.

“Yes, they were,” said Sinclair. “Everything except their insignias.”

“How many military were involved?”

“Between forty and fifty,” said Lilia.

“The military intelligence post is only about a half a mile from here,” added Sinclair. “We’re actually very close. It’s just around the corner, right over the next hill.”

“What about the UCA student who took part in the massacre?”

“He actually was one of the students,” said Lilia.

“Only two people were convicted,” Sinclair added, referring to the military officers convicted on September 28, 1991. “Colonel Venemedes and Lieutenant Shushi. Shushi was the student. Seven other officers were acquitted at the same trial.”

“When they came in here, they fired for forty-five minutes,” said Sinclair. “There were flares, there were mortars, they fired thousands and thousands of rounds of ammunition. And there was a military guard post real close to here, and there was no call that there was fighting here. There was no other kind of intervention. Representative Moakley has said that within the military there must have been collaborating. But there’s no single official or soldier who volunteered any information on this case. Moakley, a Democrat from Massachusetts, spearheaded an investigation of the murders, and believed General Emilio Ponce, El Salvador’s Defense Minister, was present when the order was given to kill the Jesuits.”

But in spite of the “no witnesses” directive, Sinclair said, there was one woman, Lucia Cerna, who was in the area during the massacre.

“She lived in the house there,” he motioned, pointing to the rear at a house behind a wall. “She was the only witness. She surfaced a couple of days after the events and went to the U.S. under

FBI protection. It created a real scandal when the FBI, instead of turning her over to the Jesuits as they had promised, kept her in seclusion in Miami for three days, interrogated her themselves, and then brought up a Salvadoran military officer to interrogate her. They repeatedly gave her lie detector tests until her story was so confused that she said she didn't see anything. And when she said she didn't see anything, then the lie detector test was false. So it came out that she was lying, and that's when Christiani and the State Department came out on record and said that she had failed the lie detector test, after they had forced her into a false testimony. She is still in the U.S. under the custody of the Jesuits who were furious over the treatment of the woman."

"What was the sentencing of the Colonel and the Lieutenant?" asked Sacco.

"Thirty years for Venemedes. Which is the maximum sentence allowable by the law."

"Why did they go after the Jesuits?"

"According to what we have seen," said Lilia, "there was an order to kill Ellacuría. Some of the testimony of the soldiers was saying, 'There is an enemy. He is the enemy. We have an enemy very close to us, and he's there in UCA,' which was Ellacuría. And this was right during the middle of the offensive. 'It's either us or them, and we don't want to leave any witnesses.'"

"I think I'm going to know the answer, but could you ask her to talk a little bit about why they saw Ellacuría as the enemy?" asked Reid.

"Because they always see someone as the enemy when they are constantly denouncing injustice," said Lilia. "And they are scared of those people who with their reasoning tried to solve the problems. I think the real hate against Ellacuría came when he would say the war could end if there was a dialogue. They were really bothered by the international support Ellacuría was getting for the positions he was taking."

An advocate for negotiations, Ellacuría at the time was urging rebel commanders to listen more carefully to what President Alfredo Christiani was saying about ending the war. And later

Eduardo Sancho, one of the five rebel commanders, agreed. “Ellacuría said that Cristiani could be the way to negotiations. We didn’t believe him.”

When Lilia finished, she walked us past the back of the dormitory and administration buildings to a small house where the mother and daughter, Julia Elba and Celine, had hid during the massacre, and where the soldiers discovered and killed them.

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After visiting the site of the massacre we met Dean Brackley on his way to class who said he would join us in front of the chapel around six for dinner. “Today I’ve invited a guest speaker to my class to talk about the Holocaust,” he said.

With time to explore, we decided to visit the university bookstore, following slate walkways between academic buildings and stone steps leading from one level of the campus to another.

In the bright, airy bookstore, among several publications on the civil war and the peace movement, two booklets caught my eye: *Ciudad “Segundo Montes”* and *Los Acuerdos de Paz* – the former because of our scheduled visit in two days to the Segundo Montes cooperative in the northeastern province of Morazán, the latter because it would help to spell out and clarify the peace process.

Next we stopped at an outdoor cafeteria, a pavilion-like structure, which at 5:30 in the afternoon was packed with students, and quietly sipped coffees and sodas in the shade of overhanging trees. All of us were numb from the exhibits in the first building, the testimonies of Lilia and Sinclair, and the tour of the massacre site.

“Somehow after years have passed,” said Sinclair, “the deaths of the Jesuits become sanitized.”

Not for us.

Minutes later we stood across the street from the Centro Monseñor Romero building by cars parked on the side of the road,

waiting for Brackley's class to end. That was when Sinclair mentioned that if we wanted to we could view the photos of the slain Jesuits.

"You don't have to look at them if you don't want to," he said. "But the pictures don't lie. Any of you who want to view the albums could do so. They show the bodies of the Jesuits blown apart by bullets. They are very difficult to look at."

All of us hesitated, asking ourselves what could we possibly see that our imaginations already hadn't conjured up. Was it even necessary? Were we guilty of a morbid curiosity? Did we have a responsibility to view the albums? Did we need more proof of what had transpired at the UCA?

But we were there. We had the time. So we walked with heavy steps across the road and up the sidewalk past stairs then followed another walkway to a glass door on the ground floor, conscious that we were about to come face to face with the abyss. Inside, behind a chest-high desk, a man quietly handed over the large albums and I took one, placed it on a nearby desk, and slowly began turning the pages.

The photos were horrific.

"These people," I wrote in my journal, "were ripped apart by automatic rifle fire, mostly to the head. The heads are shot up and totally destroyed. It is gut-wrenching, grotesque."

Whole sections of heads were missing, handfuls of brains strewn about on the grass.

"Some say the soldiers deliberately removed the brains from the skulls and threw them on the ground to signal their contempt for these men as intellectuals and professors," McAllister wrote in the *Sacred Heart University Review*.<sup>11</sup>

In the same place Bertsch wrote,

I now recognize that with our visit to the Jesuit-run University of Central America (UCA), a limit of personal endurance was reached. I continued to participate, but my body ached and my spirit flagged. . . . On that brilliant, sunny afternoon at UCA, I was not prepared for the colored photographs of the bruised and mutilated bodies of the eight victims of atrocity.<sup>12</sup>

Sinclair stood nearby and I asked him about the cook, Julia, and her daughter, Celine. Photographs showed them sprawled on the floor, the mother lying on top of her daughter, as if in the terror of the moment she had been trying to protect her from the soldiers. Her skirt was torn away.

“The daughter was beautiful,” I said, recalling the photo in the poster that showed her looking directly into the camera, wearing earrings, her face framed by dark, wavy hair.

“According to what I’ve heard, the mother was shot by a soldier who placed his rifle up her vagina,” Sinclair said.

Back outside the building, Brackley met us briefly after his class. “You should check out the murals of the Jesuits in the chapel,” he suggested, excusing himself to freshen up for dinner.

Yet more *memento mori*?

Inside the chapel a simple dark wooden table altar stood on the floor of the sacristy, and behind the altar a large wooden cross was covered with painted images of Salvadoran people, maize, and houses. Two large paintings on wood also filled with Salvadoran iconography hung to the right and left of the cross. Then as we turned to leave we saw the life-size murals of the slain Jesuits on the rear wall of the chapel.

“On that brilliant, sunny afternoon at UCA,” wrote Bertsch, “I was not prepared to defend all sensibility against the Michelangelo-like, life-size drawings of the dead on the walls of the college chapel. And I began to despair.”<sup>13</sup>

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It was close to 7 P.M. by the time we arrived with Brackley at an open-air restaurant in the city.

“There will be music,” warned Sinclair, “but we’re hoping it won’t be too loud.”

While we ate, Brackley, pressed for time, launched into a talk about UCA, the slain Jesuits, and the current political situation in El Salvador. But as if on cue just as he started speaking the band

struck up, horns blaring. It was impossible to hear Brackley. Out of desperation, he got up from his seat, perched himself on a railing behind us, and started shouting over the music.

“UCA is involved with the liberation of the poor,” he said. “The school pursues the truth while confronting the systematic lies perpetrated in the country.”

Basically, he said, the three university programs – social projection, teaching, and research – all were dedicated to furthering the pursuit of truth. The social outreach program projected into the public forum, and included all areas that reflect the social consciousness of the university. “The social outreach program must guide the university’s research and teaching,” he said. “UCA would like to help shape the social consciousness of the people.”

The program, Brackley said, required students to perform six hundred hours of social service before graduation. But the requirement, in some instances, fell short of its goal. “The concept looks good in the school catalog, but the actual program had some serious flaws.” For one thing, he said, students put off performing social services until later in their academic careers, which meant undergraduates failing to reach junior or senior year never participated.

Even with its flaws, the program brought up an intriguing question. Could community service be required on our campus? An integral part of the university experience at Sacred Heart since its founding, service was required by the charters of all clubs and organizations, but was not part of an institutional-wide mandate. That meant the majority of our students missed out on the opportunity to serve the larger community. At the very least, making service, if not a graduation requirement, more accessible to our undergraduates, needed serious consideration.

“The UCA’s principal subjects of study,” Brackley said, “are the national reality and the social reality. At UCA we study the world. But the overriding question is, how are our studies going to serve the truth in this country? It is really challenging. We live within an intellectual climate of distortion. And our students come to us living in a world that is part true and part false. Our problem is to

explode that eggshell. This is a country that runs on lies. Domestically we are involved in a struggle for the truth. For example, when I arrived in 1990, a survey was published in which the plurality of the people said that the FMLN was responsible for the majority of the atrocities. How could this happen?"

"Most of the people are functionally illiterate, and then there was a massive promulgation of lies by the government. Add to that the fact of state terror, and you begin to understand how such a poll could be published. Basically we have a war of the oligarchy against the poor. You figure basically everyone knows the truth. You visit Calle Real, and that is the cutting edge of the dialectic of history."

To help fulfill the pastoral mission of UCA, Brackley pointed out that each Jesuit worked in a poor parish in the countryside as part of the social projection orientation. "Where I work," he said, "the people are so afraid that they still refuse to speak. Twenty people died there during the civil war. If I am a *campesino*, state terror makes it impossible for me to talk about my life, my work, and my family history. The apparatus of state terror must be dismantled, and it will happen incrementally and dialectically. There is right now, before your eyes, a public dispute with ARENA. Christiani goofed up on the death squads and the army. The death squads must be stopped. One death makes it impossible for people outside the city to organize." But, he added, the climate was slowly changing. People were beginning to believe in the possibility of a new order in El Salvador.

"Many people would argue," Brackley said, alluding to the death of the Jesuits, "that the end of the war would not have occurred if the massacres had not happened. That event woke us from our bipartisan slumber and embarrassed Congress. It turned into an important element that brought the military to the point where the accords were made possible. And we kept that emphasis alive."

The answer, he concluded, was to be found in three words: "truth, justice, and reconciliation. Of course, we Jesuits can speak forever, so now I'll keep quiet. And of course," he smiled, "we don't live up to all this."

That night a few members of our group returned to the Central Plaza in the city to take part in the ongoing celebration for the war-wounded, a revelry that promised to last till dawn and beyond.

“Wounded guerrillas in combat fatigues and the people of San Salvador in FMLN red T-shirts, headbands, and hats, hugged one another and danced in the plaza,” said Sacco.

That was where he met Deimas. “He had been shot in the leg, and after he was operated on and his leg stretched eight centimeters, he still limped.”

“But not as much as before,” Deimas told Sacco.

“I asked him where I could get a hat like his. He took off his hat, signed it, dated it, then handed it to me. I offered him money, my expensive Guayabera shirt, even my shoes, but he refused everything. Later I told him our delegation was visiting the Segundo Montes cooperative in Morazán on the weekend. Deimas said he too was going to Morazán, and he might see me there.”