

CHAPTER TWO

From Mission Statement to El Salvador

The long-standing commitment to the poor and the greater Bridgeport community took on new meaning in 1988 when Dr. Anthony J. Cerna was named the fifth president of Sacred Heart University. Dr. Cerna inherited a school with a rich tradition of community service, but a school facing troubling times with enrollments dropping and demographics pointing to a dwindling supply of high school graduates from Southwestern Connecticut, the area that traditionally sent students to the University. In fact, the University was at a crossroads. With a financial situation becoming more ominous by the day, and with a demoralized faculty and staff beginning to look elsewhere for more stable employment, the times were indeed propitious for new leadership and vision. Fortunately, the Board of Trustees selected a youthful visionary to lead the foundering University, luring him away from Marist College with the challenge to revive the ailing school, to reconnect the University to its original mission derived from the spirit of Vatican II, and finally to transform the school into one of the leading comprehensive Catholic universities in New England.

Arriving with a youthful enthusiasm (at thirty-eight he was the youngest president in the school's history), a scholarly background in systematic theology, and an abiding interest in the Catholic intellectual tradition, as well as a strong background in social activism as the Executive Director of the Bread for the

World Educational Fund, and armed with the enthusiastic support of the Bishop and the Board of Trustees, Cernera embraced his new position with all the zeal of a divine calling. "I believe that in the mystery of God's providence, inscrutable and beyond our full comprehension," he said in his inaugural address, "I have been called here to do a work that needs to be done, to make my contribution to the building of the human community, if you will, of God's Kingdom." In that same inaugural address, he drew attention to the special mission of the institution when he said, "love of learning, liberal education, and useful knowledge must be complemented by an environment that fosters service to others, especially the poor."¹

Immediately, the new president embarked on an ambitious and carefully planned initiative to place the school on a sound financial footing, to expand the applicant pool by building on-campus housing, and to continue attracting highly qualified faculty who shared his passion for the Catholic intellectual tradition. But beyond pressing demands to reinvigorate the financial status and enrollment, the new president recognized the need to move into the very psyche of the institution to create what he hoped would initiate a dramatic reconnection to the signs of the times in the Church and, as he noted in his inaugural address, to its teachings on the preferential treatment for the poor. One of the first steps was to draft a new mission statement that reflected the rich heritage of the institution, while embracing its hoped for future growth and direction. Then the new president faced the larger task of making that new direction outlined in the mission statement a deeply felt experience for faculty and staff—an experience so strong that it would ignite an institution-wide response to community service.

The Revised Mission Statement

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version of the mission statement called for fostering "moral and spiritual growth in a Christian atmosphere conducive to the development of a stable character, and a sense of moral responsibility to self, community, and nation." Fostering a moral responsibility to community reflected the school's position on community service, especially as demonstrated by the social action of fraternities and sororities on campus, but the language failed to spell out what that responsibility was, leaving the statement vague and open to individual interpretation.

By 1987, under the presidency of Dr. Robert Preston, the mission statement in the *Academic Catalog* was amended to include the following: "It is rooted in the Catholic tradition as reflects the ecumenical thrust of post-Vatican II. Sacred Heart University challenges its students to open their eyes, ears, mind, and heart to new thoughts, knowledge, the environment, and the evolving world."³ While the words "the ecumenical thrust of post-Vatican II" realigned the mission statement more directly with the intentions of the school's founders and the campus-wide response to community service, the statement still lacked the post-conciliar element needed to direct the institution in the future—specifically a directive about the preferential treatment for the poor.

Recognizing that "the University would have to review and further develop its mission without relinquishing its original spirit,"⁴ Cernera drafted a revised mission statement which he then distributed throughout the campus for refinement and feedback. The resulting document, cited in the 1989 catalog, challenged the University "to assist in the development of people, knowledgeable of self, rooted in faith, educated in mind, compassionate in heart, responsive to social and civic responsibilities, and able to respond to an ever-changing world." And more specifically, on the issue of service, the new draft declared the University's "responsibility to share its resources and its special gifts and talents for the betterment of the human condition. All members of the University community are encouraged strongly to participate in the wider community through service to others, especially the poor."⁵ The words "all members of the University community are encouraged strongly to participate in the wider community through service to others, especially the poor" struck a vibrant chord in

the school's psyche, reenergizing its mission of service by raising it to the level of an institutional priority. For the first time in an official pronouncement, service was transformed into a mandate for guiding institutional response.

"Obviously, the University's mission can't be reduced to service," said Sr. Donna Dodge, S.C., vice-president for Mission and Planning. "It's much broader. When you look at the structure of the University, our mission is to educate, and service is an element of that. We are not a social service agency." But then Dodge pointed to the centrality of service. "I don't know that we could be a Catholic institution without focusing on the poor," she said. "The gospel is the touchstone, and that certainly calls for a preferential option for the poor."⁶

One challenge, with the new mission statement in place, was to create a program of sustained service that was unique. "We do not ask our students to engage in service unless the faculty and staff do the same," said Dodge. Then, she added, "service is based on the needs of the community, not on what students or faculty feel like doing." Another distinguishing feature of service at the University, she said, is that "we believe in sustained efforts . . . commitments, as opposed to one-shot deals." And finally, she pointed out, "We provide opportunities for our students and faculty to reflect on the service experiences."⁷

But while seeking to create a unique service mission, there remained the issue of ownership. Who on campus, what office, was responsible to see that service initiatives were carried out? From the school's earliest days, service had been the responsibility of the entire University community, and it was crucial that the newly articulated mission of service to the poor be embraced with that same sense of total community proprietorship. Several years later, while looking back at how the University measured up to the ownership issues, Dodge reflected that "service is not housed in only one office. We do have an Office of Service-Learning and Volunteer Programs, but in addition, service opportunities are generated through the classroom, in campus ministry, by athletic teams, in student life, fraternities and sororities, clubs, student government."⁸

But articulating a mission statement is relatively easy; acting on it so as to weave it into the very fabric of the institution is

quite a different matter. "If we don't live up to our mission statement," said Fr. Michael McLernon, campus minister, "then what are we doing here? What justification do we have for being here?" Perhaps the school's response to the call for service is best measured by the words of President Cernera:

Thousands of students and faculty and staff have been involved in some form of community service—Habitat for Humanity, the Merton House Soup Kitchen, tutoring at one of the local schools, visiting old age homes. You name it, we have students and faculty who have done it. There is a genuine concern for the poor. We invite people to come and work here as members of the faculty and staff who want to espouse that mission statement and want to contribute to make it happen. And that is what we are saying to students. 'This is the kind of place that we are.' At a fundamental level, attending to the mission and purposes of the institution, and inviting us continually to make that vision real, to embody it, is what I think is the challenge.¹⁰

The story of how Sacred Heart University distinguishes itself by encouraging service is a complex story of faith, courage, and vision. The rest of the story, bringing the history of service and volunteerism into the twenty-first century, started with the revision of the mission statement and with certain events in a war-torn, third world country in Central America known as the land of "The Saviour"—El Salvador.

The Road to El Salvador

After the revised mission statement was in place, a complex set of events sent several delegations of faculty and students traveling to a small country in Central America the size of the state of Massachusetts. First, there was the historical context of what was transpiring in El Salvador during its bloody civil war, and how the war was affecting the people of that country and faith communities all over the world, and more specifically how

that war affected our campus. Then, because of the revised mission statement, there was the need to develop a mindset at the University that understood, at least partially, what it meant to be poor. Who were the poor? What was it like for a community of people to live without the barest necessities on a daily basis? Was there a way for people on campus to come to know that reality—even minimally?

In the 1980s, the civil war that raged across the countryside in El Salvador was punctuated by several events that horrified the international community and created a groundswell of opposition to the war and the role the United States government played in supporting the right-wing political party and military in power. The public execution of Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero on March 24, 1980, while he said Mass in the Chapel of the Divine Providence Cancer Hospital in San Salvador, shocked people around the world. Romero's assassination, an attempt to silence a voice that repeatedly called for peace and reconciliation among his people, was a brazen act of the Salvadoran power structure that would stop at nothing to maintain economic and military control over the country. But as Romero repeatedly said, "If they kill me, I will be resurrected in the Salvadoran people."¹¹ And that is exactly what occurred. The spirit of Romero, freed by the assassin's bullet, lives on in the people he served with such humility and grace. As Rubén Zamora, a candidate for the President of El Salvador in 1994 and a personal friend of Romero's, said, "His assassin and those behind the assassin could not liquidate his word and his presence among his people."¹² Fr. Gustavo Gutierrez, one of the founders of liberation theology in Latin America, said Romero "has flooded our hearts and minds with his presence; someone whose presence has reached the length and breadth of this continent and beyond. Someone who knew fully how to give up his life. Someone who was the pastor of this diocese, whose death and resurrection has converted him into a pastor of the universal Church."¹³

On campus, one response to Romero's assassination was to institute a lecture series in his honor. Dr. Joseph Grau, professor of religious studies, said several years later, "In April 1981, the Institute for Religion and Society here at Sacred Heart University

sponsored the first Oscar Romero Memorial Lecture. And why did we do so? Because we believe that what he had said and what he had done and what his life was in the three short years that he lived as Archbishop of San Salvador—that what he did then for the sake of the poor and the oppressed was of profound significance for all those who are concerned about what religion should be up to in a world that is devastated by poverty, oppression, and violence.” Professor Grau went on to say “across our world, social injustices in our country, in our state, in our cities, continue to dehumanize, oppress, and kill. And the number of victims is legion. The challenge to people of all religious beliefs to live their faith in action for justice I think faces every one of us.”¹⁴

One of the early Romero lectures occurred on March 9, 1983, when Carolyn Forché, the poet and journalist, read from her award-winning book, *The Country Between Us*, about “her personal experiences amid the revolutionary turmoil in El Salvador.” The press release from the University explained that “at the invitation of an El Salvadoran coffee farmer, she spent two years as a journalist and human rights investigator, witnessing brutal sights of human suffering and torture. She went because she ‘felt deeply that I was being presented with the means by which I could do something with my life.’”¹⁵

Still another response to the legacy of the slain Archbishop was a lecture on February 16, 1989, by the activist priest Fr. Daniel Berrigan, who talked of his indebtedness to Romero for making clear the “spirit of death” that permeated much of our world. Referring to the assassination of Romero and others, Berrigan said, “Sometimes this spirit of death according to need or occasion or even whim announces itself as passionate and stark. It fools not around. It cracks like a discharged bullet. Such is the story of Romero and countless other troublesome spirits across the world. They got in the way: that is their obituary. It mattered not at all that one victim was an honored and saintly archbishop and a hundred or thousands of others were nameless and poor. The contract went out, and the gun went off.”¹⁶

Then speaking directly to the assembled University community and guests who packed the Schine Auditorium, Berrigan leveled this charge:

The same spirit of death filters down and down toward us. Eventually we too breathe the spirit of death. It afflicts and stifles every area of decent striving. The same spirit that drives the great to death as a social method urges us, the "lowerarchy," toward such things as false peace, moral compromise, and complicity. This spirit of death reaching us stifles, mitigates, urges moral adjustment. Its slogans are "Things could be worse," it suggests "One does what one can," it urges "Silence is golden." The atmosphere afflicts us severally with dread, fear and trembling, floating anxiety, and moral numbing. We are thus normalized to conditions and events and crimes that are by any standard morally abnormal. We summon in response not rage and action but a feeble kind of half-dead whimper, cocktail chatter at the crimes of the high and mighty.¹⁷

But there is hope, Berrigan assured the audience, in the works of those who administer to the needs of the oppressed. In America, he said, there is a certain kind of heroism, "disconnected from macho images and conduct, a kind of tenderness that cares for others, an attentiveness to good work done modestly, caring for the down and out." Berrigan singled out the heroic acts of "men and women, confessors and teachers of faith, those who stand somewhere and pay up. . . . Such women and men are harboring persecuted aliens, praying at nuclear sites, telling the truth in courts, surviving long terms in jail." Then, in what amounted to a definition of service at Sacred Heart University, he talked of people who "serve the multitudes of poor and homeless, the victimized, the mental patients, the abandoned and expendable. Such cope with back-breaking needs that ever seem to multiply, never seem to be assuaged."¹⁸

By instituting the Oscar Romero Memorial Lecture Series, the Sacred Heart University community had responded intellectually to the atrocities that had become daily occurrences in El Salvador. But a more compelling question remained to be answered. With the revised mission statement in place, was there yet a larger role for the University to play in El Salvador? And if so, what would that role be? Looking ahead, it seems unlikely that what transpired—

the extent of University involvement in El Salvador—could possibly have been foreseen back in 1989. Then, nine months after Berrigan's talk at the University, another tragic event in the history of that war-torn country, shocked the world and moved the University to a new level of involvement with the people of El Salvador.

The Assassination of the Jesuits

Just after midnight on Thursday, November 16, 1989, while 300 members of the American forces-trained Atlacatl Battalion surrounded the campus of the University of Central America (UCA), approximately seventy members of the commando unit entered the grounds by forcing a gate, clambering up an embankment, and scaling a chain link fence. Their mission: to eliminate the outspoken rector of the University, the Jesuit Ignacio Ellacuría, and "to leave no witnesses." At the time, the superior of the Central American Province of the Society of Jesus, José María Tojeira, S.J., was living in San Salvador. "I had heard gunfire that night," he said, "but there had been shooting in the city all week between the army and the guerrillas, so I didn't think it was happening on the campus of the UCA." After being told about the murders, he said:

I went over immediately and saw the bodies of the Jesuits lying in front of their residence. . . . My first thought was, what should be done? I sent one Jesuit to speak with Archbishop Arturo Rivera y Damas, another to call all the Jesuits' communities in El Salvador to tell them to come to the site of the murders. Another I sent to notify the press, and then I myself called Rome and spoke with Father Alvaro Restrepo, the Jesuit assistant (coordinator) for northern Latin America. He was in shock when I told him and at first didn't believe me. Finally he said, "Who are the killers?" "The army, of course," I said, and I went on to talk about their brutality.¹⁹

As Fr. Dean Brackley, S.J., wrote: "The Salvadoran military had long claimed that the UCA was a hotbed of guerrilla activity

and perceived Ellacuría and the other Jesuits as intellectual godfathers of the FMLN." Basically, as Brackley pointed out, "Ellacuría and fellow Jesuits Segundo Montés, Ignacio Martín-Baro, and Jon Sobrino recognized that the cause of the poor was just and that the armed forces fought to preserve an unjust status quo, with terror, torture, and murder of civilians as an integral part of a counter-insurgency strategy. They repeatedly denounced abuses by government security forces and allied death squads."²⁰

The murders of the six Jesuits and a domestic employee and her young daughter met with worldwide horror and a universal call to end the bloody Salvadoran conflict. Brackley wrote:

The murders activated a political earthquake, both in El Salvador and abroad. Inside the country this became the crime that refused to go away. A few years later a high-ranking Salvadoran officer would confide to Ellacuría's successor, Francisco Estrada, that the killings of the Jesuits had done more damage to the Salvadoran armed forces than eleven years of guerrilla warfare. By badly undermining the prestige of the armed forces, the "Jesuit case" helped consolidate the peace process once the accords were signed two years after the murders.

Beyond El Salvador, shock waves reverberated far and wide, but nowhere more than in the United States. . . . By November of 1989, people had stopped following events in El Salvador. The State Department had succeeded in selling its version of reality: The U.S. was helping to consolidate democracy. Our military aid had succeeded in professionalizing the Salvadoran armed forces. The UCA murders woke us from our bipartisan slumber. Outrage spread across the U.S.²¹

That shock and outrage can be heard in the words of Sacred Heart University Professor Robin McAllister, who after visiting the site of the Jesuit massacre with the first delegation from the University in 1992, wrote that the Jesuits "were not just priests and martyrs but intellectuals and university professors as well. The UCA is a beautiful suburban university high up the slopes of San Salvador

volcano, an oasis of civilized, affluent culture, in the midst of an otherwise war-torn city. It is no more possible to imagine soldiers shooting down university officials here than imagining them storming and shooting through Sacred Heart University."²²

On our campus, the response to the murders of the Jesuits would forever alter our relationship with the country of El Salvador. Immediately, there was the sense that the University needed to become more involved, to take a stand against the atrocities of the warring factions and the death squads, and to act in support of those voices that championed the causes of the country's poor while at the same time seeking a peaceful solution to the civil war. Years later President Cernera recalled those times and the need for a new level of commitment to El Salvador "as a response to the assassination of the rector and priest-professors of the Jesuit university in San Salvador and their house-keepers." Then he said, "As an act of solidarity with that university community as well as with the Church in El Salvador, Sacred Heart University conferred the degree of Doctor of Humane Letters, *honoris causa*, upon Archbishop Rivera Damas of El Salvador at a special academic convocation on May 17, 1990. During that convocation we committed ourselves to a long-term process of learning about and responding to the needs of the Salvadoran people."²³

Support in this country for the efforts of the Archbishop who had assumed the mantle of the slain Romero was crucial because he too had been singled out for execution by right-wing extremists. Speaking of his precarious situation when the Jesuits were murdered, Archbishop Damas said, "Bishop Rosa Chávez and I could have died too on that night. Our names were on the list of *Plan Djakarta*, whose aim was the physical elimination of all of those who denounce human rights violations and the system of injustice here in El Salvador."²⁴ The citation read at the conferral of the honorary doctorate praised Damas as "a man of God; a man guided by a rich, strong interior life; a man not afraid to speak out for the rights of others; a man full of faith, devotion and the conviction to spread God's message even at the risk of death."²⁵

But for several people in the audience, the question remained: What was the next step for Sacred Heart University? The

President spoke about committing “a long-term process of learning about and responding to the needs of the Salvadoran people,” but how? That question was answered on October 30, 1991, when Dr. Gerald Reid of the Sociology Department and the director of the Center for Ethnic Studies, submitted a proposal to the University administration, suggesting that a delegation be sent to El Salvador, “to provide Sacred Heart University faculty with international experience and to establish a long-term relationship and dialogue between Sacred Heart University and appropriate partners in El Salvador.”²⁶ The President, who knew from working with the poor that face-to-face meetings with the people of El Salvador would have a dramatic and lasting effect on members of the University community willing to risk such a journey, welcomed the delegation idea, and planning for the first trip began in earnest.

Suffice it to say, Sacred Heart University was changed by reaching out to El Salvador, sometimes subtly and sometimes in ways dramatic and obvious. As Cernera later pointed out in the opening paragraph of his essay on El Salvador in the *Sacred Heart University Review*, “At the end of its four-day visit to Sacred Heart University, the accreditation team from the New England Association of Schools and Colleges captured something of our ongoing efforts to embody our mission as a comprehensive Catholic university in the world when it stated: ‘A university that sends a dozen faculty members to El Salvador for several weeks to better understand that country’s problems and to seek a way of assisting its people is taking its mission very seriously.’”²⁷