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After 20 years, Salvadorans remember slain martyrs

Dan Nemes | Nov. 17, 2009

Salvador vigil commemorates slain martyrs (CNS photo)

San Salvador, El Salvador
Salvadorans from every segment of society gathered here Nov. 14- 16 to commemorate the 1989 murders of six Jesuits, and their housekeeper and her daughter.

Many used local events to reflect on El Salvador's progress since the end of the country's civil war in 1992.

It was 20 years ago that a Salvadoran military unit broke into the grounds of Central American University, brutally killing Jesuits Ignacio Ellacuría, Ignacio Martín Baró, Segundo Montes, Joaquín López y López, Amando López and Juan Ramón Moreno, as well as their housekeeper, Elba Ramos, and her daughter, Celina.

At the entrance to the university, only a short walk from the courtyard where the priests and the women were executed and where they are buried in the university's chapel, students collected supplies to contribute to disaster relief efforts after heavy rains Nov. 8 that led to mudslides, killing 160 people and leaving more than 12,000 homeless.

Carrying out the university commitment to social justice, several noted, is one way students could remember the Jesuits. ?This is what they stood for, helping the poor,? one said.

Other students remembered the martyrs by participating in a weekend-long celebration at the university, including a soccer tournament featuring teams such as ?F.C. Romero.? Even with Red Cross helicopters overhead delivering aid to mudslide victims, the mood at the university was festive.

Various North American delegations looked on as local community organizations covered the university?s main thoroughfare with a series of murals, or alfombras, a tradition usually reserved for Holy Saturday. Students arrived early and spent the better part of the day creating intricate, mosaic-like images with brightly dyed salts. The alfombras stretched 20 feet long and spanned the width of the street.

The pictures that appeared throughout the day were familiar ones in El Salvador: assassinated Archbishop Oscar Romero; and four U.S. churchwomen, Dorothy Kazel, Srs. Jean Donovan, Ita Ford and Maura Clarke.

The festive atmosphere turned more solemn as night fell Saturday. Thousands of people, moving past the university's Romero Center, which houses artifacts and graphic pictures from the assassinations, walked over the alfombras, destroying them. The two-hour procession ended with a vigil Mass. The university?s rector, Jesuit Fr. José María Tojeira, presided, recalling the martyrs as eight among tens of thousands killed during the Salvadoran civil war. He also recalled the millions of Salvadorans who live in poverty today, a fact that pushes more than 700 Salvadorans a day to attempt a treacherous, illegal migration to the United States.

?Only through recognizing past victims' dignity, as well as the dignity of victims in the present, will we construct a country with dignity,? Tojeira said in his closing benediction.

As the Mass moved into its third hour, Salvadorans listened through a translator to Cardinal Keith Patrick O?Brien of St. Andrews and Edinburgh, Scotland, who remembered the martyrs, connecting the struggles of the Salvadoran people and church to the worldwide church.

?Many beautiful things have been said about your country and those who have suffered,? O'Brien said at the end of Mass. ?Pope John Paul II, before his death, called upon all of us to be aware of the place of martyrs and their example. He said, 'Once again the church has become a church of martyrs,' and your country has witnessed to that.?

Jesuit Fr. Dean Brackley, who volunteered to run the university after the murders and has stayed on for two decades, at one point said he wished he could say that El Salvador was ?a paradise or a just society,? adding, ?but we are living very hard times. Officially we have an index of poverty over 40 percent, but in reality two-thirds of Salvadorans live in poverty.?

Brackley continued: ?The U.N. says that El Salvador is the most violent country in the world not currently at war.?

On Sunday, after Mass at the cathedral that houses Romero's tomb, the recently elected left-wing president, Mauricio Funes, posthumously awarded the six Jesuit priests El Salvador's highest civilian honor, the National Order of José Matías Delgado, in a ceremony at the Presidential Palace in downtown San Salvador, the nation's capitol. Addressing the slain Jesuits? family members and Jesuit priests from the university, as well as dignitaries like U.S. Rep. Jim McGovern, D-Mass., Funes said the award is one way the government can begin

to take responsibility for the killings.

?We would like this to be an act that revives the collective memory,? Funes said.

Since the 1991 peace accords that ended the 12-year Salvadoran civil war, many of the country's right-wing governments have denied the military high command's role in the 1989 killings. In a speech addressing North American students and professors from Jesuit universities in the United States, McGovern reflected on the example of the murdered Jesuits.

?The Jesuits are important because they showed me that religion and faith are more than ritual,? he said. ?It's about being active. It took faith to feed the hungry and visit the poor and speak truth to power. It's the kind of life all of us should aspire to. I am much more committed to social justice and peace in places like Afghanistan because of what I experienced here.?

McGovern traveled to El Salvador several times as an aid to longtime Massachusetts Congressman Joseph Moakley. Today many, including McGovern, see the Moakley Commission's denouncement of the El Salvador military after the killings as key to the decision by the U.S. Congress to cut military aid to El Salvador in 1990.

?We were sending $1.5 million a day to El Salvador,? McGovern said. ?Cutting off that aid forced the military to the negotiating table.?

On Monday, as the North American delegations and dignitaries began to depart, it was business as usual at the university. The alfombras were cleared away so that students and faculty could continue with their work.

Dan Nemes is a freelance writer who spent the last several weeks in El Salvador.

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