What is it to be a companion of Jesus today?
It is to engage, under the standard of the Cross, in the crucial struggle of our times: the struggle for faith and that struggle for justice which it includes.
Preface

At 2 A.M. on November 16, 1989, six Jesuits and two humble Salvadoran women were cruelly murdered in the priests' house. Their names are Ignacio Ellacuria, Ignacio Martín-Baró, Segundo Montes, Amando López, Juan Ramón Moreno, Joaquín López y López, Julia Elba, their cook, and her daughter Celina Ramos. They were all cherished brothers and sisters to me, my family.

This barbaric murder has had a profoundly moving impact on people around the world. I personally can attest to the impact it has had in the United States where I lived during the months following the murder. Quite diverse kinds of people, from Christian churches and of other faiths, individuals and groups working in solidarity, but also men and women who do not know much about El Salvador, who when it comes to the Third World have only the stereotyped ideas the media foist on them—"revolutions, communism, democracy"—all these could not comprehend how in a Christian country six Jesuit priests and two women—whose only crime was to spend the night in the priests' home out of concern for their own security—could be murdered so unjustly, cruelly, and pitilessly. The impact has indeed been great.

Time goes on, however, and the initial emotional reaction tends to abate little by little. This is quite understandable but it is neither good nor healthy that events like these, both important and tragic, should be forgotten. It is not good, because such forgetting is dehumanizing for the living, whereas keeping memory alive is humanizing. That is why we must keep these persons and these events alive. We must keep recalling—for the naive or the blind—that such things could take place just a few thousand miles from U.S. soil, while democracy is supposedly sweeping forward around the world. It is very important to maintain...
the suspicion that our Western world is not so beautiful, free, and democratic as it is made out to be. And for those who are aware, in solidarity and commitment, it is good to keep up this service and to do even more to bring the crucified down from their crosses, as Ignacio Ellacuría used to say. It is in keeping alive and energizing this memory, both necessary and humanizing, that I see the importance and purpose of this present book.

Those six Jesuits are the core of this book, present here in short biographies, some of their writings, and in reflections on them. Their lives function as a "concrete universal" of a whole people of the poor, of a whole crucified Third World, and especially of those who lovingly and freely devote their lives to the liberation and salvation of others. And if it is death that tells the truth about life, their biographies and lives can and should be read now from that perspective, in the darkness of murder of course, but in the light of martyrdom as well.

Through the Jesuits the book also shows many other things. Above all it shows the reality of the Salvadoran people—and of so many other peoples of the Third World—a reality of poverty, injustice, and death for the majorities, a reality that puts to death those who cast their lot with those poor. But also a reality of creativity and hope that generates conversion and is also capable of converting all, including Jesuits; a reality of light that can enlighten all, including intellectuals; a reality of enthusiasm and encouragement that can put a heart of flesh into every human being, including believers.

It also shows the reality of a new faith and a new way of being church, as Medellín proposed, in solidarity at all levels with the poor, striving for their total liberation, within history and transcending history, the reality of a new love, even to the point of surrendering life, a love shown by so many Christians who have shed their blood, simple Christians, priests, sisters, Archbishop Romero... It shows that there is a cloud of witnesses to Jesus, witnesses to the God of life and to the life that God wants for the poor of this world.

More specifically, the book shows a new face of the Society of Jesus, the Jesuits. In their General Congregation in 1975 they reaffirmed the Jesuit mission as "serving faith and promoting justice," which subsequently took shape as the "option for the poor." The Jesuits have changed, albeit with limitations and ambiguities. If any proof need be provided, it is enough to recall the price they have paid for carrying out this new mission: since 1975, thirty-two of them have been murdered, all in the Third World. In El Salvador the protomartyr is Father Rutilio Grande, a great friend of mine and of the six Jesuit martyrs, who was murdered in 1977.

Finally it shows how a university can really be of Christian inspiration, something not at all obvious since universities—like anything human and created—can bring into our world sin as well as grace and can support the oppressed but also their oppressors. The murder of the Jesuits at the hands of the oppressors of this world shows that a university's conversion to God's reign is both possible and real, one that turns toward the poor and puts all that it is, all that it has, and all that it does at the service of the liberation of the poor.

In a brotherly way I should like to suggest to North Americans that they read this book as a "revelation"—that is, as a manifestation of reality, initially the reality of the Third World and thereby also the reality of their own First World, a reality that normally remains hidden, or worse, covered up. That they read it as "challenge," as expression and contemporary sacrament of God's eternal question to human beings: "What have you done to your brother or sister?" That they read it as a call to "solidarity," to open up more to the crucified of this world, and to carry their crosses and also to let themselves be carried along by those peoples, to receive their hope, their creativity, and their faith. That they read it as "good news" since, although the events narrated here are tragic, lives like those of these men and women show that in today's world it is possible to come to be human beings, to come to be believers, to come to be Jesuits, and to come to be university personnel serving God's reign; that in a world of darkness with a heart of stone it is possible to live with light and with a heart of flesh, and that it is possible to experience in one's own life the blessing and joy of the beatitudes—this is the most scandalous truth, but also the most blessed truth this book offers.

Finally, I would suggest to North Americans that they read
the best Christian traditions, in the light of the lives of other martyrs, of Martin Luther King, of Ita, Maura, Dorothy, and Jean, and of Maureen Courtney, a Sister of St. Agnes who was murdered in Nicaragua on January 2 of this year. This is not a call to masochism, but an invitation to build on the best traditions, on those that bear mercy, justice, and love. If all citizens and believers build on these best traditions, that will also mean solidarity with El Salvador and with the Third World, for everything good, both here and there, converges for the good of all.

In closing, I would like to add a personal word. I should like to take advantage of this opportunity to thank all those who have offered their efforts and their solidarity on behalf of the Salvadoran people and their churches, and of the Jesuits and the UCA. I should like to thank Orbis Books for the interest and dedication put into publishing this book. And in a very personal way I should like to express thanks for the countless demonstrations of support and solidarity I have received from many places in the United States, especially in Santa Clara, San Francisco, and Washington, where I have spent the most decisive weeks and months of my life. This solidarity, of which I am a grateful witness, shows quite clearly that the death of my brothers, and of Julia Elba and Celina, has not been in vain, and that like the death of Jesus theirs was true death, on the cross and in darkness, but also, like that of Jesus, true seed of resurrection, of light, of hope, of justice, and of love.

Jon Sobrino, S.J.
San Salvador, March 24, 1990

Tenth anniversary of the martyrdom of Archbishop Romero

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Introduction: The Crime

Stan Granot Duncan

On November 16, 1989, the world was shocked to learn that eight people were murdered on the grounds of the José Simeón Cañas University of Central America (UCA) in El Salvador. Six of the victims were Jesuit priests, who taught at the university and who were leading spokespersons for a nonviolent, negotiated settlement of the ten-year civil war. The two others who were murdered with them were the cook for the priests' dormitory and her fifteen-year-old daughter. Ironically, the two had left their homes in the community just days before the attack to sleep at the university because they believed that, since the military had imposed a 6:00 P.M. curfew and had surrounded the grounds, they would be safe.

Following the killings, an international cry arose from diplomats, heads of state, religious groups, and the human rights community to find the perpetrators of the crime. Not since the killing of the archbishop of San Salvador, Oscar Romero, in 1980 had there been such an uproar over political killings in El Salvador. At first hesitant, the newly elected president of El Salvador, Alfredo Cristiani, eventually nominated a blue-ribbon "honor commission" to investigate the murders, and after two months of intensive investigations he announced that eight persons in the military, including one colonel, would be charged. Unanswered, however, were questions as to whose orders the colonel was following and how much influence did and does the

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The murders are best understood against the background of the largest rebel offensive in El Salvador’s ten-year civil war. The civilian and military leaders were searching desperately to find ways to turn back rebel gains in the capital city. Even though the offensive had been expected by both the Salvadoran military and the government, when it finally happened its intensity and skill surprised everyone. The rebels showed themselves capable of coming and going in the capital at will and of taking and holding strong positions against army forces. In addition to San Salvador, rebels struck forcefully in several other cities. In Usulután and La Paz, troops sent to pursue the rebels were ambushed and totally wiped out. By the fourth day of the offensive, the military high command met to discuss the future of the fighting and the very real danger of losing the war itself. According to later testimony, two important topics were discussed at the meeting. One was the use of the airforce to strafe the poor neighborhoods, or barrios, of the capital city where the rebels found their strongest support. The second was a crackdown on leftists and progressives throughout the city in the hopes of demoralizing the movement. Within days the airforce had killed hundreds in the barrios and left tens of thousands homeless. The military had arrested or “disappeared” dozens of suspected leftist sympathizers, “death squads” had murdered numerous others, and eight people at the UCA were massacred.

The offensive itself was in great measure a response to the breakdown of peace talks which had just begun between the representatives of the Cristiani government and the rebel directorate, the Frente Farabundo Martí Liberación Nacional (FMLN). According to the Arias Peace Plan, or “Esquipulas II” as it was known, government and rebel groups in each of the conflicted countries were to meet for good-faith negotiations toward peace. There had been two such Salvadoran meetings already. The first was in Mexico City in August, and the second was in September in San José, Costa Rica. Arrangements had been made for future meetings.

The projected series of meetings in many ways had signaled the first hopes for a negotiated peace in many years. The FMLN by all accounts (including their own very secret in-house documents which had been captured) had come to believe strongly in the wisdom of pursuing a negotiated peace to the conflict. In the weeks preceding the talks, they made some very serious concessions, such as dropping their demand for power sharing and agreeing to accept the outcome of fully monitored elections. However, a series of events in September and October soured the mood for negotiations, and by the end of November the FMLN had broken off plans for the next round of talks.

FMLN leaders claimed that government representatives at the talks had refused to negotiate in good faith. They said that, since there had been relatively little fighting preceding the talks, the government’s negotiating team had come to the table acting as though the rebels had been defeated and that the task was only to negotiate a rebel surrender. Therefore, the talks were useless, and a demonstration of the rebels’ real force was necessary. Another important factor which drove the FMLN to cancel future talks and launch the offensive was the dramatic surge in violence against “popular” Salvadoran organizations, such as churches and unions, by unknown persons widely believed to be linked to the government. During the month of October alone, bombs damaged the offices of opposition political leader Rubén Zamora, a school sponsored by the Lutheran Church, and the offices of Co-Madres, a support group of mothers and family members of the “disappeared.” The most brutal attack in the series was the bombing of the offices of the National Trade Union Federation of Salvadoran Workers, which occurred on October 31. Ten people were killed in the blast, including its president, Febe Elizabeth Velásquez. Fr. Segundo Montes, one of the assassinated priests and the director of the university’s human rights institute, said in a speech in Washington, D.C. immediately following the bombing that it signaled a “qualitative and quantitative change in the human rights situation” in El Salvador. Two days later the FMLN rebels issued a statement saying, “We must avoid the appearance that our presence in the
dialogue be used to cover up the government's responsibility in this massacre, and strengthen Cristiani's mask of a moderate interested in dialogue. . . . Given these conditions, we feel it is necessary to suspend the dialogue.” On November 11, less than two weeks later, the offensive, named after Febe Velásquez, was launched.

**THE UNIVERSITY**

Although the Central American University has an international reputation for its intellectual and academic excellence, Salvadoran government officials and the U.S. Embassy in El Salvador have often spoken of it as the intellectual leadership of the FMLN. Its strong support of a negotiated, rather than military, solution to the decade-long war frequently made it the target of threats and occasional attacks from the military or other rightwing groups. Its residences had been bombed on two separate occasions, and once the entire library was impounded by the government. In early 1989 prominent conservative business persons began construction on a 19-story office tower, which they called “Democracy Tower.” The name was criticized by many who argued that El Salvador had only a tenuous relationship with democracy, and shortly before its completion it was bombed by the FMLN, damaging several floors. Elements of the shadowy, militaristic, far right, unable to strike back at the FMLN directly, retaliated by once again targeting UCA. Within a week the university printing offices were bombed, and in the process the only non-progovernment press in the country was silenced.

On November 12, the day after the rebel offensive began, the government took over the independent radio and television stations and began broadcasting attacks (usually anonymous) against “communists” in the church, Archbishop Rivera y Damas, and the Jesuits. “Bring them to the public places and lynch them,” said one of the radio announcers. Ignacio Ellacuría and Segundo Montes, respectively rector and professor at the university, were named personally in the threats. Some of the verbal attacks claimed that the priests' support for peaceful negotiations with the “communists” was itself a threat to national security.

During the offensive, in the days just preceding the shootings, troops from the army's Atlacatl Immediate Reaction Battalion were suddenly pulled from active fighting with the rebels and placed on guard duty in the section of the city which includes the military school and the UCA. The Atlacatl Battalion is an elite group organized by U.S. trainers in the early 1980s as a crack counter-terrorism force, and has been frequently implicated in human rights abuses. The most famous was the massacre of over seven hundred civilians in the town of Morazán in 1981, immediately following the battalion's initial training at Ft. Benning, Georgia. A professor at the army training school once joked that “we've always had a hard time getting [them] to take prisoners instead of ears.” According to papers filed by the U.S. State Department in the investigation of the killings, all of its officers and most of its soldiers had received extensive training in human rights, some of them within the past year. One of the main places where the human rights training is offered is the Salvadoran Military School, of which the man later charged with giving the orders for the Jesuit murders is the head.

On Monday, November 13, a unit of the Atlacatl Battalion, under orders from the very powerful head of the joint chiefs of staff, Col. René Emilio Ponce, raided the rectory at UCA, destroyed university files, and damaged office equipment. Lt. Jose Ricardo Espinosa, who was later implicated in the killing of the Jesuits, led the unit. The following night, the battalion, which was by that time stationed outside the gates, entered the university once again and searched the Jesuits' dormitories, asking who was in what building and where each person slept. When they attempted to enter the residence of Ellacuría, he blocked their entry, but said that they would be welcome if they returned the following morning, during daylight, with witnesses watching. They did not return.

That same day, Major Roberto D'Aubuisson (Ret.), founder of the ruling Nationalist Republican Alliance Party (ARENA), and president of the Salvadoran Constituent Assembly, went on the radio and made more threats against the priests and “rebel sympathizers” generally. D'Aubuisson is most frequently
remembered for the description of him as a "homicidal killer" given by former Ambassador to El Salvador Robert White during Congressional testimony. He is also known to have fond feelings for the Nazis and their system of solving national social problems. He once commented to a group of visiting Germans, "You Germans were very intelligent. You realized that the Jews were responsible for the spread of Communism and you began to kill them." 7

D'Aubuisson created the ruling ARENA party in the early 1980s when he came under intense criticism for his alleged connections to the underground death squads. In order to continue receiving U.S. aid and support for the rightist military-led government, he and his colleagues created a new ruling political party using symbols that would be familiar and comfortable to an American audience. They used the Republican party of the United States for their model, incorporating its name in their title, and even adopting the familiar U.S. red, white, and blue as its official colors. It emerged as a "republican alliance" of military and para-military groups and members of the wealthy farming and industrial oligarchy. Its new image has been dubbed the party of the "Reebok Right" for its attempts to emulate an American upper-middleclass look. 8 In spite of these efforts, D'Aubuisson was officially ostracized by the United States in 1984, when it was discovered that he had ordered the assassination of Ambassador Thomas Pickering. A ban was placed on all official U.S. meetings with him of any kind, a ban that lasted until June 1989, when Vice President Dan Quayle paid a visit to D'Aubuisson while visiting in the country.

On previous occasions when D'Aubuisson went on the air and publicly threatened "enemies" of the state, they were often murdered soon afterward in death squad-style killings. The most famous instance was the 1980 killing of Archbishop Oscar Romero, who was shot while saying Mass two days after he was denounced by D'Aubuisson in a broadcast on the government-controlled television station. Even though he is no longer officially a part of the military apparatus, and no longer the president of ARENA, D'Aubuisson is still considered "Maximum Leader" of the party, and through his seat in the Constituent Assembly he wields great power. He also still has close and frequent communications with members of the ruling military bloc, including Col. Ponce, the Chief of Staff. Ponce himself has been implicated in numerous massacres, extrajudicial killings, and disappearances from the early 1980s when he headed the Treasury Police. 9 While it is unlikely that D'Aubuisson had a direct hand in the massacre at the UCA, it is nonetheless true that the next morning, November 16, following his public death threats against the Jesuits, approximately forty uniformed men, violating the military curfew and passing through the Atlacatl Battalion guarding the gate, entered the University of Central America and shot eight people: six priests, a cook, and her fifteen-year-old daughter.

**THE KILLINGS**

The initial information on the killings was spotty, but sufficient to be very incriminating. There was, in fact, a witness who—though she did not actually see the killings themselves—saw the killers and their general movements on the campus. She was Lucia Barrera de Cerna, a cleaning woman, who was sleeping in a building bordering the UCA grounds with her husband and daughter the night of the killings. At about 1:00 a.m. they were awakened by the sounds of grenade launchers, anti-tank weapons, and other heavy power rifles being fired into the air. The men were making noises which sounded as though they were in a fire fight with rebels, but there were no signs of rebels present. What she saw from her window was several uniformed men gathering at the gate to the UCA and a number of others coming through it. When they reached the residences, one of them threw a grenade into the dormitory where several of the priests were sleeping. They seemed to know just where to go, as though they had been on the grounds recently. Two of them rushed into the dormitory and shot two of the priests, Joaquin López y López and Juan Ramón Moreno, while they were still asleep. They evidently were surprised to discover that the Jesuits' cook, Julia Elba Ramos, and her daughter, Celina, were sleeping there also—expecting the curfew and military to protect them—and they too were shot.

After the women were shot, three other priests, Amando
López, Ignacio Martín-Baró, and Segundo Montes, were dragged from their beds and taken outside to the lawn in front of their residence. Fr. Ellacuria, whose quarters were next door to the others, was brought out to join them, and all of them were forced to lie face down on the lawn. Cerna testified that the last voice she heard from the garden was Fr. Martín-Baró’s. He shouted, “You are committing an injustice!” Soon afterward she heard another shot and then the shouting stopped.

There was speculation early in the investigation that the killers had wanted to make the statement that the priests were the “brains” of the rebel movement by strewing pieces of their skulls on the campus lawn. While that may have been true, American ballistics experts who worked on the case later pointed out that the rifles used were standard U.S.-issue M-16s, and were sufficiently powerful to accomplish the same effect unintentionally when fired at close range.

After the killers had finished with the priests, they searched the residences, torched the university archives, and threw grenades into the school of theology. Before leaving, some of the men went to several of the buildings and wrote rebel slogans on the walls. One person, apparently in an attempt to incriminate the FMLN, wrote “The FNLM executed the enemy spies,” and then scratched out the incorrect letters and reversed them. The last act before leaving was to fire a flare into the air which appeared to be a signal to others who were monitoring the assassinations. At no time during the forty-five minute event did the guards at the gate enter the grounds to see what was happening. At no time did any of the other battalions in the area rush to the scene of what appeared to be a firefight to lend support or to investigate. On the surface, at least, it appeared as though most of the military and government leaders in the southern half of San Salvador understood what was happening and did not need to investigate.

The next morning, soldiers of San Salvador’s First Infantry Brigade circled the archdiocesan offices of the Catholic Church in a military sound truck, praising the killers for their work. “Ignacio Ellacuria and Ignacio Martín-Baró have already fallen,” they announced on the truck’s loudspeaker. “And we will continue murdering communists.”

THE REACTION

The immediate reaction of the Salvadoran government to the massacre was to condemn the killings and to exonerate the military and government. The official Salvadoran position was that the crime was simply another in a line of rebel terrorist attacks. Salvadoran military spokespersons asserted that without question the crime “was perpetrated as part of the FMLN campaign to defame the army and government.” The armed forces released an official communiqué which condemned the “treacherous murder committed by the FMLN guerrillas.” Commenting on the testimony that the killers wore uniforms, President Alfredo Cristiani told reporters, “There are many others who do not belong to the armed forces who also have uniforms.” In the U.S., Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney stated emphatically that “there’s no indication at all that the government of El Salvador had any involvement” in the crime. As late as the end of December, just days before the Salvadoran government itself admitted to military involvement in the killings, a high level State Department spokesperson was still stating publicly that “the evidence has not linked the killing to the military” and that in his opinion, it incriminated the rebels.

Perhaps the most controversial event to follow the killings was the allegation that agents of the FBI and the Salvadoran military attempted to get the cleaning woman, Lucia Barrera de Cerna, to change her story about seeing uniformed soldiers on the UCA campus. After she gave her initial testimony to the Salvadoran investigating judge, the Spanish and French ambassadors arranged for her and her family to quickly leave the country and go into hiding under the protection of the Jesuit community in the U.S. However, when U.S. Ambassador William Walker heard of the arrangements, he asked if he could send a representative along with her also “to facilitate a smooth entry into the United States.” Without telling the Jesuits, the other ambassadors, or the Cerna family, he also arranged to have them met in Miami by State Department officials who took them into custody. For the next six days, Lucia de Cerna was interrogated by two FBI agents and Lt. Col. Manuel Antonio
Rivas, the head of the Salvadoran Special Investigations Unit (SIU) which was investigating the killings. During that time she was not allowed to have counsel present, and her friends in the Jesuit community were not allowed to visit her. She said that they repeatedly accused her of lying and threatened her with deportation back to El Salvador if she did not tell the "truth" and change her story. She said they repeated the questions and the threats continuously. "Then I became scared of these men," she said of the incident later. "I didn't have any confidence anymore. And then I said, 'No sir. I don't know anything. Don't ask me any more questions. I don't know anything.'" When she finally changed her testimony and denied that she had seen anyone the night of the shooting, she was given a polygraph test, which she failed. The fact that she had failed a lie detector test was immediately released to the press as evidence that she had fabricated her story. In El Salvador, President Cristiani held a press conference to announce that she had failed the test and that her testimony would no longer be held credible. The Attorney General stated that because of it she had shown herself to be a "very unreliable witness." 17

Perhaps the most startling revelation in the affair was that, according to a very credible source, Lt. Col. Rivas, who repeatedly accused Cerna of lying and threatened to send her "back to Salvador where death is awaiting you," may have known since the first days of the investigation who the killers were and who had ordered them to do the killing. The source was Col. Carlos Aviles, the man who finally broke the story of the military's involvement in the murders. Allegedly, he told an American major who works with him in El Salvador that the man later charged with giving the orders for the killings came up to Rivas shortly after the event and told him, "I did it . . . what can you do to help me . . . what can we do about this?" After his alleged conversation with Rivas, the direction of the investigation began to center almost entirely on material evidence (ballistics tests, fingerprints etc.), and military personnel ceased being interviewed.18

Following the interrogation, the Cernas were taken into the care of Jesuits in the U.S. who immediately denounced the affair as an outrage. Attorneys for the Cernas demanded that U.S. authorities turn over the transcripts of the interrogation, but they were refused. To counter the controversy, State Department spokesperson, Margaret Tutwiler, described Cerna's treatment as one of "respect and courtesy . . . Every effort was made to make the witness feel comfortable and secure." 19 When Cerna's attorneys then requested the results of the polygraph tests which allegedly proved that her testimony was flawed, the State Department stood by its story that the questioning had been handled fairly, but refused to turn over the lie detector results to prove it.

THE INVESTIGATION

Meanwhile in El Salvador, the Cristiani government decided finally to launch a massive investigation into the murders. As evidence of government involvement began to mount, it was becoming more and more difficult to deny responsibility or to blame the rebels. Another factor was that, in what was described as strongly worded terms, the U.S. embassy in El Salvador had informed President Cristiani that if he did not quickly name a person or persons in the military as the guilty parties he would eventually run the risk of Congress cutting back on military aid. 20 To facilitate the investigation, experts were called in from Spain, the United States, and Great Britain, and the blue-ribbon "honor commission" was established to aid the search. Attorney General Mauricio Eduardo Colorado, who wrote to the Vatican demanding that the pope recall priests who preached the "questionable doctrine" of working with the poor because they would no longer be assured of safety, was assigned to head the investigation. Scores of government employees were turned over to the effort, a reward of $250,000 was offered for information leading to arrests, and for two months an intensive nationwide investigation took place. Finally, after a flurry of activity, on January 8, 1990, President Cristiani announced the names of the military personnel who would be charged with the crime and disbanded the investigating commission. He said the investigation had found that in spite of his earlier claims to the contrary, "there was involvement of some elements of the armed forces" in the killings, 21 and immediately made plans to go to Washing-
ton to lobby Congress for further increases in military aid.

Because of the almost total autonomy of the military from civilian control in El Salvador, Cristiani was able to announce to Congress that he had successfully charged a relatively high ranking military official with a crime, without at the same time implicating the elected government, which officially receives U.S. aid. However, Congress in January of 1989 had been seriously considering cutting back on all aid to countries in the Third World because of budgetary restraints resulting from the expensive 1980s military buildup. Therefore, when Cristiani arrived in Washington he told the president and Congress that new money would be needed in El Salvador to support the military’s newly established program of fighting illegal drugs among the campesinos and rebels.

Eight persons were charged in the slaying, including seven who were from the Atlacatl Battalion which had surrounded the university, and Col. Guillermo Alfredo Benavides, who was head of the military school and in charge militarily of that sector of the city. Actually the government’s massive investigation did not itself produce the names of the persons who were charged. The actual source was Col. Carlos Aviles, head of the military’s psychological operations unit. Aviles worked alongside an American major on improving the generally dim image of the Salvadoran military. The priests’ killings had presented to them a particularly difficult public relations problem. Therefore, in mid-December he shared with the major some inside information which he had heard in military circles about Benavides’ role in the killings. Aviles said that the information was for their public relations problem, and requested that the major not share it or its source with anyone else.

The major asked him, “Who else knows?” Aviles implicated Col. Ponce, the head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Lt. Col. Rivas, who was heading up the SIU investigation, and at least a few others. The major waited for two weeks without doing anything with the information, and then he passed it and its source on to his superiors and eventually to Cristiani. When questioned about it, he said that he held off as long as he could because he was told by Aviles that Benavides and others would soon be charged with the shootings, and he wanted the Salvadoran officials to appear as though they had solved the crime on their own without outside help. When that finally appeared unlikely, he broke the news. The major allegedly had also known, from the same source, of the planned slaying of the priests some days before it happened. He was recalled to the U.S. for questioning.

Many people have questioned the naming of Col. Benavides as the “immediate author” of the killings. For example, the Atlacatl Battalion had been assigned to him at his post at the Military School just two days before the killings, and then reassigned two days afterward. He didn’t know either of the two lieutenants who led the unit. It would be extremely unusual for someone to entrust such a highly political killing to strangers. Also he was not known as a hardliner and did not have a long string of human rights abuses, as did Chief of Staff Ponce and others who were not named. Unlike many of his colleagues, Benavides had not been known to make public death threats about the Jesuits. Finally, it would be highly unusual for a military commander of his rank to make such a move without at least consulting with other members of the Tandona (or “Big Class”) of which he was a part. Renegade behavior was not tolerated in the Tandona ranks, and nothing he did indicated that he was acting alone. All of his actions appeared as though he believed he was either under orders or being protected by others higher up. He used military forces which could be easily traced back to him, he promised higher-up protection to the men who did the shooting, and he turned over his operations book which contained incriminating information about the night of the killings. (Not surprisingly, the book and other pieces of crucial evidence in the crime turned up missing during the investigation.) According to the report of the Congressional Task Force on El Salvador led by Rep. Joe Moakley (D.-Mass.), “whether or not Col. Benavides was acting under orders, it can be argued that he behaved as if he were.”22 However, in spite of the heavy evidence of multiple decision making at a very high level in the military, investigators with the Task Force said that the U.S. embassy in El Salvador repeatedly attempted to get them to narrow their inquiry and not to pursue linkages with the rest of the military Tandona or the civilian government. That
the embassy would ask them to do that, one investigator described as “incredible.”

**THE EVENT**

The actual murders themselves appear to have been decided upon during a high-level strategy meeting of the National Intelligence Directorate the night of the shootings. The meeting was called by Col. René Emilio Ponce, the one who had ordered the ransacking of the Jesuit rectory two days earlier, and who had probably reassigned the Atlacatl Battalion to the area surrounding the UCA. Col. Benavides was also there. The meeting was called because the commanders were afraid that the rebels were about to take the city and that more dramatic measures had to be taken. The FMLN rebels had shown themselves to be much better armed, trained, and skilled than the military had imagined, and the poor of the city seemed to be joining their ranks in much larger numbers than they had expected. There was for the first time a very real fear among the colonels at the meeting that the “Popular Insurrection,” long heralded by the rebels, was finally taking place. One decision they made at this meeting was to increase the use of air power, artillery, and armored personnel carriers in the poor barrios where the rebels had their greatest support. They reportedly reasoned that the FMLN would not fight long if the poor people they were supposedly there to help were being killed in unusually large numbers. They also decided to go after and eliminate all suspected rebel leaders or sympathizers and their “command centers,” a term used on occasion in connection with UCA. Each person there who commanded a battalion in the various sectors of the city was given an assignment. Some had human rights workers in their sector, some had unions, and one had the UCA. All through the night, following the meeting, noncombatant civilians were “disappeared” or shot by mysterious unnamed “death squads.” At about 10:15, during the final moments of the meeting, someone radioed Lt. Espinosa, the man who had led the raid on the rectory two days before. He was asked by someone at the meeting to gather the troops in front of the Military School for an important assignment. At 10:30 President Cristiani was awakened and informed of the meeting. He went to the meeting of the High Command and signed an order authorizing the use of fire and artillery power against civilians. The meeting finally ended at about 11:00 with the men joining their hands together for prayer. They prayed that God in his goodness and mercy would protect them and come to their aid in their time of need.

At 11:30, Col. Benavides gathered together forty soldiers in front of the military training school and gave them their orders concerning the priests. Benavides told them that “this is a situation where it’s them or us; we’re going to begin with the ring-leaders. Within our sector, we have the university, and Ellacuria is there.” To Lt. Espinosa he said, “You conducted the search and your people know the place. Use the same tactics as on the day of the search and eliminate him. And I want no witnesses.”

The group was asked if any one of them knew how to fire an AK-47, the kind used by the rebels. An enlisted man, Oscar Amaya, offered that he did, and a rifle of that type owned by the Military School was given to him. Sub-Sgt. Antonio Avalos, known as “Satan” by his comrades, was asked to join him because he was known for being a good shot. Espinosa turned the men and told them that their mission that night was to “kill some terrorists who were inside the UCA.” At about midnight, they all got into two beige Ford vans and drove to the UCA. They met there at about 1:00 with the rest of the battalion, and at 1:30, they began banging on the university doors.

Fr. Ignacio Martín-Baró was the first to come to the door. He let some of the soldiers in the gate and then accompanied one of them to another gate and opened it to the rest. Within minutes two of the priests and the two women were shot in their beds. The rest were gathered out on the lawns just above the backyard entrance to the living quarters and ordered to lie face down on the grass. Lt. Espinosa asked “Satan” Avalos when he was going to begin. Avalos turned to Amaya, with the AK-47, and said, “Let’s proceed.” That was when Lucia Barrera de Cerna, from her window in a small house bordering the UCA property, saw the men gathered there on the lawn, and heard Martín-Baró say his last words, “This is an outrage.” After that the men opened fire.

The soldiers stayed on the campus for about a half an hour
after that, destroying property, faking the sounds of a rebel firefight, and stealing whatever valuables they could find. One was seen taking a valise containing $5,000 which had been given to Fr. Ellacuria just days earlier in recognition of his human rights work. As they were leaving, Sub-Sgt. “Satan” Avalos passed by the guest rooms where Julia Elba Ramos and her daughter, Celia Marisette Ramos had been shot. He heard them moaning and shined a light into the room and saw them holding onto each other in the darkness crying. He then “re-killed” them by firing at them repeatedly until they finally stopped moaning. When the soldiers had finally finished, they fired off a flare, as they had been instructed to do, and left the campus.

When they reported back to Col. Benavides at the Military School, Lt. Espinosa said to him, “My Colonel, I did not like what we did.” The Colonel told him to calm down. “Don’t worry,” he said. “You have my support. Trust me.” “I hope so, my Colonel,” Espinosa replied.

At 8:00 the next morning, during the regularly scheduled military intelligence meeting in which U.S. military advisors were almost always present, the announcement was made that the hated Ellacuría was dead. The officers broke out in applause and cheers.24

EPILOGUE

Meanwhile, many diplomats, human rights monitors, and persons in the religious community both within and outside of El Salvador remained doubtful that justice would be served in the upcoming legal proceedings. During the funerals for those killed, the homilies frequently stated that the real issues in El Salvador were not the complicity of an individual colonel, but a broader ruling attitude of serving the rich at the expense of the poor. “They were assassinated because they sought truth and spoke the truth—because their truth favored the poor,” said Fr. José María Tojeira, the Jesuit provincial for Central America. “Nobody can destroy their testimonial to the truth.”25

NOTES


3. Just preceding the rebel offensive they had begun a ten-day training course with U.S. Green Berets which had to be cut short when the fighting broke out. The Green Berets were then assigned to pass their time in the San Salvador Sheraton in a wealthy zone considered safe from the fighting. However, their relaxation was interrupted a few days later when they found themselves having to barricade their doors from a contingent of rebels who had invaded the wealthy zones and occupied the hotel. Cf. Rep. Joe Moakley, ed., Interim Report of the Speaker’s Task Force on El Salvador, April 30, 1990, p. 15.


5. Interim Report, Appendix C.


13. Interim Report, p. 43.


15. Barriers to Reform: A Profile of El Salvador’s Military Leaders, Congressional Arms Control and Foreign Policy Caucus, May 21, 1990, p. 15. The report notes that as recently as January 1989, Ponce apparently lied to Rep. Gerry Studds (D.-MA) when he told him that a massacre of ten peasants in the small town of San Sebastián had been committed by FMLN rebels. When Studds pointed out that the people had all been shot at close range in the head with rifles like those owned by the military, Ponce replied that the rebels had dug up the bodies,
shot them in the heads with U.S.-issue weapons and then reburied them in order to incriminate the army. The statement was later retracted by a Salvadoran Army spokesperson.

18. Ibid., p. 28.
22. Interim Report, p. 47.
23. Interim Report, p. 16. The following details of the killings were taken for the most part from the Report.