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Closing the Door On the School of the Assassins

By THOMAS P. RAUSCH

I AM ONLY AN OCCASIONAL and reluctant demonstrator, but the vigil in Georgia was worth the trip. Nov. 16, 1996, marked the seventh anniversary of the murder of six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper and her teen-age daughter at the University of Central America in El Salvador. To mark the event, the School of the Americas Watch and a large representation of the "Ignatian Family"—Jesuits, former Jesuits, their family members and Jesuit students—organized by Robert Holstein, a former Jesuit and now a lawyer in Riverside, Calif., who served a prison sentence of two months for taking part in last year's demonstration, staged a vigil at the entrance to Fort Benning in Columbus, Ga. Fort Benning, one of the largest U.S. Army bases in the United States, is the home of the School of the Americas.

Since the founding of the S.O.A. in 1946, some 59,000 officers and men from Latin America have been trained there. Their graduates have made such a name for themselves and for the institution that it is called by many the "School of the Assassins," a name first given it by a major newspaper in Panama, where the school was located until 1984. A majority of those accused of war crimes and human rights abuses in country after country in Latin America are S.O.A. graduates. Among those who attended the school were 19 of the Salvadoran officers cited for the murder of the Jesuits and lay colleagues at the UCA, three of those responsible for the murder of Archbishop Oscar Romero and three of the officers cited for the 1980 murder of the four U.S. church women. In addition, 12 S.O.A. graduates were implicated in the massacre at El Mozote in 1981, 100 were among the Columbian officers cited for war crimes by the international human rights tribunal, and at least 19 have been linked to the Honduran death-squad known as Battalion 3-16.

As I looked at the beautiful grounds and the road beyond the gate disappearing into the woods, I found myself wondering how many times Roberto D'Aubuisson, widely believed to be the architect of the murder of Archbishop Romero, had come down that road, and which of the officers named in the murder of the Jesuits at the UCA had also paused to admire the view.

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The demonstration at the gate was a combination of ritual, prayer, song and celebration. People came from all across the country—nuns, priests and religious brothers, former priests with their wives and children, Catholic Workers, aging activists, students from Jesuit schools and campus ministry organizations, native Americans, representatives of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, Pax Christi, Veterans for Peace, the Latin American Working Group, Amnesty International and many of the S.O.A. 13, those who had been arrested at the demonstration last year for "crossing the line" and had served prison terms. Absent was the Maryknoll priest Ray Bourgeois, still in a Federal prison in Atlanta for his participation last year.

After Carol Richardson, coordinator of the S.O.A. Watch in Father Bourgeois' place, opened the vigil, a number of



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The following statement was read by Paul Locatelli, S.J., president of Santa Clara University, Calif., at the memorial peace vigil held on Nov. 16, 1996, at Fort Benning, Ga.

AS A PRIEST, I celebrate with you the lives of the eight Salvadoran martyrs who were murdered seven years ago today in San Salvador under cover of darkness—a murder planned and executed by persons trained here at Fort Benning in a program funded by U.S. tax dollars. These martyrs were killed because of their determination to walk the path of Jesus by being “good news for the poor, sight for those who cannot see, and liberation for those who are oppressed” (Lk. 4:18). Today, we remember that all whose fidelity to God requires them to drink deeply from the cup of human suffering will ultimately join together “with Mary the mother of God, the apostles, the martyrs and all the saints...at the one eternal banquet with Jesus Christ our Lord.”

As a university president, I come to protect the search for truth and academic freedom. I know that gathering and following evidence to its conclusion, no matter how unpopular or threatening the conclusion may be, is the mind and heart of scholarship and the soul of a university. Ignacio Ellacuría, Ignacio (“Nacho”) Martín-Baró and Segundo Montes were internationally acknowledged scholars. They worked indefatigably to create the kind of university that Ellacuría once described thus:

A Christian university must take into account the Gospel preference for the poor.... This does not mean that the university should abdicate its mission of academic excellence—excellence needed in order to solve complex social problems. It does mean that the university should be present intellectually where it is needed—to be a voice for those who have no voice, to give intellectual support for those who do not possess the academic qualifications to promote their legitimate rights.

These scholars were murdered for drawing the conclusions called for by scholarly evidence. And death really was the only way to keep scholars of such integrity and conviction from telling the truth. It is noteworthy that throughout the world we celebrate the hope and truth of their lives—not the lie of their deaths. We celebrate our Jesuit brothers and colleagues from the south as martyrs to the value and the responsibilities of academic freedom. Ignacio Ellacuría was a friend. I will never forget that Thursday morning seven years ago this day, when another Jesuit stopped me under the arbor in the gardens alongside the Mission Church at Santa Clara to tell me the terrible news. What Ignacio said of the church, I would like to say of his University of Central America, his beloved UCA. Ignacio said of the church in El Salvador: “In the annals of ecclesial life today, it is hard to find a church as martyred and persecuted simply for being faithful to its commitment to the poor and for striving to be the true people of God.”

Today I speak a similar truth for UCA: In the annals of intellectual life, it is hard to find a university as martyred and persecuted simply for being faithful to its commitment in the search for truth and for striving to be true to the people of God.

Finally, as a professional educator, I also come to protest our Government calling this place a school. Schools educate. Education is a process that leads individuals to search for truth, to discover the best of our humanity and to live truly human lives. Torture, deception, kidnaping are perversions—not perfections—of the human spirit; institutions that teach these practices can lay no claim to be schools. Such institutions stand for the inhumanity from which education aims to liberate. Until this place is closed, we will never realize the vision of Amos, in which “justice roll[s] down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream” (5:24).

statements of support were read. One of the most moving moments in the morning came when Dick Howard, a former Jesuit and now a teacher at Archbishop Mitty High School in San Jose, Calif., told his story of the morning of the murders. At the time, he had been head of Jesuit Refugee Service in El Salvador, and received a phone call from the Jesuit provincial superior about 7:15 A.M., telling him of the massacre and asking him to go to the residence of the archbishop, Msgr. Arturo Rivera-Damas, S.D.B., as he could not get through to him by phone. The Archbishop couldn't believe the news and had to retire for a few minutes to his room before the two of them went to the UCA to confirm the story and identify the bodies. As Howard spoke before a crowd holding crosses, each bearing the name of a victim killed by those trained by the S.O.A., he found on those crosses the names of people he had known, Ignatio Martín-Baró, the Jesuit sociologist from the University of Chicago whom Howard remembered playing the guitar for the scholastics, and Elba Ramos, the cook at the UCA, who used to scold him when he came home too late for dinner.

ANOTHER SPEAKER, a former army officer who had been on the staff of the S.O.A., spoke powerfully about how his own views had changed and how much damage the S.O.A. was doing to the Army he loved. He revealed that the cost borne by the U.S. taxpayers for the school was not the \$2 million of the official figure, but closer to \$20 million, and said although new material on the protection of human rights had been added to the program (a four-hour unit, not a course), nothing had been taken out. He also said that of the 21 instructors on the staff, 17 were from South or Central America,

which means that the U.S. Army does not really have control of the instruction.

The participants recited together a pledge of nonviolent discipline, promises to remain nonviolent, to renounce anger, insulting language or any damage of property, pledging to treat those opposing them with respect and to protect them from insult or attack. I was reminded of the spirituality of nonviolence Thomas Merton developed in his wonderful essay, "Blessed Are the Meek." Then we all broke bread together, a kind of ecumenical service of communion. A Jewish woman spoke of the bread of the Passover, then recited the blessing in Hebrew. A Hispanic woman spoke of the importance of the tortilla in Mexico, how it was bread, life and communion. Then, tearing three tortillas into pieces she proclaimed "*pan de vida, pan de los pobres, cuerpo de Cristo.*" Finally, Bill Bichsel, S.J., who had served four months in prison as one of the S.O.A. 13, invited us to share in the bread blessed and broken. It was not a Mass, and no one tried to suggest that it was, but there was real communion, and it made the Eucharist itself all the more real.

After a group prayer of exorcism directed towards the S.O.A. and a blessing of those who would cross the line, 61 participants "crossed the line," processing through the gate to plant their crosses on the grass on the other side and then continuing on toward the S.O.A. Again the almost liturgical quality of the day came through. Everyone was

very polite. The security forces pointed the way for the protestors to go. They complied silently. As they disappeared down the parkway, security forces concealed around a bend took them into custody, while others removed the newly planted crosses. Those who engaged in the civil disobedience could serve from two to six months in Federal custody.

THE ULTIMATE GOAL of the demonstration was to show support for the third legislative attempt by Representative Joseph P. Kennedy (Democrat of Massachusetts) to close the school. The long litany of the victims and the recent admission by the Pentagon that seven Spanish language manuals used at the S.O.A. during the years 1982-91 advocated execution, beatings, torture, blackmail, false imprisonment and threats against family members should be argument enough. Tom Hayden, 60's activist and now a California state senator, is described in one of the manuals as "one of the masters of terrorist planning." Lisa Haugeard, legislative coordinator for the Latin American Working Group, commented: "It is precisely this identification of activists for social change as terrorists that led death squads in Latin America to kill thousands of religious leaders, students, union members and human rights activists." I'm glad I was there. It's time to close the door on the S.O.A. ■



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