



Think, love, challenge: The Jesuit martyrs' legacy

Jennifer E. Knapp

16 November marks the 25th anniversary of the murders of six Jesuits, and their housekeeper and her daughter, in El Salvador. The Jesuits were targeted because they spoke out against the unjust treatment of the Salvadoran people. Jennifer Knapp, who works with imprisoned Salvadoran youth, explains why the martyrs' legacy is still urgently relevant in 'post-war' El Salvador, where the injustices that the Jesuits confronted have transformed rather than been resolved.

This year marks the 25th anniversary of the murders of six Jesuit scholars/priests, and their housekeeper and her daughter, at the 'José Simeón Cañas' University of Central America in San Salvador in the early hours of 16 November 1989. The Jesuit martyrs were not merely murdered – their brains were blown out of their bodies as a deliberate symbol of the murderers' intention to obliterate the intellectual and moral support for the Salvadoran struggle for justice. Perhaps the military officers who designed and carried out the murders (who were trained and funded by the Carter, Reagan and Bush administrations) believed that sending such a gruesome message to the Salvadoran people would cause them to give up their struggle and succumb to the injustices that had defined their lives and those of their ancestors since the colonial takeover of the region.

However, the death of the Jesuits brought a new wave of international pressure on the United States government to cut off military aid to the Salvadoran army. While the murders of [Archbishop Oscar Romero](#) and of four US Maryknoll missionaries in 1980 had served as red flags, they did not garner enough scrutiny from the international community to disrupt the US government's strategic 'low-intensity warfare' agenda that would grind on uninterruptedly for twelve more years. However, when news spread in 1989 of the



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murders of the high-profile Jesuit priests (five of whom were Spanish citizens), the public could no longer be fooled into believing the US justification that the war was being waged to defeat 'communists' whose dangerous agenda posed a threat to the entire region. Amidst public outcry and at the risk of losing face by prolonging an increasingly unpopular war, Congress began to reconsider its military aid to El Salvador. Joseph Moakley, a

Democratic Representative from Boston, led a task force on El Salvador that proved that the murders had been carried out by the Salvadoran military. Congress used these findings (coupled with the fact that Cold War scare tactics were going out of style) to support the decision to cut off military aid to El Salvador. Shortly thereafter, in December 1991, the Salvadoran government and the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) negotiated an end to the war.

The Jesuit martyrs would no doubt lament the fact that while roughly 70,000 Salvadoran men, women and children were killed throughout the war, it took their own murders to create enough cognitive dissonance for the US government to question its foreign policy in El Salvador seriously. Throughout their lives, the martyrs leveraged their power to give voice to the people's struggle for agency and economic justice, and they exposed state-sanctioned violence and

torture. They believed deeply in the equal value of all human life, yet, ironically, it took their 'high profile' deaths to stem the flow of aid that had been sponsoring the gross human rights violations they had denounced all along.

The martyrs' legacy lives on in the work of those who continue to struggle for the protection of human rights in El Salvador. They preached a theology of liberation, one that does not ask a suffering people to accept their plight humbly and to wait for heavenly salvation. Rather, theirs is a theology that favours the poor and calls for active participation in the creation of the kingdom of God on earth, in which all human beings live with dignity and in right relationship with one another and with creation. Not surprisingly, this 'radical' interpretation of the gospel message has not been an easy pill to swallow for those (in the Church and in society at large) wedded to wealth, power and control. Thus, the martyrs' faces have been painted and white-washed again and again in the tug of war between truth and power that plays out visibly on church walls in El Salvador, and invisibly in the forces of structural and cultural violence that have continued to permeate Salvadoran society since the signing of the 'peace accords' in 1992.

In the field of peace studies, the widely used term 'post-conflict' has been deemed by many to be a misnomer at best. In El Salvador, there was no such 'post-conflict' period; rather, the conflict simply transformed. Many Salvadorans acknowledge that they currently live in a state of war. In the words of Carolyn Cohn, in her book *Women and Wars*, following an armed conflict:

The social fabric of community and nation will take painstaking reweaving, the wounded bodies and psyches of both fighters and their victims may be beyond repair or require years of careful tending. Ex-combatants trained to kill with gun or machete, to destroy what they fear and take what they want, represent an enduring threat to family and community unless psyches are healed, nonviolence is (re)learned, and means of livelihood are found.¹

There was no such 'painstaking reweaving [of] wounded bodies and psyches' in El Salvador. The perpetrators (and funders) of the war crimes in El Salvador still have general amnesty (though the Jesuit murders are

now under investigation in Spain², and the Salvadoran Supreme Court recently agreed to hear challenges to the amnesty law³). Amidst this climate of 'amnesty,' which felt to many victims more like a climate of utter invisibility, Salvadorans have been expected to pick up the pieces of their lives and hearts and continue to survive.

Since the signing of the peace accords, mass deportations of Salvadoran refugees from Los Angeles (many of whom had joined the LA-based 18th Street and Mara Salvatrucha gangs), combined with collective trauma, unemployment and an abundance of arms, set the stage for an informal economy in drug trading and organised crime. Meanwhile, the right wing ARENA party, who were in power until 2009, wasted no time in complying with the US neoliberal economic agenda, and the Salvadoran economy was dollarised by 2001 (producing inflation rates that are a continuing burden on Salvadorans). In 2005, the Central American Free Trade Agreement was signed into law, which has made it exceedingly difficult for Salvadoran farmers to compete in their own national (let alone international) market. The agreement gives private industries, such as mining companies, the power to extract raw materials even if the Salvadoran people and government protest such initiatives on environmental grounds (which has led to a highly publicised, controversial lawsuit between the Salvadoran government and Pacific Rim gold mining company⁴).

This economic restructuring has benefited Salvadoran elites and transnational corporations, while the majority of the population has continued to struggle to survive in the context of great poverty, exploitation and environmental degradation.⁵ As profit is prioritised over human security and environmental protection on a global scale, the Salvadoran poor are routinely and disproportionately affected by not-so-natural disasters thanks to climate change, deforestation and substandard housing that is consistently reconstructed in high-risk areas.

Faced with this stark economic reality and a general climate of fear and mistrust, many Salvadorans have made the dangerous journey to migrate to the US, only to be met with discrimination and a new host of challenges. Currently, there are approximately 2 million Salvadorans living in the US, which is equivalent to one third of the population of Salvadorans

living in El Salvador. An increasing number of Salvadoreans who remain in El Salvador (some estimate as many as 60,000) have joined criminal organisations, whose resolve and structure have strengthened in response to the hard-fisted security measures designed to weaken them. Though the left-wing FMLN party has been in power in El Salvador since 2009, the country continues to be a pawn of hegemonic, neoliberal agendas, and has become increasingly militarised. The two go hand-in-hand: in a country with a history of economic exploitation and armed resistance, repression is required in order to ensure the stability necessary to 'encourage foreign investment' and keep human rights activists at bay, while conveniently attributing their murders and disappearances to 'gang violence'.⁶ 'Collateral damage' of the macho, hard-fisted security approach combined with an existing *machismo* culture can be noted in an increase in domestic violence and startling femicide rates in recent years⁷ – though much gender-based violence goes unreported, or unaddressed when reported in El Salvador's swamped legal system that is roughly five years backlogged when it comes to rape cases.

The 'war on communists', in the middle of which the Jesuit martyrs found themselves, has simply morphed into the 'war on drugs' in the spirit of continued militarisation and control of the region. The Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI) founded by the Bush administration in 2008 has poured \$574 million into warlike drug interdiction and law enforcement, despite human rights' organisations documentation of extrajudicial killings and torture at the hands of law enforcement officials.⁸ The military now controls many civilian police posts, and President Obama has renewed and expanded CARSI, despite its abysmal track record. As a result of these punitive efforts, homicide rates have skyrocketed in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. The icing on the cake, as far as militarisation is concerned, is the little-known fact that in addition to militarising their own country, US-trained Salvadoran soldiers have also been deployed in recent US military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan.⁹ They have been sent to the Middle East to search for terrorists and weapons of mass destruction, while small arms continue to flow from the US into the hands of both narco-traffickers and law enforcement officials alike in their own country, creating ever-greater insecurity, tragic loss and terror.

One might ask: where is the Catholic Church in the midst of such great suffering and injustice? How is the Church keeping the martyrs' work alive? The sad truth is that aside from the Christian Base Communities (which are ostracised from the Church yet are still actively working for justice in El Salvador), the Church has in general become increasingly conservative. Through Tutela Legal (a human rights and legal aid office for the poor and oppressed, founded by Archbishop Oscar Romero before the war), those in the Church who were committed to social justice (albeit the minority) advocated tirelessly for the protection of the rights of the marginalised, and demanded investigations into incidents such as the massacre of El Mozote. However, in 2013, Archbishop Jose Luis Escobar Alas of San Salvador closed the office unexpectedly. Mauricio Funes, El Salvador's president at the time, stated in regard to the closure: 'The Catholic Church, and especially the Archbishop of San Salvador, are not determined to accompany the just causes of the people'.¹⁰

According to Father Ignacio Ellacuría (one of the Jesuit martyrs and rector of the University of Central America at the time of his death), 'the crucified people' are the suffering poor in the world and the ones that 'bear the weight of the world's sin'.¹¹ Who are these crucified people today who are paying the price for the world's sin? Having spent four years accompanying incarcerated minors in Salvadoran detention centres, I consider the young foot soldiers in the gangs to number among the crucified people of today. As part of the 'war on drugs' propaganda, we see images of tattooed youth flashing gang signs and holding automatic weapons, and we are expected to internalise the notion that they, in fact, are the problem – the sinners. Yet their actions and decisions cannot be separated from 'the sins of the world' which include all of us (myself included) who prop up the systems of structural violence that create the conditions ripe for hopelessness, desperation and organised crime on the margins. I am certain that if the martyrs were alive today, they would speak out against the continued economic injustices in El Salvador, the expansion of the military industrial complex that profits from human insecurity, and the punitive justice system which cages those whose crimes (though barbaric) are often the screaming expressions of their inherited traumas and their search for belonging while buried beneath layers of structural violence.

I do not want this piece to be an aggravating article that details all of the problems and neglects the solutions. As vast and complex as the problems may be, they must not immobilise us. We must seek ways to transform conflicts by envisioning our way into a world where accountability, relationship and human security are valued above profit, power and the endless accumulation of amenities that distract us from life as it unfolds before us. Deep-seeded change will not happen in a matter of weeks or years, it will take the work of lifetimes. If we choose to distance ourselves from the struggles for justice taking place in El Salvador, in our home countries, and in every corner of the globe, we are denying the fact that we are already intricately implicated in this struggle. From a faith perspective, we all belong to one another as sisters and brothers; from a global systems perspective, we are all interconnected. We must imagine and act our way into a different kind of shared future, rather than sitting idly by as oppressive economic policies and ‘security’ measures are carried out in our names. There are plenty of positive deviants who are already living their way into this new, restorative future.¹² Find them. Form community. You name the issue; it needs attention, at the grassroots and structural level. Refuse to believe that human security will be achieved through the barrel of a gun. Challenge trickle-down economic narratives near you. Get close enough to the margins that the urgency of ‘their’ struggle becomes your lifelong struggle. Think strategically. Love whole-heartedly. Leverage your collective power. And with the courage and wisdom of the martyrs, notice oppression embedded in the very structures that seek to normalise it, and then join the struggle to denounce and dismantle it, and to create something life-giving in its place.

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¹ Cohn, Carol, *Women and Wars* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), p. 21.

² See <http://cja.org/article.php?list=type&type=84>

³ See

<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2013/10/el-salvador-shutters-historic-rights-clinic-20131010112129327660.html>

⁴ See

<http://daniellemariamackey.com/2014/02/17/between-corporate-power-and-human-rights-in-el-salvador/>

⁵ For example, seed company Monsanto have managed to introduce their genetically modified seeds and fertilizer (a likely cause of chronic kidney disease) on a large scale, though the tide has shifted in the past few years as the Salvadoran government has been buying seeds from subsistence farmers, despite the US government’s threats to deny aid packages as a result. See

<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/04/business/international/el-salvador-ends-dispute-with-us-over-seeds.html>

⁶ See <https://nacla.org/news/salvadoran-anti-mining-activists-risk-their-lives-taking-%E2%80%98free-trade%E2%80%99>

⁷ See <http://cgrs.uchastings.edu/our-work/central-america-femicides-and-gender-based-violence>

⁸ See <https://nacla.org/news/2014/7/3/us-re-militarization-central-america-and-mexico-0>

⁹ See <http://www.southcom.mil/newsroom/Pages/El-Salvadoran-troops-train-at-JRTC.-deploy-to-Afghanistan.aspx>

¹⁰ See <http://articles.latimes.com/2013/oct/02/world/la-fg-salvador-rights-20131003>

¹¹ See

http://www.fordham.edu/campus_resources/ewsroom/archives/archive_1714.asp

¹²

<http://daniellemariamackey.com/2014/09/29/community-roundtable-in-el-salvador-seeks-to-mitigate-violence/>