

## POSTHUMOUS HONOURS FOR ASSASSINATED PRIESTS

I arrived in El Salvador last Thursday 12<sup>th</sup> November 2009 in the company of Father Gero McLoughlin SJ from the Jesuit Community in Edinburgh to take part in the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary commemorations of the assassination of six Jesuit Priests in the University of Central America (U.C.A.) along with their cook and the cook's daughter. However, as happens so often in El Salvador, my visit was more eventful than expected! Three Masses had been prepared and at each of these I was to preside and speak. Each celebration was a wonderful outpouring of the faith of the Salvadorian people – along with reminders in prayers, songs and actions of their longing for peace with lasting justice for all in their country.

The first Mass for the “Martyrs of El Salvador” began with a torchlight procession through the grounds of the University and out in to the public street with about ten thousand participants who then shared in the Mass following celebrated in a large open air extension in the grounds of the University. The Rector of the University was principal celebrant at this Mass while the Provincial of the Jesuit Priests in Central America was principal celebrant at Mass the following day. On the Sunday Mass was celebrated in memory of the Martyrs before the tomb of the late Archbishop Oscar Romero in the crypt of the Metropolitan Cathedral of El Salvador at 10.00 am. The third celebration of Mass was of the University community and celebrated in memory of the Martyrs of U.C.A. outside one of the large assembly halls of the University. Each Mass had a different theme: In the first I emphasised the service to be expected of bishops, priests and people in the Church and in society of today also quoting both Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI of the role of Archbishop Romero; at the second Mass I emphasised in a special way the role of the lay faithful thinking of Romero's words that even if they killed him he would continue to live on in his people; while in the third Mass I emphasised the role of the University itself indicating that it stood for “a new kind of university, a new kind of society, a new church”.

One might say that that triduum of celebrations might have been enough in a packed weekend but there were two other unexpected major events.

The first was the devastation wrought by Hurricane Ida which had devastated parts of El Salvador a few days prior to my arrival in El Salvador. On the morning of our arrival we were immediately taken to the San Vicente area of El Salvador meeting peoples who had previously been completely cut off from the rest of the country following on the devastation which had recently overtaken them. Heavy vehicles and trucks were only beginning to get through to some isolated communities – and I myself had never been in a disaster area so soon after tragedy struck. It was heartbreaking to see and try to console those who had lost members of their families; the thousands of people who had been rendered homeless; but it was inspiring to realise the great levels of support given by peoples from other parts of El Salvador themselves often extremely poor to those who had been rendered even poorer than themselves. The radio station run from U.C.A. was the rallying point of the aid coming from San Salvador – I was on one of a long convoy of trucks making their way packed with goods to the affected areas. Among the areas which we visited in a packed day were Varapaz, San Ignacio, Guadeloupe and San Vicente – everywhere being strengthened ourselves by the strong faith of the local people.

The other unexpected event was an invitation from Mauricio Funes the Constitutional President of the Republic of El Salvador to the Presidential Palace on Monday 16<sup>th</sup> November for the presentation of Posthumous awards to the six martyred Jesuits of some twenty years ago, the awards being the National Order “Jose Matias Delgado” in the grade of Grand Cross with gold star.

This was to prove a very, very wonderful event – being the first official recognition by the Government of El Salvador of the assassinations of these Jesuit Priests while simply trying to improve a lot of the people whom they were called upon to serve. U.C.A. in the words of one of the present members of staff stands for “ new kind of university, a new kind of society, a new church” – and one in which those who had been martyred “made constructive proposals for the just peace and more humane social order”.

After the formal presentation of the awards a most poignant moment was the singing of a group of “Campesinos” – the country people whom the Jesuits were trying to serve – in their own plaintive way pleading for liberty and freedom.

Other events were fitted into a busy programme including: Being shown around the magnificent memorial to the Jesuits in the Romero Centre by Father Jon Sobrino SJ himself the only survivor of the massacre quite simply because he was absent lecturing in Thailand when the assassinations took place. He showed us the only book of his which had been dislodged from the shelf during the assassination and was stained with the blood of one of his brother Jesuits with the book being entitled “The Crucified God”; and also being shown around the simple sacristy and the little house in which Romero himself had lived while being cared for by the Carmelite Sisters and in whose Chapel he had been shot while celebrating Mass.

Once again I had the opportunity of appreciating the simple faith of the people of El Salvador. On one occasion I spoke of the conditions which I witnessed in slum areas of the City as well as in other parts of the country as being “ a crime crying out to Heaven for vengeance”. However, their love of Monsignor Romero and the assassinated Jesuits was obvious, their love of the Church was clear to see, and their longing for the way of life which we take for granted was very evident. One could sum up the people in the words of Romero himself who said: “With people like these it is easy to be a good pastor!”

I was also aware of the strength of character and the commitment of the Jesuits at present in El Salvador. They are still living in a country of contrasts, still inspired by the spirit of Romero and their assassinated brethren, and they are still working in the University. I suggested that as well as the speedy beatification and canonisation of Archbishop Romero that the Jesuit Martyrs of U.C.A. should be regarded as Martyrs of the Universal Church – that being one of the reasons why I was in El Salvador.

As Patron of the Romero Trust in the United Kingdom I realise the ongoing outstanding work of the Trust to help the peoples of El Salvador in collaboration with our own charities in Britain namely CAFOD and SCIAF. For further information regarding the Romero Trust please contact the offices at: Romero Trust, 8 Deans Mews, London, W1G 9EE.

Cardinal Keith O’Brien

19<sup>th</sup> November 2009