

# The Martyrs of El Salvador

## Anniversary of the Martyrs of El Salvador – an SCU Perspective

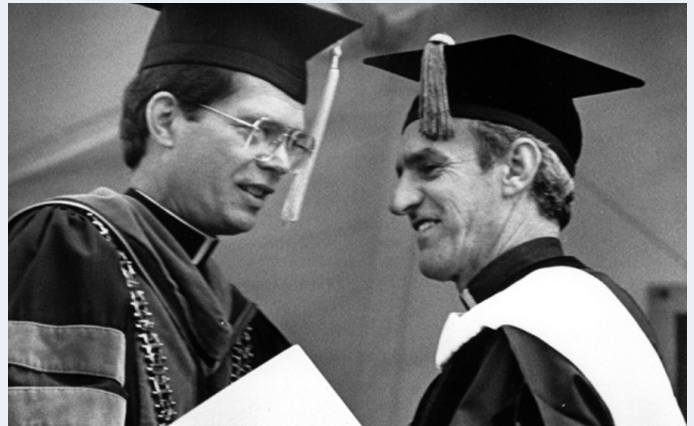
By Luis Calero, S.J.

Thirty years have passed since the killing of six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper, and her daughter, at Universidad Centroamericana (UCA) in El Salvador. It was a long night of terror. The next morning the world woke up in disbelief to this atrocity. Pictures of the brutally murdered UCA martyrs in their machine-gunned residence appeared on the global news graphically displaying the bodies of the slain Jesuits, including the university president—Fr. Ignacio Ellacuría. A staunch critic of U.S. military aid to the local government, he had directed the mission of the school to study the grave national crisis and to explore viable solutions. A university with a critical mind enraged the local elites. This tragic event marked the turning point of the war in El Salvador as the pressure from the international community against the local regime mounted – a work of solidarity in which Jesuit universities in the United States played a pivotal role.

The universal reaction, with expressions of solidarity, was overwhelming: It came from different nations, religious traditions, and most importantly from the Jesuit world of

education. Santa Clara University felt the loss on many levels, institutionally and personally. There had been a history of closeness between the two institutions dating back to the 1970s, and in June 1982 Fr. Ellacuría received an honorary doctorate that recognized his international standing as a fearless defender of human rights. After the murders, Jesuits worldwide volunteered to work in El Salvador. Fr. Charlie Beirne left his post as academic vice president at Santa Clara to fill in the position left by Fr. Ignacio Martín-Baró. Similarly, Fr. Dean Brackley left his tenured position at Fordham University to spend the rest of his life in El Salvador on the side of the poor. Conversely, Fr. Jon Sobrino, a member of the UCA community, spent the months after the killings at Santa Clara, where he struggled with a deep sense of loss – and where he wrote his reflections. His life had been spared by the fact that he was in Thailand on the night of the tragedy.

Under President Fr. Paul Locatelli, Santa Clara created a number of programs, including an on-going yearly



Fr. Ignacio Ellacuría (right) receives honorary doctorate in 1982 from Santa Clara University President William Rewak, S.J.

immersion that brought hundreds of faculty, staff, and administrators to UCA to walk in the steps of the martyrs' legacy. As many can attest, this experience was eye-opening in understanding Jesuit education. As time evolved, "Casa de la Solidaridad" emerged as Santa Clara's signature study abroad program. This program brought U.S. students to experience El Salvador; its impact has been truly transformative. Graduates have moved to significant justice-minded leadership positions in the U.S. and abroad.

Today eight crosses remain standing in front of the Mission Church of Santa Clara, each bearing a martyr's name. Some visitors recognize their significance, but many do not. Thirty years can erase a memory. Thus we must continue to tell the story – the incredible story of the spiritual heights of Jesuit higher education where men and women died so that others could live.

*Luis Calero, S.J., is a professor of anthropology at Santa Clara University.*