



Curriculum Theologiae

The Price of Justice

The Universal Witness of the Salvadoran Martyrs

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The Price of Justice: The Universal Witness of the Salvadoran Martyrs

Thomas Fornet Ponse

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Rutilio Grande

Oscar Arnulfo Romero

Ignacio Ellacuría

Ignacio Martín-Baró

Segundo Montes

Joaquín López y López

Amando López

Juan Ramón Moreno

Elba Julia Ramos

Celina Marisela Ramos

These names are probably the most well-known, but only ten of many thousands killed before and during the civil war in El Salvador, the last eight of the mentioned assassinated by soldiers of an elite battalion of the Salvadoran army 25 years ago on November, 16th, 1989. They were murdered because of their commitment to the preferential option for the poor propagated by the Bishops' Conference 1968 in Medellín, their support for a dialogical solution of the civil war and more generally speaking, because they disturbed the powerful and the rich. Although the brutal assassinations were intended to silence their voices, their story is not a depressing one, "for beyond the tragedy the reader perceives the hope of the resurrection of the Christ of God"¹; their story is a sign of God's mysterious presence in human history.

In the following lecture, I want to introduce you to the central aspects of their life and work by first outlining the possible universal significance of a testimony and a theology deeply rooted in a Central American context. Second, we take a look on the work of some of the assassinated and thus on the background of the

¹ Cardenal, Rodolfo, Presentation. In: Lassalle-Klein, Robert, Blood and Ink. Ignacio Ellacuría, Jon Sobrino, and the Jesuit Martyrs of the University of Central America. Maryknoll 2014, vii.

assassinations by referring to the importance of the preferential option for the poor based on Vatican II and Medellín. On this basis, we can finally ask about their legacy.

1. The Universal Significance of a Central American Contextual Theology

On first view, it may seem somewhat strange to lecture in Jerusalem about events in Central America and to claim that they have a universal significance. Nevertheless, this is what I am doing now because I am convinced that they are prime examples of “witnesses who have given their lives so that the victims and the poor might finally have life”². Thus, they can be regarded as exemplary disciples or companions of Christ. They illustrate the three dimensions of confronting oneself with reality explained by Ignacio Ellacuría: 1) grasping what is at stake in reality (*el hacerse cargo de la realidad*) with an active character, 2) taking responsibility for reality (*el cargar con la realidad*) expressing the ethical character of human intelligence, since this is not a mere contemplative and interpretive activity, and 3) taking charge of or transforming reality (*el encargarse de la realidad*) meaning the practical dimension of really doing something.³ “[E]very act of theological reflection and production is simultaneously an exercise of intelligence, a deployment of one’s fundamental ethical stance, and a historically real praxis.”⁴ The murdered Jesuits dedicated a great part of their life to analyse and comprehend the historical reality of El Salvador for being able to act responsibly for a transformation of this reality out of their Christian and specifically Jesuit (or Ignatian) perspective. The confrontation with the particular historical reality implies different exigencies of different realities without denying the universal task of fighting for justice and the full life of the victims and the poor. By confronting intensely their specific historical reality and even giving their lives for others while trying to take the crucified people from the cross, the murdered Jesuits give an example of the radicality of following Jesus Christ. Thus, their contextual testimony has universal significance which will be made clearer when we later discuss some theological convictions especially of Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino. But according to the three stages of doing liberation theology (seeing – judging – acting), we have to turn to the historical reality as the

² Sobrino, Jon, Foreword. *With Hope and Gratitude*. In: Lassalle-Klein, Blood xiii.

³ Ellacuría, Ignacio, *Hacia una fundamentación del método teológico latinoamericano*. In: *Ibid., Escritos teológicos I*. San Salvador 2000, 187-218.

⁴ Burke, Kevin, *The Ground Beneath the Cross*. Washington 2000, 101.

background of their life and work and as basis for these theological considerations.

2. Remembrance: Archbishop Romero, the Jesuits and the Background of the Assassinations

With regard to the time, concerning the historical reality of El Salvador suffice it to say that this was (and still is) marked by extreme poverty, a huge gap between the poor and the rich, state oppression and death squadrons with several massacres, many “disappeared” persons etc. which led in the 1980s to a bloody civil war with more than 75.000 dead. In this context, most of the murdered Jesuits worked at the Universidad Centroamericana “José Simeon Cañas” which was founded in 1965 – Ignacio Ellacuría was its rector since 1979 – and was first dedicated to the paradigm of development but soon realized the necessity of following the pathway of the “preferential option for the poor” opened by Vatican II and the Bishops’ Conference in Medellín 1968.⁵ While Vatican II expressed especially in the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the modern World, *Gaudium et spes*, the significance of the world for church and theology as its opening sentences clearly reflect⁶, the Latin American bishops at Medellín drew the consequences of the pastoral situation of the church by insisting on the priority of liberating development and – in the words of the Third General Conference of Latin American Bishops a decade later in Puebla – sought to “affirm the need for conversion on the part of the whole Church to a preferential option for the poor, an option aimed at their integral liberation”⁷. This goes hand in hand with the emergence of a theology of liberation which is often falsely associated with Marxist approaches (which surely exist but are not representative) and the conversion of the Central American Jesuits to the preferential option for the poor which the Jesuit provincials expressed at their meeting in Rio de Janeiro in May 1968: “In all our activities, our goal should be the liberation of humankind from every sort of servitude that oppresses it.”⁸ In this line, Ignacio Ellacuría and Miguel Elizondo led the Christmas 1969 retreat for the Central American province on the *Spiritual Exercises*. The participating Jesuits formulated in their final document of this meeting three points for an apostolic plan:

⁵ Cf. for the UCA Lassalle-Klein.

⁶ “The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the [people] of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ.” (GS 1)

⁷ Quoted by Lassalle-Klein 17.

⁸ Quoted by Lassalle-Klein 31.

“(1) the province’s communal commitment to the ‘redemption and liberation’ of Central America as part of the Third World; (2) a strengthening of the spirit of community, mutual respect, and simplicity of lifestyle in the province; and (3) a deepening of the spirit of the willingness to put oneself and the works of the province at the service of the poor”⁹.

These short remarks should suffice to elucidate the radical shift in horizons and the strong commitment to the preferential option for the poor in which the murdered Jesuits participated. But besides these important developments, there is a single person whose importance for their life, work and commitment to the poor cannot be exaggerated: Oscar Arnulfo Romero, who was appointed archbishop of San Salvador 1977 and murdered during mass on March 24, 1980. While being appointed as archbishop because of his rather conservative stance, his good relations to the upper class and his very critical approach to the work of the UCA and the Jesuits during his time as auxiliary bishop of San Salvador, he soon became a prophetic defender of civil society and the poor. This development is sometimes regarded as a “conversion” due to the assassination of Rutilio Grande, a Jesuit working in Aguilares and supporting the rural workers in their aim to organise themselves. More probable, it was a gradual evolution towards embracing Medellín’s call to a preferential option for the poor, since already at his former position as bishop of Santiago de Maria, Romero opened his bishop’s house to the poor. Nevertheless, the assassination of Rutilio Grande played an important role for Romero’s later decision to publicly denounce abuses of human rights etc. “I would argue that we can distinguish Romero’s *personal conversion*, characterized by his gradual decision to assume personal responsibility for the suffering of the poor, from the archbishop’s *socio-political conversion* following the assassination of Rutilio Grande and other priests.”¹⁰ Only after Grande’s death, Romero began his public denunciations of the situation in the country thereby arousing the anger of the oligarchy, military and the government. One example is his decision not to be present at official acts of the government etc. as long as the murder of Grande was not investigated. In the following three years, Romero was the symbolic leader of El Salvador without having sought such a thing – and the Jesuits were often accused of manipulating him although they saw themselves in retrospect as his followers. “He had been transformed into the central reference point for the church and for the country. Nothing of any importance occurred in

⁹ Lassalle-Klein 49.

¹⁰ Lassalle-Klein 111.

our country over the next three years without our all turning to Monseñor Romero for guidance and direction, for leadership.”¹¹ An important means was his Sunday morning homily followed by church announcements, the weekly events in El Salvador and a reading of the names of killed, tortured or kidnapped persons. Among the important resources Romero drew on for his homilies, commentaries and interviews were Ellacuría, Sobrino and other Jesuits and UCA faculty members. His convictions and hopes (combined with the hopes of those committed to a reform via the Salvadoran civil society) are clearly expressed in an interview two weeks before his assassination:

“I have often been threatened with death. [But] I must tell you, as a Christian, I do not believe in death without resurrection. If I am killed, I shall arise in the Salvadoran people. I say so without boasting, with the greatest humility.

As a shepherd, I am obliged by divine mandate to give my life for those I love – for all Salvadorans, even for those who may be going to kill me. If the threats are carried out, from this moment I offer my blood to God for the redemption and for the resurrection of El Salvador.

Martyrdom is a grace of God that I do not believe I deserve. But if God accepts the sacrifice of my life, let my blood be a seed of freedom and the sign that hope will soon be reality. Let my death, if it is accepted by God, be for my people’s liberation and as a witness of hope in the future.

You may say, if they succeed in killing me, that I pardon and bless those who do it. Would, indeed, that they might be convinced that they will waste their time. A bishop will die, but God’s church, which is the people, will never perish.”¹²

Two weeks later, on March 24th, he was shot while celebrating mass in a hospital chapel. The day before, in his last Sunday homily, he appealed to the army not to suppress the people. “No soldier is obliged to obey an order against the law of God. ... In the name of God, and in the name of this suffering people, whose laments rise to heaven each day more tumultuous, I beg you, I beseech you, I order you in the name of God: Stop the repression!”¹³ The military regarded this as call for insubordination, thus as treason and therefore his assassination follows a certain military logic.

¹¹ Sobrino, Archbishop Romero 28. A good example of that is Ellacuría’s letter to Romero written after the events of March 1977 (published in: Ashley, Matthew / Burke, Kevin / Cardenal, Rodolfo, Eds., *A Grammar of Justice. The Legacy of Ignacio Ellacuría*. New York 2014, 3-6). See further Sobrino, Jon, *Monseñor Romero’s Impact on Ignacio Ellacuría*. In: Ashley/Burke/Cardenal, *Grammar* 57-76.

¹² Quoted by Lassalle-Klein 136.

¹³ http://www.romerotrue.org.uk/homilies/162/162_pdf.pdf (accessed 13 April 2023).

The influence of Romero on the murdered Jesuits, the UCA faculty and many others cannot be overestimated and can be summarized in four points:¹⁴ First, he taught how “to historicize the power of the gospel” for El Salvador by stressing the preferential option for the poor. Second, Romero empowered “the poor to historicize their own salvation” and to give “historical flesh to the eternally new word of God”. Third, Romero showed that embracing the sufferings and hopes of the poor majorities strengthened an opaque, amorphous and ineffective word to become “a torrent of life to which the people drew near in order to quench their thirst”. Fourth, he showed how “the power of the gospel could become a transformative historical force”. In short, he taught Ellacuría “to love the common people of El Salvador, to trust them, to see Christ in them, and to discover his vocation to take this crucified people down from the cross.”¹⁵ Thus, he was a witness of God as Father of the poor.

Romero’s engagement for the poor and a strengthening of the civil society inspired the murdered UCA Jesuits and their colleagues to combine this spirituality of national service and integral development with their commitment to the liberating struggles of the poor majorities. Following the three dimensions of confronting reality mentioned above, they spent much of their time becoming aware of the historical reality of El Salvador, especially with a regard to the crucifixion of the poor. Segundo Montes, e.g., went to refugee camps, Ignacio Martín-Baró worked on post-traumatic stress, Jon Sobrino prepared drafts for Romero and Ignacio Ellacuría supported personally and as rector of the UCA several grassroots organizations which demanded a negotiated peace (that was regarded as treason). He met with politicians from the whole political spectrum and said after a critique of being too friendly with president Cristiani, that he would negotiate with the devil himself if that would end the war. In short, especially Ellacuría, Sobrino and Martín-Baró spend a huge amount of their academic work in service of the poor following their understanding of a university as being called to give those a voice which are without voice.¹⁶ On the personal level, they too immersed themselves in this service: Martín-Baró worked most weekends in a very poor parish in Jayaque, Segundo Montes traveled to refugee camps, Ellacuría visited embattled communities in Chalatenango, Amando López

¹⁴ Cf. Lassalle-Klein 250f referring to Ellacuría, Ignacio, *La UCA ante el doctorado concedido a Monseñor Romero*. In: *Escritos teológicos III*, 96-104. See also Sobrino, *Impact*.

¹⁵ Lassalle-Klein 252.

¹⁶ Cf. Ellacuría, Ignacio, *Commencement Address at Santa Clara University, June 1982*, in: <https://www.scu.edu/ic/programs/ignatian-worldview/ellacuria/> (accessed 13 April 2023).

worked at a poor semi-rural area, Joaquin López y López led “Fe y Alegría” with thirteen schools, twelve workshops and two clinics and Juan Ramón Moreno trained El Salvador’s religious who worked directly with the poor. Elba Ramos and her daughter (and her husband) were landless campesinos. “Thus, as academics, Christians, and human beings the UCA martyrs were deeply immersed in the reality of El Salvador and its poor majorities.”¹⁷

Going beyond that, they also tried to assume responsibility for the reality by denouncing the ongoing suffering: Segundo Montes directed the UCA Institute for Human Rights and documented hundreds of political assassinations, pointed out that 20 % of the population had become refugees and showed that the money sent back by refugees added to more foreign capital than the foreign aid and export income. Ignacio Martín-Baró directed the university’s national opinion poll clarifying the political reality. Ignacio Ellacuría enabled the journal *Estudios Centroamericanos* (chiefly edited by him) and the UCA’s Chair for the National Reality to become El Salvador’s leading forums for analysing the major events and policies and guided the UCA’s dedication to the option for the poor. Furthermore, he persistently called “for a negotiated end to the war and legal protections for civil society (its ‘third forces’) as vehicles for the participation of the country’s poor majorities in shaping the future of El Salvador.”¹⁸

Besides analysing the reality and assuming responsibility, they also attempted to transform or take charge of the reality by working with many organizations to end the political repression and to promote policies consistent with the realization of the Kingdom of God in history.¹⁹ Especially the work of Ellacuría, Martín-Baró and Montes was dedicated to support the political mobilization of El Salvador’s civil society, the so called “third forces”, for example by establishing the 1988 National Debate where the poor majorities were able to express their desire for a negotiated peace through an emergent civil society. Needless to say that this perspective was not shared by the government and both ARENA, the presiding party, and the guerilla FMLN. “The net result of these and a host of other activities was a powerful contribution to the emergence of El Salvador’s poor majorities as a political, economic, and social force through the sundry vehicles of civil society. The autonomy, integrity, and appropriateness of the average Salvadoran’s insistence on a negotiated end to the war was not enough, however,

¹⁷ Lassalle-Klein 350.

¹⁸ Lassalle-Klein 351.

¹⁹ Cf. Ellacuría, Ignacio, La teología como momento ideológico de la praxis eclesial. In: *Escritos teológicos I*, 163-185, 178-182.

to change the minds of the military, the government, or even the FMLN"²⁰. In fact, the FMLN started on November 11, 1989 a large offensive which surprised the military and its U.S. sponsors in its strength and led to a declaration of a state of emergency. On November 15, a meeting of the General Staff with military heads and commanders took place in which it was decided to "take stronger measures" including bombing civilian neighbourhoods and eliminating ringleaders, trade unionists and known leaders of the FMLN. After the official end of this meeting, the chief of staff of the Salvadoran Armed Forces, Colonel Ponce ordered Colonel Benavides, the director of the Military Academy, to eliminate Ellacuría and to leave no witnesses using the unit from the U.S.-trained Atlacatl Battalion.²¹ All in all, virtually the entire command structure of the Salvadoran army and possibly even the president was involved in the order to kill Ellacuría and his colleagues (most probably as a means of avoiding prosecution afterwards). In the night to November 16, about three hundred soldiers surrounded the university's campus, and about 6:30, a force of fifty soldiers simulated a guerrilla attack and formed a ring around the Jesuit community residence, entered the building, destroyed offices and took five of the Jesuits to the front lawn and murdered them, the sixth one (López y López) and Elba and Celina were shot in the residence. When Juan Ramon Moreno was dragged inside, Moltmann's *The Crucified God* fell of the shelf into his blood. In symbolic acts, the brains of some of them were dislodged by a soldier's boot and a picture of Romero was shot through its heart. These Jesuits (and many others) thus paid the price the Jesuits' thirty-second General Congregation in 1975 prophesied: "We shall not work for the promotion of justice without having to pay a price."²² Although this emblemized the utter defeat of the Jesuits and their companions to historicize the gospel and to construct a politics of negotiations and reconciliation, their story does not end with their deaths. In fact, the international outrage that followed and military realities led in the next two years to a negotiated end. "Ironically, the strategic vision diligently promoted by Ellacuría, the UCA, and so many others was given new life through the impact on the peace process of the deaths of the martyrs."²³

²⁰ Lassalle-Klein 352.

²¹ United Nations, Report of the Commission on the Truth for El Salvador, 50. (Quoted by Lassalle-Klein xix).

²² Quoted by Whitfield, Theresa, *Paying the Price: Ignacio Ellacuría and the murdered Jesuits of El Salvador*, Philadelphia 1995, xvi.

²³ Lassalle-Klein 181.

3. A New Understanding of Martyrdom and the Crucified People

Having heard that story, you may wonder why with many others, I call them (including Grande and Romero) “martyrs”. Obviously, we use an understanding of “martyr” different from that the official use by the Roman-Catholic Church is based upon. This different understanding was developed by Jon Sobrino but can also be based on considerations by Karl Rahner and Jürgen Moltmann.²⁴ Whereas the classic definition of the word means a person who was killed because of his or her confession and without seeking violently his or her death, Sobrino differentiates between dying for Christ – as in this classic definition – and dying like Jesus as Romero or the UCA martyrs did. Thus, he stresses the importance of following Jesus Christ. Since in Latin America, many people are not killed because they are Christians but because they engaged in a struggle for justice and furthermore, most of the killers were christened persons, it seems to adopt a definition of martyrdom adequate to this Latin American experience. Martyrdom in Latin America results more often from an “odium iustitiae” than from an “odium fidei”. The core of this definition consists rather of the motives of the killed than of the killing persons. Sobrino’s central criterion for martyrdom is an unjust and undeserved death out of love. He uses therefore the term “Jesuanic martyr” who in the strict sense of the word is “not someone who dies for Christ or for Christ’s sake but someone who dies like Jesus and for the sake of Jesus’ cause”.²⁵ After all, Jesus did not proclaim himself or the truth only in his speeches but he proclaimed the reign of God, defended the poor by his deeds and is thus witness of God’s love to them. “Jesus is a witness and martyr of the Reign of God.”²⁶ He bore witness for a God of the Kingdom, of the poor, of life, of mercy and justice. This witness can be recognized by his deeds rather than by creeds. A Jesuanic martyrdom is based not on an “odium fidei”, but on an “odium iustitiae” or “odium misericordiae”. It is important to stress that by advocating this concept of martyrdom, Sobrino does not exclude human beings dying for their confession of faith; a witness of love and a witness of truth do not exclude each other. This changed perspective on martyrdom based on the testimony of many people killed

²⁴ Cf. Fornet-Ponse, Thomas, Für Christus oder wie Jesus sterben? Zu Jon Sobrinos Verständnis des Martyriums. In: ZKTh 135 (2013) 73-90; Rahner, Karl, Dimensionen des Martyriums. In: SzTh XVI (1983) 295-299; Moltmann, Jürgen, Der Weg Jesu Christi. Christologie in messianischen Dimensionen. München 1989, 220-226; Thiede, John S., The Reality of Martyrdom in the Christology of Jon Sobrino. Diss. Masch. Notre Dame 2012. (<https://curate.nd.edu/show/3r074t66c5g>; accessed 13 April 2023).

²⁵ Sobrino, Jon, Unsere Welt – Grausamkeit und Mitleid. In: Conc(D) 39 (2003) 6-14, 10.

²⁶ Sobrino, Jon, Christologie der Befreiung 1. Mainz 1998, 364.

in Latin America is reflected in the concluding document of the Bishop's Conference in Aparecida 2007 insofar as not only Christ or the Church, but also the people are mentioned: „We wish to recall the courageous testimony of our men and women saints, and of those who, even though not canonized, have lived out the gospel radically, and have offered their life for Christ, for the Church, and for their people.“²⁷ Sobrino emphasises the priority of the similarity with life and death of Jesus Christ. By this essential relationship of the Jesuanic martyrs with the reality Jesus Christ they become “*ipso facto* a central reality for the faith, the church and theology”²⁸. They can help understanding Jesus' martyrdom. By bearing witness of a God of life in their death, these martyrs bear witness against idols and thus point to the total contradiction of the reign of God and the anti-reign. The moment of martyrdom is strictly speaking not their death but “those moments of decision when a word needed to be spoken, an act of witness placed”²⁹. Martyrs teach us how to be Christian. They are strictly speaking not martyrs (only) of the church (defending primarily inner-church-realities) but “martyrs for the reign of God”³⁰.

This is closely connected to another theological concept based on Romero, introduced by Ellacuría and further developed by Sobrino: to understand the poor majorities as crucified people. This is an “analogy between the historical reality of Jesus of Nazareth and the crucified people as victims of the sin of the world, bearers of its salvation, and an ongoing historical sign of God's self-offer in Jesus Christ”³¹. Ellacuría speaks of a correlation and a continuation of Jesus and his work. The parallel between Jesus and the crucified people lies in the persecution and death because they resisted to oppressive powers and struggled for historical liberation as response to the word of God. The crucified people continue Jesus' work because “like Jesus and the suffering servant, the suffering innocence of the crucified people is a sign that invites and demands a compassionate response from followers of Jesus as an act of faith in the God of the Reign that he

²⁷ Concluding Document of the Bishop's Conference in Aparecida 2007, No. 98. Cf. Gutiérrez, Gustavo, *Der Preis der Nachfolge*. In: *StZ* 232 (2014) 757-765, 758f.

²⁸ Sobrino, *Welt* 11.

²⁹ Burke, Kevin, *Memory, Martyrdom, Hope. The Gift of Ignacio Ellacuría*. In: Ashley/Burke/Cardenal, *A Grammar of Justice. The Legacy of Ignacio Ellacuría*. New York 2014, ix-xvi, x.

³⁰ Boff, Leonardo, *Martyrium. Versuch einer systematischen Reflexion*. In: *Conc(D)* 19 (1983) 176-181, 180.

³¹ Lassalle-Klein 303. Cf. also Cardenal, Rodolfo, *The Church of the Crucified People. The Eschatology of Ignacio Ellacuría*. In: Ashley/Burke/Cardenal, *Grammar*, 147-159.

announced.”³² The crucified people are an ambivalent sign of both sin and salvation and poses risks and challenges for each generation anew. Sobrino mentions three hermeneutical principles as gifts from the victims of history:³³ First, the historical hope of the crucified in the victory of life over death is hermeneutically required to understand what happened to Jesus. Second, this hope can only truly be understood through a praxis of love taking them down from the cross. The Reign of God is something hoped for but also something that has to be built. Third, for knowing Jesus’ resurrection it is necessary to accept reality as a mystery and as bearing within itself and pointing to an eschatological future.

This concept of the poor majorities as crucified people combined with the renewed understanding of martyrdom as martyrs dying for Jesus as well as like and following him, as martyrs for justice or the reign of God gives important clues for the question about the legacy of the Salvadoran martyrs. Their main aim was to take the crucified people down from the cross.

4. Their legacy: Taking the crucified people down from the cross

The motivation and trinitarian inspiration for dedicating their life to this aim is explained by Sobrino:

These men were also believers, Christians. I do not mention this here as something obvious or to be taken for granted, but as something central in their lives, something that really ruled all their lives. ... When we spoke about matters of faith in the community, our words were sparing but really meant. We spoke about God’s Kingdom and the God of the Kingdom, of Christian life as a following of Jesus, the historical Jesus, Jesus of Nazareth, because there is no other. In the university – in teaching and theological writings, of course – but also in solemn moments and public acts we recalled our Christian inspiration as something central, as what gave life, direction, force, and meaning to all our work, and explained the risks the university very consciously incurred. There was plain speaking about God’s Kingdom and the option for the poor, sin and the following of Jesus. This Christian inspiration of the university was never just rhetoric when these Jesuits talked about it, and people understood that this was really the university’s inspiration.³⁴

³² Lassalle-Klein 306.

³³ Cf. Sobrino, Jon, *Christ the Liberator. A View from the Victims*. New York 2001, 35ff.

³⁴ Sobrino, Jon, *Companions of Jesus*. In: *Companions of Jesus: The Jesuit Martyrs of El Salvador*. New York 1990, 16.

While Ignacio Ellacuría with his fundamental theology and Jon Sobrino with his Christology form probably the most fully developed Catholic contextual theology since Vatican II which can serve as a model for other contextual theologies, with Robert Lassalle-Klein I want to point out “the God revealed to the UCA martyrs by Archbishop Romero and the suffering people of El Salvador”³⁵. Besides the example of Romero, the trinitarian spirituality of both the Ignatian exercises and the popular religiosity of the Salvadoran people is an important source for their Christian faith, their spirituality and their praxis. They were able to see in the crucified people of El Salvador the risen Jesus. And through their service “they became bearers of Jesus’ Holy Spirit to this crucified people and living signs of his resurrection”³⁶. Although they were assassinated, they are not forgotten: many people visit the place where they died, communities and organizations are named after them and with Grande, Romero and the murdered American women they have become signs of the mysterious presence of God.

Corresponding to their Christological spirituality, they regarded the poorest countries as the best possible place to live the *Exercises* as Ellacuría argued for in his talk at the 1969 retreat. Based on the assertion that “Christ is in the poor” they were able to see that “it is not us who have to save the poor, but rather it is the poor who are going to save us”³⁷. He stresses the importance of becoming like Christ – not seeking pain, poverty and death but to fulfil his mission – for salvation. Ellacuría historicizes Karl Rahner’s notion of salvation as acceptance of God’s self-offer by arguing that this self-offer is mediated through the historical reality of Jesus of Nazareth and by following him, we are drawn into God’s inner life. Since Christ is present in the historical reality of the poor, to embrace this can lead to sharing fate and future of Jesus of Nazareth. The path of Jesus can be defined with Sobrino by 1) his sense of mission to initiate the Reign of God as good news for the poor; 2) his relationship to the Father to bring salvation to Israel as light to the nations; and 3) his death by those opposed to his mission. This defining aspects were historicized by Romero who thus serves as a model for the Jesus-centred trinitarian spirituality: He dedicated himself to evangelize the poor, he saw the God of Salvation in the crucified people and his reaction transformed both him and his people. Likewise, the UCA martyrs historicized this by stressing the Christian inspiration of the university³⁸ that means Jesus’

³⁵ Lassalle-Klein 340.

³⁶ Lassalle-Klein 341.

³⁷ Quoted by Lassalle-Klein 342.

³⁸ Sobrino, Jon, *The University’s Christian Inspiration*. In: *Ibid.*, *Companions of Jesus*, 152-173.

proclamation of the Reign of God as guiding principle and goal for the UCA and the church's preferential option for the poor as hermeneutical principle of the UCA. The poor majorities of El Salvador and the planet are regarded as "a *locus theologicus*, a place of discernment of God's active presence in the world, and a place generating a faith response to that presence"³⁹. Looking for God among the poor does not exclude the rest of humanity but means to take the poor as starting point to reach out to the whole. God reveals his self-offer in the rejected and poor majority of humanity and thus reaches out to all of humanity. "This in no way limits the universality of that self-revelation or its salvific implications for humanity, but it does reveal the importance of solidarity with the poor for salvation history, as can be seen in the New Testament emphasis on the Reign of God as good news to the poor."⁴⁰ On this basis it can be claimed that the UCA martyrs recognized and experienced the risen Jesus in the crucified people as expressed by Ellacuría's words of the crucified people as continuation of Jesus and his work, as victim of the sin of the world and bearing the world's salvation.⁴¹

The implications of this for a Christian university are spelled out by Ellacuría in his speech at the University of Santa Clara (1982): "If the university had not suffered, we would not have performed our duty. In a world where injustice reigns, a university that fights for justice must necessarily be persecuted."⁴² He further recommends asking oneself the three questions of Ignatius of Loyola in front of a crucified world: What have I done for Christ in this world? What am I doing now? And what should I do? The answer of the UCA martyrs on these questions can serve as an example of trying to follow Jesus in a world of injustice and oppression. They saw themselves called to become companions of Jesus even and especially in the crucified people and to dedicate their efforts at the university and beyond to taking them down from the cross. An important aspect of this was to develop a deep familiarity and expertise concerning the historical reality of El Salvador. They emphasised the serving character of the university by addressing the national reality in every course and by promoting the active participation of the poor majorities in this reality. Following the three dimensions of confronting reality pointed out by Ellacuría, "faculty and students were asked to design and participate in university-style efforts intended to produce not just (1) awareness

³⁹ Sobrino, inspiration 164.

⁴⁰ Lassalle-Klein 345.

⁴¹ Ellacuría, Ignacio, El pueblo crucificado. Ensayo de soteriología histórica. In: Ibid., Escritos teológicos II. San Salvador 2000, 137-170; Ibid., Discernir el signo de los tiempos. In: Ibid., Escritos teológicos II, 133-135.

⁴² Ellacuría, Commencement address.

but also (2) practical ways of taking responsibility for the historical reality of El Salvador that (3) produce tangible results and positive outcomes for the country and its crucified people."⁴³ In the part on their work I mentioned some examples of their own efforts to do this: the work in refugee camps and poor parishes, the academic work on post-traumatic-stress, the leading of organisations like a human rights institute or a national poll institute, the tireless engagement for a negotiated solution of the civil war etc.

They were enabled to do this by their spirituality which can be also called a spirituality of liberation comprising honesty about reality, fidelity to reality and correspondence to the encounter with the crucified people.⁴⁴ By being honest and faithful to the crucified people, the UCA martyrs said their "yes" to God's saving self-offer in the poor. In a variation of the word by Irenaeus: "gloria dei vivens homo", Romero spoke of "gloria dei, vivens pauper". Lassalle-Klein summarizes this very concisely:

It is a trinitarian spirituality that believes that God acts in history through Jesus' Holy Spirit, transforming the public lives and innermost existences of his followers, and making them holy through their "yes" to God's historical self-offer in the crucified people. Here also is the claim of this book: that the honesty, fidelity, and love of the UCA martyrs for the crucified people of El Salvador transformed them into living signs and bearers of Jesus' Holy Spirit to them and to us.⁴⁵

They gave thus an exemplary answer to the three questions of Ignatius of Loyola but our own answer to these questions lies in our own academic and personal responsibility. Do we let us address from the Holy Mystery that guided their lives and do we let us be transformed by it? Do we grasp what is at stake in reality, do we take responsibility for reality and do we take charge of reality?

⁴³ Lassalle-Klein 348.

⁴⁴ Cf. Sobrino, Jon, *Spirituality of Liberation. Toward Political Holiness*. New York 1990.

⁴⁵ Lassalle-Klein 354.