

SOLIDARITY TRANSFORMING A UNIVERSITY

THE UCA: A CASE STUDY

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Gustavo Gutiérrez writes, “There was a time when the Church responded to the questions asked of it with an imperturbable appeal to its doctrinal and institutional traditions. Today, the problem we call liberation is so serious and so widespread that it calls both Christianity and the Church into question. They are being asked to demonstrate their significance when faced with a human problem of such magnitude” (Assmann 1976, 54). While Gutiérrez’s challenge is to the church, it could very well be directed to Catholic colleges and universities that take their inspiration from the Gospel. What would a Catholic university that took liberation seriously look like and what would it do? How might a Catholic university effectively enter into solidarity with the poor and marginalized and engage in the struggle to create a more just and peaceful social order?

In my judgment, there is no better place to begin our study and analysis than with the Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas (UCA) in El Salvador.¹ It was thoroughly committed to the struggle to effect justice and create peace in El Salvador. And for that commitment it paid the ultimate price: the murder of its Jesuit president, five members of the Jesuit university community and two innocent women who sought safety behind the university walls during the FMLN’s final offensive on November 16, 1989.

By examining the UCA, its mission and its attempt to live its mission faithfully in the extreme conditions of poverty and repression in El Salvador, my hope is that Catholic colleges and universities in the United States may find not only inspiration but a new standard for measuring the depth of their own commitment to justice and peace.

The Theological Foundation of the UCA’s Mission

Because the UCA is first and foremost a Catholic university our analysis must begin with the way it defined its mission theologically (Sobrinó 1990, Ellacuría

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1990). If there is a principal theological theme that oriented, directed and integrated all of the UCA's activities it was the presence and the coming of the Kingdom or the Reign of God. The UCA's leadership believed that ultimately the university did not exist for itself, the church, its students or even El Salvador. Its reason for being was to further God's Reign as an academic institution in the society of which it was a part and in the global society. The UCA's leadership was very conscious of the fact that the university is a social force and plays a role in shaping history. Theologically speaking, it could very well be a force for the anti-Kingdom or the Kingdom, an instrument of sin or grace. They believed it possesses an ethical character. The university affects the quality of life in society and life and death themselves.

One of the challenges the UCA faced was the matter of for whom the social weight and intellectual power of the university should be used and how that weight and power might be directed in such a way so as to reduce human suffering and repression. The university's leadership ultimately decided that in the face of such immense suffering and violence neutrality could be no more an option for the university than for any other institution or individual that professed to be Christian. Just as God chose the poor, the university, institutionally, would also need to make a preferential option for the poor. Moreover, that option or choice would have to be reflected in the very structure of the university, its research, teaching and social projects.

The university leadership believed that the institution itself must be grounded in compassion. Jon Sobrino, who was a member of the theology faculty at the UCA, explains that his fellow Jesuits were murdered and the university bombed over sixteen times because they tried to introduce compassion into a society that had become anti-compassionate. He writes, "Knowledge can be orientated by compassion...it is possible that compassion would be the motivation to think seriously within a university...it should be the principle which shapes and configures university life" (Sobrino 1991, 6-7). Reflecting on the lives of the murdered Jesuits, Sobrino notes that they themselves were first and foremost men of compassion. Their compassion was evident in both their personal and professional lives. He writes, they "saw a crucified people, and because they saw that, and because they were moved to mercy or compassion, they reacted within the university, and through the university, to heal the wound" (5). The UCA's leadership believed that in the end the university would be judged not by the number of successful students, its publications or its international reputation, but by whether it was compassionate and contributed toward furthering God's Reign in El Salvador and the global society. They believed that a Catholic university must itself become a sign of the Kingdom.

The UCA's leadership firmly believed that a university must pursue the truth, and because it is a Catholic university, its pursuit of truth must be grounded in faith. They understood that pursuit of truth brought with it a responsibility to identify what would constitute its denial in society. For the Christian, one of the most fundamental truths is that all human beings are made in the image and likeness of God. Human life is sacred, and all human beings, regardless of their race, class, and gender have a God-given right to live and live in dignity. The greatest denial of this truth then is the existence of poverty. Sobrino takes this a step further. He argues that to the wealthy and powerful, the poor are non-persons; their lives are expendable. They live lives of "forced anonymity" (Sobrino 2003, 4). In Sobrino's words, "Forced anonymity—a massive, routine, and still common reality—is a quintessentially ungodly act, for God moves us to 'give names'" (4). Sobrino also says that something miraculous happened in El Salvador. Archbishop Romero and Ignacio Ellacuría refused to cooperate with the dominant powers and instead gave the anonymous poor "titles of dignity" (5). "They called them 'the suffering servant' (Isaiah 52:13-54:12), 'Christ crucified in history,' 'the crucified people'" (5). In short, the Christian foundation of the university compelled it to give names to those society preferred to remain nameless.

Another basic truth of the Christian tradition is that we are part of the same human family, share the same human nature, and are responsible for one another. Thus, when the wealthy and powerful refuse to acknowledge their fundamental relationship to and responsibility for the poor, and refuse to examine how their wealth and poverty are integrally related, this constitutes a denial of truth in society.

Finally, the most fundamental truth of faith is that there is but one God, and all that exists is subject to God. Sobrino argues that a society that is structured to bring suffering and death to the poor denies God. The god it believes in more resembles the idols of ancient peoples that demanded victims in sacrifice (Sobrino 1991, 3).

There were other areas of truth and its denial that became problematic for the UCA's leadership, for example, the Gospel admonitions on wealth and the university's dependence on the wealthy. Because the university's existence and development depended on the resources of the wealthy or the resources they controlled, the UCA's leadership was concerned that the university could easily lose sight of its Christian mission, be distracted from its work and pressured to comply with their interests and concerns. Over the years, the UCA leadership made a concerted effort to become less dependent on the wealthy, and they made a conscious decision to come closer to the poor. Ignacio Ellacuría argued that

while it was impossible to physically move the university closer to the poor or to admit a greater number of students who were poor (primarily because the poor rarely attain education beyond the primary level) the university, nevertheless, would need to do its research, teaching and carry on its social projects from the social location of the poor (Burke 1997, 7-8). It would have to find ways to become incarnated among the poor. In his essay, "The University, Human Rights, and the Poor," Ellacuría wrote that the university must be situated in the "theoretical locus" of the poor (Ellacuría 1991b, 213). Jon Sobrino writes that Ellacuría would say, "we think and write and do research at a desk. That's why we need university buildings and libraries. We need a physical space, so that with a minimum of tranquility, you can think. But we don't think from the desk...we try to think from the crosses of the world" (Sobrino 1991, 9). The UCA leadership believed that the locus of the poor was essential to keep the university focused and faithful to its call. In his powerful essay, "The Cost of Speaking the Truth," Jon Sobrino writes, "What is the place of the university? The place of the church and the university is at the foot of the Cross...If the Church is not at the foot of the Cross of this world, then tell me where the Church should be. The same thing goes for the university. If our place really is not at the feet of the crucified people, you tell me what we are doing" (8). And finally, the UCA's leadership understood the university's mission ultimately in terms of bringing the suffering Salvadorans down from their crosses.

The UCA's Mission: Within Its Walls

Now that I have laid out some of the theology that informed the UCA's mission, let us turn to the impact it had on the university structure, its teaching, research and social projects. As stated above, the UCA's leadership clearly understood that the university functioned both as a social force and an ethical force in the society of which it was a part. In El Salvador approximately forty percent of the population lived in poverty, one third lacked access to safe drinking water and adequate housing. Sixty percent did not have access to basic health care. And the country's wealth and power was concentrated in the hands of roughly two percent of the population. It was a country in which organized efforts to effect change by the poor consistently met with repression, and from the late 1970's until the Peace Accords were signed in 1992, El Salvador was engaged in a civil war.

For the UCA's leadership, the condition of the poor and the systematic repression of their efforts to change their situation constituted a denial of reason itself. They argued that it was irrational for the vast majority of human beings in a soci-

ety to be denied access to the basic goods, services and the power they need to secure their lives and live in dignity. The powerful in society are acting irrationally when they are indifferent to or prefer this situation, and take steps to actively prevent the poor from securing their basic human rights. The UCA's leadership believed that were the university to ignore this reality or cooperate with it, the university itself would be acting irrationally. Thus the choice for the university came down to acting rationally or irrationally, preferring the truth or living a lie. In choosing to participate institutionally in solving the problem of injustice in El Salvador, the UCA's leadership chose reason and truth.

Having committed itself to this path, the UCA's leadership had to determine where and how solving the problem of injustice would fit into the work of the university. The question became whether this is tangential to preparing students with the knowledge and skills to participate effectively in society? Ellacuría strongly argued that "the university should not only devote itself formally and explicitly to having the fundamental rights of the poor majorities respected as much as possible, but it should even have the liberation and development of those majorities as the theoretical and practical horizon for its strictly university activities, and it should do so preferentially" (Ellacuría 1991b, 20). In short, solving the problem of injustice in El Salvador was to be the highest priority of the university and integral to all university work.

Now to the question of focus. One would assume that the university should concentrate on changing the minds and hearts of its students who would become the future leaders of Salvadoran society. While the UCA's leadership acknowledged the importance of this, it nevertheless felt that students should not be the sole or primary focus of the university's work for justice. Because the situation of the poor and marginalized is integrally related to the structural organization of society, their situation cannot be changed without changing the structures. To increase its effectiveness, the university leadership decided to focus its efforts on transforming the structural order (Ellacuría 1991b, 188-189). They reasoned that ultimately it is society that is the beneficiary of university education. While it educates students to enable them to acquire certain knowledge and skills, the knowledge and skills are employed by society. While the UCA's leadership did not see individual and structural transformation as mutually exclusive or in opposition to each other, the leadership was convinced that it mattered where the university placed its emphasis. Thus, transforming the social order into one that was more just, compassionate and peaceful became the objective that directed and integrated all university activity: its teaching, research and social projects. It is important to point out that integration was key for the leadership lest one university activity cancel out the work of another.

To take on the work of transforming the social order, the leadership argued that the university would need to become expert on the Salvadoran reality. They decided that the national reality would need to become the great “learning field” of the university (213). The challenge was for each academic discipline to rethink its discipline from the oppressive reality of the poor and marginalized. Thus the unjust suffering of the poor, its roots and history; the needs and aspirations of the poor; the forces and obstacles to it; and initiatives and the strategies needed for change, would need to become the proper subject of analysis for the disciplines of political science, economics, philosophy, psychology, history, sociology, theology, science, engineering and others. Without this kind of deliberate, critical engagement with Salvador’s oppressive reality, the concern was that university and the disciplines themselves would continue to reproduce the existing social order and serve its interests. The goal was to consciously and deliberately separate the university from this oppressive reality so that it might become an instrument for liberation. Ellacuría wrote, “This striving for liberation should be primarily an effort of the university as such, that is, of the whole university structure. It has two essential moments: separating itself as critically and radically as possible from the demands of the system in which it lives and which to some extent is forced to serve (the moment of liberation-from), and turning towards the liberating service of the oppressed majority (the moment of liberation-for)...One cannot serve two masters at the same time...” (216-217).

Teaching the national reality from the perspective of the poor and marginalized was especially important for students enrolled in the UCA. The UCA itself was founded by the upper class as a “conservative” alternative to the national university which was perceived to have “leftist” and radical leanings. The majority of students at the UCA came from upper class families and would become the future teachers, lawyers, journalist, physicians and public officials—in short, the leaders—of Salvadoran society. One of the concerns of the UCA’s leadership was that it would be the channel through which more privileges would flow to the already privileged, thereby reinforcing the system of privilege (Ellacuría 1991a, 200). They were well aware of the fact that the knowledge and skills acquired in universities, and even Catholic universities, have contributed to the exploitation of the poor and marginalized worldwide. By using the national reality as the basis from which even the more technical courses would be taught, their intent was to prepare skilled professionals who would approach the social order critically and ethically. And to give the students greater exposure to this reality, one of the UCA’s requirements for graduation was 600 hours of community service. Ellacuría would say that where students come from is not as impor-

tant as where they are going (198). Ellacuría was often heard to express the concern that the UCA not contribute to the production of “more predators” (210).

The UCA’s decision not to reproduce the unjust social order through the university structure was also reflected in its program and course offerings. This was especially difficult given the fact that El Salvador is an underdeveloped country and desperately in need of skilled professionals. But the leadership reasoned that even its program offerings could promote certain kinds of development over others. Given the country’s preference for meeting the superfluous needs of the rich over the basic needs of the vast majority, they argued that the criteria for deciding which academic programs to offer could not be left to popular demand, market forces, or funding availability. It had to be decided on the basis of what was most needed to promote equitable, sustainable development in El Salvador. The same reasoning carried over to research topics for degree completion. The UCA maintained that a country plagued by poverty, oppression and civil war could not afford the luxury of random research. The university focused research by giving priority to certain research topics and directing students and faculty to them. Among the topics were: agrarian reform, demographics, appropriate technology, educational reform, public health, public housing, socio-political participation, foreign dependence and integration into the global economy. The UCA also encouraged research topics that could be carried on by several departments simultaneously in order to increase the social impact.

The UCA’s Mission: Beyond Its Walls

Just as the knowledge and skills that students acquire in the university contribute to the larger society, the UCA’s leadership understood that the university itself had a role to play and a contribution to make toward the larger society. They were convinced that the university has responsibility to enlighten society and serve as its conscience. It should stimulate change and devise concrete plans and models for a more just social order. And finally, it should participate in the process to implement those changes. The UCA referred to all this as the university’s “social projection.” The UCA’s leadership was convinced that its social projection, if exercised effectively in the public arena, would have an even greater impact on social transformation than its teaching of students. While they were convinced that the poor themselves must be the agents of their own liberation and the liberation of Salvadoran society, they nevertheless believed that the university’s resources and power could be enlisted in their struggle. Ellacuría wrote eloquently that “the university should be present intellectually where it is needed: to provide a science for those who have no science, to provide skills for

the unskilled; 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 and legitimate their rights” (Ellacuría 1990, 150). The leadership insisted that while the university’s bias toward the poor and marginalized was reflected in taking their experience as the starting point and their liberation as the end for its social projection, the university’s research and contributions to the public arena must be conducted with impeccable scientific rigor and objectivity. They also believed that its research must draw, as much as possible, from direct contact with the poor and those organized in the struggle for liberation. In the end this would become the basis for publicly criticizing and denouncing the actions of the government, the military and the oligarchy, demanding effective change and proposing appropriate and workable solutions. The UCA’s leadership made a decision to use every forum available to it, including its institutes and centers, academic publications, the press, the media, public symposia, conferences, awards, and testimony before U.S. congressional committees. In an interview with Teresa Whitfield, presidential candidate, Ruben Zamora, who was forced to flee El Salvador until his return in 1987, said that the UCA, and particularly Ellacuría, dared to say things inside the country that no one else had the courage to say (Whitfield 1995, 241).

The “Social Projection” of the UCA

Ignacio Martín-Baró, S.J., one of the murdered Jesuits, was a social-psychologist and vice-rector of the UCA. Martín-Baró observed that the polling in El Salvador relied consistently on a very small and elite segment of the population and consequently could be counted on to reflect the dominant ideology. Thus, the accuracy of its data and its interpretation were suspect. To counteract this, Martín-Baró founded the Institute for Public Opinion, IUDOP, under the university’s sponsorship in 1986. Between 1986 and 1989 it conducted 23 national polls, sending teams into the urban and metropolitan areas and the countryside to interview not only the affluent but the poor to insure a broader sampling and more accurate information. IUDOP polled on issues ranging from negotiations to end the war to health issues. The data from IUDOP polls was significant for a number of reasons. It gave support to those positions and individuals that were believed to have been in the minority. IUDOP polls also provided a much needed mirror to Salvadoran society. Finally, they offered evidence and alternate perspectives to observers outside the country.

Segundo Montes, S.J., another of the murdered Jesuits, was chair of the UCA’s sociology department and also religious superior of the Jesuit communi-

ty. In 1985 he founded the university's Institute for Human Rights, IDHUCA. Unlike Tutela Legal, the archdiocesan human rights office which documented and reported on individual cases of human rights abuses, IDHUCA provided another invaluable service. It studied trends in human rights abuses and the issues that seemed to launch them. Montes' own research on land tenure, social class, and particularly human rights and refugees won him international reputation. His research led him to the conflictive zones and also to refugee camps in Honduras where he listened to and documented the refugees' stories of persecution and flight. There he witnessed their indomitable spirit and ingenuity in rebuilding their communities. Inspired by them, Montes often told them they were the hope for peace and the future of El Salvador. Montes often traveled outside El Salvador to present reports at major conferences on the plight of refugees and violations of human rights in El Salvador.

Estudios Centroamericanos (ECA) was one of the most important journals of the UCA. Originally, it was a journal of the Central American Province of Jesuits. ECA had an international reputation for being the most reliable and the most relevant journal of social science in El Salvador. In her study on the murdered Jesuits, *Paying the Price*, Teresa Whitfield notes that copies of ECA could be found in offices ranging from the U.S. Embassy to popular organizations to government ministers (Whitfield 1995, 244). In 1969 the journal seemed to take a new direction, devoting the entire issue to the war between El Salvador and Honduras. Then in 1970, ECA came under the direction of the UCA. Ignacio Ellacuría, S.J., the president or rector of the UCA, became its editor. Under his leadership ECA developed a reputation for tackling some of the most difficult issues facing El Salvador. After an issue devoted to land tenure and land reform, with an editorial criticizing the government's capitulation to the oligarchy in 1976, ECA's offices were bombed. In addition, the university lost its national subsidy. Nevertheless, Ellacuría and the ECA staff refused to be intimidated. They courageously continued to address issues that needed to be addressed, and their editorials continued to speak "truth to power."

In 1980 a Center for Information, Documentation and Support for Research called CIDAI was founded at the university. It published *Proceso*, a weekly newsletter of social analysis edited by students of Ellacuría.

Ellacuría also founded a university forum, Catedra de la Realidad Nacional, at a time when even the suggestion of dialogue with the opposition brought recriminations. This forum was the only place where highly-sensitive issues like a negotiated settlement to the war, election fraud, land reform and others could be openly discussed and debated in El Salvador.

And finally, the university created a theological center, now called Centro Monsenor Romero, where seminarians, delegates of the Word, and lay catechists were trained to be a church for, with, and of the poor. Altogether, the university published nine journals. As the independent press was silenced and more and more of the opposition eliminated or forced to flee the country, the UCA's publications, its institutes, journals and activities played a critical role in El Salvador. They became vehicles for independent voices, some of whom were in exile, and they provided sources of reliable information and critical analysis both in and outside the country.

What Has the UCA to Teach Us?

It is important to point out that the responsibility to educate for justice and to promote justice in and through the UCA was not the assignment a few faculty, a vice-president for mission, a department or a center. Rather, the responsibility to educate for justice and to become a force for justice in society was integral to the university's mission, identity, and structure. In addition, the UCA *institutionally* made a preferential option for the poor. It chose to come closer to them geographically, intellectually emotionally, spiritually and politically. It chose to know them and allow itself to be affected by their suffering and struggle. While the UCA identified with those who were beaten up and left for dead alongside the road, it put itself in relationship with those who were organized and engaged in the struggle against oppression. And because it did, the university discovered how its resources and power might specifically be used to restore compassion, justice and peace in Salvadoran society. It is no exaggeration to say that the poor and those who were organizing for justice truly entered the university's mind and heart, converted it. The university also engaged in praxis in the truest sense of the term. Sobrino claims that by engaging in critical reflection and *critical intervention in society*, the university's knowledge changed from being descriptive to becoming liberative. (Sobrino 1990, 164). As described above, the national reality became the great learning field of the university in its curriculum, forums, research, publications and outreach. Its praxis was not limited to the university community, it reached far beyond its walls to Salvadoran society and even the global society. Because of its praxis, the university itself became a powerful "player" in the struggle for economic, political and social justice. In short, it became an agent of life. And finally, in giving its life, as the Gospel bids, the university found its own life.

NOTES

¹Teresa Whitfield's, *Paying the Price: Ignacio Ellacuría and the Murdered Jesuits of El Salvador* and Charles J. Beirne's, *Jesuit Education and Social Change in El Salvador* were invaluable resources for this essay.

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