

*On the occasion of the beatification of the ten martyrs of Quiche in Guatemala (three religious priests and seven lay people), this article was written to clarify the cause and historical circumstances of their martyrdom. This is also to honor the memory of so many others who suffered and died during the dark period of their history.*

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## **The Martyrs of Quiche (Guatemala)**

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On April 23, 2021, three priests belonging to the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart (MSC) and seven catechists were beatified in Quiche, Guatemala. The religious priests were: Fr. Jose Maria Gran Cirera, Fr. Juan Alonso Fernandez and Fr. Faustino Villanueva. The seven lay people were: Rosalío Benito, Reyes Us, Domingo del Barrio, Nicolás Castro, Tomás Ramírez, Miguel Tiú and Juan Barrera Méndez who was then only twelve years old.

The ten martyrs were tortured and murdered by security forces and death squads in the early 1980s. Four other martyrs who died around this period were earlier beatified. Among them were Fr. Tulio Marcello Maruzzo – an Italian Franciscan, Fr. Stanley Rother – a diocesan priest from the US, Bro. James Miller - a La Salle brother also from the US. There were also other priests who were murdered: Fr. Eufemio Lopez, Fr. Walter Voorkdeckers (CICM), Fr. Carlos Galvez Galindo, Fr. Carlos Morales Lopez (OP), Augusto Ramirez Monasterio (OFM). Two other priests were abducted and disappeared: Fr Carlos Alonso (SJ) and Fr. Conrado dela Cruz (from the Philippines). Bishop Juan Gerardi - the former bishop of Quiche – was assassinated in 1998 by army officers. Their martyrdom has still to be recognized by Rome.

What were the historical circumstances and the basis for the Church's recognition of their martyrdom?

In 1952, President Jacobo Arbenz of Guatemala carried out a land reform program which riled the US-owned United Fruit Company (UFC) that controlled forty-two percent of the land in the country. Labelling the Guatemalan government a communist threat, the UFC engaged in a lobbying campaign that convinced President Dwight Eisenhower to act. The US secretary of state – John Foster Dulles – and his brother Allen Dulles – the CIA head – who had previous links with the UFC engineered the plan to overthrow Arbenz which was code-named Operation PBSuccess. Since 1954 after the CIA-instigated coup of a democratically elected government, Guatemala was ruled by successive military regimes for four decades with the support of the landed elite and United States of America. In the efforts to stamp out resistance, countless violation of human rights and atrocities were committed. Over two hundred thousand people were killed and forty thousand were abducted and disappeared – the desaparecidos. Majority of the victims were the Mayan Indians most of whom were poor and dispossessed. A United Nations Commission would later declare this a genocide perpetrated by the right-wing dictatorial regimes – especially under Efraim Rios Montt.

During the 1980s, the Guatemalan military assumed almost absolute government power and tried to eliminate perceived enemies in every socio-political institution of the nation, including the political, social, and intellectual classes. Security forces and death squads funded, trained and equipped by the US carried out these extrajudicial killings. The

Reagan administration increased its support for the dictatorial regime in spite the restrictions imposed during the Carter administration.

The period under Rios Montt was the bloodiest with widespread massacres of the Mayan Indians which the military regime considered as the mass base of the resistance movement. Other victims of the repression included activists, left-leaning politicians, trade unionists, academics, journalists, students, returning refugees, street children and religious workers.

In the midst of this situation, many priests, religious and lay people expressed their solidarity with the poor and spoke out against the injustices and violence. Thus, the Catholic Church became the object of persecution for its role in the defense of the dignity and rights of the poor. Those who faithfully carried out the Church's mission of promoting justice and peace suffered. Many were abducted and disappeared. Others were killed. The bishops of Guatemala in their message on March 21, 2021 explained the basis for their beatification:

"They shed their blood during the years of internal armed conflict because they were convinced that there is no greater love than giving one's life for others and, as Catholics, insisted on upholding the Kingdom of Heaven values proclaimed by the Lord Jesus: defense of human dignity, respect for life, social justice and protection of the weakest and most vulnerable."

In an interview with Vatican News, Bishop Rosolino Bianchetti of Quiché diocese described what these martyrs did:

"In spite of the threats, they embraced their cross and were persecuted and eventually killed by those who considered the teachings of the Gospel a danger to the interests of the powerful. With the Word of God and the Rosary in hand, they would go around communities assisting those in need. The priests would act as guides for the people, while the laypeople visited the sick, served in the church, and, after finishing their jobs as farmers, would help the peasants recover lands that had been unjustly stolen from them."

Traditionally, martyrdom is associated with "odium fidei" – hatred of the faith of those who profess it. This was the case in the first three centuries, in the seventeenth to the eighteenth centuries during the missionary expansion in Asia, in the early 20th century during the Spanish Civil War and World War II. In this case in Guatemala, martyrdom was the consequence of practicing their faith, a faith expressed not just in holding on to a set of beliefs but also in the liberating faith that does justice and in solidarity with the poor and oppressed. This was not simply political praxis but prophetic acts and expression of Christian discipleship. Martyrdom was the consequence of fulfilling their prophetic mission. This was the kind of martyrdom similar to that of St. Oscar Romero and other undeclared martyrs in Latin America and elsewhere.

Pope Francis' and the universal Church's recognition of the martyrs of Guatemala is, therefore, very significant and needs to be celebrated as a development of the understanding of martyrdom. This is also a recognition of the contribution of the local Church in Guatemala in promoting integral human development, justice and peace which is an authentic expression of the Christian faith.

In the midst of armed conflict Catholic bishops quietly promoted peace talks and address the roots of violence: the political, social and economic inequities. They supported the initiative of the Lutheran World Federation to bring together military, government and

guerrilla leaders in Oslo, Norway to negotiate and finally come up with a peace agreement in December 1996.

As the peace process was ongoing, Catholic bishops initiated the “Recovery of the Historical Memory Project” which enabled the survivors break their fear-induced silence and to record their testimonies, expose war crimes and identify perpetrators. Bishop Juan Gerardi who presented the finding of the REMHI project in April 24, 1998 was assassinated two days later. Three members of the military were convicted but those who ordered his killing have not been held accountable. So far, the martyrdom of Bishop Gerardi who was the foremost defender of the Mayans and who tirelessly worked for justice, peace and the respect for human rights have not been yet been recognized.

The beatification is, therefore, a confirmation of the witness not just of the blessed martyrs but the entire Church of Guatemala that went through a period of persecution. The martyrs represent the entire suffering Church and the people of Guatemala – especially the campesinos and Maya Indians who constitute the majority. Even as we celebrate their beatification and await their canonization, we should continue to remember the countless others who suffered and died those who survived – including religious men and women. Among them Sr. Dianna Ortiz, an American Ursuline nun who was abducted, tortured and raped but survived and exposed the complicity of the US government that supported the Guatemalan military regimes. Although they have not been officially recognized as martyrs, they in their own way gave witness to the truth and to their faith. After all the word martyrdom comes from the Greek word “marturein” which means “to give witness.”

It is not enough to celebrate the beatification of the martyrs and remember many others who suffered and died. We have to witness to the truth and to hold the perpetrators of injustice and violence accountable so that we can say “Never Again.” Bishop Juan Gerardi two days before he was killed said:

“Unless we know the truth the wounds of the past will stay open and cannot be healed... Truth is the primary word, and is what will break this cycle of violence and death and open up the future of hope and light for all.”

Almost twenty-five years after Gerardi’s death and after the peace agreement, majority of the people of Guatemala continue to suffer from widespread poverty and inequality. Many are migrating to the US in search for a better life. But the borders remain close to them. Many of those responsible for the violence and injustice have not been held accountable. While President Clinton admitted the complicity of past US administrations and publicly apologized when he visited Guatemala, the US has not done much to make amends for the harm done in Guatemala and the rest of Latin America. The most prophetic act for the Catholic Church in the US as well as the religious orders is to honor the memory of the martyrs and make the US government aware of its moral obligation to recompense the countries that it used to consider its backyard. The local Churches as well as religious communities in Central America have the obligation not just to rejoice in the beatification of the blessed martyrs but to demand accountability and continue to be prophetic witnesses and continue the work of justice, peace and in the integrity of creation.