

20th Commemoration Mass for the El Salvador Martyrs
Rev. Stephen A. Privett, S.J., President of the University of San Francisco
November 16, 2009 | St. Ignatius Church

“...we dare the dream that produced these martyrs who made their university an instrument of justice and a sign of hope.”

Today’s first reading declares that Jesus is “the image of the invisible God.” In other words, if you want to see God, look at Jesus. Where do we see God in the dying Jesus of today’s Gospel? We catch a glimpse of God in the mercy and compassion Jesus extends to the ultimate reject, a criminal condemned to death. In the midst of his own death throes, Jesus responds – as he had throughout his life – to a cry for help from the most despised and marginalized of individuals. We see in Jesus the God who identifies with the so-called “dregs of society”: prostitutes, lepers, criminals, cripples, the addicted and the deranged. We see in Jesus the God who hears the cries of the poor. In this Gospel, we see forgiveness, compassion and hope offered to one whom society condemned to death. We see God.

The Russian author, Ivan Turgenev, recalled a time when he was returning from hunting, walking along a path through the woods with his dog running ahead of him. He wrote:

Suddenly the dog took shorter steps,
And began stealing along
As though tracking game.

I looked down the path
And saw a young sparrow...
It had fallen out of its nest...
And sat there unable to move,
Helplessly flapping its half-grown wings.
My dog was slowly approaching it,
When suddenly darting from a tree close by,
An old dark-throated sparrow
Fell like a stone right before his nose,
And all ruffled up, terrified...
Flung itself twice towards
The open jaw of shining teeth.

The old sparrow sprang to save;
It cast itself before its nestling...
But all its tiny body was shaking with terror...
Swooning with fear, *it offered itself up!*

What a huge monster must the dog have appeared to it
And yet *it could not stay*

On its high branch out of danger...
A force stronger than its will flung it down...

I hastened to call off the disconcerted dog,
And went away full of reverence...
Love, I thought, is stronger than death or fear of death. Only by love life holds together
and advances. [*Poems in Prose*, pp. 269 – 270]

To be moved to action by human suffering is to be touched by God. In the face of our insecurities and fears, to offer ourselves to the weak and the powerless is to “image the invisible God.” To leave the safety of the high branch to be in solidarity with the poor and the marginalized is to be liberated from the power of darkness however it masks itself in our lives.

A student – perhaps one of you – left the comforts of her college campus to experience life among the poor in El Salvador. She wrote about Kata, a 10 year old Salvadoran girl, who “knew more about life than I or any other 21 year old college student I know. She told me things happen for a reason, and that she knew I was there because God had led me there. Kata did not have a mother, but she believed that she was blessed to have a loving grandmother. She taught me that instead of asking God for what I don’t have, I should thank God for all that I do have.” The student goes on to say “I discovered there [in El Salvador] a desire to become an instrument of peace and love, a desire to change the world...” That desire was of God. God called this young woman from college companions to a motherless child in El Salvador.

Today is, for us, a privileged moment to celebrate our call to be God’s compassionate love, to accept the role that we are called to play in God’s timeless struggle against the power of darkness in our world; to let ourselves be touched by human suffering so that God’s power may work through our lives as it did through that student and through the lives of the women and men we celebrate this morning.

Today we particularly remember Julia and Celina Ramos and our colleagues and brother Jesuits Ignacio Ellacuria, Segundo Montes, Nacho Martin-Barro, Juaquin Lopez y Lopez, Amando Lopez and Juan Moreno. They were university people who did the research, conducted the surveys, collected the data, hosted the forums, gave the talks, taught the classes, wrote the articles and reports that told the truth about the real enemy in El Salvador: poverty and repression, not communism.

Their academic work unmasked the lies that justified the pervasive injustice and continuing violence that was El Salvador. They advanced proposals for a just peace and a more humane social order in the face of violent opposition and threats that did not silence them. As human beings, academics and persons of faith they felt obligated to serve the truth, and for this they were killed. They were killed because they would not stop telling the truth about El Salvador; Julia and Celina were killed so that they would not tell the truth about the murder of the six Jesuits.

We remember these men and women today, not for their sakes but for ours. We tell their story and celebrate their lives so that we never sell our souls on the cheap; so that our faith remains firm in the God who came down from the high branch to become flesh and dwell among us still; so that we resist those forces that would have us feather our nests far from the cries of the poor and God's gentle touch; so that this university's teaching, research and outreach address the actual world as it unjustly exists and help reshape it light of the Gospel; so that we dare the dream that produced these martyrs who made their university an instrument of justice and a sign of hope.

May the courage and conviction of our brothers and sisters whom we remember today be ours. May we, like they, image the invisible God as we go about the stuff of our lives.

Let us go now to the table to share bread and wine and the dangerous memory of Jesus and of the martyrs whom we celebrate at this liturgy.