

The Blood of Martyrs, Seed of Christians

- 33rd Sunday of Year
- November 15, 2015
- Stephen V. Sundborg, S.J.

Twenty-six years ago tomorrow I was having breakfast at 7:15 in the Jesuit community—which at that time was in Loyola Hall—when a young Jesuit came bursting into the dining room weeping, wailing, because he had just heard on the radio that during the night six Jesuits, and their housekeeper and daughter, were assassinated in their community house at the Jesuit university in San Salvador! The Jesuits of another Jesuit university had been struck and we felt struck here at Seattle U. The details emerged that the soldiers of the Atlacatl Brigade of the Salvadoran Army had burst into the house of the sleeping Jesuits at 2:00 am, dragged them into the garden and shot them in the head, then scooping out their brains. They were accused of being the brains, the intellectuals, behind revolutionary people fighting for justice against the rich and holders of power. We later learned that the leaders of this brigade had been trained in the US by the US Army at The School of the Americas at Fort Benning, Georgia.

We gathered that noon 26 years ago in the Quadrangle in a somber remembrance—mostly in silence—students, faculty, staff, Jesuits, friends, to honor those who were killed, so much did we identify with them as members of another Jesuit university like theirs. That evening the city gathered at St. Joseph's Church on Capitol Hill with the Archbishop as a huge cross was passed over the heads of the congregation, brought to the front, and, as the blow of a hammer on that cross echoed across that church, the names of each of the eight were called out.

That event changed our university forever, forged our mission “for a more just and humane world”, empowered our commitments to the poor. Their deaths rose up in our lives. The ancient saying became true for us, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of Christians.” We have commemorated this anniversary every year since on campus in a sacred ceremony; it has represented our deepest commitment as a Jesuit university.

This is a grim story and this is a story of hope. Both. So too are our readings: the grim, exaggerated language of times of catastrophe, and the anchor of our hope of Jesus coming with his messengers to summon the blessed from their graves and from all points of the earth to God's kingdom of justice and light and joy and peace which he will establish on the earth. It is quite a story which we are bringing to a conclusion as we approach the last Sunday of the year of the celebration of the mysteries of our faith, our salvation story.

We are in this story, which has not yet come to this promised conclusion, this finale. Where are we in the story? Think of it as something like The Lord of the Rings, and we are Hobbits, and Jesus is Gandalf. Oh, there are many dark events in the story, seemingly total tragedies, yet you know even if you have not come to that end of the story, that Gandalf will prevail and the Hobbits will be safe as they drink their tea on their porches and admire the hair between their toes, and the earth will be saved from all the powers of evil. Where are we and where is our salvation story, our Christian story? At what point has it now arrived?

A simple statement about Christianity has always been a tremendous reassurance, a solid foundation of confidence for me. The statement is: “The time of Christianity is dawn”. What this means is that with the resurrection of Jesus from the dead—the first to rise from the dead but we are also to rise one day—the night is over, never to return. It is not getting darker; it is dawn, not dusk. But it is also not yet sunrise and day; it is the time before sunrise, the early light, the first light. Jesus has risen, bringing the night of death to its end. But he alone has risen guaranteeing the coming of light, our own rising. He is the dawn that assures that the sunrise is coming. The sunrise, the day, the full sunshine is the kingdom of God on earth which our reading says Jesus is coming to bring. When we rise then it shall be day. Now it is dawn, not day, but assured day. Not a time of fear as if we were going into dark, into night, but a time of hope—unassailable hope—because in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, which has occurred, our resurrection from the dead like his, which will occur, is assured if we but hold onto him by faith and love. Where we are in the story, if the story is like one 24-hour period, is at dawn, approaching but not yet into the unending day.

What our reading as well as our Salvador Martyrs tell us is: “Wake up! Be vigilant! Look for the light! Have no fear! Christ has overcome the darkness, even the darkness of death, even the darkness of being put to death! Wake up and live with Christ and love and give your lives for a more just and humane world! Be like sentinels, watchmen, looking for the first rays of the rising sun! Have no fear before anyone because the day is assured, the powers of darkness do not have a future! You do in Christ!”

I shall never forget the sound of those eight hammer blows on the huge cross in St. Joe’s on that night 26 years ago; they resounded, echoed, throughout the church and they echo still for me. It was the sound of wood struck, the wood of the cross, because that evening in our shock and grief was the evening of the Crucifixion. Since then “the blood of the martyrs” has in fact become “the seed of the Christians”. People—many people, especially the people of El Salvador—believe today, are awakened to faith, because those eight died as martyrs to faith, killed because of their faith. Perhaps now a more appropriate sound is the ringing of a bell, an awakening sound, as we read each of their names. Let me do so and leave you with the echo of this awakening sound of these martyrs in this chapel and in you.

Ignacio Ellacuría
 Ignacio Martín-Baró
 Segundo Montes
 Amando López
 Joaquín López y López
 Juan Ramón Moreno
 Elba Ramos
 Celina Ramos