

The death of a bishop: The killing of Juan Gerardi still resonates through Guatemala

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

Before leaving in 1980 to report on human rights to Rome, [Juan Gerardi] narrowly escaped assassination. On his return, the government of General Lucas Garcia forced him into exile in Costa Rica. He returned to Guatemala in 1984, when General Mejia Victores was in power, and became an auxiliary bishop in the archdiocese of Guatemala. Victores said he allowed Gerardi into the country because he preferred to have his "enemy nearby."

Gerardi's murder would test the incredulity even of Guatemala's most seasoned and cynical observers. Early leads pointed to military involvement. Retired Colonel Byron Disraeli Lima Estrada and his son, Captain Byron Miguel Lima Oliva, were implicated most. But police arrested a criminal drunkard, Carlos Enrique Vielman (motive, common delinquency), and then Gerardi's housemate and fellow Catholic priest Father Mario Orantes

While a material culprit, or culprits, may one day be prosecuted, a sickening veil of impunity seems destined to protect those officers in the army high command whom the human rights office believes planned the murder of Gerardi. The blows that took the bishop's life were felt by all Guatemalans who believed, as Gerardi did, that Guatemala: Never Again could represent a new beginning. "The report is a legitimate and painful denunciation," Gerardi had proclaimed. "But it is also an annunciation, an alternative aimed at finding new ways for human beings to live with one another."

FULL TEXT

For some people it's the assassination of John F. Kennedy, for others it's the death of Princess Diana. With me, it is the murder of Bishop Juan Gerardi that I can anchor in the nexus of time, place, and memory like no other death, save my father's.

I was in Seville, on a research stint. On Monday evening, before news of Gerardi's fate had shown up in the press, I went to see *Men With Guns*, a film set in a fictional Latin American country that is unequivocally Guatemala. Through a restless night I was haunted by the desolate angels of Guatemalan photographer Luis Gonzalez Palma, whose pictures of faces, flowers and thorns closed the film.

The next morning I picked up a copy of *El Pais* in the Plaza del Duque. Glancing at it before I put it in my shoulder bag, I noticed a photograph showing a body, not quite fully covered, head in a pool of blood. "ETA," I thought, for the Basque separatist group was always in the news. Not until I stopped for a coffee a few minutes later and read the headline – "Assassinated in Guatemala, the Bishop who Investigated the Horrors of the Army" – did I realize it was Gerardi.

Gerardi, born in 1924 of Italian immigrant stock in Guatemala City and ordained there at age 22, knew well the

venom of the forces he was up against. As bishop of the province of El Quiche, it was his unprecedented decision to close the diocese in 1980 because of savage repression. In one exchange with army leaders he said, "You are the ones who assassinate. You are the enemy of the people. We have to be with the people ... As long as you do not change, there can be no agreement between us."

Before leaving in 1980 to report on human rights to Rome, Gerardi narrowly escaped assassination. On his return, the government of General Lucas Garcia forced him into exile in Costa Rica. He returned to Guatemala in 1984, when General Mejia Victores was in power, and became an auxiliary bishop in the archdiocese of Guatemala. Victores said he allowed Gerardi into the country because he preferred to have his "enemy nearby."

In 1989, Archbishop Prospero Penados asked Gerardi to set up the Archdiocesan Human Rights Office. Five years later, the archbishop initiated the project known as "the Recovery of Historical Memory." Gerardi inspired the project's investigation of violence unleashed on the people of Guatemala during a brutal civil war.

The project report, titled Guatemala: Never Again, details 55,000 human-rights violations, of which more than 25,000 resulted in death. Almost 50,000 of the incidents are attributed to state security forces – the army, the police, civil defence patrols, military commissioners and paramilitary death squads. Guerrilla insurgents are held accountable for the rest. Volume four of the report lists the names, dates and places of execution of 52,000 people. It is 544 pages, the longest of four volumes. Left unnamed are those responsible for the murders, whether soldiers in the field or their commanding officers, the intellectual authors of some of the worst crimes against humanity in Latin America.

On Friday, April 24, 1998, Bishop Gerardi presented the report at a special mass held in the Metropolitan Cathedral of Guatemala City. Two days later, he was beaten to death at his home. His assailants pounded his head with a concrete block. Guatemala's "men with guns" had used a different weapon on this occasion, but with the same lethal effect as countless times before, and since.

Gerardi's murder would test the incredulity even of Guatemala's most seasoned and cynical observers. Early leads pointed to military involvement. Retired Colonel Byron Disraeli Lima Estrada and his son, Captain Byron Miguel Lima Oliva, were implicated most. But police arrested a criminal drunkard, Carlos Enrique Vielman (motive, common delinquency), and then Gerardi's housemate and fellow Catholic priest Father Mario Orantes

Najera (motive: homosexual crime of passion). Also taken into custody were the parish household's cook, Margarita Lupez, and Father Mario's German shepherd dog, Baloo, who allegedly attacked Gerardi. All the suspects were later released because of lack of evidence, but in January 2000 Orantes and Lupez were arrested again, along with Lima Estrada, Lima Oliva and Jose Obdulio Villanueva, a former member of the Presidential Military Guard. The case is still under investigation.

While a material culprit, or culprits, may one day be prosecuted, a sickening veil of impunity seems destined to protect those officers in the army high command whom the human rights office believes planned the murder of Gerardi. The blows that took the bishop's life were felt by all Guatemalans who believed, as Gerardi did, that Guatemala: Never Again could represent a new beginning. "The report is a legitimate and painful denunciation," Gerardi had proclaimed. "But it is also an annunciation, an alternative aimed at finding new ways for human beings to live with one another."

Four months after Gerardi's slaying, I attended a memorial service for him in the Metropolitan Cathedral. It seemed the sentiments expressed by the bishop and his flock were very much at odds. "Your Kingdom is Peace, Your

Kingdom is Love," sang a packed congregation, the voices of Indians and non-Indians filling the vast space. Yet placards declared, "Death to Impunity," "No More Unjust Bloodshed," and "Monseuor Gerardi: Martyr of the Truth."

The most moving moment came when the report and a photograph of Gerardi were placed alongside the blood and body of Christ. Two women and two men, their arms held high for all to behold which volume of the report they were carrying, approached the altar. The images chosen for the cover of each volume, a photographic collage by Daniel Hernandez, struck a powerful chord:

Me callo: I am silent.

No veo: I cannot see.

No oigo: I do not hear.

Para que todos lo sepan: So that all shall know.

As a long line of people formed to take communion, the afternoon sun entered the cathedral in slanted beams of golden light. The yellow dome above us began to glow. As mass ended, I rose from the pew I shared with a row of nuns and exited through wafts of incense and the hush of prayer. Outside, a thunderous cloudburst had paved the way for a rainbow, its colours arching from one of the cathedral's twin spires over jagged rooftops to the Church of San Sebastien, where Gerardi had lived, preached and died. The sky, at least, seemed to have matters elementally resolved. It was an awesome sight.

From *A Beauty That Hurts: Life and Death in Guatemala*.

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Illustration

Black & White Photo: Reuters / Catholic school students prayed in front of the tomb of Bishop Juan Gerardi in Guatemala City's cathedral this week, on the third anniversary of his murder. ;

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