

An aerial photograph of a village in Guatemala, showing a cluster of houses with dark, steeply pitched roofs. A prominent white church with a tall steeple is visible in the center. The village is situated on a hillside, with a dark, forested mountain range in the background under a cloudy sky. The title 'DEATH AND RESURRECTION IN GUATEMALA' is overlaid in large, white, serif capital letters.

# DEATH AND RESURRECTION IN GUATEMALA

**Fernando Bermúdez**

**Introduction by Phillip Berryman**

# **Death and Resurrection in Guatemala**

**Fernando Bermúdez**

*Translated from the Spanish  
by Robert R. Barr*

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To the memory of my unforgettable friend,  
Rubén Torres—"Bayron,"  
a young Guatemalan Christian  
murdered October 14, 1982,  
and to that of the numberless martyrs of Guatemala  
and all Central America  
who have poured out their blood  
for the building of a new society

*I beg everyone to learn the truth and tell it to others. We must break the blockade of silence and lies. Let denunciation and proclamation take wings; let the bad news of death and the good news of resurrection in the lives of our Central American brothers and sisters be blazoned forth. May their blood—their poor, magnanimous blood—fall on our hearts and become Eucharist.*

MONSIGNOR PEDRO CASALDÁLIGA  
BISHOP OF SÃO FÉLIX, BRAZIL

## PREFACE

Central America today is a church of martyrs. Thousands of Christians in recent years have passed the supreme test of love, from Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero, to the dozens of priests and ministers who have given their lives for their faith, to the countless catechists and members of the base communities who have done the same.

In this little book, I shall concentrate exclusively on a forgotten country of Central America—Guatemala. I shall attempt to present the witness of faith, hope, and love of Guatemala's heroic people in such a way as to offer a memorial to their martyrs, and to let my readers know the whys and wherefores of the situation of death in which they lived and died.

I should also like these pages to be a celebration—a celebration of the cause for which so many Guatemalan men and women have shed their blood, a celebration of the love that gives meaning to their death.

The memory of the martyrs is a call to solidarity with a struggle for life being waged by a whole people. We Christians see in this struggle the drama of Christ on the cross, the challenge to death that Christ hurls from a cross of injustice, poverty, oppression, and genocide. But we also see, in this same struggle, the clear sign of a resurrection.

It has been my happy lot to share the gift of faith over a

number of years with the *campesinos* in northern Guatemala. I came to them with the intention of evangelizing them, but they evangelized me.

I bless you, Father, Lord of heaven and of earth, for hiding these things from the learned and the clever and revealing them to mere children. Yes, Father, for that is what it pleased you to do [Lk 10:21].

The indigenous communities of Guatemala are teaching us what we cannot learn in books or in the halls of theological scholarship. They are teaching us what it means to share, what it means to trust in God, what it means to live as a Christian and be a Christian, what it means to give our lives for our sister and brother.

How many Catholic priests and Protestant ministers have paid the price of martyrdom in Central America for their determined commitment to walk with the people in their aspirations for a more just and humane society!

The reason the people of Central America struggle—as in Guatemala, where the vast majority are Amerindian Christians—is not communism, but the injustice of economic, social, and political inequality, the injustice of a situation of oppression and repression. Innumerable socioeconomic studies from various sources attest to this fact, as do certain groups of Protestants and Catholics. The bishops of Guatemala, for example, declared: “The violence in Guatemala is the fruit of an unjust social and economic system” (*Excelsior*, Mexico City, September 5, 1984).

Clearly, the native population has fallen into the hands of the mighty and the powerful, who have harassed, despoiled, outraged, tortured, and put them to death by the

thousands. The cry of a people has come to the ears of the Lord. We Christians throughout the rest of the continent cannot simply pass them by, as did the religious individuals in the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

We discern a new spirituality arising out of this painful experience on the part of so many Christians—a new manner of following Jesus, of being his disciple, in a context of suffering. This new way of following the Lord Jesus flies in the face of the traditional manner in which so many, Catholics and Protestants alike, have sought to follow him. Beyond all doubt, our lives will be the richer for having studied at the feet of this suffering church, for having studied the experiences of its people in solidarity and shared commitment.

The purpose of the following testimonials—some of them documented by others, some the statements of persons with whom the author has spoken—is to alert the general public to the immense suffering of a people who hunger and thirst for justice and to enable them to share their mighty faith and hope. In spite of everything, this is a people of unshakable trust in the promises and the power of the Lord Jesus. As one of our brothers declared when he was on the point of death: “I’m going to die . . . but I know I’ll rise again.”

No, those who have the political, economic, and military power do not have the last word. The last word belongs to Jesus Christ, Lord of history, who is dying and rising at this very moment in the Guatemalan people.



## **SOME FACTS ABOUT GUATEMALA**

Following are some official data regarding Guatemala:

Area: 42,042 sq. miles

Population (1985): 8.34 million, of whom more than 60% are indigenous Mayas

Rural population: 67%

Unemployment and underemployment: 45% of the work force

Illiteracy: 71 % (in total population); 84% (among Amer-indians)

Infant mortality: 7.37%

Housing: Shortage of more than 900,000 units (1980). Of existing units, 57% are without drinking water, 72% without electricity, and 59% without sanitation.

The UN Commission on Food and Agriculture states that four out of every five peasant families in Guatemala live in destitution or near-destitution.

Government cuts in health and education budgets for 1984 were 20.8% and 15.5%, respectively. Military expenditure went up by 40%.

# GUATEMALA



- |                  |                   |                       |
|------------------|-------------------|-----------------------|
| <b>Central:</b>  | <b>South:</b>     | <b>North Central:</b> |
| 1. Guatemala     | 10. Retalhuleu    | 19. Baja Verapaz      |
| 2. Sacatepéquez  | 11. Suchitepéquez | 20. Alta Verapaz      |
| <b>West:</b>     | 12. Escuintla     | <b>North:</b>         |
| 3. Chimaltenango | <b>East:</b>      | 21. El Petén          |
| 4. El Quiché     | 13. El Progreso   | 22. Izabal            |
| 5. Quezaltenango | 14. Jalapa        |                       |
| 6. Huehuetenango | 15. Zacapa        |                       |
| 7. San Marcos    | 16. Chiquimula    |                       |
| 8. Totonicapán   | 17. Jutiapa       | ★ Guatemala City      |
| 9. Sololá        | 18. Santa Rosa    |                       |

# CONTENTS

|   |           |
|---|-----------|
| <b>Preface</b>  | <b>xi</b> |
| <b>Some Facts about Guatemala</b>                       | <b>xv</b> |
| <b>Introduction by Phillip Berryman</b>                 | <b>1</b>  |
| <b>1. A People's Tragic Reality</b>                     | <b>17</b> |
| <b>2. Church of the Poor, Church of the Catacombs</b>   | <b>23</b> |
| <b>3. Persecution and Martyrdom: Testimonials</b>       | <b>28</b> |
| <b>4. Murder "In the Name of God and Anticommunism"</b> | <b>46</b> |
| <b>5. Drama of Our Time: Refugees in Faith and Hope</b> | <b>55</b> |
| <b>6. A People Fighting for Its Life</b>                | <b>62</b> |
| <b>7. Prayer of a People in the Throes of Martyrdom</b> | <b>73</b> |
| <b>Notes</b>  | <b>75</b> |

## **INTRODUCTION**

*by Phillip Berryman*

This little book is a cry from the heart, an agonized cry in the name of the suffering people of Guatemala. Fernando Bermúdez, a priest who worked pastorally amid the violence in Guatemala until he had to flee to Mexico, is giving voice to the victims of that overwhelming violence. At the same time he is sharing with readers the faith and courage of the Guatemalan people and his conviction that ultimately they will not be vanquished.

Bermúdez points out that Guatemala is a “forgotten” country. In fact, the level of human suffering in Guatemala is as high as or higher than in El Salvador—recent data indicate that from 50,000 to 75,000 people have been killed since 1978—yet that suffering rarely reaches the U.S. media. There seem to be two main reasons: first, in the 1980s, there appears to be far less direct U.S. government involvement than in El Salvador and Nicaragua, and second, violence in Guatemala seems to be perennial and hence only the most bizarre cases are deemed newsworthy.

To appreciate the selective vision of the U.S. media, consider the killing of Father Jerzy Popieluszko in Poland, which became a daily media drama: his disappearance, the finding of his body, the trial of his murderers. Yet, with regard to Guatemala, the media have largely ignored the murder of about a dozen priests, several Protestant ministers, a Christian brother and a 50-year-

old Guatemalan sister—without the slightest call to bring anyone to justice.

In his unpretentious little book, Bermúdez seeks to break through that indifference. He wants the world to know about the agony of the Guatemalan people. He is also convinced that their sufferings are the birth pangs of something very important for the life of the church.

Readers who go directly to the text will feel the impact of this account of brutality and courage. However, such readers might be left with a number of questions. Why does the Guatemalan army engage in atrocities: mass killings, bashing babies to death, gang-raping women in the presence of their families? How did church leaders among Guatemalan Indian peasants come to be perceived as such a threat?

In Mexico, where the original version of this book was published, the newspapers cover Guatemala and Central America much more extensively and with much more insight than do the U.S. media. Furthermore, many of the intended readers in Mexico have already met Guatemalan refugees and heard their stories. United States readers, however, who are much less familiar with the events mentioned here, may need some orientation. Hence, in what follows I will sketch some basic background elements of the Guatemalan situation.

Habitual stereotypes are one obstacle to understanding. For example, we may assume that the normal state of Guatemala's Indians is a kind of idyllic isolation until it is broken by the advent of tourism. We may view them as a people without history. Far from being historyless, however, the Indians of Guatemala have lived a history of oppression for over four centuries. Indeed their colorful clothes—admired by tourists today—were imposed on

them by the conquerors in order to denote the wearers as being inhabitants of particular towns, towns the Spaniards themselves set up for the Indians. The patterns were taken from the Spanish courts. In other words, the picturesque Indian clothes were originally a means of social control.

Since the Spanish conquest the elites have monopolized the best lands for agroexport and have found ways of forcing the Indians to labor on their plantations. Indians were also forced to provide free labor for road-building and other government projects even after Independence (1821). When the Liberals took power in 1871, they immediately set out to cultivate coffee in order to supply the burgeoning demand in Europe, then in the midst of a major industrial expansion. They passed a law making it illegal to hold land communally, aiming at both the Indians and the Catholic religious orders. The law was justified on the grounds that both those "backward" groups stood in the way of "progress," namely coffee cultivation and export. Liberalism provided an ideological justification for a land grab. Not only were their lands taken away; the Indians were legally bound to work on the plantations a given number of days a year and to carry identification papers as proof that they had fulfilled their requirement.

Other handy stereotypes are those of the priest, the landholder, and the military officer, all part of the same oppressive system. Priests did tend to preach a static social order, wherein the poverty of some and the wealth of others reflected "God's will." However, this stereotype glosses over the fact that from the middle of the last century into this century, Liberal governments were at odds with the Catholic Church, passing laws to weaken it and taking away its property. Many of the clergy left the

country and sometimes even bishops were expelled. The result was an institutional weakening of the church. Today approximately 80 percent of the priests in Guatemala are foreigners.

As a result of this institutional weakness, people living at the village level saw priests only rarely, on ritual occasions. Hence, a static and fatalistic religious worldview was transmitted through the culture itself: through parents and grandparents, legends and stories, prayers and proverbs.

Since Independence (1821), dictatorship has been the norm in Guatemala. Manuel Estrada Cabrera, who was in power from 1898 to 1920, and who was overthrown after being declared insane, served as the model for the book *El Señor Presidente* by the Nobel-prize-winning Guatemalan novelist, Miguel Angel Asturias. Then, in the 1930s and 1940s, when all Central American countries but Costa Rica were under dictatorships, came Jorge Ubico. Ubico was overthrown by a largely urban and middle-class revolt in 1944. From then until 1954 Guatemala enjoyed its only period of what might be called democratic rule.

The governments of Juan José Arévalo (1945–50) and Jacobo Arbenz (1950–54) were populist and explicitly sought to carry out a capitalist modernization in Guatemala. But Arbenz incurred the wrath of the Eisenhower administration because of his land reform program, which affected the United Fruit Company, the largest landholder in the country, and because he extended political freedom to the Communist Party.

The Arbenz reforms were largely carried out by the urban middle class, and Indians were generally not actively involved, with some notable exceptions. When Archbishop Rossell began to rally antigovernment senti-

ment in the name of anticommunism, he was able to appeal to the religious sentiments of the Indians.

Meanwhile, the CIA and the Eisenhower administration engaged in a multilevel destabilization effort, seeking to isolate Guatemala internationally and engaging in psychological warfare (e.g., flying over Indian towns and dropping copies of Archbishop Rossell's pastoral letter on communism). The CIA helped bring together a small group of what today would be called *contras*. When the invasion came, CIA-piloted planes bombed and strafed Guatemala City. Arbenz's officers, whose loyalty had been undermined by the United States, refused to support him, and he resigned. The new president, Carlos Castillo Armas, was flown to Guatemala on a U.S. embassy plane. Land reform was reversed, about two hundred "communists" were killed and hundreds more were arrested (the U. S. embassy supplied lists), labor unions were disbanded, and Guatemala entered its long night of violence.

During the Arbenz period the Catholic Church had begun a process of institutional rebuilding. This process was accelerated as relations with the Castillo Armas government warmed up. For example, several priests served in the National Assembly that wrote the country's new constitution. Soon, in response to the appeals of Pius XII and John XXIII, clergy and religious were arriving from Europe and North America. The Spanish Sacred Heart Fathers took charge of the Quiché area, which figures heavily in Bermúdez's narrative. The Maryknoll Fathers, who were increasing their presence in Latin America after being expelled from China, took responsibility for Huehuetenango.

Reflecting their pre-Vatican II mentality, this generation of missionaries came with a strong anticommunist thrust.



However, the Council and the growth of their own critical awareness of the conditions of the people led them to new forms of work such as the promotion of cooperatives and lay leadership training. Maryknoll pioneered in the formation of catechists, and the Sacred Heart priests developed Catholic Action, both forerunners of “basic Christian communities,” with their lay leaders.

During the 1960s a guerrilla movement arose, concentrated largely in northeastern Guatemala, away from the Indian highlands. For a time this movement was apparently successful. Then, from 1966 to 1968, the Guatemalan army, under the command of Colonel Carlos Arana, unleashed a savage counterinsurgency campaign. Two aspects of this period are worth noting. First, the United States was intimately involved, funding and training the Guatemalan army, sending advisors, and by some accounts, even flying combat missions. Second, the president during this period, Julio César Méndez Montenegro (1966–70), was the only civilian head of state in over thirty years (1954–85), and as a condition for taking office, he had to guarantee the army a free hand in security matters. Under his nominal rule, 6,000 to 8,000 peasants were killed in order to stamp out a guerrilla movement that never numbered more than 300 combatants. This experience made Guatemalans skeptical about the significance of the election of a civilian president in 1985.

In 1967 Maryknoll priests Tom and Art Melville and Maryknoll Sister Marian Peter were beginning to collaborate with the guerrillas and planning to go to the mountains with them when they were discovered and denounced to Cardinal Casariego and the Guatemalan government and had to leave the country. The “Melville affair,” like the death of Camilo Torres in combat in Co-