

The Reign of God Is At Hand: Close the SOA!

Speech to over 7,000 people at the annual demonstration to close the School of the Americas Saturday, November 21, 1998, at Fort Benning, Georgia

(The next day, over 2,370 people crossed the line, entered the base, were detained and released in one of the largest acts of nonviolent civil disobedience in recent decades.)

Thirteen years ago, in 1985, as a young Jesuit, I spent a summer as a guest of the Salvadoran Jesuits, living and working in a church-run refugee camp near Guasapa in El Salvador. On my first day, I was brought to meet El Salvador's great voice of peace and justice, Father Ignacio Ellacuria, the Jesuit theologian and president of the Jesuit University in San Salvador.

"Ellacu" was hated by the Salvadoran military, the death squads, and the US embassy. He was considered the brains behind the movement for change, and thus an enemy of the state. That spring afternoon, I learned why. The first thing Ellacuria said to me was: "The purpose of the Jesuit university here in El Salvador is to promote the reign of God." I was dumbfounded. I could not imagine a US Jesuit school like Georgetown University which trains ROTC cadets to kill and which accepts money from the Pentagon, ever saying such a thing.

Then, he said something I will never forget--which I want you also to remember: "To work for the reign of God is to work for peace and justice," Ellacuria said. "But you cannot be for the reign of God if you are not also actively, publicly opposed to the anti-reign." In other words, you cannot truly be for God's peace and justice if you are not also publicly against war and injustice. And so, he said, they were constantly speaking against war, US military aid, the death squads, systemic injustice, starvation, and poverty.

This fervent vision sums up the Jesuit martyrs, as well as the preaching of Romero, the example of Ita, Maura, Dorothy and Jean; the witness of Dr. King and Dorothy Day; indeed the

life of our brother Jesus. And this is the mission before us now, the mission left to us by Ellacuria and the martyrs: to be for God's reign of peace and justice and life, and thus to be actively, publicly opposed to the anti-reign of war, injustice and death.

That night in 1985, I was a dinner guest at the Jesuit community house. We were a group of five young Jesuits from the US in El Salvador for the summer, and the community threw a party to welcome us. In the previous seven years, their house had been bombed 21 times; strafed with bullets several times; and they had received scores of death threats.

So there they were at the dinner table: Ellacu, Segundo Montes, Nacho Martin Baro, Juan Ramon Moreno, Amando Lopez, and Lolo (Joaquim Lopez y Lopez, the oldest, who had cancer); as well as our great Jesuit friends Jon Sobrino and Jon Cortina. They were laughing, enjoying themselves, having a great time telling us their stories; each one of them determined to proclaim God's reign of peace and justice; to resist the anti-reign of war and injustice, and to follow Jesus.

"Take a look at the chair you are sitting on," they said. "One night, we were having dinner and we saw the car come around the corner, and we all ducked just as the death squads opened fire... Take a look around the house. Notice the bullet holes on all the walls... Or how about that time, the bomb went off in the middle of the night outside Lolo's room, blew up the window, his bed went flying across the room, and he remained asleep the whole time!" They all burst out laughing.

I was dumbfounded. All I could think was: so this is what it means to be a Christian; this is what following Jesus looks like... "You cannot be for the reign of God's peace and justice if you are not also actively, publicly opposed to the anti-reign of war and injustice."

That summer, as I befriended the Salvadoran refugees, witnessed the daily US bombings, and was interrogated by US backed death squads, my heart was broken. When the six Jesuits and Elba and Celina were murdered nine years ago on November 16th, 1989; when 19 graduates of the School of the Americas executed my brothers, these beautiful Christians, I broke down weeping, but with all of you, with these glorious martyrs, I take up their mission to seek God's reign of peace and justice, and so, with you now, I stand against the anti-reign of US warmaking and systemic injustice.

Today, in the name of Ignacio Ellacuria and the murdered Jesuits, in the name of Elba and Celina Ramos, we denounce the anti-reign, this US reign of warmaking, murder, assassination and death which is the School of Americas.

Today, in the name of Oscar Romero, Ita Ford, Maura Clarke, Dorothy Kazel, and Jean Donovan, we denounce the anti-reign, this U.S. systemic injustice which kills the poor of Latin America and the world, which violates every human right; which oppresses, imprisons, tortures, disappears, and assassinates God's children; this anti-reign organized here at the School of the Americas.

Today, in the name of all the martyrs of Latin America, we denounce this anti-reign, the School of the Americas, this center for social sin and immorality; and we denounce the other 150 military schools where the U.S. trains Latin American soldiers; and we denounce Congress' recent drug act which gives \$670 million to the Pentagon to train soldiers and wage war in Latin America under the guise of fighting drugs.

Today, in the name of Martin Luther King, Jr. who labored and suffered here in Georgia, we denounce the anti-reign of violence, racism and war which the School of the Americas and the Pentagon inflict upon us, but we also say to all the School of the Americas employees here,

to all soldiers, the police, U.S. government officials, to the F.B.I. and the C.I.A.: You are not our enemy. The killing and warmaking which goes on here is our enemy. You are our sisters and brothers. Quit your jobs and join us!

Today, in the name of the God of peace and nonviolence, the God of the poor, the God of Jesus, we not only denounce the anti-reign of war and injustice, today, we announce the reign of God.

My dear friends, the nonviolent reign of God is at hand. The time has come to close the School of the Americas. The time has come for our government to stop teaching how to assassinate, torture and oppress the people of Latin America. The time has come for you and me to take up the mission of the prophets and martyrs of Central and South America.

The nonviolent reign of God is among you. From now on, wherever you go, speak out against the anti-reign of war, which is U.S. militarism and nuclear weapons and the School of the Americas and the Pentagon and U.S. plans to bomb Iraq and the horrific U.S. economic sanctions which have killed over 1 million Iraqis, mostly children, these past 8 years. From now on, denounce the high government crimes--not the Monica Lewinsky scandal--but the real immoral, criminal, illegal government activity which is the School of Americas and the Pentagon's nuclear arsenal. From now on, wherever you go, announce the reign of God, the reign of justice for the poor, the reign of peace and disarmament and compassion and truth.

From now on, announce God's reign of nonviolence, that transforming way of love and truth which refuses to kill but which seeks justice for all humanity and the abolition of all wars, all executions, all nuclear weapons and all injustice.

My dear friends, take heart. There is reason for hope. We are on a great campaign of satyagraha and nonviolence. The School of the Americas will one day close. And we will keep coming back until it is closed.

So stay centered in the Spirit of Christ' peace; love your enemies; denounce the anti-reign of war and violence; announce God's reign of peace and nonviolence; and know that one day, this day, right now, our God, our martyred sisters and brothers, our beloved savior Jesus, all, now risen, stand in our midst, blessing us with the fullness of God's reign.

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