

**AL FIN SUFREN AHORA LA MISMA SUERTE
QUE SU PUEBLO HUMILLADO: FINALLY THEY
SUFFER THE SAME FATE AS THEIR CRUSHED PEOPLE.
FILIPINO MISSIONARIES IN GUATEMALA DURING
THE CIVIL WAR (1960-1996).**

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Missionary movement in the modern era has always been from the Global North to the Global South and often accompanied by colonizing efforts. Religion was one of the pillars that supported the triumvirate of the State, Oligarchy, and Military. Since Vatican II, missionaries from the Global South have ventured into other countries of the Global South and even the Global North. This paper is mainly about Filipino members of Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary who served in Guatemala during the most turbulent years (1960-1996) of the civil war, how they were increasingly politicized and radicalized together with their European confrères. Like the local population, they suffered repression, exile, and some of them, even death.

INTRODUCTION

This paper traces the political, ideological, theological, and pastoral transformation of missionaries, with particular focus on Filipino members of the Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (CICM),¹ in Guatemala during the country's civil war

¹ The Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, whose members are known as CICM after the initials of their Latin name - *Congregatio Immaculati Cordis Mariae* - or as Scheutists after the suburb of Brussels where it was first started, was founded by Théophile Verbist (1823-1868) in 1862 to work in China. It was initially popularly called *Congregation of the Priests of the Belgian Mission for China*. The first 6 members were composed of 6 Belgians and 1 Dutch. Today the majority of the CICM missionaries are still Belgians, though mostly retired. The

(1960-1996). Their immersion in the 'daily lives' and the social, political, economic, and cultural struggles of *campesinos* (small farmers and agricultural workers) and *indígenas* (indigenous Mayans) bolstered their understanding of mission as a centrifugal and liberation movement. The Filipinos, missionaries of the Global South, in their 'material insufficiency,' brought a particular lens to their endeavors. The missionary work of Filipinos and Filipinas in other countries is an expression of the vitality of the Philippine Church, a Church that is today a 'receiving' and 'sending' Church. The paper hopes to contribute to a critical appreciation of the 500th year of Catholicism in the Philippines, first introduced by Spanish missionaries in March 1521.

The paper begins with a brief historical description of the start of the CICM mission in Guatemala, followed by the evolution of the pastoral practice of the missionaries. This change is explained by external geopolitical and internal ecclesial factors. The transformation of these missionaries is reflected in several initiatives that led to collaboration with popular and revolutionary movements. Their radicalization meant that many of them suffered the same fate as their people- threats, exile, and martyrdom.

The end of the Spanish colonial rule in the Philippines in 1898 also meant the expulsion of Spanish missionaries and the dismantling of church institutions guaranteed by the *patronato real*. The Apostolic Delegate and the bishop of Vigan, which at that time covered the whole of northern Luzon, appealed to CICM. Belgian members of the order arrived in November 1907 to work with Cordillerans. It was not until almost fifty years later that Filipinos were accepted into the congregation. The first Filipino CICM priest was ordained in 1959. Filipino CICMs sought not only the assumption by Filipinos of leadership positions, but also, perhaps, more importantly, the 'sending out' (*ad extra*) of Filipinos to the 'missions,' as this was a unique feature of the congregation. In 1965 two Filipinos went to Brazil. In 1972 two Filipinos went to Guatemala. Since then, all Filipino CICM missionaries have had to serve in "a country other than their own."

Philippines was its third mission country, after the Belgian Congo. CICM understands its missionary task as serving outside one's own country and culture.

MISSION ACCORDING TO THE CHRISTIAN EVANGELICALS

The victory of Mao Zedong in China in October 1949 and the subsequent imposition of the three self-movement- self-government, self-support, and self-propagation of the Christian Churches- resulted in the expulsion of all foreign missionaries. The last European CICM was expelled in November 1955. Almost nine hundred CICM Belgian and Dutch missionaries served in China from 1865 to 1947. Nevertheless, the crisis led to some opportunities. The expulsion from China of Catholic missionary institutes opened new missionary ventures in Latin America and the Caribbean. CICM started in Chile (1953 to 1957), Haiti (1953), Guatemala (1954), Dominican Republic (1958), and Brazil (1963).

In 1952 the Apostolic Nuncio to Guatemala and the bishop of Quetzaltenango requested the CICM Superior General to send missionaries to that country. Guatemala was then undergoing serious political troubles. The government of Jacobo Arbenz, actively pursuing a land reform program, was pitted against the United Fruit Company and the powerful landowners of the nation, with ample support from the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency. In general, the Church sided with the landed oligarchy. An initial request for visas for CICM missionaries was rejected by the Arbenz government. The visa situation changed when the Arbenz government was overthrown.

After the fall of Arbenz (1954), the Apostolic Nuncio offered to CICM the department² of Escuintla, which was under the Archbishop of Guatemala, Mariano Rossell Arellano. The Archbishop wrote to the CICM Superior General saying that the group was welcome to do parish and missionary work and encouraged them not to delay “because the lack of priests here is great and the faith of Catholics is in great danger due to the active propaganda of Protestants.”³ It is interesting to note that the

² An administrative division equivalent to a province or state.

³ Communication in French quoted in Wim van den Eerenbeemt, *Scheut - C.I.C.M. en Guatemala, 1955 - 1973*. Spanish translation in 1997 of the original Dutch, trans. Marcel Dobbels, (Escuintla, Guatemala, 1974), 23.

Archbishop was worried more about the influx of Protestants than the influence of communists, which had expanded their presence in trade unions among United Fruit Company workers. Rossell was confident that the missionaries would lead both Protestants and communists back to “the right path”: “Communists have tried to infiltrate among these simple souls; but fortunately, they have not had much success. That they managed to have some followers is due above all to the spiritual abandonment of this region. So, with a bit of apostolic work, it will not be difficult to get them back on the right path.” It is obvious in this communication that Rossell considered the attraction to communism as due to “spiritual abandonment” rather than to the appalling social divisions of the time that the Arbenz government tried to rectify. For the archbishop, religion was going to be an antidote to communism.

On 13 April 1955, four CICM Belgian and Dutch missionaries who had previously worked in China landed at Puerto San José, the port of Escuintla. When more Belgian and Dutch members followed, the group eventually spread out to other departments. Five years after the arrival of the first missionaries, they numbered nineteen. Until 1970 all the CICM missionaries in Guatemala were Belgians (20) and Dutch (11). The first non-Europeans, an American and two Filipinos, arrived in late 1972.

Geopolitical developments in Latin America, characterized by the binary divisions of the Cold War, and developments within the universal, Latin American, and Guatemalan church gradually led CICM missionaries to question their traditional function as allies of the government, landowners and big business, and the military. Some of them eventually collaborated with popular movements and guerrilla groups. During the governments of military generals Fernando Lucas García (1978-1982) and Efraín Ríos Montt (1982-1983), a period simply referred to as *la violencia*, several members were martyred or exiled, together with hundreds of their lay collaborators. The first five Filipino CICM missionaries to Guatemala, all honed by the First Quarter Storm, eventually suffered the same fate as the people. Conrado de la Cruz and his parish worker Herlindo Cifuentes were forcibly disappeared on May 1, 1980. The other four were threatened and eventually had to leave the country.

CICM GUATEMALA FOUNDATION

The *conquistadores* of Guatemala in 1524 were led by Pedro de Alvarado and accompanied by priests including Francisco Marroquín, who later became the first bishop of the diocese of *Santiago de Goathemala*, erected on December 18, 1534. Throughout the colonial period until its independence in 1821, the fusion of Church and State, with the former acting as *instrumentum regni* (instrument of the kingdom), was unquestionable. As Chea points out, the church was one of the pillars of colonial domination: “Together with the military and landowners, the church was for a long time one of the three pillars of the status quo, and its principles and teachings were the foundation of the political culture and the moral practices of Latin American society in general.”⁴ This harmony of objectives and structures persisted even after the fall of the colonial order with the succession of liberal and conservative governments, albeit punctuated with anti-clerical stances. It was a church that predicated its power on the triumvirate of the State, Oligarchy, and Military and this persisted until the late 1960s.

From the arrival of the first CICM missionaries in Guatemala until the mid-1960s, when they had by then numbered almost thirty, CICM missionary work, in line with what was then the dominant approach everywhere, concentrated on the celebration of the sacraments and religious activities. A newsletter of the congregation described the CICM Guatemala apostolate as consisting “above all in placing the church at the centre of the life of the people through the celebration of the Word and the Sacraments.”⁵ In this they were no different from other sectors of the Guatemalan Church, conforming neatly to the traditionalist and conservative typology that concentrated on other-worldly concerns and thus legitimated the existing social, political, and economic structures. The dependence on the state, oligarchy, and military was unquestioned.

⁴ José Luis Chea, *Guatemala: La Cruz Fragmentada*. (San José, Costa Rica: DEI and FLACSO, 1989), 22.

⁵ van den Eerenbeemt, *Scheut*, 75.

Historically, landowners correctly judged the church as an ally in keeping society intact and conflict-free. Chapels were built in *fincas* (large estates) and workers were encouraged, if not forced, to attend masses and religious celebrations, with the *finquero* (landowner) and his family occupying the front seats. According to Adams, until the mid to late 1960s, “there is little doubt that it [the church] is playing the role of the conservator of contemporary regimes, and no matter what its agents may profess, its actions will be gauged not to threaten its good standing with that order.” He argued that as long as the Guatemalan church had no independent power base outside of the upper classes, it could not venture into independent action.⁶ This led to a paternalistic approach towards the vast majority of poor landless peasants, agricultural and industrial laborers, and urban poor settlers, especially the Mayan population.

The young and newly ordained Dutch and Belgian CICM missionaries who later arrived, starting from the early 1960s, were destined to perpetuate this neat arrangement. Their studies in philosophy and theology in Leuven, Belgium, and Nijmegen, Holland, with very minimal pastoral experience, were, in the words of Guido De Schrijver, “to propagate Christianity.”

This neat arrangement did not last long.

FROM TRADITIONALISM TO RADICALISATION

Unlike their Filipino confrères, the shock of facing poverty and inequality for the first time was unnerving for the young Europeans. Vandeviere remembers well his arrival with De Schrijver in Guatemala on 12 October 1964 and the feelings of confusion and disquiet it elicited in him.

The arrival in Guatemala ... was an experience that shook me deeply. It questioned and challenged me to discover a reality that was very different from what I knew since my childhood. I was confronted

⁶Richard Newbold Adams, *Crucifixion by Power: Essays on Guatemalan National Social Structure, 1944-1966*, (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1970), 317.

with totally new and different cultural identities. At the same time, I began to *know the suffering of many people who lived and survived in poverty*, a reality that hit me and worried me deeply.

The poverty he saw led initially to a sense of hopelessness.

The suffering became a challenge. I asked myself: what will you do with that pain? A question that for a long time silenced me. Confronted by that level of misery, I believe I was condemned to total powerlessness... Given the absence of answers to the magnitude and depth of the poverty we (not only I but also the others who recently arrived) assumed an attitude of expectation and suspense. Perhaps in time, we will discover elements of an answer...⁷

Sabine Mortier, a member of the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (ICM, a virtual sister congregation of the CICM), remembers how, as a young sister who had barely finished her novitiate, she arrived in Guatemala in 1964:

You go to the missions and you think you are prepared to go to the missions, then you see the reality of the people. Then you start thinking from the reality of the people and no longer from the way you have been thinking. And this makes you change little by little. I cannot say that it happens in one day. But this makes you change. You are living with people. Your aim is to deal with the lives of people and grow together, in faith, education, and towards God.

“Living with the people” opened her eyes to the social contradictions around her. These challenged her preparation and assumptions about being what a missionary meant. She talked of a “collapse” of old her ideas and a “new beginning”: “When you are really with people, all that I was taught and knew about mission

⁷ Written communication from Juan Vandevaire, July 24, 2013.

collapsed and I started from the beginning. Look, listen to the people and then try to enter into their way of thinking.”⁸

Mortier's view that she thought she was prepared to go the missions resonated with many of the young Belgian and Dutch missionaries; after all, all of them spent many years of training in their home countries before finally setting foot in the Central American republic. But as their stories unfolded and their missionary lives intertwined with the Guatemalan people, not one of these missionaries was prepared for what would await them.

This was not true of the Filipino members. Coming as they did from the Global South; they were no strangers to poverty and its inhumanity. On August 14, 1972, Conrado de la Cruz and Wilfredo Dulay left the Philippines that was in the throes of increasing militarization and the threat of dictatorship. A month later, on September 21, President Marcos proclaimed martial law. CICM seminarians then were very involved in the movement calling for a non-partisan constitutional convention, the struggle for better living conditions of farmers, workers, fisherfolk, jeepney drivers, and urban poor, and the respect for human rights. As Dulay recalls:

During our studies, we were part of the First Quarter Storm. We were the first CICMs to participate in street demonstrations in front of Congress, asking for a non-partisan constitutional convention. We could not say that we were influenced by liberation theology because we did not know about it then. We were part of the worldwide student unrest. We had theoretical and practical involvement. There were attempts by *Kabataang Makabayan* to recruit me, but I did not join them.⁹

⁸ Interview with Sabine Mortier, De Jacht, Heverlee, Belgium, January 21, 2010.

⁹ Interview with Freddie Dulay, Antipolo, Philippines, February 6, 2008. The First Quarter Storm refers to the period of intense civil unrest, demonstrations and protest from January to March 1970, led by students. *Kabataang Makabayan* is a Marxist-inspired youth movement, which has operated clandestinely since it was banned in 1972.

Unlike their European confrères who had very minimal pastoral exposure during their theological studies, Filipino CICM seminarians were involved with workers, farmers, fisherfolk, and lay movements as an essential part of their education. Dulay and de la Cruz worked with the Federation of Free Farmers, and Trinidad and Villero with the Young Christian Workers. Villero spent the last year of his theological studies in Tipas, Rizal working with fisherfolk under the guidance of Father Ben Villote, who was “immersed in the reality of the people.”¹⁰ As Dulay recalls, “we had a certain sensitivity for the marginalized in society and when you reach Guatemala it would only take a short while to realize who are the marginalized in that society.”¹¹ Elsewhere, he describes de la Cruz and himself as “*bien encaminado*” (well on the way) because of their Philippine experience and found their two weeks at an acculturation course in Maryland, USA, organized by the U.S. Bishops Conference Latin American Bureau and the *Centro de Comunicación* (CENCOS) in Mexico City, as affirming rather than challenging.¹²

For all of these young missionaries, theological and pastoral radicalization was a gradual, deliberate, and calculated option. In the words of their Dutch lay collaborator from 1972 to 1980, Mario Coolen, it was “not a whim, madness nor a big mistake – *no fue capricho, no locura, ni gran equivocación* – to take risks, including death, and denounce the injustices. It was the historical moment to step forward in line with the Christian tradition of giving one’s life.”¹³ Many threads were woven together like the colorful *huipil* (woven blouse) of Mayan women to arrive at this option. To fully appreciate this significant shift, we need to understand the socio-political struggles within Guatemala and the wider Latin America, the theological and pastoral developments within the Church, and their repercussions within the Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary.

¹⁰ Interview with Melchor Villero, Los Angeles, USA, April 28, 2004.

¹¹ Interview with Freddie Dulay.

¹² Email of Freddie Dulay, Antipolo, Philippines, July 5, 2013.

¹³ Interview with Mario Coolen, Utrecht, Holland, December 1, 2006.

BUDDHISM'S VALUATION OF TRUTH CLAIMS BY OTHER RELIGIONS



Figure 1. First Filipino CICMs in Guatemala on the occasion of the visit the seminary rector in 1974. From left to right: Mario Trinidad (arrived October 1973), Wilfredo Dulay (arrived December 1972), Walter Willems (rector of Maryhill community), and Conrado la Cruz (arrived December 1972)

EXTERNAL POLITICAL AND INTERNAL ECCLESIAL FACTORS

The 1954 CIA-backed military coup against the democratically-elected government of Jacobo Arbenz can only be fully understood within the context of the Cold War and its ideology of anti-communism. The needs and interests of the U.S. were intimately intertwined with the concept of national security: “The merger of national and imperial interests ... achieved a particular thrust in the United States after World War II, when the United States began a policy of systematic opposition to the Soviet Union, in particular, and towards communism and revolutionary movements in general.”¹⁴ This doctrinal system was played out with

¹⁴ Roger Burbach, “Revolution and Reaction,” in *The Politics of Intervention: The United States in Central America*, eds. Roger Burbach and Patricia Flynn, (New York: The Monthly Review Press, 1984), 15. Burbach refers to the National Security Council Document No. 3 (NSC-68), drawn up in 1950, that explicitly ties

particular ferocity in the Caribbean Basin, where no other region has suffered as many U.S. intrusions in the post-war era. The overthrow of the Arbenz government was the first of such interventions, approximately one every three years until the 1980s.¹⁵ Although successful in toppling the government, the coup did not quell dissent altogether; on the contrary, the 1959 Cuban Revolution became a beacon for revolutionary movements in Guatemala, the rest of Latin America, and indeed in the whole world. "The so-called 'exportation of revolution' became a major controversial aspect of castroism (sic) as soon as the guerrillas took power in Cuba."¹⁶ To counteract the appeal of socialism and to encourage regional economic integration, foreign investment, intraregional trade, and industrialization, Central American governments formed in 1960 the Central American Common Market (CACM). These goals coincided with those of the U.S. Alliance for Progress, described by Flynn as "counterinsurgency in disguise."¹⁷ However, these 'trickles down' wealth creation strategies failed to absorb the growing labor supply and halt the rising cost of imported raw materials and declining terms of trade due to the relative costs of imports versus exports, so much so that by the end of the 1970s the CACM accord began to weaken and in the 1980s its disintegration was complete.¹⁸ Although Cuban

U.S. national security to the demands of maintaining the U.S. system abroad. Viewing the Soviet Union as the primary obstacle to U.S. interests, the NSC-68 advances the view that "only by using 'any means, covert or overt, violent or non-violent' could the United States create 'a successfully functioning political and economic system,'" 16.

¹⁵ Ibid., 16-17.

¹⁶ William E. Ratliff, *Castroism and Communism in Latin America, 1959-1976*, (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1976), 38.

¹⁷ Patricia Flynn, "Central America: The Roots of Revolt," in *The Politics of Intervention: The United States in Central America*, eds. Roger Burbach and Patricia Flynn, (New York: The Monthly Review Press, 1984), 29-64; 40.

¹⁸ John A. Booth and Thomas W. Walker, *Understanding Central America*, Third Edition, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1984), 29. See also David Landes and Patricia Flynn, "Dollars for Dictators: U.S. Aid in Central America and the Caribbean." in *The Politics of Intervention: The United States in Central America*, eds. Roger Burbach and Patricia Flynn, (New York: The Monthly Review Press, 1984), 133-161, where they point out that in Guatemala and all of Central America

leaders urged Latin American revolutionaries to wage armed struggle from the time of their 1959 victory, the urgency of this call and the breadth of its applicability were strongest in two periods: during the early 1960s and between 1966 and 1968.¹⁹

In Guatemala, these periods coincided with the first waves of guerrilla insurgency. In the mid-1960s the Central Committee of the *Partido Guatemalteco del Trabajo* (Guatemalan Workers' Party, PGT) concluded that objective and subjective conditions for armed struggle existed, though the latter were not yet "fully matured."²⁰ Subsequently, in the early 1970s, the guerrilla movements of the 1960s re-emerged and revolution was reborn. Claiming to have learned from past mistakes, four groups appeared: The *Ejército Guerrillero de los Pobres* (EGP, Guerrilla Army of the Poor), the *Organización del Pueblo en Armas* (ORPA, Organization of People in Arms), the *Fuerzas Armadas Rebeldes* (FAR, Armed Rebel Forces) and a faction of the PGT, called *Núcleo de Dirección Nacional* (National Leadership Nucleus). All four coalesced on February 7, 1982, to form the *Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca* (URNG, Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity).²¹

The birth of Guatemala's guerrilla insurgency led to a new level of fear and anti-communist sentiment among military officials who had been trained and indoctrinated in Panama and the United States and the landed classes. The intensified military response to growing guerrilla activities included the formation of death squads,

"development fuelled by private investment only made the poor worse off.... The most dramatic example of this failure was the Alliance for Progress," 138.

¹⁹ Ratliff, *Castroism...*, 27. During the first period rural guerrilla warfare was expounded most forcefully in Che Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare*. (NY: Monthly Review Press, 1960) and the second in Régis Debray, *Revolution in the Revolution? Armed Struggle and Political Struggle in Latin America* (London: Verso Books, 2017).

²⁰ Ibid., 70. "In Marxist-Leninist terminology, 'subjective' factors (such as consciousness, personal determination, boldness of action) were more strongly emphasized than 'objective' factors (such as political, economic, and social conditions, available resources, and the like)," 48.

²¹ Jim Handy, "Insurgency and Counter-insurgency in Guatemala," in *Central America*, eds. Jan L. Flora and Edelberto Torres-Rivas, (New York: Monthly Review Press), 112-139; George Black, *Garrison Guatemala*, (London: Zed Books, 1984), 66-110; Oficina de Derechos Humanos del Arzobispado de Guatemala. *Guatemala, nunca más Vol. III: "El entorno histórico,"* (Guatemala: ODHAG, 1998), 196-214.

composed of off-duty military and police officers. The *Mano Blanca* (White Hand), the death squad of the ultra-right National Liberation Movement (MLN) begun in 1966. Within two years 19 death squads had appeared. The product of collusion between economic elites and the military.²² According to the *Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico* (Commission for Historical Clarification, CEH), the military supplied the personnel, the arms, the financing, and operational instructions.²³ As we shall see later, church people were not exempt from these atrocities.

Alongside the wider geopolitical context, especially the Cold War as fought out in the Caribbean Basin, Guatemalan insurgency can only be fully understood within the context of the country's societal disequilibrium where there was no attempt to address the needs of the poor and the indigenous population. Between 1950 and 1970 the number of *campesino* families who had land parcels too small for subsistence farming (*minifundios*) increased from 308,070 to 421,000 and the number of landless peasants increased to about one-fourth of the rural workforce, with the opposite increase of big landholdings (*latifundios*).²⁴ A result of this agrarian crisis was the extensive seasonal migration of Mayan men, women, and children to the large southern coastal sugarcane, coffee, and cotton plantations where they worked under miserable conditions from two to six months of the year.

The agrarian crisis also resulted in the increasing partial or complete proletarianization of small *campesino* landholders. The socio-economic and political mobilization and pressure for reform resulted in the resumption of trade unions, cooperatives, and community organizations. But the pressure for political and

²² Rachel May, *Terror in the Countryside: Campesino Responses to Political Violence in Guatemala, 1954-1985*, (Athens, OH: Ohio Center for International Studies, 2001), 28.

²³ Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico (CEH), *Guatemala: Memoria Del Silencio Tz'inil Na'tab'al* (Guatemala City, 1999), 113. This Truth Commission was established by the Peace Accord in 1996 between the Guatemalan government and the coalition of the four guerrilla groups (URNG).

²⁴ Sheldon H. Davis, "Introduction: Sowing Seeds of Violence," in *Harvest of Violence: The Maya Indians and the Guatemalan Crisis*, ed. Robert Carmack, 3-36. (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), 14-15.

economic reform by popular organizations was met with violence by the state apparatus. May points out that “this (state) intransigence leads to radicalization of the popular sectors, and eventually coordinated counterattacks as some popular groups make the decision to try to take control of the state.”²⁵ In the face of popular protest and the dissent, the regime responds with counterinsurgency and the conflict eventually evolves into civil war. And the spiral of violence continues. Terror and violence became weapons of counterinsurgency.²⁶ State violence became systematic and indiscriminate such that “by the late 1970s, any distinction between institutional terror – exercised by the state on behalf of the ruling class – and freelance terror from extra-legal groups of the bourgeoisie had blurred so far as to become meaningless.”²⁷ Schirmer argues that instead of a voluntaristic interpretation of violence and human rights violations that emphasizes individual decisions rather than State policy or collective interests only a “structural analysis of violence as intrinsic to the logic of counterinsurgency” can understand “how deeply entrenched and inexorable human rights violations are to the justificatory narratives and mentalities of the Guatemalan military.”²⁸

Together with these social and political developments were events within the Catholic Church, universally and in the Latin American and Guatemalan church. The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) enunciated a new definition of ecclesial identity and presence in the world. It marked a significant rethinking in how the Catholic Church understood itself and its place in the modern world, away from the traditional hegemonic self-definition that was deprecatory of other religions and the world. Subsequent papal declarations reiterated these progressive directions.²⁹

²⁵ May, *Terror in the Countryside*, 25.

²⁶ Gabriel Aguilera Peralta, “Terror and Violence as Weapons of Counterinsurgency in Guatemala,” *Latin American Perspectives* 7, nos. 2-3 (1980): 91-113.

²⁷ Black, *Garrison Guatemala*, 47.

²⁸ Jennifer G. Schirmer, *The Guatemalan Military Project: A Violence Called Democracy*, (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), 5-6.

²⁹ *Populorum Progressio*, written on March 26, 1967 by Pope Paul VI, criticized colonialism, absolute and unconditional private property and unbridled

This universal shift did not go unnoticed in Latin America. From August 24 to September 6, 1968, 130 bishops representing the 600 bishops of every country in Latin America met in Medellín, Colombia to reflect on the implications of the Second Vatican Council for their continent. The documents they produced were aptly named “The Church in the Present-day Transformation of Latin America in the Light of the Council.” The Medellín documents became the Magna Carta for many Latin American Catholics who “cannot remain indifferent to the tremendous social injustices existent in Latin America which keep the majority of our peoples in dismal poverty, which in many cases becomes inhuman wretchedness” (*Proceedings*, no. 14, Poverty 1.1). Smith described the Medellín documents as “a radical departure from the rhetoric and strategy of an institution which, for centuries, had justified the killing of native peoples, provided a religious legitimation for an authoritarian, hierarchical social system, and aligned itself with conservative power elites.”³⁰ Conversely and equally significant, Medellín legitimized and promoted the nascent theology of liberation: “what Medellín introduced, liberation theology cultivated and elaborated, and systematized.”³¹ The main incubators of this new way of being church were the *Comunidades Eclesiales de Base* (BEC, Basic Ecclesial Communities): “small free-

capitalism. He called for authentic human development and proposed that “development is the new name for peace.” In *Octagesima Adveniens*, published on May 14, 1971, Paul VI called on Christians to be involved in actions of justice, to become politically active and participate in collective action and organizations, for “it is not enough to recall principles, state intentions, point to crying injustice and utter prophetic denunciations; these words will lack real weight unless they accompanied for each individual by a livelier awareness of personal responsibility and by effective action” (section 48). Later that year, on November 30, 1971, the second assembly of bishops, convened by the pope, produced “Justice in the World.” It erased the dividing line, espoused and strongly defended by traditionalist and conservative church people, between social action and religion, proclaiming that “action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, or, in other words, of the Church’s mission...” (section 6).

³⁰ Christian Smith, *The Emergence of Liberation Theology: Radical Religion and Social Movement Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 19.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 21.

forming associations of Catholics, who meet on a regular basis to deepen their knowledge of the Gospel, to reflect on community needs and seek adequate solutions of those needs, to celebrate victories and share defeats together in the Eucharist, and to spread the Word of God.”³² Considering BECs as “perhaps, the most subversive institution the Latin American church has developed,” Montgomery identified four ways in which they changed the lives of participants: (1) they provide an organizational framework for the participants; (2) they promote and develop grassroots leadership; (3) they offer an experience of participatory democracy; (4) they are the medium by which the message of liberation theology is delivered.³³ Through the formation of BECs, the church redefined itself radically by cutting its historic link with the state and the powerful and taking the side of the poor and the marginalized.

TRANSFORMATION: FROM REFLECTION TO ACTION

The socio-political developments in Latin America and within Guatemala, coupled with the developments in the universal and Latin American church, inevitably affected Guatemalan church people and they began to be protagonists in the country’s political and ideological struggles. Writing in 1975, Bendaña echoed the thoughts and sentiments of many progressive church people when he described the *contradicción principal* within the Catholic Church in Guatemala not in structural nor theological terms, “not between the hierarchy and the faithful, not between traditionalists, reformists, and radicals, but rather between those who are *de facto* with the poor and those who are *de facto* involved with the powerful so that they perpetuate injustice.” He continues,

³² W.E. Hewitt, “Strategies for Social Change Employed by Comunidades Eclesiais de Base (CEBs) in the Archdiocese of São Paulo,” *Journal of the Scientific Study of Religion* 25, no.1 (1986):17.

³³ Tommie Sue Montgomery, “Liberation and Revolution: Christianity as Subversive Activity in Central America” in *Trouble in Our Backyard: Central America and the United States in the Eighties*, ed. Martin Diskin, (New York: Pantheon, 1983), 82-83.

“the current severe crisis – the most profound in history – can only be overcome when the Church, having undergone a sincere self-criticism, recognizes its errors and decides to be faithful to its people and their deepest aspirations ... when it accepts its prophetic vocation to construct the New Society.”³⁴

The CICM missionaries were, as it were, right in the eye of the storm that was raging in Latin America. Omer Degrijse, their Superior General then, wrote that “there was much to learn from South America, where they were far ahead in pastoral matters compared to Central America and Europe.” He expressed “the wish that in Guatemala our group would gradually be involved in this profound pastoral renewal in Latin America.”³⁵ With the support of their leaders in Rome, the Guatemalan CICM members went all over the Latin American continent in search of new understandings and models of pastoral practice. Two spent time at CIDOC (*Centro Intercultural de Documentación*) in Cuernavaca, México founded and run by Ivan Illich. CIDOC questioned the increasing number of foreign missionaries in Latin America and challenged them to examine their motives and warned them not to be, albeit unconscious, “pawns in a world ideological struggle ... (as) it is blasphemous to use the gospel to prop up any social or political system.”³⁶ One went to Northeast Brazil, which was then where the most progressive bishops of Brazil were working, and then studied at the *Centre International d’Études de la Formation Religieuse* (Lumen Vitae) in Brussels, Belgium where he was exposed to progressive

³⁴ Ricardo Bendaña, “Iglesia e ideologías en Guatemala.” *Diálogo* 26 (1975): 7.

³⁵ Omer Degrijse, Letter of July 12, 1964, cited in Van den Eerenbeemt, *Scheut*, 70. Degrijse, CICM Superior General from 1961 to 1967, was one of the few non-bishops who was invited to attend all four sessions of the Second Vatican Council. At the first session he became friends with a bishop from the northeast of Brazil, (Natal), Dom Eugênio de Araújo de Sales, later cardinal archbishop of Rio de Janeiro. It was during Degrijse’s government that in 1962 CICM accepted to work in Brazil in Nova Iguaçu, a satellite city of Rio de Janeiro. See Daniël Verhelst, and Nestor Pycke, *C.I.C.M. Missionaries Past and Present 1862 –1987*, (Leuven: Leuven University Press), 364.

³⁶ Ivan Illich, “The Seamy Side of Charity,” in *Celebration of Awareness: A Call for Institutional Revolution*, ed. Ivan Illich, (London: Calder & Boyars, 1971), 65.

catechetical methods in the company of many Third World pastoral agents. Three studied at catechetical and pastoral institutes that emerged out of the Medellín conference, *Instituto de Catequesis Latinoamericano* (ICLA) in Manizales, Colombia and *Instituto Latinoamericano de Pastoral* (IPLA) in Quito, Ecuador. Two went to San Miguelito, Panamá to study and observe the *La Familia de Dios* methodology of *comunidades de base*.³⁷

By the end of 1970, fifteen years after the congregation was first established in Guatemala, there were 32 Belgian and Dutch CICM missionaries in active ministry. In those years 8 had followed formal courses and had been exposed to pastoral initiatives introducing them to the wider Latin American reality and the developments within the post-Vatican II church. A year later 2 Belgians with postgraduate studies in sociology and missiology joined the group. All this would have a tremendous impact on the group's missionary activity. By the time the first Filipinos arrived ground-breaking initiatives had been in place.

NEW MISSIONARY INITIATIVES

The exposure to the creative and exciting developments in the wider Latin American church spawned three new initiatives that had a significant impact and lasting consequences on the life and work of the group. Firstly, with the studies of Vandeviere in ICLA, the group erected a *Centro del Apostolado Seglar* (CAS, Centre for Lay Apostolate), called Emaús, which offered biblical, catechetical, spiritual, and theological training for laypeople. The

³⁷The model was first used in the United States with Hispanic Catholics, who were generally excluded from the mainstream of Catholic life in that country. In 1963 three North American priests of the Archdiocese of Chicago were sent to work in the parish of San Miguelito in Panamá where they introduced *La Familia de Dios* basic ecclesial communities. After a few years, the fame of San Miguelito spread all over Latin America. See Bravo Francisco Bravo, *The Parish of San Miguelito in Panamá*. Cuernavaca, (México: Centro Intercultural de Documentación, 1966); Robert J. Delaney, "Pastoral Renewal in a local Church: Investigation of the Pastoral Principles Involved in the Development of the Local Church of San Miguelito, Panamá," PhD thesis, Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität, 1974.

multifaceted center became a hive of activity, welcoming particularly groups from the basic ecclesial communities and other religious groups for meetings, workshops, and retreats. Unfortunately, barely ten years after its opening, the center had to close down due to government repression.³⁸

Secondly, the introduction of team ministry, where priests, nuns, and laypeople would work together, was proposed by Degrijse and he encouraged the creation of pilot parishes to experiment with this model.³⁹ These teams were composed of young and relatively inexperienced newly-arrived missionaries. In hindsight, while the decision might have been driven by the convenience of leaving the 'Chinese' missionaries and the older ones undisturbed in their enclaves with their traditional pastoral methods and one-man parishes, it was a bold and courageous step to put the two most important parishes of the department – Escuintla and Santa Lucía Cotzumalguapa— under the care of the younger ones. This model of team ministry was eventually extended to other parishes. Dulay and Villero pursued the model at the El Calvario parish in Cobán, Alta Verapaz, Trinidad, and de la Cruz were in such a team in Tiquisate, Escuintla.

The first two initiatives flowed into the third and most important one, the creation of BECs. In a meeting in 1968 two parishes agreed to start this venture. By early 1970, at least six CICM parishes had adapted this methodology of lay formation. Initially, the groups adapted the syllabus of the San Miguelito *Familia de Dios* approach, but gradually they delved into more social, political, and economic issues, beyond the individual and family spheres, based on the actual experiences of the 8 to 15 participants,

³⁸ On August 24, 1980 Guatemalan Army and National Police operatives swooped down on a workshop of trade union leaders of the *Central Nacional de Trabajadores* (CNT, National Labor Union) conducted by the *Escuela de Orientación Sindical* (EOS, School of Trade Union Orientation) of the Universidad de San Carlos and detained and forcibly disappeared all sixteen participants. On 2 September 1980 the administrator of Emaús was captured, tortured and executed "for accommodating communists." Soon after this tragedy, the diocese decided to suspend the use of Emaús.

³⁹ Cited in van den Eerenbeemt, *Scheut...*, 71.

both men, and women. Mario Coolen described the methodology in a report he prepared in 1980:

At the start of the meeting, the group coordinator narrates a small story, *una historieta*, some concrete case that describes one of the many problems that the exploited of the Southern Coast encounter. Through questions, they try to analyze the problematic situation that has been presented, they look for its roots and compare it to their own situation. They ask the questions: what do we see in the story that has been presented to us? Why do these things happen? Are there similar problems in our midst? What can we do together to solve these problems that affect us? At the end of the meeting, a biblical text that has a similar focus as the story presented would be read. Through small projects, the groups of Familia de Dios began to look for solutions to their problems.⁴⁰

The format remained always the same: a story (in words, in song, or drawing), followed by questions, choice of the relevant biblical text, and agreement on common action. Figure 2 is an example of one of the themes. In its heyday during the mid-1970s, there would have been at any one time in the department of Escuintla alone 40 to 50 groups of men and women who were regularly meeting to analyze the socio-economic and political situation from a theology of liberation perspective and plan its change. At that time the total population of the department was less than 300,000. This was a considerable social and political force that the missionaries would not have fully appreciated at that time. BECs were also introduced in parishes in the departments of Santa Rosa and Alta and Baja Vera Paz where young CICMs worked. Aside from the weekly preparation, the coordinators of the basic ecclesial communities held inter-parish meetings, lasting a few days at a time, to study, plan and evaluate their activities.

⁴⁰ Mario Coolen, *Una experiencia pastora en la costa sur de Guatemala* (mimeographed, 1980), 7.

1. Those who are seated on the table, who are they and how many are they?
2. Those who are underneath, who are they and how many are they?
3. Why do the poor carry the weight of the table and the life of the rich?
4. Will those who are above feel the weight and the pain that those who are below suffer?
5. If this table is not useful, what changes need to happen?
6. Will the day arrive when those on top of the table will willingly share with those who are below?
7. What steps do we need to take so that one day we will all be brothers on the same level?

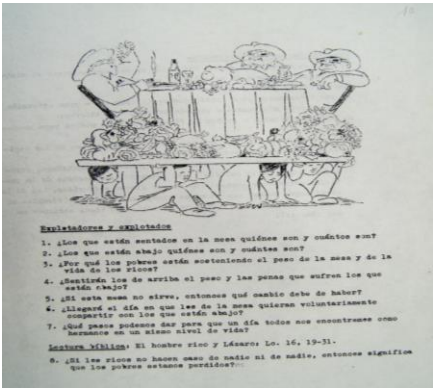


Figure 2 – The Exploiters and Exploited,⁴¹ an example of *una historieta*, used for consciousness-raising

INCREASING RADICALISATION

While the social and political consciousness of BEC groups was growing, it was also obvious to the missionaries and the groups that the reflection groups on their own were powerless to dismantle the structures of oppression and exploitation, and were vulnerable to repression. In Santa Lucía Cotzumalguapa after five years of BEC work, landowners summarily dismissed tenant farmers who were

⁴¹ *Temarios de la Familia de Dios: textos para comunidades de base* (Escuintla, Mimeo-graphed, 1973). Loose pages are found at KADOC.

members of the reflection groups the moment they began to claim their rights. The groups got tired of continually discussing the same issues repeatedly without concrete action. According to De Schrijver, the groups wanted to move forward, beyond simply reflecting on the situation:

The people started to say that they were caught in another vicious circle: “We are formed, we are conscientized, we know where the problem is, we are now united, now what? How do we go forward in having a better salary, having land we can till so that we can eat, in having a life with dignity? What can we do with the landowners, the *latifundio*, with the injustice in Guatemala?” This is where things began to unravel.⁴²

The missionaries’ work caught the attention of popular organizations and there were overtures from student organizations and trade unions that offered leadership training. But the missionaries were suspicious of their sectarian tendencies.

The missionaries and the BECs felt the need for another organization that had a clear political agenda for change, was *campesino*-based and *campesino*-led and with a much broader reach than simply the southern coast, especially with the highland Mayan communities. For some time, the *Ejército Guerrillero de los Pobres* (EGP) had been trying vigorously to pursue its mass line and mass structure through the formation of a peasant organization. This eventually took the form of the *Comité de Unidad Campesina* (CUC, Committee for Peasant Unity). The first meetings of CUC in the southern coast were held in the CICM parish of Tiquisate, where de la Cruz was the parish priest. In CUC, members of the *comunidades de base* found “a space where we could assert or enforce our rights to demand just treatment, better wages and reasonable hours of work in the *fincas*.”⁴³ The first generation of CUC leaders in the southern coast were all leaders or members of the BEC

⁴² Interview with Guido de Schrijver, Leuven, Belgium, December 14, 2006

⁴³ Victor Mejía, cited in Anon., *Porque Queríamos Salir*, 11.

groups. Years later Coolen would describe this natural progression of involvement:

There was a direct line from the leaders and their communities to the formation of CUC. And the more outstanding among CUC members joined EGP – some, from within EGP, to promote the wider peasant struggle; others for more specifically military tasks and went to the mountains.... For them, religious motivation was the orientating element. With great conviction, they joined *Familia de Dios*, then CUC, and then EGP, as an expression of their faith.⁴⁴

Enrique Corral, former Jesuit and EGP leader and director of Fundación Guillermo Toriello, a non-government institution charged with the resettlement of ex-guerrilla combatants and their families until his death in March 2018, wrote in 1997 that

By the end of the 1970s, the *Comité de Unidad Campesina* had great attraction and influence in the villages and estates. This organization worked closely with the leadership and the base of the churches due to a convergence of objectives between Christians and peasant organizations. They practically fused. It was difficult, almost impossible, for a consistent Christian faith animator not to be involved in the peasants' organization. The parish at that time contributed to and shared in the efforts to improve the life, wages, the prices of products, and respect for the human rights of peasants.⁴⁵

Similar radicalization was happening in other CICM parishes. Gloria Ongkingco, a Filipina ICM sister who worked in the CICM parish in Cobán, Alta Verapaz later joined the EGP. She saw her decision as a natural progression of her work with Mayan Q'eqchi'es. In one of the villages where she worked, there was a

⁴⁴ Interview with Mario Coolen in Maastricht, Holland, January 18, 2010.

⁴⁵ 7-page private report of Enrique Corral on Sergio Berten, July 20, 1997.

massacre committed by the military where some 70 men, most of them young men and members of the BECS were killed. Many survivors decided to join the guerrillas. She recalled that at first, she questioned them: “Why are you going there? Do you really want to join them? What if you get killed?” She said, “They answered: ‘It does not matter because we die fighting for a cause.’ She finally joined them when it also became dangerous to work openly.⁴⁶

The missionaries were also closely involved in the production of popular materials such as *De Sol a Sol Periódico Campesino* (From Sunrise to Sunset Peasant Newspaper), its name being a challenge to the bourgeois criticism that farmers and landless peasants were poor because of laziness, when in fact they toiled from sunrise to sunset. Published from 1974 to 1980, 4 to 6 times a year, the newspaper was very popular; its readership extended beyond the members of the BECs. Eventually, it became more closely linked with the EGP, and its themes became more militant and combative (Figure 3). Other popular publications like *Cristo Compañero*, which first appeared at about the same time, and *Guatemala: Cristianismo y Revolución* (Figure 4) directly encouraged Christians to join the fight for a revolutionary, popular, and democratic government.



Figure 3: Last two issues of *De Sol a Sol*, nos. 35 and 36 (1980)

⁴⁶ Interview with Gloria Ongkingco, Los Angeles, USA, April 22, 2008.



Figure 4: Guatemala: Cristianismo y Revolución (June 1981, vol. 1, 16-17)

The missionaries were also instrumental in establishing in 1977 the *Comite Pro Justicia y Paz en Guatemala* (CPJP) – an organization of laypeople, sisters, and priests, and led by laypeople, created “to offer a space for reflection and encounter between committed Christians who were in different areas of popular struggle to strengthen their commitment.... This reflective space would nourish their commitment and give more coherence and content to the Christian presence in the different popular and revolutionary organizations.”⁴⁷ CPJP planned to establish Justice and Peace groups in each diocese. In dioceses where there were CICM and ICM missionaries, they were active members of the CPJP groups. In the beginning, it was not intended to be a clandestine organization, but at the height of the repressive years, it was forced to go underground. Though it was not stated openly, “the idea was to prepare a sector of the Church that is committed and will take on the revolutionary spirit so that when the guerrilla war is won the Church can rightfully be involved.”⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Comité Pro Justicia y Paz en Guatemala, *Evaluación y Cronología desde Febrero 1977 a 1981* (Guatemala, mimeographed), 4.

⁴⁸ Interview with Guido de Schrijver, Leuven, Belgium, December 14, 2006

LEVELS OF INVOLVEMENT IN THE REVOLUTIONARY PROJECT

Among the missionaries, there were various levels of revolutionary commitment and collaboration. Two Belgian seminarians –Berten and Capiou – joined the EGP which they considered as a natural progression of their involvement with CUC. On October 22, 1981, Capiou and a comrade were ambushed by the military in San Lucas Sacatépequez. Capiou was killed while covering for his comrade. Berten was abducted together with two other companions on one of Guatemala City’s main roads on the 10th anniversary of the founding of the EGP, January 19, 1982. Gloria Ongkingco ICM, who was a member of the pastoral team of Cobán, eventually joined EGP when it became dangerous both for her and for the communities to do the open formation of community leaders. She joined the communities who hid in the mountains to flee the massacres and other atrocities committed by the military in their villages. These communities scattered in the mountains and the border with México were called *Comunidades de Población en Resistencia* (Communities of Population in Resistance); they were often under the protection of the guerrillas. She performed what Falla, a Jesuit who also served the CPR, called *pastoral de resistencia*, “an accompaniment of the people in their experience of persecution.”⁴⁹ Describing her role as “the leaven in the dough” (Lk. 13, 20-21), she trained catechists, conducted bible studies, prepared families for the celebration of the sacraments, conducted consciousness-raising sessions and social analysis, and attended to the health needs of the people. She was doing basically the same role, she said, as when she was a member of the parish team in Cobán, but this time “with protection.”⁵⁰

Others had regular contact with guerrilla groups but never thought of joining their ranks. Dulay and Villero and a Belgian confrère in the Verapaces had meetings with officials of the *Organización del Pueblo en Armas* (ORPA) around 1974-1975, long before the public launch of the group in September 1979. As Dulay recalls:

⁴⁹ Ricardo Falla, “Pastoral de Resistencia” *Siglo Veintiuno*, (1993): 6-7.

⁵⁰ Interview with Gloria Ongkingco, Los Angeles, USA April 22, 2008.

My contact with ORPA began in 1973. I can't exactly remember when the first contact was made, possibly through the Burgos missionaries in one of our meetings of the *pastoral indígena*. The first contact was with *el colochó* (the curly-haired one) Manolo who was a university professor – he was eventually killed in a raid in a safe house in Guatemala City. I initially had the same contact person, later another one was assigned. They probably wanted to recruit me to join them, but I never became a member. While there was agreement, there were differences also. I was very clear with them that 'I am not under your control. I would transport medicines and money, but arms never.' I would describe the relationship as one of cooperation because of ORPA's appreciation of the Indian question. ORPA was more respectful of the Indian contribution to the revolution.⁵¹

Dulay was quite 'ecumenical' in his guerrilla contacts: he also had friends who were with FAR.

Unbeknownst to each other though they were at one stage living in the same parish house, Villero had contacts with ORPA also. He describes his relationship as an alliance:

I felt that somehow, they were allies. We were fighting on the same level, for the same values, as it were, though they were more organized. I did not feel intimidated or forced by them or being coerced. I never felt this at any moment. They provided me with information about what was happening elsewhere in the country. At the same time, it was an opportunity for them to know what has happened in the parish, in our part of the country.... So, for almost two years, I had ongoing contact with them. They saw me either in Cobán (where the parish was, some 200 kilometers from the capital city) or in Guatemala City in unknown places.⁵²

⁵¹ Interview with Freddie Dulay, Antipolo, Philippines, February 6, 2008.

⁵² Interview with Melchor Villero, Los Angeles, USA, April 28, 2004.

Nimez, Filipino CICM, who arrived in Guatemala in early 1982, was working in Santa Lucía Cotzumalguapa. when EGP and ORPA made contact with him but it was the latter that persisted in arranging meetings with him. He had three or four meetings with an ORPA female cadre who came from Guatemala City. She would come on a Sunday morning, attend mass, thus informing him that she was around, and return in the evening to have a one-on-one discussion around reading materials she had previously given him.⁵³

I had meetings with an economics professor from the Universidad de San Carlos who had for years been organizing in the villages of Tiquisate. He was a member of the PGT. I was 'handed over' to him when the Belgian parish priest left for six-month home leave in the last quarter of 1974 and left me in charge of the parish. I was not aware of his professional background because he was dressed as a *campesino*. On the first night, I met him, when he learned I was from the Philippines, he mentioned how he was familiar with the life and work of William Pomeroy, an American WWII veteran who joined the communist *Hukbong Bayan Laban sa Hapon* (HukBaLaHap, People's Army Against the Japanese). Only then did I know his true identity.⁵⁴

IN THE ARMY'S SHOOTING GALLERY

Quite predictably, the triumvirate of the government, business, and the military viewed with extreme suspicion any dissent. At the heart of the efficient political terrorism that plagued Guatemala during the years of conflict (1954-1996) was the intelligence apparatus of the military-run by the Army Intelligence Directorate. Lieutenant Colonel Edgar D'jalma Domínguez, army spokesman from 1979 to 1984, dispassionately described the end result of the intelligence investigation of supposed enemies of the state: "three options - disappear them, eliminate them in public, or simply invite them to leave the country."⁵⁵ Anybody who

⁵³ Interview Romeo Nimez, Quezon City, Philippines, February 2008.

⁵⁴ In June 1975 I had to leave Guatemala after credible threats to my life that were traced to military officials.

⁵⁵ Allan Nairn and Jean Marie Simon, "Bureaucracy of Death," *The New Republic* 194, no. 26, (1986): 15.

disagreed with the state was simply presumed to be an enemy. “To combat subversion,” Schirmer writes, “the Army assumes common ideological heresy: everyone is ‘the enemy.’”⁵⁶ Indeed, even the church people whom they had traditionally considered as their allies since the Spanish conquest. This is when, in the words of Black, “the clergy [and by extension, all church workers] took their place in the Army’s shooting gallery.”⁵⁷

CICM missionaries, along with thousands of Guatemalans, became victims of this military heresy. Conrado de la Cruz, parish priest of Tiquisate, and Herlindo Cifuentes Castillo, parish worker, were abducted in Guatemala City by six heavily armed unidentified men after the May Day parade in 1980. On May 12, Walter Voordeckers, parish priest of Santa Lucía Cotzumalguapa, was gunned down in broad daylight in one of the town’s main streets by four heavily armed unidentified men. Months earlier the notorious death squad *Ejército Secreto Anticomunista* (ESA, Secret Anti-Communist Army) painted the walls of the parish house with accusations that Walter was a communist.

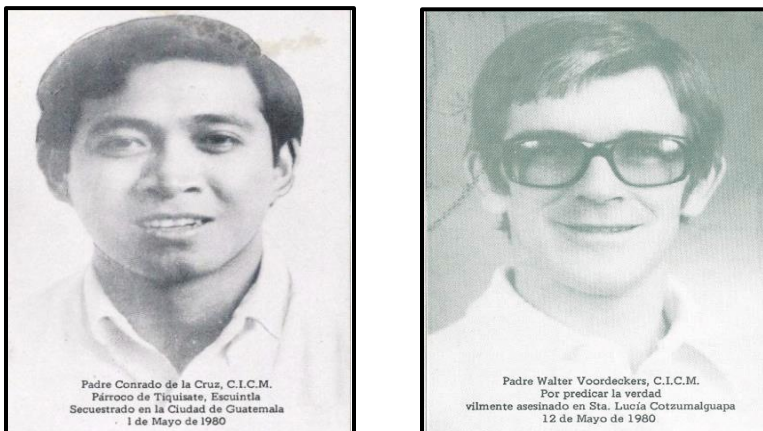


Figure 5: Prayer cards issued by CICM to commemorate their confrères

⁵⁶ Schirmer, *The Guatemalan Military Project*, 53

⁵⁷ Black, *Garrison Guatemala*, 96.

The forcible disappearance of one of their confrères and his parish worker and the brutal assassination of another did not discourage the CICMs. Though the members and leaders of the Congregation seriously discussed the possibility of abandoning the country in the end, in “A Message of the Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary to the People of Guatemala,” they reassured the nation that they “will not abandon you or retreat from the path that our brothers have chosen to tread with you, a path where they left their bloodied footprints.”⁵⁸

At the beginning of 1982, the annual list of members of the CICM Guatemalan province counted thirty-three members, 17 would be identified as pursuing a traditional ministry and 16 would follow the liberationist direction. At the end of the year, of the sixteen members who followed the liberationist line, twelve would be out of Guatemala for safety reasons (ten because of direct threats and two because of stresses connected with living under constant surveillance). The four who remained and continued to work along the liberationist line continued in the military sights.

CONCLUDING REFLECTION

When the Belgian missionary congregation first started in Guatemala in 1955, it was understandable that they were staunchly anti-communist because most of the first missionaries were forcibly expelled from Mao Zedong’s China, some of them after months of suffering and incarceration. Nobody could have foreseen that twenty-five years later 4 of their confrères would be viciously eliminated by the state apparatus and a dozen had to flee the country, suspected of being communists or communist sympathizers. They did not expect it to end like this. Their seminary formation would have prepared them for a comfortable and easy life, celebrating the sacraments, promising the poor eternal bliss in the next life, and enjoying the support of the rich and the powerful. As they faced daily the grinding poverty of the majority, child and adult malnutrition, high infant burials, children working in the

⁵⁸ *Prensa Libre*, 19 de mayo, 18; *La Nación*, 19 de mayo 1980, 5; *Prensa Libre*, 20 de mayo, 1980, 5-6.

coffee, cotton, and sugarcane fields instead of being in school, high illiteracy, the annual migration of Mayan families from the highlands, the missionaries struggled to understand the deeper causes of these realities in the hope of contributing to their alleviation. These realities began to challenge their understanding of themselves, their mission, and their God. As De Schrijver puts it, *en el camino la gente nos concientizó*, in the journey the people conscientized us. The people's stories of determination, their tenacity in the face of life's adversity, their generosity in their poverty, their courage to sacrifice even life itself for a better future, their unwavering faith in a God who would liberate them – all these gradually opened the eyes of these missionaries to see another reality. De Schrijver described it as a “conversion.” The people converted them!⁵⁹

From the retelling of the experiences of missionaries both from the Global North and the Global South in a Global South country, one can draw at least two conclusions that have implications for a post-colonial understanding of the missionary enterprise today. Firstly, evangelization is not always a safe and conflict-free activity. Missionary and pastoral work involve denunciation and annunciation. It questions the existing unjust social relations and the justifications that prop them. In a religious context, these justifications are often theological in nature which appeal to a particular understanding of the divine that sanctifies inequality and injustice. The denunciation of *what is* must lead to the proclamation of *what is not yet*, a reality that is presaged in the struggle for justice. The struggle is a *locus theologicus* where God's self is revealed and understood. Dri, an Argentinian liberation theologian, simply put it many years ago that being a disciple and missionary of Jesus of Nazareth implies the dynamism of *insurrección* and *resurrección*.⁶⁰ Often in countries of conflict such as Guatemala, such a mission leads to martyrdom, for as Tamez asserts: “In Latin

⁵⁹ Interview with Guido De Schrijver, Leuven, Belgium, December 14, 2006.

⁶¹ Rubén Dri, *Insurrección y Resurrección: La Práctica Liberadora de Jesús de Nazaret*, (México: Centro de Estudios Euménicos, 1978).

⁶² Elsa Tamez, “Martyrs of Latin America,” *Concilium: Rethinking Martyrdom* 1 (2003): 32.

America, it is not the affirmation of ‘doctrinal truths’ or abstract unhistorical beliefs that leads to martyrdom. It is the witness of the faithful, laypeople, catechists, religious Brothers and Sisters, priests and Bishops reflected in their works of justice on behalf of the poor....”⁶¹ However, there is deep joy in this because a servant cannot be greater than the master (Jn. 15,20), and like the master to the followers will eventually defeat evil and death itself.

Secondly, inculturation as the antithesis of colonization must be undertaken with a humility that comes out of a critical analysis of the power dynamics involved in missionary work. As Victor Codina, a Spanish Jesuit who has been living in Bolivia for almost forty years, recently commented regarding the Pan Amazon Synod: “The missionaries always arrive late. The Spirit has arrived earlier.”⁶² This is not only a statement of a profound reality; it is also an admonition lest missionaries believe the contrary! The Spirit is present in the people’s resilience, their determination in the face of adversity and poverty, their sense of solidarity with each other, their hope for a better world.

The following song was quite popular in liturgical celebrations during those years. The military considered it subversive, but it gave these missionaries and the *campesinos* and *indígenas* they worked with the courage to have hearts big enough to love and strong enough to fight.

<i>Danos un corazón grande para amar</i>	Give us a big heart to love
<i>Danos un corazón fuerte para luchar</i>	Give us a strong heart to fight
<i>Hombres nuevos, creadores de la historia</i>	New men and women, creators of history
<i>Constructores de nueva humanidad</i>	Builders of a new humanity

⁶³ <http://www.amerindiaenlared.org/contenido/15703/victor-codina-los-misioneros-siempre-llegan-tarde-el-espiritu-ha-llegado-antes/>

AL FIN SUFREN AHORA LA MISMA SUERTE QUE SU PUEBLO HUMILLADO

*Hombres nuevos que viven la
existencia*

New women and men who
live life

*Como un riesgo de un largo
caminar*

As a risk of a long journey

Mario Trinidad, PhD