

## **HOPE BORDER INSTITUTE HONORS LEGACY OF GUATEMALAN BISHOP GERARDI'S LEADERSHIP IN LATIN AMERICA'S STRUGGLE FOR RIGHT TO TRUTH, JUSTICE, AND REPARATION AS TO HUMAN RIGHTS CRIMES**

**The army came with their guns. The people they found, they killed. The crops they came upon, they destroyed. Our clothes, our dishes, our tools, they broke them or stole them. And all our animals, our cows, goats, chickens and turkeys, they killed them too. They destroyed and ate everything on the path of their persecutions against the people.**

**—Alejandro, Ixil massacre survivor<sup>1</sup>**

April 26, 2018 marks the 20th anniversary of the assassination of Bishop Juan José Gerardi Conedera (1922-1998) of Guatemala<sup>2</sup>. Bishop Gerardi was murdered two days after his presentation of the release of the *Guatemala: Nunca Más* report<sup>3</sup> by the country's first truth commission, at the country's historic cathedral. Gerardi coordinated the process which culminated in this unprecedented report, issued by the *Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica* (Recovery of Historical Memory- REMHI) commission established by the Human Rights Office of the Archdiocese of Guatemala in collaboration with the Guatemalan Bishops Conference.

Gerardi's legacy converges with that of other faith-based defenders of human rights in Latin America, and specifically with that of his peers in Central America such as Blessed Oscar Romero of El Salvador, the Jesuits of the Universidad Centroamericana (UCA), and Father Stanley Rother of Santiago Atitlán<sup>4</sup>. All of these endured persecution and ultimately martyrdom because of their dedication to the region's most marginalized sectors.

Guatemala's civil war was intertwined with the broader regional crisis in Central America in the 1980's that was detonated by U.S support for repressive régimes. A key element of this crisis was the massive forced displacement and eventually expulsion and exile of hundreds of thousands of refugees<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in Sanford, V. (2003) *Buried Secrets: Truth and Human Rights in Guatemala* (Palgrave Macmillan U.S)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ghrc-usa.org/our-work/important-cases/assassination-of-bishop-gerardi/>; Goldman, F. (2008) *The Art of Political Murder: Who Killed the Archbishop?* (Grove/Atlantic)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.derechoshumanos.net/lesahumanidad/informes/guatemala/informeREMHI.htm>; [http://www.odhag.org.gt/pdf/Guatemala%20Nunca%20Mas%20\(resumen\).pdf](http://www.odhag.org.gt/pdf/Guatemala%20Nunca%20Mas%20(resumen).pdf); <https://www.colorado.edu/conflict/peace/example/remhi.htm>; Guatemala Never Again! (Orbis 1999); <https://nacla.org/article/guatemala%25E2%2580%2599s-remhi-project-memory-form-below>

<sup>4</sup> Rother, a priest based in this Tzutujil indigenous community was murdered in 1981 and beatified in 2017, as the first person of U.S origin and first priest born in the U.S to be recognized as a martyr by the Catholic Church:

<http://www.archokc.org/top-news/5490-vatican-commission-approves-martyrdom-in-the-cause-for-oklahomas-servant-of-god-father-stanley-rother>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/central-americans-and-asylum-policy-reagan-era>

Persistent flows today of migrants and asylum seekers from the region reflect deep structural continuities between the lingering effects of the civil conflicts of the 1980's and current inequities deepened by U.S policies related to the drug war, free trade, and militarization<sup>6</sup>. Many of those who migrate from Guatemala today are from the sectors and communities most affected by the crimes which Bishop Gerardi was determined to denounce and document<sup>7</sup>. Gerardi's legacy of faith-based commitment to the defense of human rights is present wherever these communities and their advocates need our engagement and support.

The inter-diocesan REMHI project led by Gerardi was based on over 6,000 interviews (61% of these in indigenous languages) and testimonies conducted and compiled by 800 parish workers over a 4 year period, which documented a total of over 55,000 serious violations of human rights<sup>8</sup>. These were carried out following intensive preparatory training workshops held in the country's poorest and most isolated regions, where much of the violence was concentrated, among Guatemala's indigenous communities. Gerardi had previously served as the Bishop of the Quiché region during some of the worst violence that characterized this period, from where he was driven into exile in 1980 following the targeted killings by the Guatemalan military of several priests and catechists in his diocese.

REMHI was a key component in the ongoing process of transitional justice within the framework of Guatemala's 1996 Oslo peace accords<sup>9</sup>, together with an international commission for "Historical Clarification" (the UN-backed *Comisión de Esclarecimiento Histórico*, CEH).<sup>10</sup> The CEH issued a subsequent report in 1999 which built on REMHI's work.

The accords sought to end 34 years of civil conflict that included genocidal violence targeting the country's Mayan indigenous communities, which resulted in over 200,000 deaths and more than 40,000 people who were forcibly disappeared<sup>11</sup>. According to the CEH 83% of the victims were Mayan, and 93% of these crimes were committed by Guatemalan military personnel; this included the annihilation of some 440 indigenous highland villages (id.). Guatemala's genocide, whose most acute phase began during the US-backed rule of General Efraín Ríos Montt (1982-83), was the worst in Latin America during this period, but is sadly often overlooked when others such as those in Rwanda, ex-Yugoslavia, Cambodia, or Sudan are highlighted. Ríos Montt was eventually tried and convicted for genocide by Guatemala's highest civilian court in 2013, and was still under prosecution and house arrest when he died recently.<sup>12</sup>

A key difference between the REMHI and CEH reports was that REMHI named specific perpetrators of the crimes it documented, while these names were excluded from the CEH

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online\\_articles/the-central-american-child-refugee-crisis-made-in-u-s-a](https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/the-central-american-child-refugee-crisis-made-in-u-s-a)

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/guatemalan-migration-times-civil-war-and-post-war-challenges>

<sup>8</sup> <https://nacla.org/article/guatemala%25E2%2580%2599s-remhi-project-memory-form-below>

<sup>9</sup> <https://peaceaccords.nd.edu/accord/accord-firm-and-lasting-peace>

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<http://www.centrodememoriahistorica.gov.co/descargas/guatemala-memoria-silencio/guatemala-memoria-del-silencio.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> REMHI, CEH reports, id.

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/01/obituaries/efrain-rios-montt-guatemala-dead.html>

process. Trials in 2001 of those directly involved in Gerardi's murder, the first by the country's civilian courts of military officers, established a connection between REMHI's specific targeting of perpetrators and the motives of those charged and ultimately convicted for the crime, who included a high level military official linked to Guatemala's presidential guards and the country's most elite military intelligence units<sup>13</sup>.

Hope Border Institute commemorates the legacy of Bishop Gerardi as a key protagonist in the still unfolding struggle of Latin America's poor for the full recognition of their rights to truth, justice, and reparations regarding serious human rights crimes which continue to afflict the region's people. Much of this can be attributed to the impact of U.S policies which continue to drive large scale processes of forced migration today from Guatemala, Central America, and elsewhere. We are committed to stand in solidarity with the rights of the region's poor, migrant, and indigenous communities on both sides of the border which seeks to divide us.

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2001/06/09/world/guatemalan-court-sentences-3-soldiers-for-1998-murder-of-bishop.html>