

Tribute to a Latin American Martyr - Luis Espinal, S.J.

Luis Espinal, S.J., was faithful, always, to God's imprudence in Jesus Christ.

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Midnight in Bolivia: a new day on its way. A red jeep was following. Ahead lay the refuse dump where animals and humans scavenged. Very soon he would be home. Suddenly, several men jumped out, grabbed him and forced him into their vehicle. Neighbors heard his cries for help and glimpsed his kidnappers as they sped into the night.

His body was found early the next morning by a poor Indian. His hands had been fastened behind his back, his mouth gagged, his nasal passages stuffed with cotton; he had been brutally tortured and shot 12 times. It was the beginning of Holy Week, when the church worldwide commemorates the mystery of its own life: "A man can have no greater love than to lay down his life for his friends" (In. 15: 13).

About 75,000 people attended the funeral Mass and accompanied the remains to the cemetery. Thousands more walked in symbolic funeral processions throughout the country. Tributes poured in from around the world, and within the country the media showed how deeply appreciated he was by all those whose dignity and rights he had so often, and so courageously, defended. The dead man, fair and frail, was only 49 years old.

Twelve years had gone by since he first set foot in Bolivia, and in that time he had never returned to his native land. Now, as he was laid to rest in his adopted land, the vast multitude spontaneously broke into song. In the sounds and tones of their national anthem their voices reached for God. To God they proclaimed their gratitude and appreciation for this wonderful gift of love. It was Monday of Holy Week and surely God, too, was weeping: Luis Espinal had died for them.

Born in Manresa, Spain, where St. Ignatius of Loyola had experiences that gradually led him to found the Society of Jesus, Luis began his path to martyrdom by

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joining the Jesuits in 1949. He was 17 years old.

But his young heart and psyche were already deeply attuned to suffering. While he was still a child, his mother died; the Spanish Civil War claimed an older brother. He was in Bolivia when his father died, but did not return for the funeral because he believed a missionary had to become Bolivian, and he identified most with the poor and persecuted—those unable to travel, even for the sake of their loved ones.

As a youth, Luis enjoyed robust health and liked to swim, walk in the hills and play football. After his religious vows in August 1951, he volunteered to go to India, though he never did due to that Government's opposition to foreigners. His desire, however, showed his early commitment to the third world.

He completed his theology studies during the years of the Second Vatican Council and helped to found an international review to spread the thought of the council theologians. He obtained his licentiate in theology in 1963 with a thesis on "Theology and Symbolism." But he failed his "Ad Grad," a special comprehensive examination for Jesuits, because his professors did not share his views.

After his ordination he went to Italy for specialized studies in mass media. On his return he produced a series of programs without precedent for Spanish television. Entitled "Urgent Questions," his weekly program examined issues of social concern. The BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) bought it, as did other European stations. But it was the time of Franco, and Luis's programs were frequently censored. He resigned his post in December 1967 when his program on Spanish slums was not screened. Eight months later, he left for Bolivia.

Luis arrived in Bolivia the year of the historic conference of Latin American bishops in Medellin, Colombia. He lost no time putting into practice that conference's unprecedented option for the downtrodden of the continent. His activities were many and varied. They included teaching at the university, writing film criticism for *Presencia*, the Bolivian daily, broadcasting for *Radio Fides* and making television programs, the best known being the series, "In Living Flesh," a series similar to "Urgent Questions." His numerous writings included 12 books on cinema. All of his work reflected a deep social conscience, prophetic courage, poetic sensibility and wonderful faith against a background of strife and struggle endemic to a nation that has averaged a coup a year since its independence.

One of the first things he did on arriving in La Paz, the capital of Bolivia, was to move into the densely populated Buenos Aires Street with a few other Jesuits for the sake of greater solidarity with the poor. The small community was a new experience and provoked divergent reactions among the Jesuits in Bolivia, but in the end it made possible a collective evolution in the Society, the fruits of which included subsequent communities like it. The house was open to all, and almost always a university student lived in with the Jesuits. Other friends joined the community on Sundays for an

informally celebrated Eucharist. People very soon began to call the house after a popular song of the time: "House of Affection."

Unfortunately, the community came to an end when members were arrested or had to go underground. But its impact on those associated with it during its two-year existence, and especially on Luis, was definitive. Before long, he and two Jesuit companions began a similar community elsewhere in the city with a number of married couples. According to Federico Aquilo, one of the Jesuits who lived with Luis in the "house of affection," Luis's commitment "had been growing incessantly, and with an insubordinable logic had been acquiring an epic character that made those of us feel small who had seen him act with a serenity and skill difficult to combine with the sharp giving characteristic of his prophetic work in the social communications media. The Gospel and the Bolivian reality were the two foundation pillars of his action."

Despite numerous invitations, Luis rarely ventured outside Bolivia. In 1970 he went to Lima, Peru, as the Bolivian delegate to the International Catholic Organization of Cinema. In 1975 he represented Bolivia at the Latin American Assembly of Commissions of Justice and Peace in Panama. But in 1979 he refused an invitation to attend the Latin American conference of bishops in Puebla, Mexico, as a journalist because of the way bishops organizing the conference excluded liberation theologians and other experts.

Five years earlier, in 1974, he had also stayed in Bolivia. On that occasion he was seriously ill and was advised to seek treatment abroad. He refused, saying that he considered such treatment a privilege that not everyone could afford. By chance, a correct diagnosis was made, and Luis recovered.

In 1974, two priest members of the Bolivian Justice and Peace Commission were expelled from the country by the Banzer dictatorship for publishing photos of military violence against the peasants of the Cochabamba valley (Former Gen. Hugo Banzer Suarez had been president of Bolivia's rightist Government since 1971, when he led a bloody coup overthrowing the 10-month leftist regime of President Juan Jose Torres.) When the bishops responded by closing down the commission, Luis helped to found the Permanent Assembly of Human Rights and linked it with similar organizations in other countries, including the United Nations.

In 1976-77, Luis made a major film, working from 7 A.M. to 7 P.M. and on three evenings in the week until midnight or 1:A.M. The nights he was not working on the film, he went to the cinema and wrote his customary film reviews for *Presencia*. In those circumstances, he felt unable that year to give his usual course in sociology at the university. But the students insisted: "No one teaches like you." In desperation Luis told them that he could only hold the course at 6 A.M.-and the students agreed! So that year Luis had scarcely three hours sleep some nights.

Under the Banzer regime, repression in Bolivia was particularly acute. Many

people were sent into exile. Luis was at the airport one day to bid farewell to a friend. So, too, of course, were agents of the dictatorship. As Luis's friend prepared to depart, his young daughter spoke up in a voice that all around could hear: "Don't worry, Papi, Banzer will not last." Everyone stiffened, but the agents did not know what to do. "Then," said Luis afterward, "the eyes of the crowd lit up, and I believe that we all affirmed our commitment to the struggle. Personally, I was filled with a strange security that the days of the dictatorship were coming to an end. The gestures and attitudes of the little ones count for that much in the social and political processes."

On Nov. 9, 1977, President Banzer, under pressure from U. S. President Jimmy Carter, announced that elections would be held in July 1978. At the same time, he lifted the ban on the activities of political parties, though he reaffirmed the ban on political activities by labor unions, student groups and professional organizations. On Dec. 1, President Banzer startled Bolivians and the rest of the world by announcing that he would not run for president in those elections, saying that "six years of government are enough for a man to show what he can and should do."

Later that month, on Dec. 21, President Banzer announced a limited amnesty for political prisoners and exiles. This amnesty, however, excluded most prominent political exiles. In order to bring matters to a head, four wives of imprisoned miners decided to go on hunger strike, demanding full amnesty for all political prisoners and exiles and the right for students and labor unions to organize and engage in political activities. Their decision seemed hopeless. Luis arranged a meeting for them and their children with Archbishop Jorge Manrique Hurtado of La Paz. The Archbishop tried to dissuade them, but they said that they had come not to negotiate with the Archbishop, but to tell him that they were going on hunger strike, which began on Dec. 29. Luis joined the hunger strike a few days later, in order to replace some of the children, as did other members of the Permanent Assembly of Human Rights. They occupied the little reception room of *Presencia*.

When the police damaged the equipment of *Presencia* in order to evict the hunger strikers, the director of the newspaper, Huascar Cajias, began to reconsider. Earlier he had received a group who were shouting against the hunger strikers, especially against Luis. But Luis prevailed upon him not to do anything until he had first read the Beatitudes, a text the director himself had chosen for a liturgy on the premises some days before. Luis gave him the Lukan version to read. It contained blessings but also condemnations of the rich and the persecutors.

As Huascar Cajias read the Gospel extract, his voice quivered with emotion, and his attitude changed. He stayed up until the early hours overseeing the security of the strikers in the face of threatened armed intervention. That night the premises of *Presencia* escaped the worst. Instead the military stormed the University of San Andres where another group of hunger strikers had assembled. Among the group was Cajias's

daughter.

Despite the intimidation, destruction and brutality, more and more people joined the strike. Before the strike was over, nearly 1,300 were on strike in different parts of the country. Then what had seemed impossible before actually came to pass: On Jan. 18, 1978, President Banzer granted full amnesty for all political prisoners and exiles. On Jan. 25, he lifted the three-year ban on labor unions and granted students and workers and professionals the right to organize and to engage in political activities.

The participation of Luis and his colleagues of the Human Rights Assembly was a critical turning point in the strike. Because Luis was a national figure and a priest, his commitment gave publicity to the strike and involved people in it who otherwise would have remained in the wings. Throughout the strike, he gave leadership to the people who became involved, and his good humor and optimism kept flagging spirits buoyant.

Always very busy, Luis had left everything aside for a seemingly hopeless undertaking. But in doing so he was living his own words, and he came to see them vindicated: "Train us, Lord, to throw ourselves into the impossible, because behind the impossible is your grace and your presence; we cannot fall into a vacuum."

Years before the hunger strike, in his role as a journalist, Luis had visited the mines, but the experience left him uncomfortable, and he resolved never again to return to engage in "tourism" there. After the hunger strike, Luis felt a part of the miners' lives and agreed to participate in a national meeting of the Permanent Assembly of Human Rights in the mining district. The meeting included a visit to the mines, at the invitation of the unions. Similarly, though Luis had become a Bolivian citizen in June 1970, his intense desire to be at one with the Bolivian people was not satisfied until what he called his "nationalization by hunger." Thus at his funeral a few years later, nothing can have been more moving to those who knew him well than the spontaneous gesture of the multitude of mourners singing their anthem in his honor.

The elections held on July 9, 1978, were overseen by an international group of observers invited by the Human Rights Assembly. Less than two weeks later, however, on July 19, a national electoral court annulled the election results, citing evidence of fraud-ballot tampering and illegal voting-on the part of Gen. Juan Pereda Asbun, who claimed victory. General Asbun accepted the annulment when President Banzer, who still ruled, agreed to turn the Government over to a military junta that would rule until new elections could be held, within six months. When President Banzer changed his mind, choosing to remain in office, General Asbun staged a coup on July 21 and ousted Banzer from office. Banzer resigned, and the general was sworn in as president by the military. Thus the words of a young girl uttered two years before came true: The Banzer regime had fallen.

Luis continued to push for further change in the years that followed Banzer's fall. Above all he founded a newspaper, *Aqui* (Here), and with it brought a new style of

journalism to Bolivia. His first editorial set the tone and the objectives of *Aqui*: "To be the voice of those who have no voice; to be the voice shouting out that which others keep silent; to be the courageous voice of the people." *Aqui* denounced hypocrisy, corruption and the atrocities of the military. Its offices were bombed, but the newspaper continued to be published.

Much of Luis's work was not remunerative. But he believed in earning his keep and so always had at least one paid job. His steadiest source of income was from his film reviews for *Presencia*, which he kept up for 10 years.

For 12 years Luis had lived life on behalf of some of the poorest people in the world. Although the country was under civilian rule, in reality it was in the grip of the military. When Luis refused to yield to death threats, sections of the military, the security forces and their supporters plotted his murder.

They kidnapped him at midnight on March 21, 1980, and drove him to the outskirts of the city, to a place called the *Matadero* (slaughterhouse). There, where animals are slaughtered, they ripped and broke his body, using whips, leather straps, chains, wires and the butts of guns. Four hours passed – it must have seemed an eternity. Luis lay dying. Yet the butchery continued. Twelve to 14 bullets were blasted into his body at point-blank range, directed not at vital organs but in a way designed to prolong his agony.

The battered and bloody remains were brought out and driven up a narrow, winding, mountain road where, at an altitude of about 4,000 meters, they were dumped. His body was found lying by the wayside a few hours later by a poor Indian peasant. His, fittingly, was the honor of announcing to Bolivia the redemptive death of its missionary.

During his agony in the slaughterhouse, when many another would have felt utterly abandoned in a hell of evil, Luis may have cried the words of a prayer he had written:

Lord, we offer You the future, like the gladiators in the arena. In offering You our unknown future, we sacrifice everything and are full of confidence. We dedicate all our possibilities, all our pain, all that we are to You so that the future may be a future of love.

On the night Luis was assassinated, the New Testament in Greek lay on his bed table beside the crucifix he received at the time of his religious vows. It was marked on the page of Luke's Gospel where Jesus is brought before Pilate and condemned to death, while Barabbas is freed.

Many, some no doubt well intentioned, thought Luis was imprudent or naive. He felt their criticism deeply:

Life (he wrote) is a series of crises: of growth, adaptation and rapture. And so we are oppressed sometimes by the anguish of pain, death, loneliness. We suffer

injustice, and our good wishes become sterile, like the little stream swallowed up by the desert. Then even heaven seems leaden, where it rejects our prayer." But Luis's secret was his fidelity, even in pain and doubt, to God's imprudence in Jesus Christ: "Everyone speaks to us of prudence, Lord; but of a prudence that is not yours, that we search for in vain in your Gospel. Jesus Christ, we give You thanks because You did not stay silent so as to avoid the Cross; because You lashed out at the powerful, knowing that You were gambling with Your life ...You do not want a prudence that leads us to omission, and that makes imprisonment impossible for us. The terrible prudence of stilling the shouts of the hungry and the oppressedIt is not prudent to 'sell all that you have and give it to the poor.' It is imprudent to give one's life for one's God and for one's brothers and sisters.

Today the spot where Luis was found is marked by a rock with the following words of his clearly inscribed: "[Jesus Christ] give us the sincerity not to call cowardice conformity and convenience prudence." Beside the rock is a tall, thin, barren tree: a sign of hope in new life. Opposite both is a simple wooden cross.

To Lucho Alegre, S. J., one of his closest friends, and the man who identified his body, Luis was "a very humble man who never thought of himself, but who had genuinely given himself to the people, and whose style was deceptive for it disguised his importance. He created a wave. Because of him it was possible for many to be Christian who were distant from the church." For the receptionist at the Jesuit buildings in San Calixto Street, "Luis did more for people than any president on earth." To Luis Palomera, who worked with him in *Radio Fides*, Luis was "extraordinary. He was a prophet, very sincere, he spoke frankly, lived his life utterly coherent with what he thought, felt and believed, and displayed a great serenity in the face of the dangers that surrounded him."

For Jaimé, who collaborated with Luis on human rights work, Luis was "one of the poor among the poor. Much of the good he was doing only came to light after his death." Juan, who worked with Luis on *Aquí*, described him as "exceptional. I admired him a lot." Maria, an old Aymara Indian woman, who sells fruit on the street corner near the chapel where Luis used to come to say Mass on Sundays, wept as she said: "He was a wonderful man, he always stopped to talk to me. He helped everyone. It was very sad what they did to him." For Julia, also old, poor and Indian, and who knew him for years, Luis was "a saint. Never in all my life since my childhood have I known anyone like him."

Victor Blajot, S.J., superior of the Jesuits in Bolivia at the time and a man who stood by Luis during his life, said that the public response to Luis's death surprised the Society of Jesus and the Catholic Church, for it showed them how much they had underestimated the meaning of Luis's concern for people during his life. One Jesuit

admitted to me that he saw "Luis's martyrdom" as God's judgment on his own differences with Luis, so that since then he had changed in various ways. Other Jesuits spoke in the same vein. And there are now several young men in Bolivia preparing for priesthood as Jesuits who attribute their vocations to Luis's inspiration.

LUIS ESPINAL, S.J., has passed, physically, from this world. But he lives on still in those who are more ready now because of him to take the path of the Paschal Mystery. His powerful testimony thereby denies that injustice has wrested the world from the hands of God. Like the Lord he loved, his sacrifice sheds light and warmth where there is no sun and will inspire, always.