Boston remembers fallen Jesuits

ON November 16 we marked the 25th anniversary of the assassination of the six Jesuits, their housekeeper and her daughter at the Universidad Centroamericana (UCA) in El Salvador during their dreadful civil war. Here at Boston College, we marked the event with an address by American poet Carolyn Forché who spent years in El Salvador listening to the horrific stories. She knew Fr Ignacio Ellacuria SJ, the rector of UCA who was the main target of the assassins. He taught her that “each moment of our life shapes the whole of our life, and that we are not always responsible for what befalls us but we are certainly responsible for our response”.

She was a friend of the late, and hopefully soon to be canonised, Archbishop Oscar Romero. She was with him the week before he was assassinated in March 1980. This is how she told the story: “I met with Mgr in the kitchen of the convent of the Carmelite Missionary Sisters, where he told me gently that it was time for me to go home, as the situation had become too dangerous, and I was more needed in the United States, in the work of helping Americans to understand the struggle for justice. But I begged him to leave, as his was the first name on the death squad’s list. He seemed so calm that afternoon, tapping his fingers on the Bible he carried with him. I realised I was in the presence of a saint. ‘No’, he said, ‘my place is with people, and now your place is with yours’.

In the audience was Fr Donald Monan SJ, who had been president of Boston College when his Jesuit brothers were assassinated. He, and other Jesuit university professors, went to El Salvador and sat through the trial of the soldiers indicted with the killings. He spent years lobbying US congressmen to withdraw support for the unaccountable military in El Salvador, observing “the intellectual architects of this crime have never been publicly identified”, or called to account.

When Fr Ellacuria became rector of UCA he said his country was “an unjust and irrational reality that should be transformed” and that the university needed to contribute to social change: “It does this in a university manner and with a Christian inspiration.” When Fr Monan returned from El Salvador, he was fond of telling his students: “We must do all we can to ensure that freedom predominates over oppression, justice over injustice, truth over falsehood, and love over hatred.

If the university does not decide to make this commitment, we do not understand what validity it has as a university, much less as a Christian inspired university.”