

**REMARKS AT THE OPENING
OF THE
IGNATIAN FAMILY TEACH-IN FOR JUSTICE**

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Ft. Benning, Georgia
November 15, 2002

Introduction

This tent, in its fourth year of use, is becoming a very special place for all of us, a place where members of the Ignatian family gather to live and celebrate their faith that tries to do justice. I am happy and proud to be with you and I congratulate all of you for being here, many of you at great personal sacrifice. Let me especially congratulate our students who provide such great hope for the society and the Church of the future.

We wouldn't be here without a special man who is a friend to us all, Bob Holstein. Bob first conceived the idea for this gathering four and half years ago. I remember his phone call, asking if we could get students from our 28 colleges and universities to come to pitch our tent at the School of the Americas for an Ignatian Family Teach-In for Justice. Since then Bob and his companions, the great former Jesuits who are such an important part of the Ignatian family, have made our gathering possible. Many of you are here for the fourth time, and some for the first time. All of us will be energized by one another as we come together at this important time and in this important place.

We need these events to remind us of the values we share, to support us when we falter in our commitment, and to help us never to forget our responsibility for our brothers and sisters, whether they be sitting next to us, living next door, or struggling around the world.

Thirteen years ago, at this very time, Salvadoran soldiers -- 19 out of 26 of whom had just completed a course of training at the nearby School of the Americas -- were getting ready to enter the campus of the Universidad Centroamericana, our sister Jesuit university in San Salvador. They went there to seek out and kill six Jesuit priests and their two women co-workers, the former as threats to the militarization of the country and the latter as innocent witnesses to a vicious crime.

As we gather here, thousands of men and women also gather, just yards from where the martyrs were killed, for a vigil that will celebrate the lives of the martyrs and recommit those present to the struggle for which the martyrs died. Men and women, rich and poor, will come from all over El Salvador, Latin America, the United States, and indeed, around the world, to remember, to support, to recommit.

The soldiers coming on to the UCA campus that night thirteen years ago and our being here tonight represent two very different ways of responding to the poverty, powerlessness, and violence of our time. The men and women who were killed that night

were judged guilty of calling attention to the grave injustices of their country, of studying and researching how to lead people out of poverty and powerlessness, and how to end the violence. The soldiers trained here at the School of the Americas saw the poor and powerless and those who would work for them as dangerous Marxists. They saw violence as an inevitable way of life. We gather here because, like the UCA martyrs, we see things differently. We want to work for justice in peace and non-violence.

Tonight, thirteen years after soldiers entered the campus of the UCA, our agenda is broader than closing the School of the Americas, or as it is now euphemistically called the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation. Our horizon has been expanded by Palestinian-Israeli violence in the Holy Land, by a drug war in Colombia, by the tragedy of September 11, by the issue of sweatshops which produce the shirts we can afford because the women and men who make them are often not paid a living wage, and, finally, by the threat of a war to be waged against Iraq.

The Ignatian family was first challenged by Fr. Pedro Arrupe, to live a “faith that pursues justice” and to be “men and women for others.” More recently Fr. Kolvenbach, his successor, challenged us to be “in solidarity with the real world,” and to “let the gritty reality of this world into our lives, so we can learn to feel it, think about it critically, respond to its suffering and engage it constructively,” as the Salvadoran martyrs did so well.

The gritty reality Fr. Kolvenbach talks about includes the fact that among the alumni of the School of the Americas were 48 of the 69 men cited by the U.N. Truth Commission of El Salvador for the worst atrocities in El Salvador, 4 of the 5 senior officers of the secret “Battalion 316” in Honduras, 100 of the 246 officers charged with human rights violations in Colombia, a number of whom served as instructors at the School, and the list goes on.

Coming here this weekend helps to remind ourselves that 90% of all the people who have ever lived have struggled daily to survive the threats of poverty, hunger, disease, violence and natural disaster. Coming here tonight, we are made whole by a community that finds life in the midst of death, hope in the midst of despair and courage when all seems lost.

We find ourselves in a culture often hostile to what we have seen and experienced and now know to be true, a culture that often celebrates affluence and power over others, going it alone and being # 1. Many of our sisters and brothers around the world see our country as arrogant, self righteous and indifferent to the poor and powerless, and even to the environment around us.

The issue on most of our minds these days is the possible war on Iraq. The strong voices of many like you have forced our government to move back from the rhetoric of a “pre-emptive strike,” from “going it alone, but dangerous rhetoric continues. We need to remember the words of Martin Luther King that “wars are poor chisels for crafting peaceful tomorrows,” or Pope John Paul, “If you want peace, seek justice and forgiveness.”

The Pope has also written, “Never again war, which destroys the lives of innocent people, teaches how to kill, throws into upheaval even the lives of those who do the killing and leaves behind a trail of resentment and hatred, thus making it all the more difficult to find a just solution.” The pope teaches that we must learn to “fight for justice without violence.” The pope knows whereof he speaks because he is credited with a major role in bringing down communism without putting a single person uniform or firing a single shot.

Let me read from a letter sent to President Bush by Amber Amundson, the wife of a man killed at the Pentagon on September 11:

Dear President Bush:

I am a 28-year old single mother of two small children. The reason I am a single mother is because my husband was murdered on September 11, while working under your direction...

I am not doing well. I am hurt that the U.S. is moving forward in such a violent manner. I do not hold you responsible for my husband's death, but I do believe you have a responsibility to listen to me and to hear my pain.

I do not like unnecessary death. I do not want anyone to use my husband's death to perpetuate violence.

So Mr. President, when you say that vengeance is needed so the victims of 9/11 do not die in vain, could you please excuse Craig Scott Amundson from your list of victims used to justify further attacks?

I do not want my children to grow up thinking that the reason so many people died following the Sept. 11 attacks was because of their father's death. I want to show them a world where we love and not hate, where we forgive and not seek out vengeance.

Please, Mr. Bush, help me honor my husband. He drove to the Pentagon every morning with a “Visualize World Peace” bumper sticker on his car. He raised our children to understand humanity and not to fight to get what you want. When we buried my husband, an American flag was laid over his casket. My children believe the American flag represents their dad.

Please let that representation be one of love, peace, and forgiveness. I am begging you, for the sake of humanity and my children, to stop killing. Please find a nonviolent way to bring justice to the world.

Sincerely,

Amber Amundson (From the Winter 2002 issue of *The Plough Reader*)

In contrast to Mrs. Amundson, the soldiers trained a few yards from here were part of a \$6 billion, largely military effort to defeat rebels in El Salvador. Having done that, we then walked away and let the country try to rebuild on its own. The chief architect of our policy, who is now President Bush's advisor on Latin America, said at the time that "Central America no longer means anything to us." Again, having defeated the Taliban in Afghanistan, we have done little to rebuild the country, but now we are ready to go into Iraq without any plan or commitment to build a lasting peace there or in the entire volatile region.

We can neither justify war as the only way to fight terrorism, or excuse terrorism as simply the result of real injustices. War will never buy a remedy for the hunger and suffering in our world. Peace is the only way. We believe in a God of peace. In the words of Gandhi, "Non-violence is the greatest force at the disposal of humankind. It is mightier than the mightiest weapon of destruction."

September 11 revealed the depths and cowardice to which human beings can sink; it also revealed the heroism, goodness and generosity to which human beings can rise. Those who died on September 11, those who died in El Salvador, those who died in Afghanistan, the Middle East, Iraq, and countless other places, lay claim to our lives tonight. Their dreams and hopes for life must not be extinguished. Rather, by our presence, our solidarity, our continuing commitment to justice and peace, life and not death will have the last word.

Is indeed sacred ground for all of us, a place where we choose life over death, not just tonight, or this weekend, but for all the days and years of our lives.