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# Ecomartyrdom in the Americas

*Living and Dying for  
Our Common Home*

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*Preface*

MARTYRS OF SOLIDARITY,  
SEEDS OF HOPE

In October 2015, a group of pilgrims from El Salvador visited the Vatican to give thanks for the recent beatification of their beloved prophet, saint, and martyr, Archbishop Óscar Arnulfo Romero. Now canonized a saint in the Roman Catholic Church, Romero was assassinated on March 24, 1980, for his prophetic denunciation of economic injustice and political violence, especially the violence meted out against the Salvadoran people by the country's military government, which was backed by the United States and intent on preserving the wealth and power of the Salvadoran oligarchy. During a papal audience with the pilgrims, Pope Francis honored Romero's martyrdom with a message about the centrality of martyrdom for the Christian church: "From the beginning of the life of the Church, we Christians, persuaded by the words of Christ, who reminds us that 'unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone' (Jn 12:24), have always maintained the conviction that the blood of martyrs is the seed of Christians." For the Salvadorans on pilgrimage that day, along with their companions at home and millions of others throughout the world, Archbishop Romero certainly is a seed of hope whose witness continues to bear fruit in what Francis called "an abundant harvest of holiness, of justice,

reconciliation and love of God.”<sup>1</sup> And yet Romero is not a traditional martyr, killed by non-Christians *in odium fidei*, out of hatred for the faith. Rather, he was killed by fellow Christians out of hatred for his insistence that the Christian faith demands solidarity with the poor and oppressed, active commitment to their liberation, and the creation of a just society in which the abundance of Creation might be shared by all.

Like Romero, thousands of other Christians and people of good will also laid down their lives for the sake of justice, liberation, and peace in late-twentieth-century Latin America. These “martyrs of solidarity,” as Michael Lee aptly names them, have been recognized and remembered by their people as prophets, saints, and martyrs for decades, and in recent years, especially under the leadership of Pope Francis, the Roman Catholic Church has begun to officially recognize their witness as a form of martyrdom. Romero was officially named a martyr and beatified in 2015 and was canonized in 2018. His dear friend, Fr. Rutilio Grande, S.J., whose 1977 assassination was a turning point in the evolution of Romero’s own ministry, was declared a martyr in 2020 and beatified in 2022, along with the two laypersons, Manuel Solórzano and Nelson Rutilio Lemus (just 16 years old) who were killed along with him. Rutilio, Manuel, and Nelson had been working to conscientize and organize the farmworkers of their parish according to the gospel dream of a world in which God invites all of humanity, but most especially the poor, to dine at the banquet table of Creation.<sup>2</sup> Another priest, Fray Cosme Spessotto, who was

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis, “Address to the Pilgrimage from El Salvador,” October 30, 2015, [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va).

<sup>2</sup> This image of the banquet table was invoked by Rutilio Grande and immortalized in the song “Vamos todos al banquete,” which was composed by Guillermo Cuéllar as the entrance hymn to the “Salvadoran Popular Mass.” See J. M. Vigil and A. Torrellas, *Misas Centroamericanas: Transcripción y comentario teológico* (Managua, Nicaragua: CAV-CEBES, 1988).

killed in 1980 for his denunciation of the abuses committed against the Salvadoran people by the ruling military junta, was beatified together with Rutilio, Manuel, and Nelson.

Pope Francis has also officially recognized the martyrdom of a number of other Christians who were killed for defending human rights and standing in solidarity with the poor and oppressed of Latin America during the worst years of state-sponsored violence and political repression in the late twentieth century. Bishop Enrique Angelelli, Fr. Carlos Murias, Fr. Gabriel Longueville, and lay catechist Wenceslao Pedernera were all killed in 1976 “because of their active efforts to promote Christian justice” during Argentina’s “dirty wars,” when “right-wing death squads kidnapped, tortured and assassinated anyone suspected of being a political or ideological threat.”<sup>3</sup> When he was Archbishop of Buenos Aires, Jorge Bergoglio called these men martyrs during a memorial mass he celebrated for them in the Cathedral of La Rioja, and as Pope Francis he officially declared them to be martyrs in 2018. They were beatified in 2019. In Guatemala, several priests and laypersons have also been declared martyrs and beatified for their commitment to justice and peace in the face of state-sponsored genocide against the Indigenous people of the Quiché region between 1980 and 1991.<sup>4</sup>

Pope Francis’s recognition of martyrs who were killed by fellow Christians out of hatred for solidarity, justice, and truth represents the culmination of a decades-long process. Over the past fifty years, the Latin American popular church, ecclesial base communities, and liberation theologians have been transforming the meaning of Christian martyrdom from within the liberation struggles of marginalized and oppressed peoples. Long before Jorge Bergoglio became Pope Francis, the popular church in Latin America recog-

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<sup>3</sup> Seán-Patrick Lovett, “Beatification of Four Modern Martyrs to the Faith in Argentina,” April 27, 2019, [www.vaticannews.va](http://www.vaticannews.va).

<sup>4</sup> “Ten Martyrs of Quiché Beatified in Guatemala,” April 23, 2021, [www.vaticannews.va](http://www.vaticannews.va).

nized and carried on the legacy of martyrs like Óscar Romero and Enrique Angelelli, along with the thousands of others who were also killed for their Christian commitment. It is only now, decades later, that this prophetic, grassroots recognition of martyrs of solidarity has finally made its way up through the ranks of the hierarchy to achieve institutional recognition. Granted, Pope Francis has also continued to officially recognize the martyrdom of Christians who have been killed around the world by non-Christians out of explicit hatred of the faith. But official recognition of this expanded understanding of martyrdom represents a significant development in the church's tradition and an institutional witness to the preferential option for the poor and oppressed as a central commitment of the Christian faith.

This official recognition for Latin American martyrs of solidarity is a welcome advance, especially given the history of Western Christian complicity with conquest, colonization, racism, and neocolonialism in the Americas and around the world. It indicates that the Catholic tradition is moving through a process of conversion *metanoia*, or turning away from solidarity with the wealthy and powerful to solidarity with the colonized, poor, and oppressed. Yet there are ways in which this official process can also contribute to reinscribing patriarchal, racial, and clerical privilege in its preference for high-profile cases of martyrs who were lighter-skinned, male, and ordained priests or bishops in the Roman Catholic Church. And while the legacy of these martyrs should inspire us to carry on their work of solidarity in our own social contexts today, we run the risk of romanticizing and distancing ourselves from the historical realities in which martyrs of solidarity gave their lives if we do not recognize that marginalized communities, popular movements, and human rights defenders continue to risk their lives today for the sake of justice and peace.

The worst years of military dictatorships, death squads, and political disappearances have thankfully passed in most of Latin

America. But economic and political violence is not a thing of the past. Rather, the wealthy and powerful have found new ways and means of silencing the voices of those who seek liberation from unjust and oppressive systems. In fact, human rights defenders in Latin America have come under increasing attack in recent years. This is especially true for Afro-descendent, Indigenous, and queer folks seeking intersectional justice and liberation for their communities. Take, for example, the case of Marielle Franco, a Black queer woman who was born in a favela of Rio de Janeiro in 1979 and became a fierce opponent of racism, police brutality, and economic exploitation, fighting for the rights and dignity of Black and LGBT folks, first as an activist and then as a city councilwoman.<sup>5</sup> She was killed by hitmen in Rio de Janeiro on March 14, 2018, along with her driver, Anderson Gomes. Recent developments in Catholic theologies of martyrdom are at their best when they lift up the witness of contemporary human rights defenders who, like Marielle, persevere in the struggle against oppression and injustice in Latin America, and throughout the Americas as a whole. Benedictine monk Marcelo Barros makes this connection clear in his recognition of Marielle as one of the many martyrs who, whether Christian or not, challenge the church to stand in solidarity with the poor, marginalized, and oppressed, not as an “appendix to the faith,” but as “the fundamental nucleus of what it means to follow Jesus.”<sup>6</sup>

In recent decades, popular movements for human rights, justice, and liberation have come to recognize that environmental justice and ecological well-being are central to their struggles for

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<sup>5</sup> See “Marielle and Monica: The LGBT Activists Resisting Bolsonaro’s Brazil,” documentary film, *The Guardian*, December 28, 2018, [www.theguardian.com](http://www.theguardian.com).

<sup>6</sup> Marcelo Barros, “Queremos nossos mártires vivos,” Brasil de Fato Website, March 25, 2022, <https://www.brasildefatope.com.br/2019/03/25/queremos-nossos-martires-vivos>. All translations from original Spanish and Portuguese sources are mine unless otherwise noted.

the social, economic, and cultural well-being of marginalized and oppressed human communities. Indigenous peoples have recognized this connection between ecological and human well-being for millennia, and the retrieval of Indigenous identity and culture throughout Latin America has contributed to this ecological turn in the popular movements of the region. At the same time, under the reign of globalized neoliberal capitalism, extractivist industries have accelerated their pillage of the lands, forests, and waterways of the Americas in pursuit of limitless economic profit and at the service of insatiable consumer desire. When marginalized communities resist the invasion of extractivist projects in their territories, they are met with the violent tactics of international networks of power that stop at nothing to silence their protest. As a result, hundreds of land and environmental defenders are being killed each year for their commitment to environmental justice and ecological well-being. Like the twentieth-century martyrs of solidarity, these individuals are witnesses to the “cry of the poor,” but they also hear the “cry of the earth,” and they see both cries as intricately interconnected.<sup>7</sup>

Pope Francis’s 2015 encyclical on the environment, *Laudato Si’: On Care for Our Common Home*, offers an extended reflection on the interconnection of these cries, along with the interconnectiveness at the heart of all Creation.<sup>8</sup> In this landmark document, Francis insists that human and ecological well-being cannot be separated or pitted against each other. Consequently, he invites his readers to undergo an ecological conversion such that we might come to embody what he calls “integral ecology” through recognition of our interconnection with the rest of Creation and through

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<sup>7</sup> See Leonardo Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997).

<sup>8</sup> Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter, *Laudato Si’: On Care for Our Common Home*, May 24, 2015, [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va).

loving care for Creation as our “common home.” Land and environmental defenders throughout the Americas, and around the world, embody this vision of interconnectedness and care for Creation, and far too many of them are paying for their social and ecological commitments with their lives. They are witnesses to solidarity with both the poor and the earth, with the oppressed and our common home, with marginalized communities and the natural goods on which they depend for sustenance and on which we all depend for a future in which our atmosphere and ecosystems can continue to support life on earth.

Martyrs of solidarity are assassinated for many reasons in our contemporary world of racism, patriarchy, economic exploitation, war, and other forms of violent conflict. This book is specifically dedicated to unveiling the martyrdom of environmental human rights defenders in the Americas, especially in Latin America, where the lion’s share of documented murders of land and environmental defenders are taking place today. The United Nations defines environmental human rights defenders as “individuals and groups who, in their personal or professional capacity and in a peaceful manner, strive to protect and promote human rights relating to the environment, including water, air, land, flora and fauna.” Individuals and communities who defend environmental human rights, which include land rights, are “highly vulnerable” and “under attack across the globe.” In fact, according to the UN Environment Programme, “[w]orldwide, environmental defenders face growing assaults and murders—in conjunction with increasing intimidation, harassment, stigmatization and criminalization. At least three people a week are killed protecting our environmental rights—while many more are harassed, intimidated, criminalized and forced from their lands.” Furthermore, John Knox, the first UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and the Environment, remarks that “[f]or their tireless work in empowering communities



and protecting ecosystems, environmental defenders are killed in startling numbers. Murder is not the only way environmental defenders are persecuted; for every 1 killed, there are 20 to 100 others harassed, unlawfully and lawfully arrested, and sued for defamation, amongst other intimidations.”<sup>9</sup>

This book uncovers the root causes and contextual circumstances of these murders, contemplates the stories of several “ecomartyrs,” and offers ecotheological reflection on martyrdom in light of the dangerous praxis of defending land and environmental human rights.

The first three chapters of the book lay out the historical, political, and ecological contexts in which land and environmental defenders seek justice and liberation for their human communities in tandem with ecological integrity for the earth. Chapter 1, “The Pillage of Our Common Home: Ecomartyrdom and Extractivism in the Americas,” seeks historical understanding of the colonial roots of extractivist violence in the Americas, analyzes the logic of extractivism today, and reflects on extractivism as a manifestation of structural sin fueled by an anti-social and anti-ecological imaginary. Chapter 2, “Fighting for Our Common Home: Extractivism and the Struggle for Environmental Justice in the Americas,” details the contexts of extractivism and communal resistance in which land and environmental defenders carry out their struggles for justice and ecological well-being. Chapter 3, “Dying for Our Common Home: The Criminalization and Assassination of Environmental Defenders,” describes both the processes leading to international recognition of environmental human rights and the right to defend the environment, on the one hand, and the ways in which land and environmental defenders are persecuted for the

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<sup>9</sup> “Who Are Environmental Defenders?” United Nations Environment Programme Website, [www.unep.org](http://www.unep.org).

work they do to protect their communities and the goods of the natural world, on the other.

It is important to note here that the persecution of land and environmental defenders also takes place in the United States and Canada, which are also marked by a colonial history of land theft, slavery, genocide, and ecocide, along with a contemporary landscape of settler colonialism, environmental injustice and racism, ecological degradation, and extractivist pillage of natural resources. Land and environmental defenders in this context—especially Indigenous, Black, Latinx, and poor white defenders—experience criminalization, defamation, arrest, and even death threats by those who seek to silence their voices. In this first part of the book, therefore, I attempt to tell the story of resistance to extractivism and environmental injustice in the Americas as a whole. However, for the most part, the rest of the book turns our attention to Latin America, where the murder of land and environmental defenders is a regular occurrence and where local communities often interpret these murders as a form of martyrdom.

In chapter 4, “Narrating the Witness: In Memory of Murdered Land and Environmental Defenders,” I invite readers to contemplate the narratives of six ecomartyrs who have been assassinated in Latin America over the past forty years: Fr. Josimo Taveres, Chico Medes, Fr. Alcides Jiménez, Sr. Dorothy Stang, Marcelo Rivera, and Berta Cáceres. While these pages cannot do justice to their stories or the enormity of their sacrifice, my hope is that readers will come away from this chapter, which is really the heart of the book, with an appreciation for the depth of communal formation and personal commitment that led these individuals to accept the possibility of death as a consequence of their work for justice and ecological well-being. I end the chapter with a litany of other land and environmental defenders who have been assassinated in the last six years since Berta’s murder. While this chapter

lifts up the witness of high-profile ecomartyrs, I hope that it will also help readers understand that the individuals highlighted here were embedded within and formed by communities in which others have also suffered the same fate, and that these individuals represent thousands more slain environmental defenders in the Americas and throughout the world.

In chapters 5 and 6, I turn to theological reflection on the reality of ecomartyrdom, from an interreligious perspective and from the perspective of Christian theology. Chapter 5, “Wellsprings of the Witness: The Ecological Imaginations of Land and Environmental Defenders,” seeks understanding of the spiritual, cultural, theological, and ecological inspiration for the commitments of land and environmental defenders. This chapter asks: Where does such great love and commitment come from? What are the wellsprings of such hope and courage in the face of the violent evils of extractivism? The wellsprings of the ecomartyrs’ witness flow together and diverge in various ways, and while this chapter cannot do justice to their diversity and complexity, I hope that readers will come away with a sense of how deep these wellsprings run in the shared struggles for environmental justice in the Americas. In chapter 6, “Remembering the Witness: Ecomartyrdom in Christian Theological Perspective,” I turn to theological reflection on ecomartyrdom in light of the Christian tradition and the aforementioned evolution that took place in Christianologies of martyrdom in the twentieth century. Here I lay out the contours of that evolution in Latin American liberation theology, assess its claims from an ecotheological perspective, and uncover connections between twentieth-century martyrs of solidarity like Romero and those who have been and continue to be murdered for their defense of our common home.

Finally, I conclude with a consideration of how Christians and other people of good will might respond to the witness of ecomartyrs by honoring them with our own lived commitment

to solidarity with environmental justice struggles in the Americas and around the world. A study guide is available at the end of the book to facilitate further understanding and personal and communal reflection on each chapter. There is also a companion website available to assist with these endeavors at [www.ecomartyrdom.net](http://www.ecomartyrdom.net).

In order to recognize the truly collaborative nature of all theological research projects, I would like to acknowledge those whose influence can be felt in these pages here, rather than in a separate acknowledgments section. Any errors or shortcomings in these pages are my own, of course, but this book would not have been possible without the support of many friends, family members, colleagues, students, and all those who have borne witness to the witness of ecomartyrs in writing, documentary films, online video tributes, music, artwork, and the continued struggle for environmental justice. First and foremost, I give thanks for my spouse, David, and our children, who have unconditionally supported my passion for this project. I also give thanks to Robert Ellsberg for his encouragement over the past few years and for seeing the promise of this particular project and its relevance to the mission of Orbis Books, which I have long admired.

Memory of martyrdom in Latin America takes on many rich and varied forms, including artistic expression. This book would not be complete without the artwork that graces both its cover and the pages of chapter 4. I therefore offer my deepest gratitude to Alexander Serpas, the Salvadoran artist who created the cover image, "*Ecomartirio: voz de la tierra, fuerza de vida*" ("*Ecomartyrdom: voice of the earth, life force*"). Many thanks also to Grace McMullen, my former student and Wake Forest University School of Divinity alum who crafted the prints of Josimo, Chico, Alicides, Dorothy, Marcelo, and Berta for chapter 4 with loving care and prayerful attention.

My colleagues at Wake Forest University School of Divinity have offered unwavering support for my research, and I am especially inspired by the work of my colleague Melanie Harris, whose ecowomanist wisdom graces some of these pages. Other Wake Forest colleagues who have been influential for this project and generous with their wisdom and insights include Miles Silman and John Knox, both of whom are far more knowledgeable than I am with regard to the realities of extractivism and the work of environmental defenders in Latin America and around the world. César Ascorra, the National Director of Wake Forest's Centro de Inovación Científica Amazónica in Peru, has also been generous with his expert knowledge and experience regarding the effects of gold mining in the Madre Dios region of the Amazon and beyond. Several Wake Forest students and alums have accompanied me on my journey through this book project as well. I offer my thanks to Joy Williams, Taína Díaz-Reyes, Jessica Rowe, and Liz Esquivel for their assistance, care, questions, and insights throughout my research and writing process. Many additional thanks to all of the students in both my Spring 2021 class, "Religion and Environmental Justice in Latin America," and my Fall 2021 class, "Contemporary Ecotheologies." Our conversations, contemplative moments, shared grief, and persistent questioning have contributed great insights and corrections to much of my thinking in this book. You all give me hope that a better world is not only possible, it is on its way.

Outside of Wake Forest, Daniel Castillo has been supportive of this project from the beginning, and his work on political ecology and liberation theology has been a helpful touchstone for my thinking in this project. Laurel Marshall Potter is also a kindred spirit and conversation partner whose questions, insights, and enthusiasm for this project have been an inspiration to me from the start. Martha Inés Romero, the Latin America regional

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