



Dear Friends,

In the Catholic world the liturgical season of Lent has begun when we focus on the sufferings and passion of Jesus. We believe our sharing in the sufferings of Jesus will lead us to the joy of the Resurrection at Easter. It is a 40- day retreat when we are encouraged to take up the practices of prayer, almsgiving, and fasting to help us grow closer to God and one another. In light of our beliefs and practices, amid the present reality of world events, I share the following true story of faith lived by the community in Santiago Ixcán.

The signing of the Peace Accords in December 1996 ended Guatemala's brutal 36-year civil war. For the people of Santiago Ixcán, the worst years of the war were in the early 1980's, when the Guatemala army focused its wrath on the isolated rural areas of the country – as in the Ixcán. They perceived these to be havens for guerilla allies, so they devised a strategy "If you can't catch the fish, drain the water."

Draining the water meant scorching, razing, and burning to the ground 440 Maya villages. In the end, the slaughter of the innocent civilian population caught between the madness of the government and revolutionary armies would cost 200,000 lives.

In Santiago Ixcán, the guerillas entered the village first. Armed men in green fatigues gathered the people in the town square. "Come with us to *la montaña*, the bush," they said. "If you stay, the army will kill you. Join us, The Army of the Poor. When we win, we will have the power, the good houses, and the land."

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The thirty families in Santiago that had not fled to Mexico or other parts of the country, wanted nothing to do with the guerillas nor the Guatemalan army. Pedro Villatoro, the main catechist of the Catholic Church declared, "We are farmers who till the land. We don't want to leave our home. We won't go with you. What would we do with the elderly and the children living in the bush?" The people collectively decided to stay in the village.

And so the killing began. The guerillas thought the church leaders were influencing the people from joining them. A week later, they captured Pedro Villatoro, and two other leaders in the community, Luis Urban and Joselino Hernandez. They tied their hands behind their backs and marched them out of the town square to the outskirts of the village. The three men were made to kneel. Joselino knelt between Pedro and Luis and as the men prayed, the butchers slit Pedro and Luis's throats. The men ordered Joselino to wait, then, "Tell the others what happens when you don't obey." In shock, Joselino stumbled back to the church where the people prayed, waiting in agony to learn the men's fate. He pushed himself through the door and fell into the arms of one of his brothers. He told the brutal details and amid wailing and weeping, the entire community walked as in a procession, to the place of the murders. In shock and horror, they carried the limp and bloodied bodies of their beloved brothers back to the church.

When I asked Ana, or Marcos or Maria in Santiago Ixcán, "How did you survive (*la violencia*) the violence?" they all replied with two words, "*Puro oración, hermana, puro oración.*" Pure prayer, sister, pure prayer.

After these violent murders, the people felt it safer to live together and so left their homes and lived in the Catholic Church and the school. There was no food except roots of the banana trees they ground into a type of tortilla; there was no entering or leaving the village. The guerillas surrounded them; they were cut off from the rest of the world.

So, they did the one thing they knew to do - they prayed.

The catechists divided the men, women and children into separate groups and in shifts, throughout the day and throughout the night, they prayed.

When I asked, "What did you pray for?" One man responded, "To be saved from the enemy and if not, that we would be prepared to die."

"How did you pray?"

"We prayed the rosary, *hermana*, twenty-four hours a day in shifts for five months."

By then, the Guatemalan military killing machine had burned and destroyed the neighboring village of Kaibil Balam, two hours away by foot. The black smoke billowed in the sky from Kaibils' direction. Santiago was next.

The army captain leading his squadron of men outside of Kaibil Balam had been given the order to "destroy Santiago Ixcán." Years later, after the war, a former soldier from this squadron told the following story to a person from Santiago...

"We had the orders to destroy Santiago Ixcán. But then something strange happened. A thick fog descended upon the area. In the fog, within a cloud, we saw a man mounted on a white horse. (St. James the Apostle is Santiago Ixcán's patron saint. He is most often depicted mounted on a white horse brandishing a sword.) We were shook up. We weren't familiar with this part of the jungle, we couldn't see, we were disorientated. The squadron leader communicated with his commander on walkie-talkie, "We're lost! We can't see the way in this fog!" The voice on the other end barked, "Abandon the mission, turn around!"

Santiago Ixcán was the only village in the area that wasn't burned to the ground.

I walk down the streets of Santiago Ixcán now and often think, I am on holy ground. I think of Pedro Villatoro, Luis Urban and all the others - these men of faith who gave their lives for the truth and their community. I remember the words of the author Tertullian, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of faith." And I know this to be true in the lives of the people. I witness their deep faith, their perseverance in prayer, their solidarity, especially in times of suffering and hardship.

A song they often sing particularly moves me, "*Pasa lo que pasa, venga lo que venga, sigamos adelante en la obra del Señor.*" Let happen what will happen, let come what will come, we will continue to go forward in the Lord's work. And they do - go forward - survivors of a war that taught them reliance on God and the power of prayer and the blood of the martyrs that watered the seeds of their faith.

Then and Now.

Thank you for your prayers and financial support of our mission! May God bless you and yours. Have a blessed Lent and Easter.

Our hearts and prayers go out for the people of the Ukraine.

Sincerely,



Kathy Snider



The crosses marking where the men were murdered.

We elected a new board of directors in March 2022 and are excited for God's plan as we go forward in serving the people in the Ixcán. A special thanks to Judy Van Lishout, Mary Kay Tokach, and Sharon Nelson who served on the board for years and are moving on to new endeavors. We are grateful for their gifts of time and talent that they so generously shared.

Guatemala mission goes forward under the direction of our on-site administer, Javier Gonzalez, and Kathy Snider from the U.S. Our outreach programs of corn distribution, Las Luchadoras women's group, water holding tank distribution, and assisting those who come with various needs, plus our education programs of scholarships and the library are in place and functioning well.

OUR MISSION STATEMENT

Ixcán Ministries is a Christian lay mission serving as a ministry of presence with the Maya people in the Ixcán jungle of Guatemala. We act as a bridge between cultures for the exchange of gifts to transform lives and society.

Our programs include- Scholarships, Community Library, Women's Micro-business, Medical, Housing, and Food Assistance, Spiritual and Pastoral Accompaniment, and Promotion of Peace and Justice.

Ixcán Ministries is a 501(c) 3 organization. Your contributions are tax deductible.

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