



Bishop Gerardi: A Life Devoted to Social Justice

By: Jacob Bathanti, GHRC Intern

April 26, 2008 marked the tenth anniversary of the assassination of Bishop Juan José Gerardi Conedera. In Gerardi's extensive career, he championed the rights of the indigenous and waged a vibrant campaign against the culture of violence that continues to obstruct the path towards peaceful reconciliation. Bishop Gerardi was the driving force behind the Recovery of Historical Memory Project (REMHI), a Catholic Church-sponsored commission that sought to use Guatemalan collective memory in order to promote social reconstruction and political transparency. REMHI also catalogued the atrocities carried out by the Guatemalan military during the internal armed conflict (1960—1996), laying blame on the army for more than 90% of the abuses committed during the civil war. The REMHI Report was widely disseminated and its conclusions were validated by the United Nations Truth Commission.

Two days after the REMHI Report was released, Gerardi was brutally assassinated in his home. He was murdered for his commitment to human rights, his spirit, and his activism—but his death was not in vain. His trial led to unprecedented convictions of military officers and the legacy of his passion continues to drive activists, advocates and civic leaders alike. In conjunction with the 10th Anniversary of his assassination, GHRC held a bilingual memorial service in April 2008 to honor Bishop Gerardi. This time line of his life and trial (other side) is a continuation of GHRC's effort to commemorate the life and work of this extraordinary man.

Dec. 27, 1922: Gerardi is born in Guatemala City to parents of Italian origin.

Dec. 21, 1946: Ordained. Gerardi receives postings to rural areas of Guatemala where he becomes aware of both the rich culture and the struggles of the indigenous people.

Aug. 11, 1967: Assumes post as Bishop of Verapaz.

Sept. 1974: Appointed Bishop of the department of Quiché.

Jan.-Feb. 1979: At the Third General Episcopal Conference, Gerardi and others announce a commitment to the plight of the poor – a stance then regarded as radical by most clerics and political figures.

June 4, 1980: Two catechists are assassinated in the department of Quiché, part of a growing trend in which the Guatemalan Church becomes a target of repression at the hand of the Guatemalan government and military.

July 20, 1980: In response to the growing violence, Gerardi temporarily leaves the country.

Nov. 1980: Having traveled to Rome to meet with Pope John Paul II, Gerardi is denied re-entry into Guatemala.

1982: Following the overthrow of military dictatorship of Fernando Romeo Lucas García, Gerardi returns to Guatemala.

Aug. 14, 1984: Gerardi is named Auxiliary Bishop of the Archdiocese of Guatemala. That same year, he also receives a peace prize from the University of Eichstatt for work in human rights.

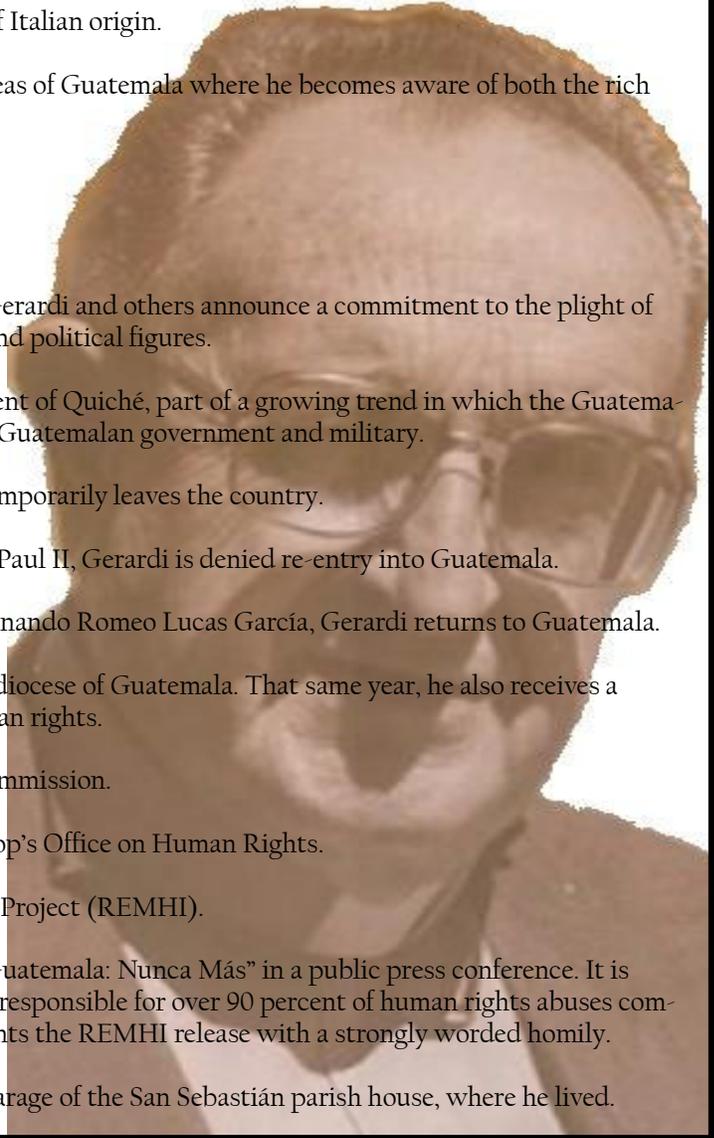
1988: Gerardi is appointed to the National Reconciliation Commission.

1990: Gerardi is named Coordinator General of the Archbishop's Office on Human Rights.

1994: Commencement of the Recovery of Historical Memory Project (REMHI).

April 24, 1998: Gerardi unveils the REMHI report entitled "Guatemala: Nunca Más" in a public press conference. It is highly critical of the Guatemalan armed forces, finding them responsible for over 90 percent of human rights abuses committed during the 36-year armed conflict. Gerardi complements the REMHI release with a strongly worded homily.

April 26, 1998: Gerardi is found bludgeoned to death in the garage of the San Sebastián parish house, where he lived.





The Gerardi Trial: Justice Delayed, Diluted, But Not Denied

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The trial of Bishop Juan José Gerardi Conedera proved to be complex and contested. Multiple, sometimes conflicting investigations were undertaken throughout the eight years it took to indict some of those responsible for Gerardi's death. From the beginning it was believed that the Guatemalan military played an active role in the crime, but to investigate the military would be risky and to obtain a conviction nearly impossible. The military, with a history of human rights violations and ties to clandestine groups, appeared to be safely veiled behind a wall of impunity and silence.

In the days following Gerardi's murder, a number of scenarios began to circulate. Officials alleged that Gerardi had surprised a pair of gay men fornicating and was murdered for his trespass, then that Gerardi had discovered a ring of thieves stealing from the parish house. Much suspicion focused on the assistant priest at the Church of San Sebastián, Father Mario Otrantes, as well as on the parish house cook, Margarita López. Although Father Mario was eventually convicted of being an accessory to the murder, early in the case it was alleged that Father Mario had acted in concert with his German shepherd, Baloo. The focus on lurid schemes sprang from a desire on the part of the military and its allies to stage a smear campaign against the Church—by this time a powerful voice for social justice—with accusations of stealing and sodomy. If they could discredit both the church and the memory of Bishop Gerardi, they would have won an important victory counteracting the effects of the REMHI report.

Through the courageous actions of a few public prosecutors and the Guatemalan Archdiocese's Human Rights Office (ODHAG), the investigation of Bishop Gerardi's murder eventually implicated a chain of command that may have extended as far as the President of Guatemala, Álvaro Arzú. Three military men were ultimately indicted in addition to Father Mario: Colonel Byron Disrael Lima, Captain Byron Lima Oliva—father and son—and Sergeant Major Obdulio Villanueva. Although investigations surrounding the intellectual authors of the crime have stalled, the Gerardi trial challenged the presumption of military impunity in Guatemala and set a precedent for action in place of silence.

July 22, 1998: Father Mario Otrantes and Margarita López are arrested. Baloo, Father Mario's German shepherd, is also taken into custody. Margarita López is quickly freed on a provisional basis.

September 17-18, 1998: Gerardi's body is exhumed to check for dog bites. None are found.

February 18, 1999: Father Mario and Baloo are released on a provisional basis.

January 19, 2000: Arrest orders are issued for Colonel Lima Estrada, Captain Lima Oliva and Sergeant Major Obdulio Villanueva, and reissued for Father Mario and Margarita López.

January 21, 2000: Colonel and Captain Lima are arrested.

January 22, 2000: Obdulio Villanueva is captured after a lengthy standoff and gunfight.

February 9, 2000: Father Mario returns from Houston, Texas, and checks into a hospital to avoid extradition to prison.

March 23, 2001: The trial for the four accused begins.

June 8, 2001: The trial ends. Colonel and Captain Lima and Villanueva are sentenced to thirty years in prison and Father Mario to twenty. López is acquitted.

July 2001: Special Prosecutor Leopoldo Zeissig goes into exile after receiving numerous death threats.

October 8, 2001: Verdicts are overturned on appeal.

Feb. 12, 2003: Supreme Court reverses appellate court ruling and orders new hearing. Villanueva is killed in a prison riot.

March 22, 2005: Appellate court upholds the verdicts against Colonel and Captain Lima.

January 12, 2006: The Gerardi case convictions are upheld by the Supreme Court.

April 25, 2007: Gerardi case convictions upheld in the Constitutional Court.

