

CHAPTER 2

Persecution of the Church

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The Army “Brings Down” Father Woods [20 November 1976]

On 20 November 1976, everyone was gathered in the church in Pueblo Nuevo. It was a Saturday, and they were waiting for Father William Woods to arrive in his small plane to give mass. “We talked to him that morning, at 6:00 A.M.,” remembers a witness who was then president of the Pueblo Nuevo cooperative. From Guatemala City, Woods had asked about the weather, and they had told him it was normal. “But the time of his scheduled arrival passed and he hadn’t arrived, and time went on, so we contacted Xalbal, because sometimes he would go to Xalbal first. But he hadn’t arrived. So we contacted the other cooperatives, but he hadn’t arrived anywhere. Finally, at 2:00 P.M. we were contacted by the Maryknolls’ main house in Guatemala City and were asked if Father Woods had entered Ixcán, because they had heard that a plane had crashed. But we learned nothing further that day. It wasn’t till the following day that we heard that he had had an accident.” Indeed, that Saturday the plane carrying Father William Woods and four other North Americans had crashed to the north of the Cuchumatanes heights, when it was approaching the town of Cotzal. All the witnesses I have talked to invariably accuse the army of having “brought him down.”¹

<i>Name of the Victim</i>	<i>Reason for Going to Ixcán</i>
1. William H. Woods	Maryknoll missionary
2. John Gauker	Housing project in Guatemala
3. Selwyn Puig	Photographic journalist (mother of four)
4. Ann Kerndt	In Ixcán for the Direct Relief Foundation
5. Michael D. Okado	Japanese-American doctor (accompanying Ann Kerndt)

None of the *parcelistas* were direct witnesses to the army action. At first, explains another witness (a catechist), “we didn’t know how he had died”; some gave one explanation and others gave another. “Some say he was shot down, others that he crashed against a tree.” Several months went by before the collective opinion was formed, based on

incoming information: "Much later we found out that, yes, he had been shot down by soldiers in the area"

What was the collective opinion based on? First, there are commentaries (which are not necessarily true) about the circumstances of the accident and the authorities' attitude in impeding investigations. One well-informed witness says: "The people working in San Juan Cotzal in the malaria unit said that a group of soldiers had shot down a small plane; word has it that people were near when the event took place and that the soldiers refused to let them look at the plane." Concerning the obstacles in the investigations: "His mother arrived in Guatemala City from the United States. The coffin was sealed and no one was allowed to open it. In order for no one to see him, the government put on a seal, so that they couldn't open the coffin."²

Second, other versions circulate about how an army officer who was very involved in Ixcán confessed that other officers were planning to kill Woods: "In 1978 Colonel Castillo said over drinks: 'I am not guilty, but other colonels planned the priest's death.'" Colonel Fernando Castillo was named national coordinator of the cooperatives by President Kjell Laugerud, and after Woods's death he became the immediate mediator between the Ixcán cooperative and the government and army. He knew the ins and outs of the army and of Ixcán. It is also possible that under the effect of alcohol he brought out the tensions between the military, which became more intense as the conflict progressed. Another witness who visited the colonel at his home on several occasions says that he confessed that high-ranking officers recriminated him during the time that President Lucas was in office: "Look, Castillo, is it true that you're in favor of the guerrillas?" This remark gives credibility to what he had said under the effect of alcohol.

Third, the collective opinion is strengthened most by the context of what happened, which is known to all. Woods was a bother to the army, not because of his personality or because of his preaching but because of his key role in the Ixcán cooperatives in obtaining lands, marketing products (using his and other small planes), and in communicating with the outside in general, thanks to his radio system and flights. Immediately after the first abductions, his license to fly was cancelled. Although President Kjell himself authorized its renewal, it was taken away on various occasions. "He was not allowed to use small planes," a witness remembers, and Woods picked up people from Mayalán who went on a delegation to Guatemala to speak to the president. His licenses were renewed, but only to go to give church services. The army took charge of marketing the community's products.

The local population also knew that Woods's house was searched on the day of the second round of abductions in Xalbal and weeks later in Mayalán. The people also knew that the army suspected Woods of being a mediator for the rebels and transporting arms, things that were never proved.

The local population also saw how the army, via Colonel Castillo and the Guatemalan air force, occupied Woods's key position in the cooperatives after he died. They made landing strips in all the cooperatives so that the army's Aravá³ could take out coffee and cardamom and take the sick to the hospital. But the army's real intention, according to the witnesses, was twofold: to gain the hearts and minds of the local population and to implant the army in the area. The flights served to bring supplies to the military barracks that were set up in several of the cooperatives. When the following priest, a German named Karl Stetter, took up his post in Ixcán, he was not allowed to carry out marketing functions.

Before moving on to see what happened to Stetter, we should remember that the death of Woods is now interpreted as a presage that was then not understood. The catechist witness says: "We did not know what was going to happen. We thought that only he would die." Father Woods was a precursor, and his death should have been a prophetic sign of the massacres to take place. As the years followed, events put his death into context: Woods appears to have been the victim of the same perpetrators who carried out the killings later on.

Father Karl is Deported [19 December 1978]

On 19 December 1978, Father Karl Stetter, a diocesan priest from Stuttgart, was arrested in Huehuetenango by the army and deported from Guatemala. The catechist in Pueblo Nuevo remembers that on that day "he took his plane to the landing strip to make sure he had enough gasoline. He told the soldiers where he was going. He went first to Xalbal and then on to Huehuetenango. From there they didn't let him come back; they took him to the military barracks in Huehuetenango. We heard that when he arrived in Guatemala City they undressed him and took him to El Salvador naked. He never came back to us."

Stetter was also a nuisance to the military in Ixcán because he was witness to what the army was doing, because he was an amateur radio enthusiast who made daily contact with the world in German, because he had a plane, and because he embodied the presence of the Church, which was regarded as competition to the army in helping the local population despite that the Church was no longer involved in the cooperative, as in the times of Woods.

Twice the army tried to trap him. Soldiers dressed as rebels visited him one night, asking him to take arms from Pueblo Nuevo to Mayalán. The first time, he told a small group of catechists. One of these catechists remembers, "We asked him what they looked like. The priest answered: One was fat and they weren't wearing uniforms. Do you think they were really guerrillas?" he asked us. We told him they were from the military barracks. 'Why?' he asked us again. 'Because everyone knows that the rebels don't bother anyone and they don't need planes to carry arms.' 'I'll go to the military barracks right now,' he said. It was drizzling. He put on his cape and left. 'Be careful,' we told him. 'What if they capture the priest? If he doesn't come back, we'll let the centers know.' He went to the military barracks. Fifteen minutes later he came back. 'I went there to let off steam. I told them I'm not to be messed around with or to be involved in politics.'"

They laid the same trap for him for the second time on 13 December, and once again Stetter refused to transport arms.

The presence of the priest bothered the army. On 6 December there was a stormy meeting between the cooperative and Colonel Castillo. The colonel wanted the members of the cooperative to build a boarding school for the entire area of Pueblo Nuevo. He wanted to inaugurate it on 20 February 1979, in honor of Tecún Umán, a Quiche hero who died when fighting against the Spanish invader Pedro de Alvarado, according to a legend. The people rejected the idea of starting building immediately, even though the colonel had sought the support of the Evangelicals. A witness who had taken part in the discussion recalls that the colonel got angry: "You should have seen the colonel. If looks could kill!"

And he threatened to take the school project elsewhere. Then the people retorted: "If you want to, take it. We aren't toys. You're only tricking us. You're a liar." They said this because the people wanted to build the landing strip first, to ensure the arrival of the building materials, but the colonel did not want this and even told them that the regular flights would be suspended.

The competition with the Church was highlighted at that meeting. The colonel wanted his school to be finished before the construction of the parochial school was completed, even though the latter had already been started. The people remembered then that Woods's flights had been suspended and that the colonel had promised to replace them and had not kept his promise. That's why they said to him, "You're a liar." The colonel replied that it was not the government but rather Father Karl who had not fulfilled his promise of providing a tractor. And the people replied that the tractor was stuck in a swamp and that the priest had fulfilled his promise.

Two weeks later the army captured Stetter and deported him from Guatemala. The local population was left without a priest.⁴

Father José María and His Sexton Are Ambushed [4 due 1080]

On 4 June 1980, Father José María Gran, a Spanish priest of the Sacred Heart congregation, whose diocese was in El Quiché, and his sexton, Domingo Batz, were ambushed by the army as they were returning from Ixcán to Chajul. A Charismatic witness, a member of a group of guitarists from Kaibil (to the east of Xalbal), remembers that Gran visited them just before returning to the highlands: "Father José María left and a few days later we heard that he had died. He was on his way from Kaibil to Chajul, visiting Santa María Tzejá first, but he never arrived in Chajul. They killed him and his sexton too. Some members of the Catholic group were happy and said: 'Let's see how the Charismatics take this. ...' From that day on, no more priests arrived."

According to an army communiqué, two subversives died in combat.

The witness from Kaibil says that there was deep division between the traditional Catholics, who did not accept the Charismatic movement, and the Charismatics. The former built another church, but Father Gran held mass only in the main church, used by the Charismatics.

The army tried to fill the absence of priests from the dioceses of El Quiché and Huehuetenango, and Colonel Castillo looked for priest friends, who visited "the Catholics" in Kaibil. According to a Charismatic, "A priest came on behalf of the government. The Catholics requested an effigy of Saint Sebastian, and it arrived by helicopter. A priest arrived and the colonel took him to bless the effigy. He also blessed the basketball court and things related to the cooperative."

The colonel also took priests to the other cooperatives, obviously only for short visits. According to a catechist witness from Cuarto Pueblo who was not a Charismatic, Colonel Castillo "later brought a priest. We were in great doubt. He brought him as the people were

in need of baptisms. But the people realized that he was not baptizing according to the rules. They said: 'Do you think he is really a priest?'

The Word of God Comes to an End

The army continued to control and threaten the Church, now no longer through its priests but through the faithful. The celebrations of the religious animators, or "animadores de la fe" (high-ranking catechists who were allowed to distribute holy communion and conducted the weekly celebration), were controlled and the lieutenant sometimes appeared for the services. A witness from Xalbal recalls: "The lieutenant entered the church, which the soldiers had surrounded. We were in a service at 11:00 A.M." He asked them if they were really celebrating the word of God or were guerrillas. He threatened them and demanded that they tell him who the guerrillas among them were: "If you don't want to say anything, we're going to get all of you indiscriminately, including children and women, and we're going to bum down your houses.' At that time, we didn't believe him, but we were scared. That was the last day we were able to celebrate the word of God." This must have taken place in 1981. It was a premonition of the massacres to come in 1982.

The Evangelicals were also controlled and threatened. The army did not, except on a few occasions, take advantage of religious divisions as it did in other parts of the country, as we saw in Pueblo Nuevo.⁵ The army distrusted everyone, Evangelicals and Catholics, traditional Catholics and Charismatic Catholics. An Evangelical witness from Xalbal recalls: "The churches were all under surveillance day and night; when there was a service, they'd come to see us. They didn't even want us to hold services. And we had to go to the military barracks to ask permission; at the end of the service we had to report back to the barracks again. When we went to ask permission, they'd say: 'You're only to drink half a liter.' They laugh at us, as if we were going to go out drinking."

The military alienated all the Christian groups. That is why with the large-scale massacres, as we shall see later on, the army chose moments when both Catholics and Evangelicals were in their chapels, celebrating their faith, to surround and kill them. It considered religion to be merely a screen for the guerrillas.

NOTES

1. In Guatemala *bajar* refers not only to lowering or bringing down but also to causing casualties or losses.—TRANS.

2. According to the Civil Aeronautical report signed by Natzul René Méndez on 25 November 1976, the accident occurred because of poor weather. But on that very day, Guy Gervais flew over the site of the accident several times and said that there had not been a cloud in the sky. The army arrived at the scene of the accident several hours later and removed the bodies, which is against the law, and did not inform the Maryknolls until the day after the accident. The aeronautical investigators only flew over the place and did not land to inspect the remains of the plane. The government refused to help a North American expert investigate the matter. Woods had said that if the army wished to kill him, it

would choose that precise canyon. One of the Maryknoll priests was informed by Guatemalan friends that they had heard military officers boasting, under the effects of alcohol, about having killed Woods (Brett and Brett 1988).

3. The Aravá is a multiple-use, medium-sized Israeli plane.

4. In February 1979 another Maryknoll priest began to provide pastoral attention to Ixcán, but on a visiting basis; from time to time he would come from Barillas to visit for several weeks. He began the Charismatic Catholic movement, which grew very rapidly, had scarcely any contact with the development projects, and put the army on the alert. According to the witnesses, the army expelled him from Ixcán in 1980. But this testimony is not well documented or widely believed, although it may be true. The last time he left Ixcán was on 16 March 1980. From June that year the persecution of the Church intensified in El Quiché.

5. Colonel Castillo seems to have been aware of the existing tensions between the religious groups, and the episodes narrated here indicate that he attempted to use them. But the army did not make these distinctions when it came to the massacres. Judging from the testimonies in which the colonel is accused of being a guerrilla by other officers, it would seem that he had begun to lose credibility.