

# Ignacio Martin Baro, leader of a college under fire

By David P. Hamilton

## Interview

*Father Ignacio Martin Baro is currently the vice-rector of the Catholic University of America (UCA) in San Salvador. He has attended Louvain in Belgium and the University of Javeriana in Colombia, and holds a doctorate in social psychology from the University of Chicago. He is a prominent educator and writer in his own country, having written three texts on social psychology and education in El Salvador.*

**Q: What led you into education?**

**A:** Well, I think it is an important field to improve the condition of the population, so I think it's a field which provides you with an opportunity to contribute, to cooperate in the shaping of the future of society and particularly those societies which have so many needs.

**Q: Can you tell me something about the history of the UCA?**

**A:** Yes, it was born 20 years ago, in 1965. And in the beginning it was thought that it would be the first private university in El Salvador. In El Salvador at that time, only the state university could be called a national university. But [the state university] has had a very difficult history over the past five years, because it was militarily occupied and its campus has been ravaged.

Anyway, at that time the national university was thought to be too socialistic-prone, and people thought that it would be good for the population of El Salvador to have an alternative.

That was the time of the Alliance for Progress, and it was a time when the Central American market was beginning, and people were very optimistic about the possibilities of development of foreign countries. And in that sense they thought that the university could contribute to forming good technicians and preparing good professionals that would be needed for the development of the country.

So at the time there was optimism, industrial development, looking ahead, looking at transforming the country from a purely agricultural one to a more industrialized kind of country. So from those two perspectives, just having an alternative to the national university, and answering the needs of national development, was born our university.

Now very soon, our university thought that what was important was not simply events of cultural development or technical development, but that the problems of the country had their roots in society. [El Salvador's society] is structured very badly, in that a very small section of the population has all the power, all the wealth, everything, and the majority of the population, where we have bad human conditions, has nothing.

So then we thought that the most important thing for us was to study all of the problems of our society and to look for solutions, and that's what we have been doing since then. That's what got us into trouble recently.

**"Due to the past four or five years we have lost between 40 and 60 percent of our faculty . . ."**

**Q: How has your promotion within UCA come about? You started off teaching philosophy, and now you're vice-rector. . . .**

**A:** I've been teaching there for many years, since 1970 — 15 years I've been there. Different courses — philosophy, psychology, ethics, research — I've also been writing a lot and doing some research.

You know we are very few people, and my predecessor had to leave the country because there was great danger for his life. I was at that time a simple professor, but due to the past four or five years we have lost between 40 and 60 percent of our faculty. So, I was appointed provost, and I'm still there.

**Q: Can you just give some background of how UCA is organized? For instance, what departments do you have, and what do you consider to be the strengths of your university?**

**A:** We have three main divisions — engineering, economics and humanities. We have 11 departments, in which we offer basically undergraduate licenses, which are equivalent, more or less, to B.A.s: We offer about 25 different degrees at the University, and we have a student body of about 6500 students, about 80 full-time professors and 150 part-time professors.

I would say that although our main concern is with social science in order to understand the problems of our society, we are very strong and very well known throughout the country for our engineering — civil engineering, industrial engineering, chemical engineering, computer sciences and all of that.

**Q: How is UCA supported? Is it supported solely by the Catholic Church?**

**A:** No, no, never. The only support we received was from the Society of Jesuits, in terms of the Catholic Church. We have tried to get a lot of the money for the university, because it is very expensive. At the beginning we received some support from the government, but not now — they have not given us financial support since 1980. Basically, we function out of the fees and tuitions of the students, except for research projects or other projects.

**Q: Can you explain what you see as the main problems or conflicts in El Salvador from your point of view and from the point of view of UCA?**

**A:** Well, I think that El Salvador is undergoing a real civil war, first of all, and that has to be taken into account,



which means that part of the population is confronting their brother citizens. It's a real civil war, it's not just a subversion, a push by the Russians or by the Cubans in Nicaragua. It's a real civil war, rooted in the structure of social injustice, terrible social injustice which has afflicted our country for generations . . .

So since 1981, [there has been] continuously an increasing and escalating war between the rebels and the forces of El Salvador. Now the United States has been supporting the armed forces and intruding into the affairs of El Salvador, and unfortunately, supporting some horror. All the terrible human rights violations that have been taking place [are] . . . very unfortunate, since it's something I'm sure the American people don't want to see.

**"They put sixteen bombs in my house, and only six exploded . . ."**

**Q: How does all this political turmoil affect UCA?**

**A:** Well, I just told you how we lost 40 to 60 percent of our faculty in many different ways. It's impossible to think of a country undergoing civil war which doesn't affect any institution. I mean, professors, students have been killed, my house has been blown out several times . . . They put 16 bombs in my house, and only six exploded, just to give you an idea. From one day to another I lost all of my friends — as you can imagine, this civil war affects everyone. There is no one single family in El Salvador which has no shelter, or has undergone losing some relatives, losing some members of the family, having to suffer materially, psychologically, morally, personally, physically. So the UCA is not an exception. We have been fighting very hard just to keep the university not only open but effectively working, doing what we consider under those conditions very significant academic work, in favor of a solution, looking for a solution to those terrible problems of our country.

**Q: How do you keep going in the midst of all this chaos?**

**A:** Well, it's just a matter of effort, courage, faith and hope. You help people, and then you go on. . . . You know, when people think that they need ten people to do something, we try to do it with three or two or one. So it's just a matter of adapting yourself to the circumstances. In that sense, we at the UCA have been practically favored by events in that we haven't suffered as much as the majority of our population has. So in comparison to what the national university has suffered, for example, we're very fortunate.

**Q: Do you find that the threats and the violence come mostly from the government or the rebels?**

**A:** They're primarily from the government, or from people protected by the government.

**Q: As a result, what kinds of governmental restrictions do your labor under, what kind of policy changes are you forced to make because of the government?**

**A:** Well, let's say that we cannot go into all those fields that we would like to. We cannot get into all those problems we would like to. We cannot undertake many of the projects that we consider to be important and necessary for the country. We have to restrain ourselves in research. We cannot go into many parts of the country, or we do not have access to necessary data to do certain research, you know. The doors are closed for us. As soon as they hear we come from UCA, we get "Oh, no, no, there is no information for you," or "You don't have access," and things like that.

Besides we know that we are followed very closely, and although we are not afraid of suffering the consequences, still, you come to know the limits of what can be said, and what can be publicly expressed. So in that sense we have come to self-censor ourselves in what we say and what we do.

**Q: What kinds of research and projects does the government frown on?**

**A:** Well, for instance, we would like communications, having radio programs, for instance, or to get to some community development in the countryside, or to do some sociological studies, anthropological studies and historical studies. And that's not possible. All those things are curtailed, I can say. It's not that we've stopped doing what we consider necessary to do, but it is that we have to be much more careful. Certain areas we cannot get into; certain areas we cannot touch. So we do put up with a lot of restrictions and a lot of difficulties.

**Q: So life for both students and faculty is very restricted in a number of ways?**

**A:** I wouldn't say very restricted. I would say somewhat restricted. Some of the students feel it, some don't. Some of the professors feel restricted, some don't. It is very different being a professor down there than . . . here. Here, you know, you are supposed to do research; there, not necessarily. Not everybody is supposed to do research. If you like research, then you can run into problems, and then you become aware of restrictions.

But if you want to simply teach, and be no more than a teacher, then you would only feel the problems of not being able to make the big salary that you would like. Or you feel restrictions on bibliography and you don't get the books you need. It's very difficult for us to buy books, or to have journals or anything like that.

**Q: Here in the United States, college campuses have been known as a source of social protest or unrest. Do you find this is true at UCA?**

**A:** The tradition of college and general university students is much more political there than in the United States. Here, there are several campuses in which you can say there are student movements that are relatively active. During the Vietnam War years, there was a huge national movement, but it wasn't restricted to college campuses. Well, there, the problem is that political movements were smashed in blood, and either the students had to go to the mountains and fight with the guerrillas, or they could have been killed or disappeared.

So now it's something that most students are very afraid of, getting involved in politics. You see, many Salvadorans now lead kind of schizophrenic lives: one is the public life you have, and the other one is your real life, the secret life you have with your political affiliations and your political sympathies. Some students do that, quite a few, maybe, but it is very dangerous to say "I . . ." particularly if you oppose the official viewpoint, or oppose Reagan's policies toward El Salvador.

**Q: What is the purpose of your trip in the United States?**

**A:** Well, I have been invited by a group of concerned faculty people, just to meet with people interested in what's going on in El Salvador — people interested in finding out about the problems of El Salvador, not in terms of the good guys and the bad guys, with the saviors of the Western values on one side and the Commies and all that on the other side, but those that really want to understand what's going on. And what I have is an analysis of the situation, and they thought that I could be of some help, just by bringing in some facts and analysis, and typical experiences of El Salvador. The main goal is just to help people analyze the situation.

A very simple-minded analysis of that is an East-West confrontation, and that we are "with the Gods," and rights, and so on. Well that can satisfy those with a lot of prejudice, or those who want to tranquilize their consciences, but they don't help at all to solve the problems and to get out of this civil war. So reality is much more complex, and our work has almost nothing to do with an East-West conflict. Now the problem here is that the basic policy of the United States is based under that consideration. That's nonsense, which is how people explain things in El Salvador. I mean, that's my personal philosophy.

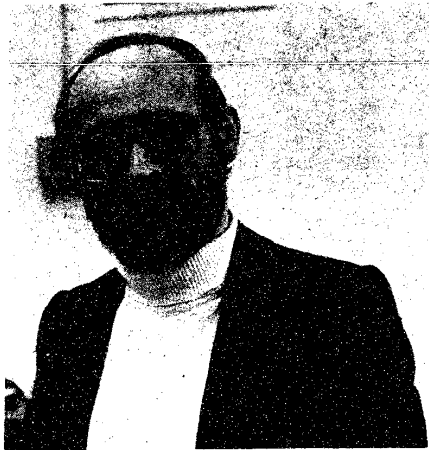
**Q: What group of professors invited you?**

**A:** It was Faculty for Human Rights in El Salvador.

**Q: Do you hope to get any kind of reaction from those that you speak to?**

**A:** Oh, no, no, no. It's just an ongoing process, it's an additional input. It's important for people to be well-informed, to have facts, to analyze scientifically, and not to be led just by ideological interests, or ideological analyses, but to have up here a picture which can help at a given moment to best design more serious kind and more adequate policies for Latin American countries.

And you know, in the sense that we can help to form political opinions, well, okay, but that's not my main concern. My main concern is just helping to provide an analysis and the understanding of what's going on down there. Now, the other thing is a matter of opinion: it's your problem, and it's your duty to see what steps you should take once you do your own analysis, and I don't pretend to impose my analysis on you. I just present what I think [are] the facts and the reality of the situation.



Photographs by H. Todd Fujinaka