The Martyrdom of Manuel Saquic

Constructing Maya Protestantism in the face of war in contemporary Guatemala

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But the purpose of straightforward remembering is to preserve something that really happened. We want to have access to scenes that were real in the past and to somehow preserve these things in our present experience; it is the search for the truth of what has gone before.¹

Prologue

On the afternoon of 23 June 1995, Kaqchikel Presbyterian minister Manuel Saquic Vásquez was kidnapped on his way home from work at the Chimaltenango Office of Human Rights of the Kaqchikel Presbytery of the National Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Guatemala. The following day his body was found in a milpa (cornfield) with 33 stab wounds, a slashed throat and torture marks. He was buried in Chimaltenango on 26 June as an unknown person “XX”. On 7 July his body was exhumed under the auspices of the United Nation’s Misión de las Naciones Unidad de Verificación de los Dere-

MINUGUA’s Third Report from November 1995 remarks that “The director of the Mission judged the assassination as very grave in terms of the observance of human rights, indicating that it was not a common crime but one destined to frighten entities and people that work in the defense of such rights” (1995:11).

Approaching the first anniversary of Saquic’s assassination, the Kaqchikel Presbytery, largely under the leadership of another Kaqchikel minister, Lucio Martínez, organized a series of memorial services in communities where Saquic had worked and where the presbytery had established an ecumenical pattern of ministry in the latter half of the 1980s. Martínez himself later died of a heart attack which some say was related to stress experienced due to threats against his own life. The commemorative events began on 4 June and were timed to end, on the anniversary of Saquic’s disappearance, with an ecumenical religious service (acta religiosa) in the central plaza of Chimaltenango and a march from the place where his body was found in the municipality (municipio) of Parramos back to the Chimaltenango general cemetery. The march route led past the military base where the suspected intellectual author of Saquic’s murder was the local military commissioner. While the commissioner was both known in and a frequent visitor to Chimaltenango, no action has ever been taken against him or his two sons who


3 Unless otherwise noted, quotations from Spanish sources are my own translations.