



Lent 2026

Dear Friends,

On the left front wall of our Catholic church is a marble plaque with the names of five men. It reads: Martyrs of the armed conflict Santiago Ixcán 1982 — Pedro Patrocinio Villatoro, Miguel Perez Toma, Amado Velasquez, Americo Vicente Villatoro, Luis Urban— If we live, we live for God, if we die, we die for God. In life and death we belong to God. – Romans 14:8.

On February 20th the Catholic community here celebrated “el dia de los martires”— a day they have marked on the calendar every year to honor and preserve the memory of the martyrs of Santiago Ixcán. In doing so, they keep alive their witness of faith for present and future generations.

The day began with morning processions to the church from the three different points in the village where the five men had been murdered at different times. I was assigned to the group that headed west on the road to the communal fields where Miguel Perez Toma’s partially decomposed, tortured body was found a month after he had been forced from his home at 1:00 am and disappeared. Miguel was only forty-five years old, a father of eight, and a catechist, a lay-leader in the church.

Miguel’s white-painted cross adorned with candles and flowers stands on the left side of the gravel road up a steep slope that had been cleared early that morning by his son Diego and Diego’s wife, Elena. A small group of us gathered around the cross. We sang, prayed, then listened as Alejandro, a catechist, read a verse from the Bible and spoke how, as a child, he remembered Miguel who prayed the rosary or read the Bible on breaks while working in the field.



This historical memorial of our martyrs seems fitting in that it occurs during the liturgical season of Lent, when Catholics focus on the passion and death of Jesus as we prepare for Easter. I am thinking how these men and countless others in Guatemala lived in a very real way a form of Lent and Good Friday. The Church in Guatemala — especially in our Diocese of El Quiché — was one of the hardest hit during the violence of the 36-year-civil war. Catechists, priests, and lay leaders were killed precisely because they accompanied the poor and proclaimed the Gospel.

I remember the stories told here when, at the height of the violence of the 1980s, our Catholic leaders lost their lives for refusing to take up arms, leave their families and homes, and fight in the civil war. They wanted only to work the land. They stayed in the village. They prayed. They preached God’s Word. And they were brutally murdered.

I stood before Miguel Perez’s cross, facing the group. Looking beyond the cross, I saw Diego, Miguel’s son, sitting directly behind the cross on a tree stump. That’s it. Death doesn’t have the final word. Tertullian, a North African Christian writer said, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of faith.” The war-ravaged church in Guatemala and Santiago Ixcán didn’t disappear; it endured. The blood that was spilled from these five men of our village consecrated the ground and gave rise to a vibrant community

of faith that lives today. Catechists continue— Diego is one of them.

Diego gave a short reflection about his father then we closed in prayer, which included God's forgiveness for the perpetrators. One-by-one, in single file we made our way on the narrow dirt path down the hill to the road. We walked to the church accompanied by guitars singing the song, "If we live, we live for God. If we die, we die for God, both in life and death we belong to God."

At the church entrance we joined the other two groups who had also just arrived to proceed into the church together for Mass.

Our parish pastor spoke of these men's witness—family men who gave their lives and left us with a great commitment to forgiveness and reconciliation. He said that their faith is a great treasure, one that is deeply valuable and calls us to be more faithful and to do good for others. He closed with these words:

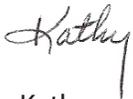
"Their deaths are part of the life of this community, leaving behind the armed conflict but never losing hope nor the conviction that we are people of peace and justice."

I am immersed here in this great cloud of witnesses, both living and dead, that inspire and bring hope. Resurrection is promised. Easter awaits.

Thank you for your continued prayers and almsgiving for our mission. May your Lenten season be rich in good works and the things that bring you and me closer to God. (Prayer, fasting, almsgiving.)

God bless you and yours.

Sincerely,



Kathy



Mission Update:

Kathy returned to the Ixcán on January 11th. Mission activities are underway with our two women's groups — Luchadoras, who are working to support themselves and their children, and the Ixcán Creations microbusiness — as well as our scholarship program and library.

The weather is already heating up, and forecasts predict a longer dry season this year, which will impact corn and cardamom crops. In response, we have our tinaco water-storage barrels and corn project in place to help meet these needs.

For Ixcán Creations women's product see our website www.ixcanministries.org and click View Ixcán Creations.

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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