

2. Panama (1989)

Introduction

The military took control of Panama in 1968. The dictator, Omar Torrijos ruled until his death by plane crash in 1981. After some internal struggles, General Manuel Noriega took control of the country in 1983. Originally a US ally, he became more and more alienated from the US. An embargo was imposed on the country by the US in 1988, ruining the economy. Noriega became more and more brutal in his repression. In 1989 elections were to be held. The bishops and some of the clergy (especially the confreres) spoke very strongly against the abuse of power, violence and repression. Nico Van Kleef was shot on election day, May 7, 1989. The tragic events were covered up, witnesses were threatened, and the case suspended until after the invasion. The funeral procession was harassed (bus driver threatened for carrying mourners, soldiers all along the route, the funeral procession was buzzed by low-flying military aircraft). After the arrival of the troops from the United States in Panama which put an end to the regime, the soldier who shot Nico was sentenced for murder. The confreres asked clemency, but clarification of the events. None of the details (cover up, why he was shot, etc.) were ever investigated. (John Prager, CM)

Martyr of the Congregation of the Mission

1. Fr. Nicholas VAN KLEEF, CM, *member of the Eastern Province of the United States, born on 18 April 1937 at Woerdan (Netherlands) and died on 7 May 1989 in Panama.*

Soon after ordination, Nico was sent as a missionary to Guatemala. In 1965 he was assigned to San Pedro de El Pino, Panama, but one year later he was in a traffic accident on the highway, seriously damaging his spinal cord, leaving him paralyzed from the waist down.

He accepted a request from his superiors that he return to Holland for therapy, with the specific condition that he be allowed to return to Veraguas, because the poor needed him. While in Holland he was given a car modified specially for his needs. Upon his return to Veraguas the community arranged to have a youth accompany him on his pastoral duties, assisting him from the car to his wheelchair and helping him move around. Despite his handicap, Fr. Nico faithfully performed his duties: celebrating liturgy and administering the sacraments, teaching classes in French and mathematics, attending to those who would come to consult him at the rectory, visiting the farms and showing religious movies, promoting sports among the youth, writing and printing the parish bulletin, participating as a member of the Diocesan Senate and presiding over the Diocesan Pastoral Planning Commission. He was known for a phrase he often said: "I want to be Good News."

Fr. Nico was martyred during the dictatorship of General Manuel Antonio Noriega in Panama. In the days before the martyrdom the military dictatorship was sponsoring a presidential election and the situation in Panama was tense. Human rights were violated and in the face of this reality, the evangelical thrust of the Vincentians in Panama was to speak out in defense of the dignity of human life. In his last homily, Fr. Nico proclaimed: "In a community where one battles evil, deceit, lies, gossip... where justice, peace and truth are defended, in such a community faith in the Resurrection is practiced."

On May 7, 1989, the day of the election, Fr. Nico was on his way to celebrate the Sunday Eucharist and, as was his custom, was calling the people to Mass using the loudspeaker attached to his car. A member of the Panamanian National Guard stopped Nico's car, entered the car and sat behind Fr. Nico, holding a rifle to his head. Though Fr. Nico was prevented from proclaiming God's Word from the pulpit that day, he proclaimed it by his own sacrifice and martyrdom. On the way to police headquarters, the soldier shot Fr. Nico in the side of his head. The next day he died.

There were many testimonies to what Fr. Nico meant to the men and women whom he served. One testimony sums up the reality of his death: "In the reign of God there should be respect, peace, justice. In Panama there is none of that. We have a martyr, we seek to promote the reign of God."