

# Miami Herald

## OP-ED

# Will George Clooney get the Gerardi assassination wrong?

By David Stoll

February 27, 2018 5:36 PM

Actor George Clooney is filming a documentary on the murder in Guatemala of Bishop Juan Gerardi, about which there are conflicting theories. Gareth Cattermole *Getty Images*

Actor and director George Clooney is producing an Amazon documentary on the death of Guatemala's foremost human rights defender, Bishop Juan Gerardi. Clooney grew up Catholic, his wife Amal Clooney is a human-rights lawyer. Their interest in the 1998 case is good news because it never has been solved.

Bishop Gerardi was murdered two nights after delivering the report of a Catholic truth commission. Since the report damned Guatemala's powerful military for massacring civilians, the timing suggested a reprisal by the same institution. Yet the killers have never been conclusively identified.

Not such good news is that Clooney and his Smokehouse Pictures have bought the rights to the least reliable of the three books about the case, Frank Goldman's "The Art of Political Murder." Goldman is a novelist, skilled in conveying mystery, so when he first reported the case for the New Yorker in 1999, he paid careful attention to two unsettling facts:

- Gerardi's own housemate and fellow priest, Father Mario Orantes, witnessed the murder and may have participated in it. But he never gave a credible account of his role.
- Another person who greeted the first investigators at the crime scene was one of Orantes' friends, a personable young woman who turned out to be a gang leader, as well as the unacknowledged daughter of another Catholic bishop.

Could Gerardi's death have come out of the convoluted personal lives of Catholic clergy? This possibility was rejected by human-rights groups as well as the Catholic Church. They knew that army hit squads were highly skilled in covering their tracks. And so, through a fog of conflicting rumors, punctuated by the sudden death of potential witnesses, Catholic human-rights investigators persuaded government prosecutors to focus on three particular soldiers — a colonel, a captain and a sergeant. The three went on trial in 2001 and, together with Father Orantes, went to prison for complicity in the murder — not the murder itself owing to lack of evidence.

Internationally, the human-rights community celebrated this as a win. But nobody in Guatemala was satisfied. The evidence against the three soldiers was so weak that they looked like fall guys. In their 2003 investigation called "Who Killed the Bishop?," journalists Maite Rico of El País and Bertrand de la Grange of Le Monde argued that the assassins were instead:

- a gang of colonial church art-looters, led by the bishop's daughter, who were set up for the crime by
- a clandestine army network seeking to discredit President Alvaro Arzú, who had angered hard-line officers by signing a peace deal with the Guatemalan guerrillas. Of the three soldiers who went to prison, two were members of Arzú's staff who served as bodyguards for Arzú's son Diego, a friend of Father Orantes.

Ask yourself: Would a peace-signing civilian president or his military aides decide to assassinate a Catholic bishop at a rectory inside their own palace security perimeter? If they did, would they choose two bodyguards assigned to the president's son? Not very likely, and there is surprisingly little evidence pointing in this direction.

For Rico and de la Grange, the attack on Gerardi is set up not by army officers working for the Arzú administration, but by rival officers who have been purged by the Arzú administration. And so this aggrieved faction lures a gang to the bishop's residence with a false rumor — that he has stashed a large cash donation in his office.

An unsuspecting Father Orantes welcomes several youth into the house because one is his friend, the daughter of another bishop. They have been told, falsely, that Gerardi is out of town. When he instead comes home, an altercation erupts. The bishop flees but, before he can start his car, a youth high on cocaine pulls him out, stomps in his head and leaves him drowning in his own blood.

Rico and de la Grange's findings shocked human-rights groups: one faction of the army had fed them false information that persuaded them to scapegoat (naively and unknowingly) another army faction. Worse, because the Gerardi murder had discredited the Arzú administration, it lost the next election to a right-wing populist party led by former army dictator Efraín Ríos Montt. The new administration included the same faction responsible for Gerardi's murder.

Some years later, Goldman published "The Art of Political Murder." Sadly, instead of dealing with Rico and de la Grange's evidence, he accused them of exonerating the Guatemalan army,

when in fact they blamed a particular faction of the army, one of the “clandestine structures” that afflicts Guatemala to this day.

To convince readers of the guilt of the three soldiers convicted in 2001, Goldman had to rescue the credibility of the star witness who placed them at the crime scene. This was a homeless man named Ruben Chanax. Because Chanax was sleeping outside the bishop’s residence on the critical night, he was put into protective custody. At first he remembered very little, but his memory broadened as the prosecution built its case against the three soldiers. By the time of the trial, Chanax was describing himself as paid accomplice, to the point of helping rearrange Gerardi’s body. That professional assassins would leave a co-conspirator like this out on the street, destitute and available to be scooped up by prosecutors, is completely implausible.

As Clooney and his team wrap up their Amazon documentary, they need to know that “the art of political murder” went far beyond what Goldman was willing to acknowledge. Human-rights groups in Guatemala have a history of clinging to simplistic versions of history that cover up their mistakes. The Clooney documentary will be a test of what prevails in media depictions — the painful truth or a more flattering version, which assures human-rights activists that they always get it right, even when they don’t.

David Stoll is the author of “Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans.”