

30th Anniversary of the death of US missionaries in El Salvador

Article by Claire Dixon of CAFOD

One afternoon in late September 1980, a young American woman breezed into the offices of CAFOD in Central London. Jean Donovan had been working for almost two years as a lay missionary in El Salvador and she was in England on a brief holiday on her way to a friend's wedding in Ireland. Like many Americans of her age Jean was bright, confident and carefree – a real breath of fresh air. But her apparently happy-go-lucky manner belied the stresses and strains of her daily life in El Salvador. Jean's visit to Europe was a short respite from the tensions and anxieties of the tiny Central America republic where the violence and repression of the armed forces were pushing the country inexorably towards full blown civil war. The purpose of Jean's visit that day was to find out if CAFOD could provide support for her mission and the work that she was carrying out with children in a refugee centre in the little town of Zaragoza in the south of El Salvador.

Many of the children were orphans or had been entrusted to the Church centre for safekeeping by their parents in areas of the country where military death squads had established a reign of terror. Jean's task, along with Ursuline sister Dorothy Kazel, was to care for and protect the children who had fled from the conflict-torn region of Chalatenango in the north of the country. Up in Chalatenango, missionary sisters Maura Clarke and Ita Ford of the Maryknoll congregation traced and rescued the abandoned and orphaned children and, with Jean and Dorothy's help, got them to safety and sanctuary in Zaragoza.

Jean jokingly told me that she was able to carry out her work because she was probably one of the safest people in El Salvador: her blue eyes and blonde hair were an effective passport through military road blocks and checkpoints. But violence was never far away. Six months prior to Jean's visit to my office in CAFOD Archbishop Romero had been gunned down as he celebrated Mass. Along with her co-workers, Jean had stood as guard of honour over Archbishop Romero's coffin in San Salvador Cathedral as crowds of grieving mourners filed past to bid farewell to the man who had been the last protection between them and the carnage about to be unleashed on the country.

Jean and I were exactly the same age – 27 – and she had embarked upon her plan to work as a missionary at the same time as I had started working on the Latin America programme of CAFOD so we had a lot to talk about. Throughout Latin America cruel military regimes and human rights violations were the harsh reality and El Salvador was no exception to the rule. Archbishop Romero himself was killed for his outspoken defence of the poor and his pleas for an end to the repression. Jean's passion for her work and her commitment to the children and refugees from the violence were palpable. She had written to friends: "Several times I have decided to

leave. I almost could except for the children, the poor bruised victims of adult lunacy. Who would care for them? Whose heart would be so staunch as to favour the reasonable thing in a sea of their tears and loneliness? Not mine dear friend, not mine”. Whilst Jean was in Europe her companion Dorothy had tried to convey to her friends in the US just how frightening life in El Salvador had become: “Up in San Antonio they have chopped up women, you know, cutting off their breasts and spearing the kids in their wombs...I mean sick, sick stuff. Oh..it just makes you ill..You wonder – it’s just so diabolical, it makes you want to weep...”

Jean talked to me of her wish to be able to prepare a Christmas celebration for the children in her care: the first Christmas that they would face without their parents and family around them. She left my office with the intention of collecting gifts of toys for the children and with the promise to write soon with a formal project request seeking help for the children.

I never received that letter: on 4th December 1980, just weeks after Jean’s return to El Salvador, her battered, bruised and violated body, and those of her companions Dorothy, Ita and Maura were recovered from a shallow grave in the hamlet of San Pedro Nonualco where they had been brutally killed two days previously.

The deaths came at an inconvenient time for the United States government. They shone a light on the massive military assistance programme that the US was providing to the government of El Salvador; aid and weapons which were ostensibly intended to stem the tide of supposed communist influence in Central America but which only managed to terrorise and brutalise the poorest communities who had the temerity to claim their basic human dignity. The investigation into the crime, which was blocked at every turn by the Salvadorean and US authorities, eventually proved that the four missionaries – all US citizens – had been beaten, raped and shot by five members of the notorious Salvadorean National Guard.

With US public opinion outraged by the killings, three days later President Jimmy Carter suspended US\$25 million of military aid to the Salvadorean government. But by January 14th, just days before President Ronald Reagan took his oath of office, Carter announced the resumption of military assistance citing “progress” being made in the case. In the aftermath of the killings Alexander Haig, US Secretary of State under Ronald Reagan tried to mislead the investigation and the American public by claiming that the women had died in an exchange of fire with the armed forces whilst Reagan’s Ambassador to the United Nations, Jeane Kirkpatrick, stated “The nuns were not just nuns. The nuns were also...political activists on behalf of the guerrillas”.

US Ambassador to El Salvador, Robert White, who knew the four victims and was convinced that they had been killed on the orders of government, was later to say “I regard the continuing cover-up on this case as one of the most shameful chapters in the history of United State’ diplomacy”. White’s refusal to remain silent in the face of his government’s behaviour cost him his job but he continued to work with the families of the victims and the Maryknoll congregation to push for justice. It was

only in 1984 that five low-ranking soldiers of the National Guard were found guilty of the abduction and murder of the women as they drove from the airport towards San Salvador. In 1998, three of the soldiers were released for good behaviour. Two of the men remain in prison and have petitioned the Salvadoran government for pardon. Repeated attempts by the families, and most notably by Ita's brother, Bill Ford, to bring to trial the Salvadorean Minister of Defence and the Head of the National Guard thought to be responsible for ordering the killings, were constantly blocked. These two men, Eugenio Vides Casanova and José Guillermo García lived comfortably in exile in Palm Beach, Florida until October 2009 when, after an unrelated court case, the US Department of Homeland Security announced that it had initiated deportation proceedings against them for assisting in the torture of Salvadorean civilians.

But the deaths of Ita, Maura, Dorothy and Jean saw the birth of a solidarity movement in the United States spearheaded by the Churches which played a huge part in finally bringing the civil war in El Salvador to an end in 1992. On the thirtieth anniversary of the killings this year, the Maryknoll congregation and the families are preparing for a pilgrimage to El Salvador, to Zaragoza where Jean and Dorothy worked and to Chalatenango where Ita and Maura are buried, to celebrate the life and the enduring legacy of the women.

Just days before she was killed, Maura Clarke wrote what was to be her last letter to her parents. She included, prophetically, the following reflection from Thomas Merton which she said had "a lot of meaning for me these days":

"My Lord God, I have no idea of where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end...But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always. Though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death, I will not fear for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone."

Jean, Dorothy, Ita and Maura – Rest in Peace.