

30TH ANNIVERSARY OF FOUR WOMEN MISSIONARIES KILLED IN EL SALVADOR ON 2ND DECEMBER 1980

REFLECTION

by

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Introduction – historical context

It seems like yesterday that we got the word, “The girls are missing”. That was in 1980, and just 30 years ago today, on 4th December, the bodies of Maura, Ita, Jean and Dorothy were discovered in a cow pasture in a lonely spot called San Pedro Nonualco. Later on, when some of us went back to put up a simple cross to mark the spot, as I stood there it suddenly hit me full force how terrified my friends must have been as they faced death at the hands of the Salvadorean National Guard.

Yet I am certain that each one of them was where she wanted to be: that is, in El Salvador, where every family had lost loved ones to violence and where so often during the 12-year civil war we would meet people, usually mothers, going from place to place wherever they heard bodies had been dumped and buried, to find out if their son or daughter had ended up there in that unmarked grave.

The members of our mission team had been together in the cathedral of San Salvador at Archbishop Romero’s funeral in March 1980 when all hell broke loose and it seemed that death was very near for all of us. But the Church was the only institution standing up for the poor, so the main worry of missionaries was not the fear of death – each of us had faced that already – but rather that we might be pulled out by superiors or bishops back home, or expelled by the Salvadorean government. In fact, in February 1980, shortly before Archbishop Romero was killed, our team had sat down with the bishop of Cleveland, James Hickey, to hammer out criteria for leaving: if any member of the team got a death threat, that person should leave; or if the people were put in danger by trying to protect us, we should leave; or if our pastoral work became completely impossible because of the war. But we wanted to stay as long as possible, as long as our presence was helpful to the people. (These criteria were to prove very useful in arguing our case to stay, because after the girls were killed great pressure was put on the remaining mission team members to leave El Salvador.)

I should explain that I was a member of the Cleveland diocesan mission team that had begun working in El Salvador in 1964, in response to calls from Pope Pius XII and Pope John XXIII that all dioceses should come to the aid of Latin America by sending personnel. In 1980, while I was working in eastern El Salvador, in Chirilagua, Jean Donovan and Dorothy Kazel were in La Libertad, a parish of the archdiocese of San Salvador. Maura Clarke, Ita Ford and the other Maryknoll Sisters were in Chalatenango, which was a very conflictive zone north of San Salvador, also part of the archdiocese. They worked closely with the Cleveland team in La Libertad, especially after one of the Maryknoll sisters, Carla Piette, was drowned in a horrific accident while she and Ita Ford were rescuing catechists who had been captured by the army. Jean Donovan, a lay member of the Cleveland team, had found Carla’s

body and was so struck by the experience that she decided, with the permission of our team, to put all her efforts into helping the remaining Maryknollers with their refugee work.

Maura Clarke was known as the “angel of Ciudad Sandino”, so well remembered for her kindness in the town where she had worked in Nicaragua – she literally gave her shoes away to the poor. Ita Ford was trying to get people out of refugee camps in Chalatenango – I remember her vividly describing the tensions in the camps between people fleeing violence from the left and others who were fleeing attacks by the army. Whenever the Maryknoll sisters sent word to La Libertad, Jean Donovan and Dorothy Kazel would go up into the hills in their white van to bring down people in danger and take them to a refugee centre in the capital where they would be safer. It was the same van that we discovered burned out on the side of the road leading to the airport after their deaths.

Faith and Church in Latin America

Pastorally speaking, in spite of the war, which was still in its early stages, it was a wonderful time to be working in Latin America. Archbishop Luís Chávez y González, the predecessor of Archbishop Romero, had attended the Second Vatican Council, and afterwards he was one of the bishops from Latin America who said that when the Council talks about the world of the poor, it means *our* continent. Even before the Latin American Episcopal Conference in Medellín, Colombia, he and the other bishops began implementing the teachings of the Council in their pastoral plans.

Great emphasis was put on the intensive formation of lay leaders. Claire Dixon of CAFOD will undoubtedly remember her visits to El Castaño, a pastoral centre in the eastern part of the country which CAFOD generously funded. It was not unusual to meet a campesino who had studied at El Castaño who would begin to chat with you about “the Church with its many charisms and varied ministries”. This tradition continues in the diocese of San Miguel. We are concentrating on Catholic Social Teaching, and people who haven’t had a chance to go to school will mention titles such as *Pacem in Terris*, *Populorum Progressio* and *Gaudium et Spes*, and be able to tell you what the documents are about.

One of the most powerful insights in El Salvador has been the concept of the three roles of Christ into which we are baptised -- prophet, priest and king – and how everything the Christian community does fulfils one of those roles: the prophetic or teaching role through catechesis and bible study; the priestly role through the Celebration of the Word, preparation for sacraments, liturgy, choirs, and prayers for the dead; and finally the role of Christ the King, that is, building the kingdom of God, a kingdom of love, justice and peace, where people have a decent job, have enough to eat, time with their families, and an education – a world more like the world God the Father wants for his children. We call this pastoral work in Spanish *pastoral social* or social outreach, and it is precisely in this role of building the kingdom of God that people have been called subversives and have been martyred for their faith.

Why did they die?

And this is the reason that Maura and Ita, Jean and Dorothy were killed. They had discerned that accompanying refugees was the crying need of the people. You see, all of El Salvador had turned into one huge refugee camp. People were running away from the bombing, and it's as if everyone took one giant step. Those in tiny villages went to the next town and moved in with relatives. We would often meet families walking along the road with just a few cooking pots, maybe a bag of clothes, and their children. Those in the towns would make their way to the next city, and those who could went to the capital, where makeshift refugee centres were set up in the churches. The major seminary of San Salvador had 5,000 people living in tents on the football pitch for five years. Technically we might call these people "displaced persons" rather than refugees because they didn't have the means to leave their own country; but they were internal refugees in every sense of the word.

In the media and official government policy, if you stayed in a conflictive zone to harvest your crops you were labelled a subversive and accused of consorting with the guerrilla army; and if you left your village you were considered suspicious because you came from a conflictive area. I remember how shocked I was to see a banner stretched across the main highway in the city of San Miguel early in 1980 which read, "It is not a sin or a crime to kill a communist or a subversive". This was the kind of brainwashing young army recruits received as well when they were picked up on the road, taken off to the barracks, had their heads shaved and were inducted into the army. The official age was 15, but often children 12 or 13 years old were recruited. So for Ita, Maura, Dorothy and Jean, "option for the poor" meant rescuing and accompanying refugees even though as missionaries they risked being labelled subversives themselves.

I think their prayer was the same as Archbishop Romero's who in the days and weeks immediately preceding his martyrdom actually trembled because he knew they would kill him very soon. And yet he wrote in his retreat notes of 25th February 1980, just a month before he died:

*I must be ready to give my life for God,
no matter what kind of death awaits me.
Unknown circumstances will be faced
with the grace of God.
He was present to the martyrs,
and if it should be necessary I will feel Him very close to me
as I render Him my last breath.
But more valuable than the moment of dying
is giving Him my whole life
and living for Him.*

Priorities in mission

How do we live for God and for God's people? I would like to reflect with you for a moment on what should be our priorities in mission today.

Mission. . . development. . . volunteering: many labels but one common effort to make our world a better place for everyone, especially for the most vulnerable. You are involved in agencies such as CAFOD, Progressio, Pax Christi, Conference of Religious, the diocese of Westminster. Thank you for your solidarity in coming here today. We have the capacity to spend some years of our lives ourselves overseas, or to facilitate the process for other people, both religious and lay, to work in mission and development. But we have to listen to voices from the South telling us where we can best be of service.

Should we not be working in dangerous areas where because we are foreigners we may be of some protection to local people? Should we not be accompanying people in refugee camps, or staying with them as they move from place to place in search of safety? And in the area of human rights, we can support the efforts of people and organisations who are campaigning for the right to land, to water, to health, to food sovereignty and security and to their own language and culture. Journalism and communications are other areas where local people need support. Mission means to be on the side of those who strive for justice. I think Ita and Maura, Dorothy and Jean would encourage us to stay with the people in ways they themselves will tell us.

Final reflection

I'd like to end on a personal note about my friend Dorothy. We went to Ursuline College in Cleveland together and taught at the same secondary school. She is the one who suggested I sign up for the Cleveland mission team, and even though her assignment was due to end, she stayed on so that her time would overlap with mine in El Salvador. I thank Dorothy for inspiring and encouraging me.

We spent Thanksgiving Day together on 27th November 1980 just four days before she died, and we shared very deeply that day. We also had a prayer service at the beach with the rest of the team, and Dorothy poured out her heart in prayer. She said we have to thank God not only for the good things but for everything, even for the deaths, the killings, the bad things. She meant that God is still there in the midst of all the things happen in our lives.

Dorothy wrote in her newsletter of November 1980, "If we look at this little country of El Salvador as a whole, we find that it is . . . a country that is writhing in pain – a country that daily faces the loss of so many of its people – and yet a country that is waiting, hoping, and yearning for peace. The steadfast faith and courage our leaders have to continue preaching the Word of the Lord even though it may mean "laying down your life" . . . in the very REAL sense is always a point of admiration and a vivid realisation that JESUS is HERE with us. Yes, we have a sense of waiting, hoping, and yearning for complete realisation of the kingdom, and yet we know it will come because we can celebrate him here right now".

During this first week of the beautiful season of Advent, recalling today's reading from Isaiah, I want to thank you again for your commemoration of the martyrdom of our sisters Dorothy, Jean, Ita and Maura; for your solidarity with the suffering people they loved; and for the part you play in the work of the Lord as he "binds up the injuries of his people" (Is. 30, 26).