



SHARE Foundation

Building a New El Salvador Today

Biographies of Dorothy, Jean, Ita, and Maura

Sr. Dorothy Kazel, OSU

Dorothy Kazel was born on June 30, 1939 in Cleveland, Ohio. She decided, even though she was engaged, to join the Cleveland Ursuline Nuns in 1960 to test out her calling to religious life. Her first eight years as an Ursuline were spent teaching drug-addicted youth in inner-city Cleveland. She then moved to Tuscon, Arizona to work with Native Americans, where she realized her mission to work with the poor. When offered, she jumped at the opportunity to join the Cleveland Latin American Mission team and work in El Salvador in 1974. Although her original tasks were to visit the homes of parishioners and prepare people for receiving sacraments, her focus shifted as the violence in the nation escalated.

Dorothy quickly became frustrated by the injustices she witnessed every day in El Salvador. To work against them, she began working with poor women to better support their families through the Caritas program. As the violence and civil war escalated in 1977, her work again shifted to distributing supplies from Catholic Relief Services, transporting homeless people to refugee shelters, and trying to secure medical care for war victims. The relationships she built through this work led her to turn down the chance to leave El Salvador in the Spring of 1980. Even though her life was in danger, especially after the assassination of Archbishop Romero, she wrote to a friend that "[she] could not leave Salvador, especially now ... [she was] committed to the persecuted Church here."

Jean Donovan

Jean Donovan was the youngest of the four women, born on April 10, 1953. She spent her childhood in West Brook Connecticut as an outgoing and fun-loving girl who was very close to her family. She led a relatively carefree life, until her brother was diagnosed with Hodgkins disease. Even though he made a complete recovery, the experience left her with a deeper appreciation for the preciousness of life.

She was first introduced to the idea of mission work while studying abroad in Ireland in college, when she became close friends with Father Michael Crowley, a former Peruvian missionary. The stories of his experience remained with her, even as she returned to the United States and obtained her masters degree from Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland. While earning this degree, she volunteered with the Cleveland Diocese Youth Ministry, where she heard about the Cleveland mission teams going to El Salvador and decided that this was the experience she had been looking for.

Jean went to El Salvador in 1979 and was stationed in La Libertad, working closely with Sr. Dorothy Kazel through the Caritas program. She served as the programs accountant, in addition to carrying out family education plans and distributing supplies to the poor and refugees. She also tried to use her appearance as blonde-haired, blue-eyed American to her advantage, by accompanying refugees in danger or obtaining supplies from locations that would not be safe for Salvadorans. While working in La Libertad, she became devoted to Archbishop Romero and traveled to the Cathedral in San Salvador whenever possible to hear him say Mass. Because of this devotion, his death took a major toll on her. After she stood vigil by his coffin and attended his funeral Mass, Jean's friends tried to persuade her to return to safety in the US. Two weeks before her death she wrote to a friend that she thought of leaving and "almost could except for the children, the poor bruised victims of this insanity."

Sr. Ita Ford, M.M.

Ita Ford was born in Brooklyn, New York on April 23, 1940. She joined the Maryknoll Sisters in 1961, immediately after completing college at Marymont. After only three years as a Sister, she was forced to leave the order because of health problems. Ita then worked as an editor at a publishing company for seven years, until she reapplied and was accepted to the Maryknolls again in 1971. She went to Latin America for the first time in 1973 when she was stationed in Chile. While in Chile, she watched the chaos that occurred after a US-backed military coup overthrew president Salvador Allende. She lived in Santiago, working with Sr. Carla Piette to minister to an impoverished population that was severely oppressed by its government.

While they were still working in Chile, Archbishop Romero put out a request for more assistance for the poor in El Salvador. They answered his call for help, but did not arrive in El Salvador until the day of his funeral. The two sisters began working in Chalatenango with the Emergency Refugee Committee to help the homeless and the poor in their struggle against the military dictatorship. In August, Ita and Carla were caught in a flash flood, in which Carla drowned. Carla's death had a profound effect on her, but she remained in El Salvador, and with the help of Sr. Maura Clarke, began to heal. She went to Nicaragua for a regional assembly of the Maryknoll Sisters over Thanksgiving weekend, where her friends saw her old spirit returned by the time the assembly was over on December 1. She left the next day with this renewed spirit and eagerness to help the poor.

Sr. Maura Clarke, M.M.

Maura Clarke was born on January 13, 1931 in Queens, New York. She was trained as a teacher and began teaching first grade at St. Anthony of Padua School in the Bronx when she joined the Maryknolls at the age of 19. Her first experience with Latin America came in 1959 when she was assigned to work in Siuna, Nicaragua. While there, she was known by the people as "the angel of our land" because she gave everything she had to the poor. She and the other sisters in Siuna left after 9 years, and began to work in the capital. They were still stationed there during the 1972 earthquake that killed over 10,000 people. After the earthquake, the sisters were trapped on the top floor of the parish house, so Maura led the other sisters in tying together sheets to climb down in order to help the injured. While cleaning up from the disaster, Maura realized that the aid money sent by other nations was not reaching the poor, and she began to return to the US on a more regular basis to educate people about the injustices abroad.

Maura left Nicaragua in 1977 to participate in the Maryknoll Sisters World Awareness Team to promote vocations throughout the United States. She returned to Nicaragua briefly in 1980 to celebrate the fall of the Somoza dictatorship with the people. While there, she thought about the call Archbishop Romero made before his death for more assistance in El Salvador. On August 5, she went to El Salvador and was there to support Ita Ford when Sr. Carla was killed in the flood. After a great deal of prayer and reflection, she decided to remain in El Salvador with Ita and start a new chapter in her life, despite the exciting events in Nicaragua. She traveled to Nicaragua with Ita and two other Maryknolls for the regional conference Thanksgiving Weekend, and on December 1, she affirmed her commitment in front of the Maryknoll community to stay in El Salvador with Ita and minister to the poor.