

## Opening

*And so we begin in silence in a darkened church. Have one light in the sanctuary illuminating some image of El Salvador, a map, a photo, a work of art -- the world into which the women came.*

*We often recommend that the processional be led by a sacred dancer solemnly carrying a bowl of lit incense -- our prayers rising to the heavens. Behind this leader, four people process slowly down the center aisle, at least 20 feet apart, each one carrying a photo, graphic image, the names, or other symbolic image of each of the four women. They should be large and dramatic, perhaps created by a small group within your community in the weeks before the event. Each is accompanied by a candle-bearer.*

*The images and candles are placed in the sanctuary, and after the opening music or song, the congregation stands for a moment of silent reflection.*

**Reader:** Words of Sister Melinda Roper, president of the Maryknoll Sisters, and Father James Noonan, superior general of the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers, December, 1980:

Our sisters were killed because they lived as the Gospel of Jesus directed them to live. That Gospel illuminates and touches all aspects of human life and is never separated from it. It proclaims total freedom for all persons and societies from the slavery of selfishness, hatred and fear. This Gospel judges the proud and powerful who put their trust in the idols of money, power and status. It lifts up the needy and the poor who put their trust in God and in God's love. To those who are blind to the message of that Gospel, our sisters and countless others who daily witness to it by their lives are dangerous! They threaten political structures which promote false idols and destroy the image of God in the human person. Ita, Maura, Dorothy and Jean were committed to the Gospel and thus gave their lives in love with and for the poor. That and that alone is why they died.

*(Follow reading with a prolonged moment of silence, followed by a musical interlude)*

## Penitential Rite

*Where possible, a North American reads one of the petitions, then walks with a Central American to the front of the congregation where they stand together. As the pairs grow with each petition, they become a symbol of the community of solidarity formed out of the acknowledgement of the sins of our world. If you are not able to have Central Americans or other Latin Americans present, have each petitioner go to the front of the congregation and stand before the images of the women and the symbol of El Salvador.*

**Leader:** Twenty five years ago, four women, missionaries sent by their church in the United States to serve the poor of El Salvador, were abducted, tortured, raped and murdered, their bodies left in a shallow grave along an isolated roadside. Why did

their commitment to the gospel bring this violent death? What is it about our world, about our nation, about us, that made this possible?

Let us pray in a spirit of repentance for the violence, selfishness, fear, greed, hunger for power and control that have broken our world, as proclaimed in the days of the prophets, of Jesus of Nazareth, of Maura, Ita, Dorothy and Jean and all the martyrs of Central America:

**Response:** God our Redeemer, have mercy on us.

**Leader:** Loving God, we live in a world of injustice and inequity, and so we have need of your mercy.

**R:** God our Redeemer, have mercy on us.

**L:** Loving God, we live in a world of hatred, intolerance and fear, and so we have need of your mercy.

**R:** God our Redeemer, have mercy on us.

**L:** Loving God, we live in a world of conflict and war, and so we have need of your mercy. **R.**

**R:** God our Redeemer, have mercy on us.

**L:** Loving God, we live in a nation of wealth, power and might within a world where millions upon millions are without what they need for a minimal life of dignity, and so we have need of your mercy.

**R:** God our Redeemer, have mercy on us.

**L:** Loving God, we live in a world where the murders of these three good women could take place, and where justice in the case has yet to be achieved, and so we have need of your mercy.

**R:** God our Redeemer, have mercy on us.

*After the petitions, the community at the front of the church joins hands. The congregation reads the following prayer.*

**All:** Loving and merciful God, you sent into the world the promise of redemption from all that is broken within us and within our world. In our time, we have witnessed this saving action in the presence of our four sisters who gave their lives for the people of El Salvador. Their example helped create among us a community of solidarity which has become a seed of hope, a seed that has within it the promise of a harvest of the fullness of life for all your people.

This is your promise in this season of our redemption. We embrace this hope as a community of peoples joined in a common project of life and justice. We commit ourselves to overcome the worship of idols with worship in spirit and truth, to overcome violence and hatred with love and compassion, to overcome greed and selfishness with selfless love and relinquishment of power and privilege, to overcome the pursuit of individual gain and control with solidarity. May the spirit and example of Maura, Ita, Dorothy and Jean give us the courage and strength to incorporate this commitment into every aspect of our lives. For this we pray. Amen.

**Leader:** Let us now, in a spirit of reconciliation and solidarity embrace one another in a sign of peace.

### Song

### Readings

**Leader:** We have opened ourselves to our world and to our sisters and brothers in our rite of repentance, reconciliation and community. Let us now open our hearts to receive the word of God to our world.

**First reading:** Jeremiah 33:14-16 ("This is what they shall call her, God our justice.")

**Psalm response** (*recited or sung*):

**Leader:** Your ways, O God, make known to me; teach me your paths, guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my savior, and for you I wait all the day.

**R:** Merciful God, teach us your way.

**Leader:** Good and upright is Yahweh; thus God shows sinners the way. Yahweh guides the humble to justice and teaches the humble God's way.

**R:** Merciful God, teach us your way.

**Leader:** All the paths of Yahweh are kindness and constancy toward those who keep God's covenant and decrees. The friendship of Yahweh is with those who fear God, and the covenant, for their instruction.

**R:** Merciful God, teach us your way.

**Second reading:** From the letter of Ita Ford to her niece and godchild, Jennifer Ford, August 18, 1980

Dear Jennifer,

The odds that this note will arrive for your birthday are poor, but know I'm with you in spirit as you celebrate 16 big ones. I hope it's a special day for you. I want to say something to you and I wish I were there to talk to you because sometimes letters don't get across all the meaning and feeling. But, I'll give it a try anyway.

First of all, I love you and care about you and how you are. I'm sure you know that. That holds if you're an angel or a goof-off, a genius or a jerk. A lot of that is up to you, and what you decide to do with your life. What I want to say...some of it isn't too jolly birthday talk, but it's real... Yesterday I stood looking down at a 16-year-old who had been killed a few hours earlier. I know a lot of kids even younger who are dead. This is a terrible time in El Salvador for youth. A lot of idealism and commitment is getting snuffed out here now. The reasons why so many people are being killed are quite complicated, yet there are some clear, simple strands. One is that many people have found a meaning to life, to sacrifice, to struggle, and even to death. And whether their life span is 16 years, 60 or 90, for them, their life has had a purpose. In many ways, they are fortunate people.

Brooklyn is not passing through the drama of El Salvador, but some things hold true wherever one is, and at whatever age. What I'm saying is, I hope you come to find that which gives life a deep meaning for you...something worth living for, maybe even worth dying for...something that energizes you, enthuses you, enables you to keep moving ahead. I can't tell you what it might be -- that's for you to find, to choose, to love. I can just encourage you to start looking, and support you in the search. Maybe this sounds weird and off-the-wall, and maybe, no one else will talk to you like this, but then, too, I'm seeing and living things that others around you aren't... I want to say to you: don't waste the gifts and opportunities you have to make yourself and other people happy... I hope this doesn't sound like some kind of a sermon because I don't mean it that way. Rather, it's something you learn here, and I want to share it with you. In fact, it's my birthday present to you. If it doesn't make sense right at this moment, keep this and read it sometime from now. Maybe it will be clearer...

A very happy birthday to you and much, much love,

Ita

### ***Alleluia of hope***

**Gospel:** Luke 21, 25-28, 34-36 ("Your liberation is near at hand.")

### **Homily**

*Suggested themes: reflection on "meaning" in a culture where meaning has become distorted, superficial, commercialized, replaced by cynicism, where young people are being lost in a consumer culture that slowly kills the spirit. We have been told that our "way of life" depends upon this consumption -- no matter what the cost to others*

*of our world. We are growing increasingly alienated from each other, separated, uprooted, fearful.*

*The world needs healing through the work of justice, liberation of oppressed peoples, including ourselves -- through finding something with deep meaning for us -- something worth living and even dying for -- through solidarity in the common project of building a world where all can live lives of dignity, that dignity inherent in being created in the image of God. This is the project of redemption.*

*How does the example of these women challenge us within this culture? Their lives had deep meaning to the point that they were willing to take on the same fate as the poor of El Salvador, to accept the risk of death at the hands of a military supported by their own government. By living this gospel journey, they were able to stand secure before God. And they reveal something to us about our nation and ourselves. They are an answer to the loss of meaning. To what does their legacy of meaning, and this Advent of hope and redemption, call us?*

### **Prayers of Petition**

**Leader:** As she wrote in her letter to her niece, Jennifer, we have Ita -- and each of these women -- supporting us in the search for meaning in our world. And so we can pray with confidence:

**Response:** God of our redemption, hear our prayer.

**L:** For a rebirth of hope in our world, hope that it can be changed, that justice can prevail, through our dedication to something worth living for. For this we pray:

**R:** God of our redemption, hear our prayer.

**L:** For a rebirth of spirit, the spirit of truth and justice, in our communities, our nation, and our world. For this we pray:

**R:** God of our redemption, hear our prayer.

**L:** For courage to live lives of meaning, meaning rooted in our gospel faith and in the witness of the martyrs of Central America. For this we pray:

**R:** God of our redemption, hear our prayer.

**L:** That the legacy of these four women, citizens of this country and our sisters in faith, will live on in us, in the work of our hands, in the commitment of our hearts to the project of redemption in our world. For this we pray:

**R:** God of our redemption, hear our prayer.

**L:** For what else do we pray? (*congregants are invited to add petitions*) **L:** Loving God, we humbly ask you to receive the prayers of your people. Nourish us with your spirit of hope. Fill our hearts with the zeal to do justice. Help us find that which gives deep meaning for us in the gospel commitment of solidarity with the poor, the

work of justice, the witness to truth, to a new creation of abundant life for all your people. For this we ask:

**R:** Amen.

### **Offertory**

*A collection may be taken with proceeds going to a solidarity organization or project. Explain to the congregation the meaning of the congregation's donation and how it is a response to the theme for this liturgy and 25th anniversary. The congregation might also be invited to put in the collection baskets or plates a written statement with the commitment they are personally offering towards the search for redemptive meaning in our world. Have index cards and pencils in the pews beforehand for this purpose. These are collected and then brought in procession along with other gifts (bread, wine, tortillas, beans, or other symbols of solidarity) and placed before the altar.*

**Blessing of gifts:** God, our loving Creator who promised the fullness of life in our world, we offer to you these gifts as a sign of our willingness -- however fearful and timid we may feel -- to become bearers of a deeper meaning in our world, within our own nation and communities.

We offer these commitments and these gifts to inspire and strengthen our hearts. We offer these funds to help support the work of solidarity which is essential in the effort to heal our world. We offer this bread (or tortillas) and wine as a sign of the fullness of life that we are called to share with all our sisters and brothers, and especially the poorest and most marginalized among us. We will break this bread and share this food and this drink as a sign of our solidarity from which fullness of life emerges as a concrete expression of your presence among us.

### **Communion**

*Where possible, have Central Americans distribute the bread (tortillas) and wine.*

**Leader:** We are all invited to the table to eat and drink. This is the food of life and the cup of celebration. We are a community of hope and therefore, despite the brokenness in our world, a community of joy. This is our feast of life. Come to the table and receive this spirit of joy and celebration into your hearts.

### ***Songs of celebration during communion Rite of commitment***

*This is a candle-lighting ritual, so pass out candles before the liturgy or have them already placed in the pews.*

**Leader:** Candles are another symbol of solidarity, sharing light from the one light and bringing it into the world. The greater the community of solidarity, the greater the light. It is a symbol of the Advent season, the expectation of the return of Light into our world. It is a symbol of hope and redemption. Therefore, we do not make this gesture lightly. This is our commitment to live what we have heard and shared together in this liturgy.

*In a large congregation, have four persons, North American and Central American, light their candles from the four that were placed by the images of the women. In a smaller gathering, invite the congregation to come forward to light their own. As the flame is passed, the one lighting the candle says to the one who receives the light -- **this is the light of hope** -- and the response is -- **I will take this light out into our world.***

*When the candle-lighting is completed, a final blessing is said. Conditions permitting, as the recessional music begins, those who led the opening procession go to the altar, take the four images and candles and process out of the church with the congregation following with lit candles. A final song could then be sung outside. The song should express the commitment of the community to be light, or hope, in the world.*

### **Final blessing**

**Leader:** Echoing the words of our sister, Ita Ford, we ask our loving God to help each of us to find deep meaning in our lives, something worth living for, even worth dying for. Now let us pray for God's blessing: God our redeemer and our hope, bless this community which has come together to remember our beloved martyrs of El Salvador, Maura, Ita, Dorothy and Jean. *(pause)* God our redeemer, you have promised us life and so we come to you with confidence in our redemption. **Amen.**

God our hope, you have given us the example of these martyrs so that we can find the way to life in this world. **Amen.**

God our strength, you have promised us everything we need to follow you on the path of truth and justice so that we can go from this place with the assurance that you accompany us on the way. **Amen.**

Than may our God bless you, the God who created us, the God who redeems us, the God who sets us free. **Amen.**

### **Closing Song**