

Maura Clarke and Companions

Martyrs of El Salvador (d. 1980)

2 December

"One cries out, 'Lord, how long?' And then too what creeps into my mind is the little fear or big, that when it touches me very personally, will I be faithful?" –Maura Clarke

On a December morning in 1980 a small assembly of priests, nuns and peasants gathered in a cow pasture in El Salvador to witness the exhumation of four North American women. One by one their broken and disheveled bodies were dragged from the shallow grave: Maura Clarke and Ita Ford, both Maryknoll Sisters; Dorothy Kazel, and Ursuline Sister, and Jean Donovan, a lay missionary both from Cleveland. They had been missing since 2 December when Dorothy and Jean, in their distinctive white minivan, had left for the airport to pick up Maura and Ita on their return from a meeting in Nicaragua. Two days later some peasants alerted church authorities and led them to the site of this hasty burial.

Each woman had followed a different path. Maura and Ita had spent many years in missions in Nicaragua and Chile. Dorothy Kazel was the longest in El Salvador. Jean Donovan, only twenty-seven, had wrestled with the possibility of marriage and the security of a lucrative career before choosing, instead, to remain in El Salvador. But for each one, called by Christ to live out her faith in solidarity with the poor, the path had led to the same cow pasture.

It was a possibility they had all wrestled with and faced up to. After all, they had all to one extent or another been touched by the witness of Archbishop Oscar Romero, assassinated only nine months before. In words which Ita Ford quoted on the night before she died, he had said,

"One who is committed to the poor must risk the same fate as the poor. And in El Salvador we know what the fate of the poor signifies: to disappear, to be tortured, to be captive and found dead."

The death of the four women had an enormous effect on the North American church, galvanizing opposition to U.S. funding for the Salvadoran government. But at the same time, the deaths provoked a backlash on the part of apologists for these policies. As one American official noted, "The nuns were not just nuns, the nuns were also political activists...on behalf of the Frente [the guerrillas]." The US secretary of state went so far as to describe a "prominent theory" that the churchwomen may have been killed "in an exchange of fire" after they were believed to be running a roadblock.

This "prominent theory" had little to do with the readily determined facts of the case: that the four women were targeted for assassination by Salvadoran officers; that soldiers, dressed in civilian clothes for a "special assignment," had followed the Sisters on their way home from the airport; that the women were killed many hours later in a different place; that they were shot in the head at close range; and that before being killed two of them were raped.

In fact the four women were anything but "political activists. Their work, in support of the Salvadoran

Church, involved ministering to the needs of refugees, shepherding priests on the run; delivering supplies; offering solace to isolated and terrified catechists. These were nightmare years in El Salvador. The women's work confronted them with scenes from hell. They saw villages where the security forces had committed massacres and then refused to allow the survivors to bury the dead. "The other day," wrote Maura, "passing a small lake in the jeep I saw a buzzard standing on top of a floating body. We did nothing but pray and feel." They each had identified with the church's "preferential option for the poor," believing that the effective witness to life and solidarity with the oppressed. In El Salvador this was enough to label one a subversive.

And yet in bearing witness to the cross they were also witnesses to the resurrection. Among the believing poor of El Salvador there was not only death, but a faith and a stubborn hope that inspired them to carry on—or at least, kept them from fleeing. As Ita wrote to her sixteen-year-old niece:

This is a terrible time in El Salvador for youth. A lot of idealism and commitment are 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 people have found a meaning of life, to sacrifice, struggle, and even die. And whether their life spans sixteen years, sixty or ninety, 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 that I hope you can come to find that which gives life a deep meaning for you, something that energizes you, enthruses you, enables you to keep moving ahead.

Jean Donovan, at twenty-seven, was the youngest of the four, and the only laywoman among them. From a privileged background, with a degree in business and a promising career, she had been drawn to the mission in El Salvador and stayed on even when the risks became clear. Two weeks before her death she wrote, "Several times I have decided to leave – and I almost could except for the children, the poor bruised victims of this adult lunacy. Who would care for them? Whose heart would be so staunch as to favor the reasonable thing in a sea of their tears and loneliness? Not mine, dear friend, not mine."

The history of the church is written in the blood of martyrs. But these four women represented a different kind of martyrdom, increasingly common in our time. Their murderers dared to call themselves Christians, indeed defenders of Christian values. And they died not simply for clinging to the true faith but for clinging, like Jesus, to the poor.

See: Donna Whitson Brett and Edward T. Brett, *Murdered in Central America* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988); Penny Lemoux (with Arthur Jones and Robert Ellsbert), *Hearts on Fire: The Story of the Maryknoll Sisters* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993).