



## ROSES IN DECEMBER – From El Salvador to Palestine

### A Call for Moral Imagination

By Eileen Purcell

December 2, 2023

**San Francisco, CA** - On December 2, 1980, forty-three years ago, 4 US-church women were abducted, raped and assassinated at point blank by Salvadoran soldiers and buried in a shallow grave in San Luis Talpas in the Department of la Libertad not far from the Salvadoran International airport.

Our sisters -- Ita Ford, Dorothy Kazel, Maura Clarke, and lay woman Jean Donovan -- were missionaries accompanying the people – particularly the orphans, refugees and displaced -- of El Salvador as the ferocious 12-year civil war was breaking out, a war that claimed more than 75,000 lives and displaced millions more.

Their bodies were unearthed thanks to a courageous campesino as other Maryknoll sisters prayed alongside the gravesite while then US-Ambassador, Robert White looked on. The Ambassador had just celebrated Thanksgiving dinner with two of the church women, Jean and Dorothy. He subsequently lost his job for condemning the Salvadoran military's role in the sisters' murders, the coverup and U.S. complicity. He dedicated the rest of his life to human rights.

The women's deaths shocked the world and galvanized a cry for an end to US military aid to a death-squad government, and the need to address the underlying causes of the conflict, including the structural violence of systemic and pervasive poverty and exclusion.

Much like the outbreak of violence today in the Middle East, the roots of war ran deep. It was the culmination of generations of struggle against persecution, land theft, discrimination, abject poverty, and a political and economic model of exclusion and domination. And it was executed in the geopolitical context of the Cold War.

Every December 2<sup>nd</sup>, the anniversary of our sisters' deaths, we remember their lives, their love of the people, their simple acts of kindness and solidarity.

Some ask, "*Why were they killed? What was their crime?*" And what lessons can we draw as we face the suffering peoples of today? How might their witness call us to respond to the current context of suffering and war in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories?

The sisters were truth tellers.

They recognized the humanity and suffering of the Salvadoran people alongside their courage, beauty and determination to create the "beloved community" and to live with dignity.



Figure 1 Maryknoll Sister Maura Clarke & Salvadoran Family

They accompanied the poor, documenting the grinding poverty that the prevailing economic and political model reinforced. They bore witness to devastating war crimes, the overwhelming majority of which were perpetrated by the Salvadoran military and paid for with US tax dollars.

They provided a safe harbor for the children – the beautiful children, many of whom were orphaned and displaced – who had witnessed unthinkable crimes against humanity, against their parents and communities. They held them, laughed and cried with them, and sang songs with them. They took refuge in the beauty of nature, “roses in December,” the majestic mountains and florid landscapes, and the faith of the community. They shared the profound grief that comes with violence and loss and lifted up stories of hope.

In a letter written to a friend just two weeks before her death, Jean Donovan shared “*Several times I have decided to leave El Salvador. I could almost, except for the children, the poor, bruised victims of this insanity. Who would care for them? Whose heart could be so staunch as to favor the reasonable thing in a sea of their tears and helplessness? Not mine, dear friend, not mine.*”

The sisters contradicted the official narrative of the US Administration.

They exposed government-sponsored repression sweeping the country – a violence that targeted students, labor leaders, church leaders, Christian community members and the rural poor. In 1980, in a country of less than 5 million people, 1,000 people were being killed a month. Hundreds of thousands were internally displaced and hundreds of thousands were forced into exile.

They challenged US policy, echoing Archbishop Oscar Romero’s appeal to the US to stop US military aid, to end the repression and to seek a negotiated political solution. The Archbishop would later be slain while saying Mass just months before the sisters’ lives were cut short.

Their truth telling and solidarity placed them squarely in the cross hairs of a military and political apparatus that viewed anyone who challenged the status quo as a terrorist or potential terrorist.

The Reagan Administration blamed them for their own deaths. U.S. National Security Advisor Jean Kirkpatrick declared, *“The nuns were not just nuns. The nuns were also political activists.”* And U.S. Secretary of State Alexander Haig sought to justify their deaths by saying, *“Perhaps they ran a roadblock,”* as if there is any justification for rape and murder.

Their witness reverberates today, as we witness the horrific events of October 7<sup>th</sup>, including the brutal attack by Hamas on Israeli civilians, the unfolding genocide in Gaza, and the precipitous rise in antisemitism and islamophobia across the globe.

Like our sisters, we are called to listen to and accompany our sisters and brothers in the birthplace of Jesus, to share in their grief and their hope.

I believe they would join Pope Francis and the United Nations in calling for an immediate ceasefire and an end to siege, the provision of humanitarian aid, the release of all prisoners and hostages, and the pursuit of a political solution to the generations-old conflict.

I believe they would challenge us to summon the courage and the moral imagination to join with our sisters and brothers in Israel and Palestine to birth an alternative to war and occupation; to recognize that the security of the Israeli people is inextricably intertwined with the security of the Palestinian people.

I believe they would invite us to dare to recognize our shared humanity, our shared grief, and our hopes and aspirations.



I believe they would commit to repairing the breach, and to work toward reconciliation and a life grounded in equality, dignity and joy.

Jesuit theologian Jon Sobrino – in the aftermath of the 1989 brutal assassination of his 6 Jesuit brothers, Elba and her teenage daughter Celina by elite forces of the US-trained Salvadoran Atlacatl Brigade – preached that our task is straight forward: we must stay close to the people – especially the suffering and oppressed; fight to change the structures and policies oppressing them; repair the divide (reparations), and most importantly, we must keep singing.

As Ita, Maura, Dorothy and Jean so eloquently showed us, this is what Yahweh requires of us:

*“To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.”*  
Micah 8:6



Nabil Anani “In Pursuit of Utopia” 2020

**Ita, Maura, Dorothy and Jean, ! PRESENTE !**

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**Eileen Purcell is the former Executive Director of the SHARE Foundation and member of the SHARE Advisory Board. She currently serves as a Senior Advisor at IBEW 1245.**

**For more information about the SHARE Foundation and the 4 US Church women, visit the SHARE Roses in December museum at <http://www.share-elsalvador.org/roses-in-december.html>**

**To join the December 2nd, 2025 Organizing Committee contact [Jose@share-elsalvador.org](mailto:Jose@share-elsalvador.org). Phone 510 8488487.**