



Roses in December 40th Anniversary Continuing Their Legacy



PRAYER

PRAYING WITH DOROTHY, ITA, JEAN, AND MAURA

Light a candle in remembrance of Dorothy, Ita, Jean, and Maura. On the 2nd of December, for 40 minutes or 40 hours, keep the candle burning. Spend time conversing with our beloved sisters. Breathe prayers of solidarity to the people of El Salvador and those whose human rights continue to be violated as a result of past and present U.S. foreign policies.

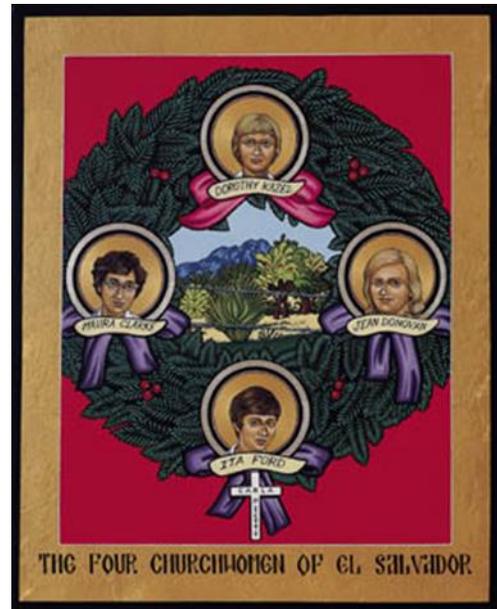
Prayer for the Four Church Women

May our remembrance of your deaths
Be a blessing on our work for nonviolence.
May our mourning and grief
Become a wellspring of desire for peace.

From the blood-stained earth
That marked your cruel deaths
May new seeds reach for the light.
From the examples of your good lives
May we be graced to continue the work.

You have passed the struggle on to us.
We celebrate you in each step forward,
Your hands in ours now,
Our hands reaching out toward the future,
All a part of the beloved community. Amen.

~ by Jane Deren, Ph.D., (11/14/2020)



Reflection Questions

- *Who were the poor of El Salvador in 1980? Who are the poor of El Salvador today? Who are the Dorothys, Jeans, Itas, and Mauras who minister and stand with the poor of today?*
- *How have past and present U.S. foreign policies contributed to massive human rights violations in Central America and other nations? What are the intended consequences of U.S. military interventions in countries like El Salvador?*
- *How do Dorothy, Ita, Jean, and Maura call us to act as God's agents of transformation in the world today?*
- *How might the violent deaths of the four U.S. churchwomen, Walter Wallace, Jr., George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and others like them, lead us toward collective conversion and Christian solidarity?*

Introduction

December 2 marks the 40th anniversary of the murders of the 4 US Church women in El Salvador by the Salvadoran Military death squads. These deaths, like the murders of Archbishop Oscar Romero and the innocent civilians of the village of El Mazote, eventually raised awareness of the brutal repression of the poor by the military dictatorship in power in El Salvador in the late 1970's and 1980's.

Each year, the Maryknoll Sisters commemorate the martyrdom of Dorothy Kazel, Ita Ford, Maura Clark and Jean Donovan, which they suffered in solidarity with the poor of El Salvador. Although a delegation from LCWR and Maryknoll had planned a pilgrimage to Salvador for this 40th anniversary, the COVID-19 pandemic has made this impossible. Below are excerpts of resource material to learn more about these courageous women and the situation in El Salvador, as well as a prayer that can be used on December 2. I encourage all of us to view the video that summarizes what happened at this link: <https://www.retroreport.org/video/a-search-for-justice/> Also, please join the Maryknoll family, the Leadership Conference of Women Religious and people throughout the world in prayer on December 2. Let us recall that all of us are called to serve others in need, with a preferential option for the poor. We are called to live in solidarity with the poor and to protect human rights and the common good. This action flows from the Gospel mandate to love God and to love our neighbor as ourselves. Sometimes this gospel way of life can be difficult and may even cost us our lives. Let us pray not only for the poor, but for ourselves, that we will have the courage, rooted in love, to live as witnesses to Gospel values no matter the cost.

Peace and blessings,

Sr. Bea Hernandez
Wheaton Franciscan
Justice and Peace Coordinator

Preface

On December 2, 2020, we mark the 40th anniversary of the Roses in December Martyrs. We invite you to join us as we honor Dorothy Kazel, OSU, Maura Clarke, MM, Ita Ford, MM and Jean Donovan who were brutally murdered by the U.S.-supported Salvadoran military for their ministry and for their dedication to those living in poverty. They were called "subversives," because they were accompanying refugee families who had fallen victim to the escalating violence and oppression that eventually led to civil war.

Perhaps Ita was speaking for all four women when she wrote:

Am I willing to suffer with the people here, the suffering of the powerless, the feeling impotent? Can I say to my neighbors I have no solutions to this situation; I don't know the answers, but I will walk with you, search with you, be with you. Can I let myself be evangelized by this opportunity? Can I look at and accept my own poorness as I learn it from the poor ones?

We invite you to join us as we celebrate the gift of these four women and remember all of the women and men who dedicated their lives to working for justice in El Salvador. Join us as we offer their story to a new generation hungry for a share of their love, selflessness, and courage. Join us as we honor all the women and men who continue their legacy today not only in El Salvador but in other suffering parts of our world.

The Four Churchwomen

December 2-4, 1980¹

In December of 1980, there were four Maryknoll Sisters living and working in El Salvador. Madeline (Maddie) Dorsey and Teresa (Terry) Alexander worked in Santa Ana, and Maura Clark and Ita Ford worked in Chalatenango. In Chalatenango, Ita received urgent requests from refugees for food, medicines and transportation. She and Maura made constant trips to the countryside to deliver supplies or to pick up refugees who had been hiding in the hills for fear of government-sponsored death squads. The church in that area was labeled “communist” because they cared for the poor who were considered a threat to the military dictatorship in control of El Salvador in that time.

Among the sisters’ in-country friends were Ursuline Sister Dorothy Kazel and Lay Missioner Jean Donovan, members of the Cleveland Mission Team who lived and worked in La Libertad, a village not far from the international airport south of the capital, San Salvador.

The Maryknoll Sisters in Latin America held annual regional assemblies and retreats. El Salvador was in a “Region” that included Panama and Nicaragua. Their assembly in 1980 was held in Nicaragua. Maddie, Terry, Maura and Ita traveled to Nicaragua for the assembly and had made arrangements with Dorothy and Jean to pick them up at the airport upon their return. They had been unable to book the same flight back and so Dorothy and Jean made two trips to the airport that day. They met Maddie and Terry’s 4 o’clock flight and took them to La Libertad where they had left their jeep prior to their flight to Nicaragua for the assembly. “A National Guardsman on duty in the airport watched the women and placed a call to his local commander.”

“It was 5 o’clock when Maddie and Terry drove away from La Libertad bound for their mission in Santa Ana. Dorothy and Jean climbed back into their white van to return to the airport. As they waited for Ita’s and Maura’s flight...the National Guardsman placed another phone call. The local commander who took the call then ordered five guardsmen to change into civilian dress for an unspecified mission.”

We may never have known what that “unspecified mission” was had it not been for several events. “At around ten that night, along the dusty road to San Pedro Nonualco, one hour from the airport and in the opposite direction from La Libertad, three peasant farmers watched from a pineapple field as a white van drove by. It traveled another seven hundred yards and then stopped. (Soon they) heard machine gun fire followed by single shots. Fifteen minutes later the same vehicle passed by on its way back.” The effort to draw attention away from the spot where the sisters had been murdered was evidenced by their van having been “left burning that night on the side of the road leading from the airport to La Libertad.”

In brief, the bodies had first been left in an open field the night of December 2. On December 3, when the bodies were discovered by local farmers, civil authorities had them buried in secret. But, on December 4, some of the local people went to the parish priest who then notified church authorities, and the gruesome assassinations came to light. The bodies of the four North American missionaries, raped and brutally shot, had been found. They had suffered “the same fate as the poor.”

¹ Quotations are taken from “The Same Fate As The Poor” by Maryknoll Sister Judith M. Noone.

Dorothy Kazel, OSU²

Dorothy Kazel was born on June 30, 1939, and joined the Ursuline Sisters, a teaching order in Cleveland, in 1960. She taught for seven years in Cleveland and later became involved in ecumenical and interracial community programs in the city. At a 1968 community retreat, one of her sisters remembers Dorothy saying that she wanted to be remembered as “an alleluia from head to foot.”



In 1974 Dorothy joined the diocese of Cleveland’s mission team in El Salvador. The team consisted of nine members working in three parishes. Their main tasks involved visiting the homes of parishioners and preparing people for the sacraments. Her brother James said of Dorothy’s decision, “She wanted to work with the people who didn’t have the advantages of the people in the United States. She wanted to spread the Gospel to people who needed help.”

But by the late 1970’s, the increased repression and political violence was changing the character of the team’s work. Maryknoll priest Stephen T. DeMott explained: “Dorothy spent more and more time transporting homeless people, especially women and children, to the refugee centers. She wrote home about the corpses that daily were being found along the roadsides and described the mutilations as ‘sick, demonic.’”

Sr. Sheila Marie Tobbe, OSU, a friend and visitor to El Salvador, said of the work of Dorothy and her companion Jean Donovan, “They went to El Salvador, a country named after the Savior of the World, to preach the good news to the poor. They trained catechists, assisted in the formation of Basic Christian Communities, carried out sacramental preparation programs, and oversaw the distribution of Catholic Relief aid and Caritas food supplies.” They were also:

engaged in working with refugees: securing food and medical supplies, finding shelters for them, taking the sick and wounded to medical clinics. They were unable to take the wounded to government-sponsored hospitals for fear that these innocent victims would be killed right there in the hospital...In the process of these duties, they fell in love with the beauty and warmth of the Salvadoran people. (reflection, December 14, 1980)

This cruel reality deeply affected Dorothy’s understanding and experience of her own faith as she shared the suffering of the people and accompanied them in their grief and in their hope. In a November 1980 letter, she wrote of El Salvador that it is a country “writhing in pain—a country that daily faces the loss of so many of its people—and yet a country that is waiting, hoping, yearning for peace

While the danger of the repression was closing in on the mission team, Dorothy and the others wrestled with what they should do. On October 3, she wrote to a friend:

We talked quite a bit today about what happens IF something begins. Most of us feel we would want to stay here...We wouldn’t want to just run out on the people...I thought I should say this to you because I don’t want to say it to anyone else—because I don’t think they would understand. Anyway, my beloved friend, just know how I feel and ‘treasure it in your heart.’ If a day comes when others will have to understand, please explain it for me.

Dorothy never made it back to the US. On the evening of December 2, 1980, she and Jean

² Based on the work of the Interreligious Task Force of Cleveland

Donovan got into their van and drove to the airport outside San Salvador to pick up the Maryknoll Sisters returning from their regional assembly in Managua, Nicaragua.

Jean Donovan

Jean Donovan, the youngest of the four church women killed on December 2, 1980, was born on April 10, 1953. She was the younger of two children and raised in an upper-middle class family in Westport, Connecticut.

Jean received a master's degree in business administration from Case Western Reserve University, then took a job as management consultant for an accounting firm in Cleveland. She was on her way to a successful business career.



But Jean was not content and began a search for some deeper meaning in life. While volunteering in the Cleveland Diocese Youth Ministry with the poor, she heard about the diocesan mission project in El Salvador. It was what she was looking for. Jean attributed her decision to “a gut feeling,” and said “I want to get closer to Him, and that’s the only way I think I can.” Perhaps that came also from the time she had spent as an exchange student in Ireland where a former missionary priest in Peru introduced her to a different world, a world of the poor and a life of faith committed to a more radical following of the example of Jesus of Nazareth.

Jean arrived in El Salvador in July 1979, a time when the repression was intensifying and the church had become a major target. She became Caritas coordinator for the diocesan mission program. In addition to keeping the books, she worked in La Libertad with Dorothy Kazel, distributing food for the poor and the refugees and carrying out family education programs. Her mother Patricia said of her work, “Jean took her commitment to the (poor) very seriously. She was strongly motivated by St. Francis of Assisi and by Archbishop Oscar Romero (canonized a saint in 2018). She translated God’s teachings into clothing for the poor, feeding the hungry, and caring for the wounded refugees—mainly children—who had lost what little they had...” As for the people of La Libertad, they loved Jean Donovan and dubbed her, “St. Jean the Playful.”

Jean was very devoted to Msgr. Romero, often coming to the cathedral on Sundays to hear his homilies which at that time were the only source of news and truth left in El Salvador. And they were present in the cathedral when the overflow crowd in the plaza attending his funeral on March 30, 1980, was attacked by security forces, resulting in a panicked stampede. The massacre left 44 dead and hundreds of wounded. As Jean sat crowded among the desperate people who fled into the cathedral for safety, she fully believed that she might die that day.

In the fall of 1980 Jean took a break from this tense reality to attend the wedding of a friend in Ireland. There she was reunited for a time with her fiancé, Dr. Douglas Cable. Many of her friends tried to persuade her to leave El Salvador, but she comforted them with the quip, “They don’t kill blond-haired, blue-eyed North Americans.”

In fact, she and Dorothy often used their very visible presence to accompany people in danger, or to get supplies into areas not accessible to others. As the violence engulfed the country, Jean felt the personal challenge of trying to cope, to understand what was happening. It tested her faith.

Two weeks before she was murdered, with the bloodbath already begun, she wrote to a friend: “Several times I have decided to leave El Salvador. I almost could except for the children, the poor bruised victims of this insanity. Who would care for them? Whose heart would be so staunch as to

favor the reasonable thing in a sea of their tears and helplessness. Not mine, dear friend, not mine.”

Jean’s time in El Salvador led her to those fundamental challenges of the meaning of life, of faith, in a world torn by injustice and violence against the poorest, the most vulnerable. It was a personal challenge and she answered it with her life.

Ita Ford, MM

Ita Ford was born in Brooklyn, New York on April 23, 1940. After college at Marymount, she joined the Maryknoll Sisters in 1961. Health problems forced her to leave after three years but she was able to reapply in 1971 and was accepted. In 1973 she was assigned to Chile, arriving there only a few months before the September 11, 1973, US-backed military coup that overthrew the democratically elected government of Salvador Allende.



The following years were bitter ones for Chile. Thousands of people, suspected to be government opponents, were rounded up and killed or disappeared. Thousands more endured torture and imprisonment. Ita lived in a poor shantytown of Santiago with Sr. Carol (Carla) Piette. There the sisters ministered to the needs of the people during the time of repression, fear, and increased misery for the poor.

Her years in Chile had a profound impact on Ita. In 1977, coping with feelings of inadequacy in the face of the harsh reality, she wrote, “Am I willing to suffer with the people here, the suffering of the powerless, the feeling impotent? Can I say to my neighbors—I have no solutions to this situation; I don’t know the answers, but I will walk with you, search with you, be with you. Can I let myself be evangelized by this opportunity?”

But even in the midst of this anguished searching, Ita was known for her lively and generous spirit. Maryknoll friends said of her, “Ita’s buoyant personality, her wit, her sense of humor and fun were striking contrast to the suffering and pain she experienced throughout her life. Her twinkling eyes and elfin grin would surface irrepressibly even in the midst of poverty and sorrow.”

In 1980 Ita and Carla responded to a call for help from El Salvador’s Archbishop Oscar Romero (canonized 2018). While they were in route to their new mission, they learned of Romero’s assassination, March 24, 1980. And so, they entered into the martyred church of El Salvador and in June of that year, the two sisters began working with the Emergency Refugee Committee in Chalatenango. In this work Ita saw first-hand the Salvadoran reality, working with the homeless, the persecuted, the victims of savage repression and counterinsurgency war, the violence of a military dictatorship determined to wipe out any trace of opposition with incredible ruthlessness.

On August 23 Carla and Ita took their jeep to pick up a political prisoner and take him home—a service they often performed for those whose lives were threatened with violence. On the way back, they were caught in a flash flood as they were crossing a river. Carla pushed Ita out a window. Finally, she managed to grab onto a branch and pull herself to the river bank. But not Carla. Her body was found the next morning. For Ita the impact of the loss of her dearest friend was profound, and left her with the question of why she had been spared. But recalling what Carla had just written to a friend, Ita said: “You’re right, Carla, we do have hearts of flesh now. The Salvadoran people have converted us.”

Following Carla’s death, Sr. Maura Clarke, already in El Salvador to explore the possibility of working there, became Ita’s new partner in the refugee work in Chalatenango. Maura was a great

personal support for Ita but real healing came at a five-day regional assembly of Maryknoll Sisters that took place on the Thanksgiving weekend. It was there that friends said they saw her old spirit returning. At the closing liturgy on December 1, Ita read a passage from one of Romero's final homilies: "Christ invites us not to fear persecution because, believe me, brothers and sisters, the one who is committed to the poor must run the same fate as the poor, and in El Salvador we know what the fate of the poor signifies: to disappear, be tortured, to be held captive—and to be found dead."

The following day, December 2, 1980, she and Maura boarded a plane to return to El Salvador.

Maura Clarke, MM

Maura Clarke was born on January 13, 1931, and lived in Queens, New York. She joined Maryknoll in 1950. In 1959 she was sent to Nicaragua where she first taught school and did pastoral work in a Capuchin parish in Siuna, a remote city in eastern Nicaragua.



In the early 1970's she was working in a parish in the capital city of Managua and was there at the time of the devastating earthquake of 1972. Managua was hit hard; an estimated 10-20,000 people were killed. Trapped on an upper floor of the parish house, the Maryknoll Sisters climbed down through a window with a rope of sheets and immediately began ministering to the wounded and digging out the bodies of the dead.

Friends said of Maura, "She was outstanding in her generosity...She would give whatever she had to the poor. She was accustomed to living in poverty." Others said she was "supportive...always saw the good in others...was very gentle...could always make those whose lives she touched feel loved." In Nicaragua, she was known by the people as "the angel of our land."

In 1977 Maura returned to the US to take her turn doing the work of mission and vocation promotion. Traveling in various parts of the country with the Maryknoll Sisters World Awareness Team, she once said of this task, "I see in this work a channel for awakening real concern for the victims of injustice in today's world; a means to work for change, and to share...deep concern for the sufferings of the poor and marginalized, the non-persons of our human family."

Maura was not in Nicaragua for the July 19, 1979, fall of the Somoza dictatorship, but she greeted the news with joy. After 20 years in the country, she knew only too well the full impact of a military dictatorship on the lives of the people. She returned for a visit in 1980, in time for the first anniversary celebration of the victory. She was described as "bubbling with joy" at the spirit she found upon her return, a spirit of incredible relief, of hope and freedom after the 45-year Somoza dynasty. And she was happy to be back with her friends of 20 long years.

But Maura had also been pondering the appeal of Archbishop Romero for help in El Salvador. On August 5, Maura went to El Salvador to explore the possibility of working there. It was hard to think of leaving behind 20 years of relationships in Nicaragua at such an exciting moment in its history, and to take on the human and pastoral challenge of El Salvador in a time of persecution. But on August 23, when Sister Ita Ford's dear friend and work companion, Sister Carla Piette, died in a flash flood, Maura decided to join Ita in her work with Salvadoran refugees.

Maura was quickly immersed in the emergency work among the victims of the repression. "We have the refugees, women and children, outside our door and some of their stories are incredible. What is happening here is all so impossible, but happening. The endurance of the poor and their faith

through this terrible pain is constantly pulling me to a deeper faith response.”

The days were often difficult and the internal struggle radically challenging:

My fear of death is being challenged constantly as children, lovely young girls, old people are being shot and some cut up with machetes and bodies thrown by the road and people prohibited from burying them. A loving Father must have a new life of unimaginable joy and peace prepared for these precious unknown, uncelebrated martyrs. 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?

On December 2, less than four months after joining Ita, Maura gave her all, even her very life, for the people of El Salvador

Lives that Inspire

Many people were impacted by the lives of the four churchwomen, Ita, Maura, Dorothy, and Jean. There are those who knew and loved them before they ever went to Latin America. There are the people in the U.S. who were touched by the letters they wrote home, by the stories they related, by the fervor of these women who risked their lives to serve among those who suffered repression, poverty and injustice there. There are the people whom they met and came to love in El Salvador. And, for Ita and Maura, there were the people in other Latin American countries where they had served as missionaries.

Ita, Maura, Dorothy, and Jean would never have said they were exceptional people. Indeed, no martyr has ever spoken of her/his valor. They told the stories of the poor among whom they lived and worked, stories of the valor, perseverance, faith, and hope in a new tomorrow that they witnessed among the peoples. And yet, it was this other-centered perspective that made the stories of these women so remarkable. They had chosen to live and walk among the poor, to eat and pray with them, to join their struggles for a better tomorrow, and, in so doing, to risk and give their lives alongside them.

There is the faith and inspiration that all four were for many who knew them. As Sister Connie Pospisil, MM, said:

Ita, Maura, Dorothy, and Jean were humble women open to the needs of the poor. They died because of their beliefs and how they lived them out in their lives, just as Jesus died for what he believed and lived.

Their lives have been an inspiration for me to stay strong with my beliefs, even as they evolve. I believe we give our lives (while living), which I have done now for 60 years with the continued support of these four women.

JEAN: Jean Donovan was a lay missionary with the Cleveland Latin American Mission Team in El Salvador. Jean's mother described her daughter as "a gusty, loving, caring person." She also said: "Jean took her commitment to the *campesinos* very seriously. She was strongly motivated by St. Francis of Assisi and by Archbishop Oscar Romero. She translated God's teachings into clothing for the poor, feeding the hungry, and caring for the wounded refugees—mainly children—who had lost what little they had..." And her dedication to the people had an immense impact on the Salvadoran poor among whom she lived and worked. Her spirit truly brightened the lives of the people of La Libertad. Maryknoll Sister, Lil Mattingly, who visited them en route to her mission in Bolivia, said: "Jean was a delight, jolly and so open, fun to be with... I was impressed by the good relationship of Jean with Dottie (young lay woman with a Sister maybe 20 years older). When I departed El Salvador for Bolivia, I recall their tenderness, and how hard it was to leave them, knowing of the dangers they faced." Sister Lil took with her the memory of her time with "Dottie and Jean" who wrote her later of the "awful things happening" in that fateful year, 1980, before they died. Yet, Lil said she will never forget "how determined they were to stay." And these memories gave her strength as she faced the assassinations and political upheaval in Bolivia.

DOROTHY: Sister Dorothy Kazel, OSU, went to El Salvador as part of the Cleveland Mission Team to "preach the good news to the poor." They also were "engaging in work with refugees: securing food and medical supplies, finding shelters for them, taking the sick and wounded to medical clinics. ...In the process of these duties, they fell in love with the beauty and warmth of the Salvadoran people." Never did they think of the danger to their own lives. They were living for the

people of El Salvador.

Dorothy's brother James said of her decision, "She wanted to work with the people who didn't have the advantages of the people in the United States. She wanted to spread the Gospel to people who needed help." He understood her desire to "give her life" for and among those in need. And Sister Lil said of Dorothy: "She was a sweetheart, and so easy to be with. I was impressed by the joy and good humor of both Dottie and Jean, so fun-loving, even as they spoke of the violence at that time by the military, and the poverty of the people... I got to see Dottie and Jean interact with the lovely folks, the women in the parish and the neighborhood where they lived." And this memory lives on, and inspires Sister Lil to this day as she now journeys with immigrants at the U.S./Mexico border in El Paso.

MAURA: Prior to her final vows, these words were in Maura's evaluation: "Sister is the most selfless, generous, outgoing person I have ever known." And these qualities that exemplified Maura touched the hearts of all who knew her. Her friends described Maura as "outstanding in her generosity." She gave whatever she had to the poor. A Maryknoll Lay Missioner who was visiting the sisters in Nicaragua recounted a story they told her about Maura: "We each receive a very small monthly stipend for small personal items we might need during the month. Inevitably, when Maura arrived home from getting her stipend from the bank, she would be empty-handed. When we'd ask her what she had done with her allowance, she would always say: 'I met someone who needed it more than I do.' And she would go the month without any spending-money." Maura's spirit of selflessness and of concern for those most in need touched the hearts of all who knew her. Others said she was "supportive...always saw the good in others...was very gentle...could always make those whose lives she touched feel loved." Is it any wonder that in Nicaragua, she was known by the people as "the angel of our land"? How might she have come to be known in El Salvador? No one will know. Maura had been in El Salvador less than a month when Maryknoll Sister Ita Ford, who worked there in the village of Chalatenango, lost her friend and companion, Carla, in a flash flood. Maura quickly volunteered to become her mission partner. Ita recognized that "Maura's great gift of kindness and love will be great for the traumatized, hurting people." And she added: "She'll be great for me, too."

ITA: From Ita's early years in the novitiate, the sisters recognized a special force in Ita "despite her diminutive size." One of the sisters in the novitiate with her said: "There was no stopping her." And added: "(She) was full of life and fun." Yes, Ita was known for her lively and generous spirit. Though she had spent years in Chile and deeply cared for the people there, it was in listening to the plea of Archbishop Romero that Ita felt called to join in the mission work of the suffering Church in El Salvador. She wanted to work with this brave and inspiring man, even knowing of the violence and repression that characterized the country at that time. And so, she left Chile only to find that, while she and her sister-friend, Carla, were en route to El Salvador, Romero had been assassinated. Ita never got to work with the person of Romero, but she worked in El Salvador for eight months in the spirit of this man and of the people inspired by his life and death. Perhaps Ita's enduring spirit and legacy that have touched thousands are most characterized in the words she wrote to her niece and godchild, Jennifer, just 3 ½ months before she, too, was murdered by the military regime that had taken Romero's life. She wrote:

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 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...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. (One reason) 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...

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...

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 it and read it sometime from now.

Maybe it will be clearer...

People continue to read and be inspired by Ita's words today. They ring out in people's hearts and spirits, and, in ways that may never be known, her words help them to choose to live life with new meaning. The lives of all four churchwomen continue to inspire today. As is often said in litanies to the martyred peoples of Latin America, they do live on and are: "*Presente!*"

El Salvador: Past and Present

The blood of the four US Churchwomen martyrs, intermingled with that of so many thousands of Salvadorans, has given the country a sacred sense of being “holy ground.” It became, and still is, a place of pilgrimage, a modern day “Holy Land” where the memory of the martyrs sustains the struggle for truth, justice and peace.



Originally populated by the Pipil and Lenca Indians, El Salvador was colonized by the Spanish over five hundred years ago. In the centuries that followed, a small land-owning elite held control of the country while the large majority of peasants, or *campesinos*, worked in deplorable conditions to harvest the major national crops of indigo, coffee and sugarcane. In 1932, a group of indigenous peasants revolted in a quest to gain the right to own land and an estimated 30,000 were brutally massacred by the military-run government, which almost completely wiped out indigenous culture.

In the 1970's, rural peasants, labor unions, teachers, and student groups began to organize once again to demand their rights before successive military governments. Christian base communities participated in these social movements, and the long-standing alliance between the Church and the economic elite began to fracture.

Nonviolent protests were met with brutal repression. The government's security forces, along with death squads, went after leaders of all the social movements. Priests, nuns and lay catechists were among them-- tortured, dismembered, killed or disappeared.

A month before he was assassinated in 1980, Salvadoran Archbishop (now St.) Oscar Romero wrote to President Jimmy Carter asking him not to send military aid to El Salvador. In spite of this plea, the U.S. did send \$5.4 billion over the course of the civil war between the Salvadoran military and Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) guerrilla forces, and trained Salvadoran soldiers in counter-insurgency and torture techniques at the School of the Americas. During the twelve years of war (1980-1992), over 75,000 Salvadorans lost their lives.



After the signing of peace accords in 1992, the United Nations Truth Commission ascribed 85% of atrocities to the Armed Forces, 10% to the allied Death Squads and 5% to the FMLN. (UN Truth Commission Report: *From Madness to Hope – the 12 Year War in El Salvador*, March 1993) Yet, the U.S. never acknowledged its role in fueling the conflict. The Ambassador at the time of the Churchwomen's death, Robert White, was fired in early 1981 by the incoming Reagan Administration for refusing to cover up the Salvadoran military's responsibility for the

murders. Worried that Congressional approval for continued U.S. aid to El Salvador could be impacted, Alexander M. Haig Jr., then Secretary of State, testified in Congress that the Churchwomen might have been shot while trying to run a military roadblock. Jeanne Kirkpartick,

one of Reagan's top foreign-policy advisors, had charged: "The nuns were not just nuns. The nuns were also political activists."

The Peace Accords enabled the FMLN to transform into a political party, the former security forces were dissolved, and a new National Civilian Police force was created. For twenty years, post-war, the far right-wing Nationalist Republican Alliance party (ARENA) remained in power, installing neo-liberal economic policies that negatively impacted the majority of the Salvadoran population. Immigration to the United States increased with over two million Salvadorans now living in the U. S. In 1990 there were only half a million.

Gang violence also increased as large numbers of Salvadoran immigrants who had fled during the war joined the Los Angeles gangs. With changes in U.S. deportation law, many gang members were deported back to post-war El Salvador where they spread their territories and established whole networks involved in violent and criminal activity.

The Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) signed with the United States in 2005 opened the door for U.S. companies to flood the Salvadoran market with less expensive goods, destroying the local economy and deepening rural poverty.

Deforestation and environmental degradation began under Spanish rule and continues, particularly through contamination of land and water by transnational mining companies. Community resistance to mining has been met with violence, including the death of land and water defenders.



In 2009, Mauricio Funes took office to become the first leftist president. The peaceful transition of power was huge for Salvadoran society, as one of the contributing factors to the war was that people could not create change through elections due to blatant fraud. Funes implemented social reforms to combat inequality, including programs such as abolishing public healthcare fees, the *Ciudad Mujer* program (providing services to women), and distributing property titles to many families.

While working for women's rights and empowerment has been a challenge, the Salvadoran women's movement won a major legislative victory in November, 2010 with the unanimous passage of the Law for a Life Free of Violence Against Women.

In 2014, the left again won the presidency with former guerrilla commander Salvador Sánchez Cerén as president. A former primary school teacher, he attributed his work for social justice to his humble roots. Sánchez Cerén named three pillars for his administration: education, employment and security, and he made great strides in improving illiteracy and strengthening alternative development models. A law prohibiting metallic mining in El Salvador was passed in 2017, the first country in the world to have such a national law.

In 2019, the left lost the presidency to populist Nayib Bukele, whom social movements have criticized for his growing authoritarianism, pursuit of austerity measures, massive cutting of public sector jobs and close relationship with the Trump Administration. In February 2020, he brought

heavily armed military and police into the legislative assembly in what was viewed as a pressure tactic for a vote.

Despite many challenges, now compounded by the coronavirus pandemic, Salvadorans continue to organize to build a more just society, and the spirit of the martyrs inspire these efforts. Today, all over the country, prayer cards and images can be found depicting Saint Oscar Romero, the four U.S. Churchwomen, the six Jesuit priests and two women killed in 1989 at the University of San Salvador, and many others who now live on through the people struggling for justice and dignity

Forced Migration: Addressing Root Causes

Out-migration from El Salvador began to accelerate in 2019 and into early 2020. The Trump Administration's efforts to close the border have resulted in a sense of desperation for many who feel trapped in a furnace of violence.

At the height of the war in El Salvador, a quarter of the population was displaced, half internally, and half fled outside the country. Many came to the U.S. Later waves of migration were provoked by the impact of CAFTA and the spiraling violence in the country. Jesuit Dean Brackley, who served in El Salvador for years, captured the essence "They are not coming to the US to pursue the 'American Dream,' but fleeing the Central American nightmare."

In more recent years, unaccompanied children and mass caravans of migrants from Central America arrive at the U.S-Mexico border only to find a host of obstacles to entry, including immediate deportation or detention, denial of the right to apply for asylum, and shutting down of the border in March 2020, an alleged "safety measure" related to COVID-19. In fact, the U.S. has deported persons with COVID-19 to countries in Central America and Haiti--exporting the virus.

Many Salvadorans who had settled in the U.S. are now facing threats to their lawful status by the Trump Administration's repeated attempts to end Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) which would affect 25,000 Salvadorans; and the administration's threat to end Temporary Protection Status (TPS) in early 2021. The latter also would affect almost 200,000 Salvadorans and their nearly 200,000 U.S. citizen children--provoking even more family separations.

While deportations of undocumented immigrants skyrocketed under the Obama Administration, the Trump Administration's xenophobic rhetoric and its aggressive anti-immigrant policy has terrified immigrants who have lived in this country, with decades-long roots.

Very little, if any, attention is given to the root causes of migration. Beyond naming poverty and violence, a deeper examination shows how years of failed U.S. military and economic policies have created the very circumstances that cause people to flee for their lives.

Instead of "blaming the victims," we have to own responsibility for our country's past support of ruthless dictators and aid packages that armed state-sanctioned military assassins. In Honduras, this continues today as extractive industries poison the land, protected by state security forces repressing the opposition. Many Central Americans would prefer to remain in their country if they could feed their children and have a safe environment in which to raise their families.



Take Action

Speak Truth to Power

The phrase “Speaking Truth to Power” originated with the Quakers in a 1955 pamphlet (*Speak Truth to Power: A Quaker Search for an Alternative to Violence*) promoting pacifism, in the belief that love can overcome hatred. It has come to mean “speaking out to those in authority” and is now used in politics and human rights activism.

American feminist scholar and Catholic theologian, Rosemary Radford Ruether, gave a lecture in NYC in the 1970s, entitled “Speaking Truth to Power.” She spoke not only of the male hierarchical power in the church but also about political leaders who hold power over populations whom they silence if the leader’s power is not accepted as the only truth. And Ruether made it clear that it is not easy to speak truth to power. It means to confront the “powers that be” with the possibility that theirs might not be the only truth, and indeed, might not even be truth at all.

The four churchwomen in El Salvador worked among the poor whose voices were ignored in the political and economic halls of power. They witnessed daily the threats and murder of innocent people whose only crime was poverty and/or a desire to live free. One is not free under a military dictatorship. And so, these churchwomen, often citing the example of the Salvadorans from whom they had learned what it meant to witness to the truth, accompanied the poor and oppressed in their daily struggles and desire for a better life. And as Saint Oscar Romero said: “When the church hears the cry of the oppressed it cannot but denounce the social structures that give rise to and perpetuate the misery from which the cry arises.”

To speak truth to power can be risky, can be lonely, can distance one from “acceptable acceptance.” But how can we live within an Earth Community that cries out for help without raising our voices against that which imprisons, crushes and destroys her? How can we turn our backs, and remain speechless, before the powers of self-interest that do not care about those made poor by their greed?

Some have asked today: “How do we speak truth in a post-truth era?” It may seem to be a post-truth era when political leaders state feelings as truth, counter true statements with false accusations, silence anyone whose idea doesn’t conform with theirs, and, in some cases, send armed military into the streets to maintain the order of the powerful. Yet, we are called to be “truthful,” to welcome the stranger, to give voice to those whose voices are silenced, to provide for those made poor, to empower those who feel powerless before the powers that be. As St. Catherine of Siena said: “We must cry out (speak truth to power) with a thousand voices for it is silence that kills the world.” When we hear the cry of the oppressed we cannot but denounce the social structures that give rise to and perpetuate the misery from which the cry arises.

Advocate for Political Change

Inspired by the Churchwomen, who were targeted in El Salvador for their work to protect refugees and those fleeing violence, take action to speak out in defense of vulnerable populations, including migrants and asylum seekers, and those in Central America who are living under threat of spiraling violence and hunger, as well as the deepening impact of the pandemic.

Some ways to do speak out:

- Explore how to submit an Op-Ed article or Letter to the Editor to your local community or diocesan newspaper; or educate others via social media.
- Communicate your concerns to your two Senators and your member of the House of Representatives.
- Organize public witness events to draw local attention to news reports (e.g., challenging border wall construction; when someone dies in immigrant detention; etc..)

Call on policy makers to:

- Stop fanning fears and blaming immigrants; instead address the [root causes of migration](#), including how decades of failed US policies have created the very conditions of violence and poverty from which migrants today are fleeing for their lives.
- Work for humane immigration reform legislation, including permanent protections for DACA recipients (Dreamers), TPS holders, and the millions of undocumented persons who are wanting to legalize their status.
- Stop repeating the U.S. mistake in the 1980s: sending millions of dollars to the military regime in El Salvador; now, the U.S. is supporting a corrupt, repressive government in Honduras, where death squads operate with impunity. Ask your Representative to co-sponsor the [Berta Cáceres Human Rights in Honduras Act](#), HR 1945 to suspend US military and police assistance to Honduras.
- Stop immigrant detention and deportations; reinstate access to asylum at the U.S.-Mexico border; and cut funding for the Department of Homeland Security's budget for Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

Welcome Delegates from Central America

It is the hope of SHARE and LCWR that delegates from El Salvador and Honduras could come to the U.S. in the spring of 2021 to speak with students, congregations and local groups about the realities in their home countries and how they are working to build justice. However, due to complications stemming from the coronavirus, there is no certainty when delegates would be able to procure visitor visas, or that the borders will even be open by next spring.

That said, it would help to know if your group might be able to host these delegates should they be able to come to this country. Hosting includes organizing and publicizing meetings or speaking presentations and, in some instances, providing housing and meals for when the delegates are in your area. If interested in welcoming delegates, please contact Jose Artiga, director of SHARE: jose@share-elsalvador.org.

Support Projects of Hope in Central America

Roses in December Fund We Remember Ita, Maura, Dorothy and Jean by Supporting Women Projects in El Salvador and Honduras

“Let’s join together and continue with hope defending and caring for Madre Tierra and the spirits”

---Berta Caceres, Honduran Indigenous water protector, assassinated March 2, 2016

Vamos a la Milpa: Sowing Seeds of Love!

As the food and hunger crisis in Honduras deepens with the pandemic, the SHARE Foundation is supporting our Honduran Sisters and Brothers with the launch of *Vamos a la Milpa*, a project that aims to achieve food security by resurrecting the indigenous tradition of planting vegetable gardens of corn, beans, squash, and potatoes in small plots of land and/or pots in every home.

The project is co-sponsored by the Jesuit-sponsored Radio Progreso/ERIC, the Council of Organizations and Indigenous Peoples of Honduras (COPINH) and many others as they tackle the desperation made worse by the Covid-19 crisis. With support, women want to plant and tend to home gardens; many are sole supporters of their household as their life partners have migrated north in search of work. But the *milpa* is more than food.

La Milpa is solidarity: *La Milpa* fosters unity – the land, the water, and the people are bound together in hope and in collective work

La Milpa is political: *La Milpa* provides daily nourishment with equity, in harmony with the environment, and with a vision of food sovereignty and protection for land defenders..

La Milpa is life: *La Milpa* is rooted in creation, nourishing with encouragement and love.

[Read Project](#) and [Donate here](#).

Water and Health for Communities in El Salvador!

The Salvadoran Association for Humanitarian Aid, PRO-VIDA, has been working in El Salvador for 35 years, hand in hand with the Salvadoran people.

Like so many impoverished countries, the pandemic has been a severe blow in El Salvador, costing lives and exposing the deep inequities, system failures and government corruption. The pandemic has magnified the economic and social crisis already afflicting El Salvador, pushed rising unemployment, caused greater militarization of the streets and resulted in deeper poverty, making it virtually impossible for many families to afford basic supplies, food or medicine. In this context, the objective of Pro-Vida’s project is to provide direct assistance and promote preventative measures against COVID-19 in the family setting with emphasis on health and water. Prioritizing women heads of household and families with underage children, funds are needed to provide medical and psychological services to more communities, including COVID-19 protection kits, family deworming, educational campaigns on prevention and rationing use of water, and more.

[Read Project](#) and [Donate here](#).

Please make a donation to the “Roses in December Fund” and send a check to: SHARE Foundation 2425 College Ave, Berkeley, CA 94704

If your congregation has a fund to which SHARE can apply for these projects, let us know and we can send the full proposals sent by our partners in El Salvador and Honduras. jose@share-elsalvador.org, tel. 510 848 8487. For more information please visit www.share-elsalvador.org.

Resources

Books about the Churchwomen

Donna Whitson Brett and Edward T. Brett, [*Martyrs of Hope: Seven U.S. Missioners in Central America*](#). Orbis Press, 2019.

Ana Carrigan, [*Salvador Witness: The Life and Calling of Jean Donovan*](#). New York: Simon & Schuster, 1984.

Jeanne Evans (ed). [*Here I Am, Lord: The Letters and Writings of Ita Ford*](#). Orbis Books, 2005.

Cynthia Glavac, O.S.U, [*In the Fullness of Life: Biography of Dorothy Kazel*](#). Dimension Books, 1997.

Eileen Markey. [*A Radical Faith: The Assassination of Sister Maura*](#). Hachette, 2016.

Judith M. Noone, MM, [*The Same Fate as the Poor*](#), Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY 1994.

Margaret Swedish. [*A Message Too Precious to be Silenced: The Four US Churchwomen and the Meaning of Martyrdom*](#), illustrations by Lee Miller, booklet, September 1992.

Phyllis Zagano. [*Ita Ford: Missionary Martyr*](#). New York: Paulist, 1996.

Article about the LCWR-SHARE 35th Anniversary Delegation

Eileen Purcell, “[Roses in December: A Call for an End Impunity in El Salvador](#),” Global Sisters Report, National Catholic Reporter; December 9, 2015

Films about the Churchwomen and El Salvador

[Roses in December](#). The story of Jean Donovan and the murder of three American nuns. Ana Carrigan and Bernard Stone. View free with your library card or college/university ID.

[Justice and the Generals](#). ICARUS Films.

[Return to El Salvador](#). Directed by Jamie Moffet.

[El Salvador , the Seeds of Liberty](#). Catholic Foreign Mission Society of America.

YouTube Videos about the Churchwomen and Women in El Salvador

SHARE: [Remembering Women in El Salvador](#).

Maryknoll: [Maryknoll Sisters: Death of 4 Churchwomen in El Salvador](#)

New York Times: [Killed in El Salvador: An American Story](#)

Alex Higgins: [*Jean Donovan: A Martyr for Social Justice and Human Rights*](#)

Online Information on El Salvador and Current Events

[United Nations 2018 Development Report on El Salvador](#)

[Committee of People in Solidarity with El Salvador](#) (CISPES)

[El Salvador Sister Cities](#)

[SHARE El Salvador](#)

[SHARE's YouTube Channel](#)

[The School of the Americas Watch](#)

[CRISPAZ](#)

[The Voices on the Border](#)

[Tim's El Salvador Blog](#)

[Upside Down World](#)