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Ita, Maura, Dorothy and Jean

John Dear | Dec. 5, 2006 On the Road to Peace

Dec. 2 was the 26th anniversary of the death of four North American churchwomen, killed in El Salvador in 1980 by U.S.-trained death squads. I remember exactly where I was when I heard the news. I was in my frat house at Duke University, bright and early. I stepped out of my room and reached down for the Durham *Morning Herald* and blanched at the headline: "Four churchwomen killed in El Salvador." Their bodies had been found in a shallow grave in a barren region some 15 miles from the San Salvador airport.

Three were nuns: Sr. Ita Ford of Maryknoll had spent years in Chile; Sr. Maura Clarke also of Maryknoll had spent years in Nicaragua; and Sr. Dorothy Kazel, an Ursuline nun from Cleveland worked in El Salvador. The fourth, a young laywoman, Jean Donovan, had volunteered to go to El Salvador through a church mission program.

Sr. Ita Ford stands, to my mind, as one of the church's giants. She was targeted specifically by U.S.-backed Salvadoran death squads because she stood up to them in defense of the disappeared. "You say you don't want anything to happen to me," she wrote her sister in 1980. "I'd prefer it that way myself -- but I don't see that we have control over the forces of madness, and if you could choose to enter into other people's suffering, or to love others, you at least have to consent in some way to the possible consequences. Actually what I've learned here is that death is not the worst evil. We look death in the face every day. But the cause of the death is evil. That's what we have to wrestle and fight against."

Sr. Maura Clarke spent 17 years in Nicaragua working against the U.S.-backed Somozoa dictatorship, before moving to El Salvador only months before her death. "If we leave the people when they suffer the cross, how credible is our word to them?" she wrote only weeks before her death. "The church's role is to accompany those who suffer the most, and to witness our hope in the resurrection."

Sr. Dorothy Kazel joined the Cleveland Mission Team in El Salvador and was assigned to work in the parish of La Libertad with Jean Donovan. Dorothy was beloved by one and all. She was feisty, lively and sweet.

Jean grew up in upper-middle-class Westport, Conn., attended the University of Mary Washington in Virginia, spent a life-changing year in Ireland, and tried to become an accountant. Instead, she joined the Cleveland diocese and Maryknoll Lay Mission programs to serve in El Salvador. After several years, she found herself in the center of a war zone. And more often than not, she and the others spent their days picking up murdered bodies left along the road.

"People are being killed daily," she wrote a friend in May 1980. "We just found out that three people from our area have been taken, tortured and hacked to death. Two were young men and one was an older man. The man had been in a government death squad, had a fight with them and quit. So that's probably why they got him. We had done a mission out there recently and they were coming to the celebrations. Everything is really hitting so

close now."

That summer, Jean's two closest friends were assassinated after they had taken her to a movie and walked her home. Their deaths devastated her.

"The Peace Corps left today and my heart sank low," she wrote later that fall. "The danger is extreme and they were right to leave. Now I must assess my own position, because I am not up for suicide. 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 could be so staunch as to favor the reasonable thing in a sea of their tears and loneliness? Not mine, dear friend, not mine."

A few weeks before her death, she wrote of her efforts and her spiritual journey. "The situation is bad and believe it or not, at times I'm actually helpful. I also was trying to deal with some close friends who had been killed the last week of August. We are still plugging along. Life continues with many interruptions. I don't know how the poor survive. People in our positions really have to die to ourselves and our wealth to gain the spirituality of the poor and oppressed. I have a long way to go on that score. They can teach you so much with their patience and their wanting eyes. We are all so inadequate in our help. I am trying now more and more to deal with the social sin of the First World."

On the evening of Dec. 2, Jean and Dorothy drove to the airport to meet Ita and Maura, who were returning from Managua. The four women were last seen driving from the airport down the main road. Two days later their bodies were discovered. They had been raped and shot at close range Jean was only 27.

I carried the newspaper into my room and laid it on my desk and trembled over the words. The news pierced my complacency, their deaths changed my life. I was by now a senior, with plans already to enter the Jesuits. But the martyrdom of the four instilled in me something new -- the resolve and courage to follow Jesus like them, all the way to the cross.

I later befriended Jean's parents, Pat and Ray Donovan. Former Republicans and Reagan supporters, they went through a change of heart and publicly denounced U.S. militarism in Central America. I took up the task of organizing speaking events for them around the country. They urged me finally to go to El Salvador myself. So in 1985 I went to work there in a church-run refugee camp under the guidance of several Jesuits, who some four years later themselves were assassinated.

Towards the end of my stay, I traveled to the lonely remote spot where the four women were killed. A simple stone cross stood witness to their martyrdom. A plaque said: "Ita Ford, Maura Clarke, Dorothy Kazel and Jean Donovan gave their lives on December 2, 1980. Receive them Lord, into your kingdom." I lingered a good long time in silence.

Twenty-six years later, in a wild contagion of U.S. warmaking, Iraq has become El Salvador. Afghanistan has become El Salvador. So have Haiti and Colombia -- indeed, nearly the entire world. The United States has spread its malignancy across the planet. The United States, according to one general, trotted out the same strategies for Iraq as it employed in El Salvador.

In El Salvador, we trained death squads, rewarded bloodthirsty generals, financed juntas. We adopted a handful of millionaires who expropriated the nation's resources. We blessed the torture and rape of thousands. We fostered the killing of some 75,000 Salvadorans, including Archbishop Oscar Romero and six renowned Jesuits at the University of Central America. Such a dark litany cries out for sackcloth and ashes. Instead, our government ransacks our malevolent history and extends its "successes" to turn the world into the killing fields of El Salvador.

Despite all, I take heart, in part because I keep vivid the memory of Ita, Maura, Dorothy and Jean. They renounced First-World nationalism, the social sin of greed. They entered the world of the marginalized and destitute, and shared their powerlessness and pain. They stood in defense of the poor and gave their lives for them. To put the matter shortly, they showed us what it means to follow Jesus -- they give us a glimpse of the incarnation. My Jesuit friend Jon Sobrino put it this way: "In Ita, Maura, Dorothy and Jean, God visited El Salvador."

In such dark times as these, the four churchwomen call us to solidarity with the victims of our government. They call us to give our lives so that the killing will stop. Embrace their memory. Let their lives suffuse your life. Make their example your Advent meditation as we prepare for ?Peace on Earth.?

John Dear, S.J. is the author/editor of 20 books. His booklet, ?Jean Donovan and the Call to Discipleship? is available from www.paxchristiusa.org [1]. His latest book, *You Will Be My Witnesses*, (Orbis Books) features an icon and essay about Jean Donovan. For further info, see: www.fatherjohndear.org [2].

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