

Acting on Conscience

by Sister Diane Therese Pinchot



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Images are truth tellers for me. The 1980 image of the broken, raped and murdered bodies of Dorothy Kazel and the Churchwomen being pulled out of the shallow grave in El Salvador continues to tell the truth even in 2008. There is no getting around this image.

It would be so easy in this North American culture to insulate myself from the destruction and devastation of what happened to the women and the Salvadoran people, and from what is happening now to the suffering peoples in my own country and within this Earth community. But Dorothy Kazel's death tore open my small, insulated, protected world and showed me the suffering of my brothers and sisters and that of creation. Even more, it impels me to speak out about her death and so many others; to do anything less would make me, as a U.S. citizen, complicit in the suffering of the Salvadoran people and now, of innocent people being killed in our country's war on terror.

These images from the past are images of truth living in me now. Today, images of war and torture continue to abound, and in them I see history repeating itself. How much more suffering will occur before the cycle of violence is ended?

I continue to ask myself why Dorothy died, what purpose her death held, if today the same school (the SOA/WHINSEC) that trained her killers, is still open and training soldiers to be puppets in governments that keep their own people poor? Dorothy's death and the thousands of other deaths and disappearances taught us nothing, if today the same U.S. government is still training soldiers the skills of torture and war.

Today the Ursulines of Cleveland still seek the whole truth regarding the brutal deaths of the Churchwomen and the killings of 76,000 Salvadorans who died during the civil war. The truth must be told in order for justice and mercy, healing and reconciliation to follow, bringing transformation to all of those involved in these deaths.

Dorothy believed in non-violence. She struggled with non-violence as she saw those she loved slain and left at her door as a warning. Still, in the midst of this terror, Dorothy and the Churchwomen proclaimed the gospel message of hope, love, respect, and dignity for all. As Dorothy was preparing to return to El Salvador from Cleveland in the summer of 1980, she was hopeful, full of life, and especially full of love for the people of El Salvador. She loved them unconditionally. This love motivated her to the end and is her legacy and challenge to me: to speak the truth with steadfast love even in the time of war and oppression.

Conscience and Faith cause me to speak out against war and torture

It is the right thing to do

- In 1968, echoing the Vatican Council, the Bishops of Latin America met in Medellin, Colombia, and described what was happening in their countries as: "...a situation of injustice that can be called institutional violence" (*Medellin Conclusions*, Justice, #16). This is the climate in which Dorothy and the Churchwomen found themselves when they answered the call to be missionaries in El Salvador. Dorothy followed the nonviolent path and returned to El Salvador in the summer of 1980 to be present to and be with the people. Today the climate of injustice and violence in Central America and Mexico and throughout the Earth community has gotten even worse. *Torture is used as policy and war is condoned as "the war on drugs" and the "war on terror," and preemptive attacks are now part of what the U.S. government condones. I cannot be present in and be with the Earth community and not speak out against this violence.*
- *I do not hear anyone in the House or Senate representing my views of nonviolence, diplomacy and building up the Earth community so poverty and oppression will end. Both houses are divided and at a stalemate concerning what constitutes torture and our use of violence, meanwhile we are posturing for war yet again in another country.*
- *Nowhere in the New Testament scriptures do we see any writings of war. In fact just the opposite is true, the Warrior God of the earlier Hebrew Scriptures is gone and Jesus preaches the powerful gospel message of love, even to the extent of loving our enemies. Jesus also made his stance on nonviolence clear by distancing himself from the zealots who wanted to form an army against the Roman occupiers of his day. (Catholic Social Teaching – Education for Justice – www.educationforjustice.org)*
- *Pope John XXIII pleaded with the people of Earth in 1963 in his writings and called us to end even the possibility of violence by ending the arms race (Peace on Earth [Pacem in Terris] #112).*
- *The Vatican II document calls for a reevaluation of a just war theory because of the possibilities of many more innocent people getting killed as a result of the new technology of weaponry. (The Church in the Modern world [Gaudium et Spes] #80)*
- *Cardinal Ratzinger, before becoming Pope Benedict XVI, stated on May 2, 2003, "given the new weapons that make possible destruction that goes beyond the combatant groups, today we should be asking ourselves if it is still licit to admit the very existence of a just war." www.paxchristiusa.org*
- *In 1983 the Bishops also stressed and reaffirmed the Pope's previous teaching of Vatican II concerning the individual's option for non-violent witness during times of war and oppression (The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response, #119).*
- *Today "The Bishops suggest that in the new historical moment which modern weapons have magnified the horrors of war has brought the tradition of Christian non-violence back." www.paxchristiusa.org*
- *I am claiming my individual option for a non-violent witness in a time of war as Dorothy did 27 years ago. Her witness was in El Salvador, which eventually led to her death. Mine is here at SOA/WHINSEC, which will hopefully lead to systemic change. How grateful I am to be able to take non-violent action and know I live in a country that will allow me to freely speak. It is with a sense of patriotism that I take this action, for I want my country to be even better. I do not have any hate in my heart for the men that ordered Dorothy's death or for those who killed her. I just want the violence and the training of war and torture to stop.*