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- The Spiritual Journeys of the  
Four Churchwomen . . . . . *Edward T. Brett and Donna Whitson Brett* 1
- Translating Sorrow and Grief into Action: El Salvador's  
Human Rights Abuses, U.S. Diocesan Newspapers,  
and Catholic Mobilization, 1977–1982 . . . . . *Michael J. Cangemi* 31
- The Question of Sanctuary: The Adorers of the  
Blood of Christ and the U.S. Sanctuary Movement,  
1983–1996 . . . . . *Carlos Ruiz Martinez* 53
- Bridges to Health: U.S. Daughters of Charity,  
Seton Institute, and Funding Primary Health Care  
Activities in Latin America, 1985–2010 . . . . . *Kristine Ashton Gunnell* 71
- The Maryknoll Sisters' Mission in Nicaragua and the  
Material Antecedents of Radicalization . . . *Christine Baudin Hernandez* 95
- Thirty Years Later: Remembering the U.S. Churchwomen  
in El Salvador and the United States . . . . . *Theresa Keeley* 119

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# The Spiritual Journeys of the Four Churchwomen

*Edward T. Brett and Donna Whitson Brett*

*On December 2, 1980, Ursuline Sister Dorothy Kazel, lay missionary Jean Donovan, and Maryknoll Sisters Maura Clarke and Ita Ford were kidnapped and murdered by Salvadoran National Guardsmen. Influenced by the principles emanating from the Second Vatican Council, all four had knowingly put themselves in danger by intentionally choosing to accompany the marginalized in their struggle for justice and dignity. They had come to know the same fear of death and torture as the poor with whom they worked. These women knew firsthand the God of those with no power. Stripped of the security that their class status and nationality had provided, they grew to trust unconditionally. Their deeds and their words indicate that each one, in her own unique way, underwent a profound spiritual transformation.*

*Keywords:* Kazel, Dorothy; Ford, Ita; Clarke, Maura; Donovan, Jean; El Salvador; U.S. missionaries; martyrdom

**F**orty years ago, on December 2, 1980, Sisters Dorothy Kazel, Ita Ford, and Maura Clarke, and lay missionary Jean Donovan were abducted by National Guardsmen while leaving the airport in San Salvador, El Salvador. Driven to a deserted area, they were raped and executed. All four had knowingly and willingly risked their lives to rescue refugees of the undeclared civil war raging in that tiny Central American country. Most, if not all, of those who commemorate their lives and deaths on this anniversary consider them martyrs.

This article explores, through their deeds and words—written, spoken, and remembered—the spiritual growth the women underwent as they followed their hearts, their faith, and the principles of Vatican II while accompanying the marginalized of El Salvador and other Latin American countries. In exploring their spiritual transformations, we proceed with a degree of

trepidation, realizing that “no one can ascertain exactly the dynamic relationship between a person and God.”<sup>1</sup>

### **Sister Dorothy Kazel: “Expand my narrow vision, Lord; do with me what you wish.”**

Growing up in Cleveland, Ohio, Dorothy Kazel (1939–1980) combined the 1950s Catholic world of daily Mass and rosaries with her very active social life and fun-loving personality. In 1960, at age twenty-one, she was engaged to be married—with a wedding date just a few months away—when she shocked her fiancé, parents, and friends by suddenly announcing that she was entering the Ursuline congregation. Ending her engagement was a traumatic decision for Dorothy, involving a struggle over several months. Eight years later, just before taking final vows, the memory remained fresh in her mind as she wrote in her journal: “Why did I enter?—Running away?—Guilt feelings? [Am I] a professional escape artist?” Answering herself, she wrote: “HAD to!! Knew this was the only way I could be a good Christian.”<sup>2</sup>

Dorothy’s earliest journals reveal a sense of devotion in her spiritual life that was typical for a young sister in formation: “On the whole I am not doing badly but if I consider . . . *what I might be doing* and the graces God has given me. . . . I am ashamed of myself and must confess I am a great sinner.”<sup>3</sup> In September 1965, after graduating from Ursuline College in Cleveland and facing the demands of teaching business courses to inner-city high school girls, she wrote: “Today—FINALLY—the opportunity to get prayers said was given. What will it be like thru-out the year? Thank you for this opportunity, dear Jesus—if only I could have concentrated more it might have been more profitable.”<sup>4</sup>

Yet her pursuit of an elusive spiritual perfection was a disconnect with Dorothy’s inherently joyful outlook on life and would not persist. By 1968, her notes were more nuanced. Instead of fretting over her prayers, her foremost concern was for her authenticity as a Christian: “People look at me with respect—why? Because I am a Christian? Or because I have a loud witnessing outfit on. . . .” When others would say to her, “You don’t understand, Sister—you don’t live like we do,” Dorothy pondered why she was not con-

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1. Ana María Pineda, *Romero & Grande: Companions on the Journey* (Hobe Sound, FL: Lectio Publishing, 2016), 81.

2. Dorothy Kazel, Final Profession Summer, unbound journal entry, June 13, 1968, Sister Dorothy Kazel Collection, Ursuline Sisters of Cleveland Archives, Mayfield Heights, Ohio (hereafter USCA).

3. Kazel, Sacred Heart Academy, unbound journal entry, circa September 1965, USCA; emphasis in original.

4. *Ibid.*, September 3, 1965.



**Sister Dorothy Kazel, OSU (All images courtesy of the authors).**

necting with them: “Do they really hear or see [Christ] in me? . . . Or am I preaching to them? Am I real—.”<sup>5</sup>

This change in Dorothy signified greater maturity and experience; but, in addition, a major event had occurred the year before: Dorothy’s spirituality—and her world—had begun to expand when she participated in a retreat that delved into the new ideas of Vatican II (1962–1965). Her retreat notes radiated with profound excitement. “A real Christian is dominated by the presence of the Risen Christ . . . [and is] a person with a mission to the world of 1967: loves the world; is caught up with the world; must be equipped with solid learning and mature love; makes use of natural history and philosophy of our time; listens with an open heart. . . . Show Christ to the world! . . . Be a living Alleluia!”<sup>6</sup> The council’s ideas resonated deeply with Dorothy’s cheerful, outgoing personality, and this new hope and enthusiasm demanded action. She now asked herself, “Am I witnessing to Christ? Am I telling others his good news?”<sup>7</sup>

A few months later, Dorothy surprised her parents, friends, and, indeed, the Ursulines, by choosing yet another dramatic change in her life’s direction: She would become a missionary. When the Ursulines decided to send two volunteers to join the Cleveland Latin American Mission Team in El Salvador, Dorothy wasted no time in writing her superior: “I have always been . . . a person eager to be on the move—to go to new places, to meet new

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5. Kazel, Final Profession Summer, USCA.

6. Kazel, Journal 4, August 1, 1967, and August 4, 1967, USCA.

7. Kazel, Final Profession Summer, USCA.

people, to learn to understand these people, and to help them. Before I entered, I traveled to the West Coast four times. It was then that I was first impressed with the Spanish and Indian people. . . . I had even ‘day dreamed’ that my parents would disown me and leave me there.” Energized by this newfound purpose, Dorothy wrote that teaching business courses “limited” her ability to know the “whole” person, and she carefully suggested to her superior that “catechetical work” was what “religious life should revolve more closely around.”<sup>8</sup> Revealing a dose of naiveté and her sense of adventure, the letter also displayed an astute awareness that her future as a sister must include more than teaching business courses.

Since she had not yet made her final vows, Dorothy was not chosen, but her wish to join the Cleveland team was granted in 1974. Based on her journal’s title page and several entries therein, her theme that year seemed to be “I have come to do your will, Lord.”<sup>9</sup> Five weeks before leaving for El Salvador, Dorothy wrote: “Jesus, . . . I am fighting ‘dying to self. . . .’ Give me the peace to know I am doing your will & the joy that goes with it.”<sup>10</sup> She soon received a reassuring insight during Mass: “[I] realize my narrowness and how I have to grow into awareness of the universal brotherhood of man. Maybe that’s what El Salvador is all about—expanding my narrow vision. Do with me, Lord, what you wish.”<sup>11</sup>

Many would later attest to Dorothy’s empathetic soul, among them Ursuline Sister Martha Owen, who was assigned to El Salvador with Dorothy and became her lifelong friend. Early on, when they studied at an evangelical language school in Costa Rica, Martha watched Dorothy join their classmates in uninhibited, revival-style prayer: “When we were leaving the school, a student said, ‘Dorothy, you may be Catholic, but in my book, you are truly saved!’ She would respond sincerely to whatever emotion you were experiencing—she would cry with you, laugh with you, pray with you, jog with you, climb a mountain with you, even speak in tongues with you!” Fortified by a master’s degree in counseling, Dorothy was extraordinarily nonjudgmental and accepting of others’ failings, believing that there was usually a rational underlying explanation for their behavior.<sup>12</sup> And her empathy was for all of creation, as Martha perceived when Dorothy swerved their jeep erratically to avoid hitting hundreds of migrating frogs.<sup>13</sup>

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8. Kazel to Mother Annunciata Witz, November 4, 1967, USCA.

9. Cited in Cynthia Glavac, *In the Fullness of Life: A Biography of Dorothy Kazel*, OSU, 2nd ed. (Pepper Pike, OH: Ursuline Sisters of Cleveland, 2019), 195.

10. Kazel, Beaumont School for Girls (A), unbound journal entry, June 24, 1974, USCA.

11. Kazel, Beaumont School for Girls (B), unbound journal entry, July 4, 1974, USCA.

12. Martha Owen, interview with the authors, August 23, 1985.

13. Martha Owen, cited in Glavac, *Fullness of Life*, 183.

Because Dorothy wrote few journal and retreat notes as a missionary and rarely voiced her innermost thoughts, her spiritual growth is inferred by her letters, audiotapes, and, above all, by those who witnessed her active devotion to the Salvadoran people. A joint team letter written in 1975 described the sacramental life of the Cleveland team's mission in La Unión, mentioning "thousands" of baptisms, first communions, and confirmations, as well as the accompanying preparations and training of native catechists.<sup>14</sup> Yet in a newsy 1976 letter, the emphasis on sacramental life was minimal, as Dorothy herself excitedly described the four new "*proyectos*" introduced to the community: a traveling library, a literacy program for adults, a health promotion program, and a lending cooperative for poor *campesinos* (peasants)—developments the team hoped would result in their 51,000 parishioners realizing "their full dignity as persons." Dorothy was clearly animated by this more intense immersion into the people's lives.<sup>15</sup>

In 1977, Dorothy and Martha moved to the team's La Libertad mission on the Pacific Ocean, which also served nearby Zaragoza and dozens of outlying villages. The team developed close relationships with the people, especially with the catechists they trained to lead Celebrations of the Word in the absence of a priest. Although they could not have known it then, the *promoción*, or "empowerment," of these leaders would have ominous repercussions as political turmoil grew. Catechists they had trained were now beloved friends but they also became targets of growing repression simply because they were community leaders.

By late 1979, El Salvador's political situation had deteriorated into an undeclared civil war. Government security forces were cracking down on anyone—be they catechist, labor organizer, *campesino*, or priest—who tried to change the unjust status quo. Dorothy wrote to her superior in November of the team's plans in light of the worsening conditions: "We would definitely want to stay here to be with the people, and help them in whatever way we could. . . . When the chips are completely down, you can't just walk out on the people you've been working with." This decision, Dorothy added, might have been influenced by the Maryknoll sisters "that we know quite well who were in the [recent civil] war in Nicaragua," and had run a refugee center during that time. The Cleveland team was beginning to consider "potential refugee centers [in El Salvador]."<sup>16</sup>

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14. Cleveland Latin American Mission Team to "Folks Back Home," September 1975, USCA.

15. Kazel to the Sisters of Beaumont Convent, May 10, 1976, USCA.

16. Kazel to Mother Bartholomew McCaffrey, November 8, 1979, USCA.

Dorothy's perception of mission was by now merging with the Maryknoll Sisters' vision of accompanying the people they lived among.<sup>17</sup> In fact, her friendship with them in Nicaragua led Dorothy to consider becoming one herself or, more likely, a Maryknoll associate. She told Martha, "It might just be a passing thought, except that it has very much been with me . . . and I see it as a possibility." As an associate, she could continue indefinitely with the mission work and Salvadorans she loved. Mission life had broadened Dorothy's spiritual perspective on a global scale. She urged Martha, who had recently returned to Cleveland, to propose a more international curriculum in their Ursuline schools, wondering if they were giving "these rich kids all the Christian principles they need." As a missionary, Dorothy was not wearing the habit and did not see it as a necessary sign of ministry; indeed, it angered her that the Ursulines refused to make it optional. With all this in mind, she told Martha, "I am nowhere near thinking about going home." And, she said, "Realistically, I could not leave Salvador right now, especially because I'm committed here for another year, and I am committed to the persecuted church here."<sup>18</sup>

"The persecuted church" was no exaggeration. The Catholic Church had come under suspicion for working closely with the poor and for its outspoken condemnation of human rights violations. The team faced this emerging reality with a new approach. When catechists became targets for brutal attacks by death squads, Celebrations of the Word were no longer held in catechists' homes so that they could not be "pointed out as being connected with us,"<sup>19</sup> and after-dark meetings were discontinued.<sup>20</sup> In seeking other ways to help, they decided to aid the growing numbers of refugees: Sister of Charity Christine Rody would manage the refugee center while Dorothy and Jean Donovan, a new addition to the team, would assist in transporting refugees to safety.<sup>21</sup>

Dorothy undertook these rescue missions with her eyes wide open. By late May 1980, she met two newcomers, Maryknoll Sisters Carla Piette and Ita Ford, and became aware of their decision to aid refugees in the northern war-ravaged department of Chalatenango. Dorothy told a visiting friend of theirs: "Carla and Ita will be doing very dangerous work—I'm very afraid for them."<sup>22</sup>

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17. See final statement of the 1978 General Assembly of the Maryknoll Sisters, cited in Penny Lernoux, with Arthur Jones and Robert Ellsberg, *Hearts on Fire: The Story of the Maryknoll Sisters* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 235–236.

18. Kazel, audiocassette to Martha Owen, August 29, 1979, USCA.

19. Kazel, audiocassette to Martha Owen, June 1, 1980, USCA.

20. June Carolyn Erlick, "Cleveland Team: 'We'll stay,'" *National Catholic Reporter*, September 5, 1980, 4.

21. Paul Schindler, et al., Cleveland Team to "Friends," September 1980, USCA.

22. Jacqueline Hansen Maggiore with Catherine McDermott Vint, *Vessel of Clay: The Inspirational Journey of Sister Carla* (Scranton, PA: University of Scranton Press, 2005), 128.

It was commonly known that government security forces viewed not only the refugees as sympathetic to the popular groups working for political and human rights, but also anyone who aided the refugees. In spite of the danger, by September 1980 Dorothy and Jean were assisting the Maryknoll sisters regularly on missions of mercy after army sweeps in the north left women, children, and older men desperate for help.

They were often called upon by San Salvador's Vicar General Ricardo Urioste because it was thought that their blonde "*gringa*" appearance helped get the frightened refugees through many an army roadblock.<sup>23</sup> Yet Dorothy frequently had to overcome fear; one can detect the apprehension in her voice when she told Martha by audiotape about an upcoming trip on winding mountainous roads to rescue fifty-five refugees: "It's always good to have a *gringa* face there in case something happens. . . . It seems to be about a three-and-a-half-hour trip, so—to know! . . . You never know *where* you're going or *what* you're getting into."<sup>24</sup>

In the months before her death, Dorothy's empathy often brought her to the point of tears. Two young men, Julio and Pastor, who participated with the team in Celebrations of the Word, were taken during the night by eight uniformed men, as their families watched helplessly. They were found dead the next day, horribly mutilated. Dorothy told Martha: "Their faith, it just knocks you over. It is so powerful. [Pastor's mother] says 'he was just like Jesus being led to the slaughter—an innocent lamb.' That was really a grueling thing for us. . . . We're still living with the sin of it. . . . Really, I could vomit when I think about it."<sup>25</sup>

Once El Salvador descended into chaos, virtually every act of Dorothy's became a living lesson in compassion and perseverance. It was difficult, dangerous, and endlessly sad work. "The situation here is still diabolical. . . . You really wonder how much more these people can suffer," Dorothy wrote.<sup>26</sup> Team members were burying or burning dozens of bodies found decomposing nearby, and six of the team's catechists had been killed. There were unspeakable accounts, almost daily, that missionaries heard the refugees describe. "They chopped up women, you know, cutting off their breasts, and spearing the kid in their wombs," Dorothy said, "I mean sick, sick stuff. Oh, it just makes you ill. You wonder—it's just so damn diabolical, it makes you want to weep."<sup>27</sup>

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23. Paul Schindler, telephone interview with the authors, May 2, 1986.

24. Kazel, audiocassette to Martha Owen, October 21, 1980, USCA.

25. Kazel, audiocassette to Martha Owen, June 1, 1980, USCA.

26. Kazel to Mother Bartholomew McCaffrey, September 7, 1980, USCA.

27. Kazel, audiocassette to Martha Owen, October 21, 1980, USCA.

Although violence mounted around her, Dorothy found her life's meaning in El Salvador, twice voluntarily extending her commitment. Her final assignment was to end in March 1981, almost two years beyond her original commitment, yet she wrote Martha: "I *may* stay till Easter—depending on need—*saber!*"<sup>28</sup> Her future seemed murky, but one thing Dorothy did trust "wholeheartedly": She would find a way to continue working with the "poor and oppressed—just **how** is where the challenge will come in."<sup>29</sup>

As demands changed and needs grew, Dorothy managed to find joy in her kittens' antics and in a little bat that had taken up residence in her apartment. A Halloween costume party with Maryknoll and Franciscan missionaries shortly before she died was "our escape from reality," she wrote.<sup>30</sup> She was, at heart, grounded in hope: "Even toward the end, with all the repression and terror, she did not lose hope," said fellow missionary, Father Paul Schindler. "We all, everyone, drew from Dorothy's optimism."<sup>31</sup>

Hope energized her to write U.S. President Jimmy Carter describing her personal witness to the reckless killing of innocents, young and old. She pleaded with Carter to discontinue aid for a regime that brutalized its people, concluding her letter with: "I would really like to know. . . , Mr. President, whether you really realize how many innocent people we are helping to kill."<sup>32</sup>

Although Dorothy prayed daily and took inspiration from her favorite spiritual authors, her hope came from the Salvadoran people who struggled in a "country that is writhing in pain" and her fellow missionaries who sacrificed for them. She was awestruck whenever she witnessed the "steadfast faith and courage our [catechist] leaders have to continue preaching the Word of the Lord even though it may mean 'laying down your life' . . . in the very *real* sense." This, she wrote, was "a most vivid realization that Jesus is *here* with us. Yes, we have a sense of waiting, hoping, and yearning for a complete realization of the Kingdom, and yet we know it will come because we can celebrate Him right now!"<sup>33</sup>

Four days before she died, Dorothy fought off mounting fatigue as she desperately searched for a doctor who had enough courage to risk the government's wrath by coming to the aid of a critically ill refugee, the mother

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28. Kazel to Martha Owen, November 28, 1980, USCA.

29. Kazel to Theresa Kane, October 6, 1980, USCA.

30. Kazel to Martha Owen, November 5, 1980, USCA.

31. Paul Schindler, telephone interview with authors.

32. Kazel to President Jimmy Carter, September 23, 1980, USCA.

33. Kazel to Diocese of Cleveland, November 1980, USCA.

of several children.<sup>34</sup> Martha, calling from Cleveland to wish her friend a Happy Thanksgiving, remembered the exhaustion in Dorothy's voice: "She sounded so tired and very discouraged at the end. She had seen so much violence. . . . Perhaps if she could have foreseen that her own death would offer some way out for the Salvadorans, I think she was almost at the point where she would have offered herself voluntarily."<sup>35</sup>

Friends who knew her best recognized the depth of Dorothy's spirituality by her actions. "Dorothy didn't talk about the things that were really deep inside of her," said one.<sup>36</sup> "She didn't have to talk about [her spirituality]. She just lived it," said another.<sup>37</sup> Maryknoll Sister Madeline Dorsey, a missionary in El Salvador, agreed: "Dorothy's joy and sincerity reflected her spirituality. She lived out Gospel values in her life."<sup>38</sup>

Dorothy's spirituality had evolved from a longing for inner perfection to a prayer of surrender to God's will. She had prayed for her "narrow vision" to expand, and as it did, her compassion led her to suffer along with the Salvadorans. Though sick at heart and exhausted, she remained hopeful, resolutely offering what relief she could. Her perseverance speaks eloquently for her spiritual motivation and is an outward sign of the stubborn streak of hope that ultimately sustained her.

### **Jean Donovan: "Why do you suppose of all people God called me?"**

Jean Donovan (1953–1980), only twenty-seven years old at the time of her death, was the youngest of the four women and the only one who was not a vowed religious. She had the briefest missionary experience—only fifteen months compared to years and decades for the others. Yet because of—or despite—her youth, her spiritual growth was in some ways the most remarkable.

Jean was a surprising candidate for mission life; wealthy, politically conservative, and controlling, she was a free-wheeling party girl who loved the limelight. But her friends also knew her as compassionate, generous, and vulnerable. As an undergraduate, she enrolled at University College Cork in Ireland for her junior year abroad where she met Father Michael Crowley, a

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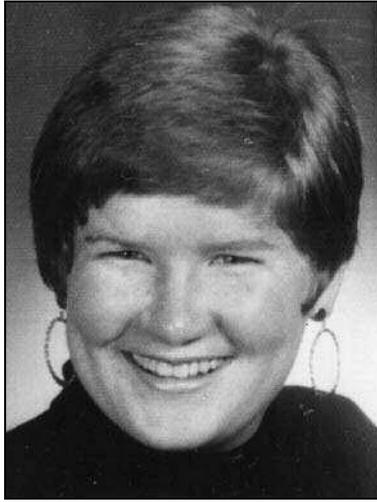
34. Betty Campbell and Peter Hinde, *Following the Star: The Liberation Process of the People*, ed. Gary MacEoin (Washington, DC: Religious Task Force on Latin America, n.d.), 8.

35. Martha Owen, interview with the authors.

36. Kathleen Cooney, cited in Glavac, *Fullness of Life*, 183.

37. Christine Rody, cited in Glavac, *Fullness of Life*, 169.

38. Madeline Dorsey, cited in Glavac, *Fullness of Life*, 184.



**Jean Donovan, lay missionary**

charismatic priest. This proved to be a pivotal experience for Jean, one that sowed the seeds for a daring future. Following her death, Crowley recalled his early impression of her: “When I first met Jean, she was like a cross section of American young people . . . confused, searching for a meaning to her life. She was a conventional Catholic. . . . She practiced, if you like, but she really didn’t have personalized a meaning for her own life.”<sup>39</sup>

The Irish priest helped stir something in Jean and she was eager to hear more. With captivating stories of his missionary years in Peru, he challenged her and tried to raise her consciousness concerning global poverty. As with other students, he urged Jean not to become a “nice, comfy capitalist” once she got a good job.<sup>40</sup> Although she was still a far cry from comprehending the structural changes needed to transform society and did not yet realize the U.S.’s role in perpetuating worldwide inequities, Jean took Crowley’s words to heart.

Returning to the United States, she moved onto the fast track toward success, earning a master’s in business administration and landing a lucrative job in Cleveland. But Jean felt unfulfilled and bored. After returning in 1977 to visit Crowley in Ireland, she made life-altering changes: She joined Kaleidoscope, a diocesan youth ministry group, and approached Father Ralph Wiatrowski for spiritual direction, startling him by brashly announcing: “I’m

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39. Ana Carrigan, *Salvador Witness: The Life and Calling of Jean Donovan* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), 52.

40. *Ibid.*

Jean Donovan. I've decided it's time I learned something about this God and I've decided that you're the one to teach me."<sup>41</sup>

Kaleidoscope participants were expected to make a two-year commitment to a diocesan outreach program. Mary Frances Ehlinger, Jean's friend and fellow Kaleidoscope member, later remarked: "Most of us took on projects in Cleveland . . . but Jean decided to join the Cleveland mission team and go to El Salvador. We all felt very dwarfed by that decision, and as usual, impressed by Jean's boldness."<sup>42</sup> Debbie Miller, who had studied abroad with Jean, was less enthralled. When she heard that Jean had decided to apply for the missions, she argued with her, questioning her motives: "I told her that we didn't need to be sending people anywhere to 'save' anybody. And I also told her the element of adventure, the fun she anticipated, wouldn't last long."<sup>43</sup>

Was Jean serious about being a missionary? Yes—and no. She did see the need to prepare herself and quickly applied to the Maryknoll Lay Missioners' training program. With friends and family, however, she answered their puzzled inquiries with one-liners about "meeting cute priests" in Central America and being a Maryknoll "jet-setter."<sup>44</sup> Her brother, Michael, frustrated, said she was a "joker" who refused to give him "a straight answer."<sup>45</sup> Yet there were serious moments. She told Father Al Winters, Cleveland's diocesan mission director: "I've had a lot of privileges in my life, and one of them may be the capacity to help others who don't have as much."<sup>46</sup> Her friend Rita Dowd-Mikalojczyk believed that "Jean was trying to figure out where she fit with God [and] felt she needed to do something because she had been given so much. She owed it . . . to God, to other people."<sup>47</sup> However, once at Maryknoll, she proceeded to go out drinking with seminarians and was seen as rebellious and flirtatious. Then, moments before the mission-sending ceremony, one of her instructors was surprised to find Jean off by herself, obviously distraught by the incongruity of wearing an expensive piece of family jewelry to this service welcoming her to a new life among the poor.<sup>48</sup> It seems most probable that Jean's decision to go to El Salvador resulted from an intriguing mix of idealistic, spiritual, adventurous, and frivolous

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41. Ibid., 63.

42. Pat Rowantree, "From fun-loving life to jungle death," *Floridian*, November 29, 1981, 9, Jean Donovan Tribute Binder, USCA.

43. Ibid.

44. Carrigan, *Salvador Witness*, 70.

45. Stephen T. DeMott, "Mission inherited: 'Our own blood spilled in El Salvador,'" *Maryknoll*, December 1983, 52.

46. Pat Hennessy, "Heroic lives of women martyrs remembered," *Fairfield* [Connecticut] *County Catholic*, December 2000, Donovan Tribute Binder, USCA.

47. Rowantree, "From fun-loving life," 9.

48. Josie Cuda, telephone interview with author Edward Brett, May 21, 1986.

motivations. And perhaps Jean herself saw the irony: Highly amused, she proudly embraced the gift her Cleveland friends presented at her farewell party—a T-shirt with “St. Jean the Playful” emblazoned across the front.<sup>49</sup>

Jean’s inner conflict continued when she arrived in Guatemala for language school in May 1979. She wrote Rita: “Why would God want me? I’m so inadequate, no good. . . . If I had chosen one or two different paths. . . . I might not even believe in God let alone be a missionary. . . .” She went on to acknowledge that, although she saw her “values” as deficient, she was anticipating a “spiritual renewal.” She concluded on a hopeful note: “Now I have to have God help me grow.”<sup>50</sup>

Jean arrived in El Salvador in August 1979, just as the undeclared civil war was heating up. Mutilated bodies were appearing in ditches and the team received word of priests and catechists being kidnapped and killed. Jean, who had expected to spend most of her time peacefully working with youth and dispensing food to the poor through the *Caritas Internationalis* program, had a superficial comprehension of life’s complexities in El Salvador. But that did not deter her from expressing her opinions with conviction and sometimes sarcasm. Oblivious to the experience-based skepticism of fellow team members, Jean asserted that only a small number of violent extremists were responsible for El Salvador’s problems, and once these malcontents were eliminated by the *junta*, which had recently come to power following a coup, El Salvador would be on the road to a bright future.<sup>51</sup> Sister Christine Rody later recollected how one night Jean attempted to school the mission team by laying out “a whole theory of how a capitalist economic system could still save El Salvador.”<sup>52</sup> Even Dorothy, writing to Mother Bartholomew a few months after Jean’s arrival, remarked that the new missionary “is a good person—but at times VERY adolescent-y.”<sup>53</sup>

Jean’s conservative views eventually moderated, but never completely dissipated. She disparaged the efforts of Salvadoran leftists to change governmental structures, belittling their attempts for a “glorious revolution.” She referred to the recently victorious Sandinistas as “the twerps that run Nicaragua,”<sup>54</sup> when, at that time, there was much hope across the Americas for their more democratic governing approach. Even towards the end of her

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49. Darrell Holland, “Slain Cleveland missionary is buried in Florida,” [Cleveland] *Plain Dealer*, December 10, 1980, Donovan Tribute Binder, USCA.

50. Carrigan, *Salvador Witness*, 97.

51. Rowantree, “Fun-loving life,” 14.

52. *Ibid.*, 15.

53. Kazel to Mother Bartholomew McCaffrey, November 8, 1979, USCA.

54. Carrigan, *Salvador Witness*, 125, 129.

life, when she visited her parents for the last time, she told them that she would not vote in the upcoming presidential election. Ronald Reagan's rhetoric, she contended, would cause an even greater bloodbath in El Salvador should he win, but as a lifelong Republican she could not bring herself to vote for Carter, a Democrat.<sup>55</sup>

Initially, Jean's sense of privilege was a source of embarrassment for the team.<sup>56</sup> She also exhibited an unrealistic perception of her capabilities, which team members immediately addressed. This inspired Jean to write: "I am really at times fed up with the Church and blame God for it. I find myself asking him if I can't cop out of the institution and deal with things myself. . . . But then he expects me to deal with these men running around calling themselves priests. . . ." Yet, she conceded, "I am sure God is calling me to something and presently I am not listening too well."<sup>57</sup>

Jean's letters reveal a secure, trusting relationship with God—one that at times included doubt and anger. She wrote to a friend: "I . . . wonder what I am doing here as opposed to being married and living at lollipop acres. . . . Am I ever going to have any kids? . . . I talk to the Lord, and I say, 'Why are you doing this to me? Why can't I just be your little suburban housewife?' And you know, he hasn't answered me yet. Sometimes I get mad at him. Sometimes I tell him I'm going to chuck the whole thing. I've had it."<sup>58</sup>

Jean was in the company of many whose beliefs and courage propelled her down a new path of spirituality while opening her heart to the injustices underpinning Salvadoran society. Of her many mentors, Dorothy stood out, becoming Jean's trusted and patient confidante. Perhaps by comparison Jean felt the need to challenge herself spiritually: "I see so many people doing so much good all the time—and it comes so easy for them. And you know, I think that sin comes so easy to me, and being good is the hard part. . . . I just don't have that spontaneous spirituality. . . . I'm too independent, and I'm afraid to be dependent, even on God."<sup>59</sup>

Jean's compassion was steadily growing. Daily, she saw impoverished Salvadorans, many her own age, struggling against unbearable odds to improve their lot. The courageous Archbishop Oscar Romero significantly deepened Jean's spirituality.<sup>60</sup> In January 1980, she began keeping a diary,

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55. Rowantree, "Fun-loving life," 15.

56. Christine Rody, telephone interview, September 23, 1987; conversations with Martha Owen and Sheila Tobbe, March 19, 2019, and May 7, 2019.

57. Carrigan, *Salvador Witness*, 109.

58. *Ibid.*, 99.

59. *Ibid.*, 105.

60. Sheila Tobbe, conversation with the authors, March 19, 2019.

and on nearly every page up to his death she mentioned him. He had become her hero. She listened to his Sunday sermons, echoing his brand-new title as the “voice of those without a voice, striving for peace and defending justice.” She wrote of his growing renown as he received an honorary doctorate from the University of Louvain and a \$10,000 peace prize from Switzerland.<sup>61</sup> She began to see El Salvador through the beloved archbishop’s eyes and to better understand the injustice at the roots of the Salvadoran conflict: “He is the leader of Liberation Theology in practice. . . . [He] is so inspiring . . . [and] really is the voice of the people. . . . It is like the Pope when he enters church. They stand on the pews and clap for him. . . . At the same time he is a very humble person. . . .”<sup>62</sup> After his assassination on March 24, 1980, she claimed to be one of the nuns so she could march in procession before his casket.<sup>63</sup> A friend saw Jean soon after Romero’s death and later said: “There is no question Jean had changed. . . . She was . . . much more thoughtful about her commitment and the growing risks. . . . Her head told her to come home, to turn away, but in her heart she really felt God had called her. . . . She kept saying, ‘Why me. . . ? Why do you suppose of all people God called me?’”<sup>64</sup>

This change is seen in her diary’s series of very short notations, most devoid of commentary. By 1980, violence in El Salvador had escalated to almost unimaginable heights, and Jean probably wanted her eyewitness testimony to be precise and credible, perhaps wishing to offer it to the American public once her mission commitment ended. She might also have limited entries to short facts, unencumbered by observations that could be used against her, in case her journal fell into the wrong hands.

Most entries are chilling: a Jesuit residence machine-gunned, bombs exploding in the archdiocesan radio station, countless church buildings ransacked by soldiers who sometimes desecrated altars and dumped consecrated hosts on the floor, and lists of peasants, catechists, priests, children, and others who were decapitated, shot, kidnapped, and tortured. In many instances the victims’ names are included. Two of these entries especially stand out: The first, a seminarian, soon to be ordained, was killed with twelve others—he had just returned from a seminary in Mexico to prepare for his first Mass. The second, a member of the paramilitary group ORDEN (*Organización Democrática Nacionalista*) slashed Sister Dionesia Hernández of the Divine Oblates of Love with a machete. Jean recorded Romero’s assassination on March 24 and gunfire two days later during the procession of sis-

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61. Jean Donovan, 1980 Daily Diary (January 30–September 24), February 2, 1980, USCA.

62. Carrigan, *Salvador Witness*, 110–111.

63. *Ibid.*, 159–160.

64. Rita Mikolajczyk, quoted in Rowantree, “Fun-loving life,” 9.

ters and priests accompanying his body to the cathedral. She also noted the killing of over thirty at the archbishop's funeral.<sup>65</sup>

To comprehend how Jean's eyewitness encounters with violence affected her, it is helpful to review a few entries, especially following her immersion in refugee work:

- June 21: 2 men killed in Tamanique. Dorothy, Paul [Schindler] and I go to bless bodies. . . . Two shots fired in cemetery. Leave quickly.
- July 20: Shots fired down by the beach as I came back from taking people home. Everyone scared. I spent the night at Paul's house . . .
- July 26: [They] killed a man near the church in St. Cruz. Two children & a few others were shot in Chalatenango. The others died. Got the children to San Salvador on Monday. 18 year old was killed in the hospital. Nuns & priests threatened and fired upon during mass in Dept. of Chalatenango.
- August 2: Went to Tamanique for first communion class. No children came. Parents scared . . .
- August 9: Ita trying to arrange transportation for a kid shot in Chalatenango hospital. Five bodies found on the road to the airport.
- September 3: After [funeral] mass for Carla [Maryknoll sister who died in a flash flood] in Chalatenango, the seminarians who had come to sing had their bus stopped. . . . All were made to exit the bus with hands on their heads. The bus was then set on fire. The seminarians then walked to a nearby parish rectory for protection. Army tanks then surrounded the rectory.
- September 5: Went to San Salvador to shop, found 5 dead bodies on the way.
- September 7: Today in the afternoon a man was taken out of Chris Rody's house and beaten up by SM [death squad]. . . . They were still there when I left.<sup>66</sup>

Jean's diary graphically illustrated the barbaric nature of the environment in which she freely chose to live, simply because, through much prayer and reflection, she concluded that this was where God wanted her. Such a distorted environment, coupled with her commitment to helpless refugees, rid Jean of any frivolous notions of mission life and deepened her relationship with God. These entries show that, like soldiers in combat, Jean witnessed enough violence to suffer both emotionally and psychologically.<sup>67</sup> The diary ends with Jean making reservations to fly to Miami, Florida, for a much-needed break.<sup>68</sup>

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65. Donovan, Diary.

66. Ibid.

67. Jean's recollections were often written with abbreviations and without concern for correct spelling or grammar. Corrections have been made by the authors to avoid confusion.

68. Donovan, Diary.

Repression hit close to home, literally, in the summer of 1980. Jean grieved for catechists she had trained who were later killed and mutilated, and for two male friends slain by a death squad just outside her apartment.<sup>69</sup> When she later immersed herself more deeply in transporting terrified refugees, team members detected a newfound purpose in her.<sup>70</sup> The refugee children especially touched Jean's heart. She wrote the following in one of her last letters, bringing tears to the eyes of her brother Michael as he read it aloud to a reporter three months after she died:

And so the Peace Corps people left today, and my heart sank low. Of course, the Peace Corps is right in ordering them out. There is no question that the danger is extreme. But as these poor people beset with tragedy increase, the help available departs. I love life and I love living. While I feel compassion and care for the people here, I'm not up for suicide. And so I must assess my own situation frankly. Several times I have decided to leave El Salvador. I almost could except for the children, the poor, bruised victims of this adult lunacy. And who would care for them? Whose heart could be so staunch as to favor the reasonable thing in the sea of their tears and loneliness? Not mine, dear friend, not mine.<sup>71</sup>

Jean told friends at Maryknoll that she feared death and, above all, torture.<sup>72</sup> She yelled at God and he yelled at her, she told a friend in Cleveland.<sup>73</sup> But she made peace with God—and with her unknown future. Her compassion had graced her with the courage to remain.

Not long before she died, Jean wrote to Father Wiatrowski: "I don't know how the poor survive. People in our positions really have to die unto 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 wanting eyes. . . . I am trying now more and more to deal with the social sin of the first world. It's not an easy question."<sup>74</sup>

Were it not for Jean's willingness to endure an impossible situation while offering herself day by day to the suffering Salvadorans, she would not have gained the humility or spiritual insights to write the final letters she sent to friends. Her own expanding compassion was at the heart of her dramatic spiritual growth.

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69. Christine Rody to the authors, December 10, 1987; Donovan, Diary.

70. Rody, telephone interview; Donovan, Diary.

71. Thomas J. Brazaitis, "A missionary's death; a brother's anguish," [Cleveland] *Plain Dealer*, March 22, 1981, Donovan, Tribute Binder.

72. Carrigan, *Salvador Witness*, 216–217.

73. Mikolajczyk, telephone interview with authors, May 21, 1986.

74. Donovan to Father Ralph Wiatrowski, October 30, 1980, in Donovan, Tribute Binder.

### **Sister Maura Clarke: “In spite of fear and uncertainty, I feel at peace and hopeful.”**

Maura Clarke (1931–1980) was born in New York City, the daughter of Irish immigrants. She loved listening to her father and his friends talk about the struggles against the British in their native land, thus developing in her early years a strong identification with oppressed peoples. She entered Maryknoll in 1950 and was assigned in 1954 to teach African American and Puerto Rican first graders at St. Anthony of Padua, a school in an area of the Bronx with high crime and unemployment. Although there are no extant written records from Maura for these years, the sisters’ accounts painted a bleak picture of the neighborhood. Sister Richard Marie McKinney, who taught music at St. Anthony’s, remembered: “Beyond the red brick [school] walls, drugs, prostitution, related crimes, and the accompanying violence—though camouflaged by day—raged undisguised at night. The sounds of shattering glass, screeching tires, drunken cries, a shot in the night were so common that a certain insensitivity towards tragedy seemed to hang in the air.”<sup>75</sup> Indeed, it was not uncommon for the sisters to hear from their students about family members being murdered, raped, shot, or stabbed.<sup>76</sup> The sisters showed love, compassion, and generosity to the children in their care, but there is no indication that in this pre-Vatican II period they wrestled with the sociological questions of why life was so grim in this area of the Bronx. The hope that, through their teaching ministry, at least some students would eventually transcend the misery of their parents, seemed sufficient. From Maura’s personal perspective, however, it can be said that her experiences in the Bronx readied her for the world she would encounter during her next assignment in Nicaragua.

In 1959 Maura received her first assignment outside the United States. She was to teach second grade in Siuna, an isolated Nicaraguan gold-mining town run by a Canadian multinational company. Miners toiled under oppressive conditions but could barely feed their families while company officials resided in a special zone with all the accoutrements of North American country club living. Secured by National Guardsmen, no one could enter the zone except the Canadians, their guests, and their servants—the hired help. The miners once attempted to form a union, but the leaders were fired and the union never got off the ground. Maryknoll Sister Laura Glynn, who taught there with Maura, later commented on the sisters’ myopia concerning the unjust realities that pervaded the town:

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75. Richard Marie McKinney, “Recollections on Sister Maura Clarke at St. Anthony’s,” August 2, 1982, Same Fate as the Poor Collection (SFATP), box 6, file 11, Maryknoll Mission Archives, Maryknoll, New York (hereafter MMA).

76. *Ibid.*



**Sister Maura Clarke, MM**

A consciousness of the social reality with its contradictions and exploitations was a slow process [for us]. The shocking poverty of the people brought more a response of compassion than of a realization of injustice. . . . We didn't question American policy in Nicaragua nor its complicity with the Somozas [Nicaragua's family of dictators]. . . . We did not see the real importance of promoting people's organizations, not even that of the gold miners. . . . It's as if we thought that if we educated their children, they might escape the fate of having to work in the mines.<sup>77</sup>

Sister Bea Zaragoza also taught with Maura, and her recollections were similar to those of Glynn: The sisters saw educating the youth as their sole mission. They realized that the miners were not receiving a fair wage and their working conditions were quite poor, but they excused this by reasoning that the company's labor practices were in compliance with Nicaraguan law.<sup>78</sup>

Maura's tender heart was continually touched by the sufferings of the poor families. That Maura was compassionate and highly generous to the

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77. Laura Glynn, Recollections on Maura, SFATP, box 6, file 12, MMA.

78. Bea Zaragoza, Recollections on Maura, SFATP, box 6, file 12, MMA. Like Maura, Sisters Laura and Bea illustrated the transformation in so many missionaries as a result of Vatican II. Glynn went on to serve the rural poor in Panama. When Father Hector Gallegos disappeared, she and her fellow Maryknoll Sisters began an investigation, which caused a clash with the conservative local bishop, who expelled them from his diocese. Glynn later served in Ecuador where she was involved in human rights work until her death in 2004 in an automobile accident. Zaragoza spent most of her missionary career living in the slums of Managua and joining the poor in their struggle for justice during the Somoza years. Forced to return to the United States due to illness, she died in 1986: [maryknollmissionarchives.org/deceased-sisters/](http://maryknollmissionarchives.org/deceased-sisters/).

poor of Siuna is well documented; she gave away most of her modest allowance and even her shoes and other personal items.<sup>79</sup> Yet her generosity, although a commendable virtue, was not necessarily connected to a sophisticated understanding of social injustice. One can assume that Maura would have been just as lacking in social consciousness as were her fellow missionary sisters. Because sisters were expected to be as isolated as possible from secular society, it was unlikely that any female religious would have had the opportunity to develop a sophisticated social consciousness.

In 1962, the year that launched Vatican II, Maura was appointed superior of the sisters in Siuna. As one of the younger sisters and with only three years' mission experience, she accepted with reluctance and humility, asking for her companions' help. Yet, it was she who, growing steadily in self-confidence over the next six years, led the group as they adjusted to the new ideas emanating from the council, especially those calling missionaries to immerse themselves into the lives and culture of the people they served. Some sisters felt drawn to identify more radically with the marginalized, arguing that to be effective missionaries it would be better to withdraw from teaching schoolchildren and move out of the convent to experience firsthand the hardships of the poor. Other sisters disagreed and Maura, as superior, agonized over the decision. She opted for the activist approach, permitting some sisters to reside in outlying communities where they lived among the local *campesinos*. Finally, in 1968, the Maryknoll community left their school and semi-cloistered convent in Siuna and moved to the *barrios* of Managua where they could integrate with the poor. They visited the homes of local residents, listening and learning about their hardships to better assist them. The Maryknoll Sisters' mentality changed from "teachers of the poor" to "learners from the poor."

Soon, however, Maura returned to the United States for a year to care for her ailing mother. Prior to this, her letters, although laced with compassionate stories of suffering individuals, were devoid of analysis and did not allude to the Somoza dictatorship or the U.S. policy that enabled it. Upon her return home, as her sister Judy later noted, the family detected a change. She had come to believe that the previous band-aid approach to mission work—that is, treating the wounds that festered from poverty without attempting to change the unjust structures causing it—was not enough. Maura had begun a process of radicalization and her traditional Catholic family was at first unsure what to make of it.<sup>80</sup>

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79. For more on Maura's generosity, see Donna Whitson Brett and Edward T. Brett, *Martyrs of Hope: Seven U.S. Missionaries in Central America* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2018), 199, 201, 206.

80. Judith M. Noone, *The Same Fate as the Poor*, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 59–61.

Following her return to Nicaragua, one can easily detect in Maura's letters a more critical, intense tone. A letter to her parents noted that she and the two sisters with whom she lived in the *barrio* hoped to form their indigent neighbors into a faith-sharing group, "which is a way of trying to unite them to solve their own problems."<sup>81</sup> A second letter told of participating in anti-Somoza demonstrations and visiting incarcerated political prisoners. After this second letter criticized Nicaraguan bishops for siding with the dictatorship against protesters, Maura addressed her worried parents who had cautioned her to stay clear of violence: "Don't worry, dear Hearts, I'll be careful and stay out of riots and fights but we must do what we can to lend support to those who have the courage to give themselves for . . . change."<sup>82</sup> It was increasingly evident that Maura herself was growing in courage, and her letter probably did little to ease her parents' minds.

In December 1972, a devastating earthquake hit Managua, and Maura—like other survivors in her *barrio*—was lucky to escape with her life, spending that night helping others buried in the debris. The next day her Maryknoll coworkers found her, exhausted from lack of sleep, distributing communion to survivors.<sup>83</sup> Over the next three years, Maura lived for a time in a "tent city" with other survivors and then moved back to the *barrio*. Near the end of her last year in Nicaragua, her neighbors discovered that they were paying the Somoza-affiliated water company twice what the nearby affluent area's residents paid. A committee formed to demand justice, and when it was ignored, the people peacefully protested. Guardsmen attempted to arrest a protester, but Maura blocked their jeep and smashed her fist on its hood, demanding that the soldiers release their captive. Whether they did so is uncertain, but it is undeniable that she risked arrest and torture by her action, raising her commitment to the oppressed another notch.<sup>84</sup>

Maura was by now so immersed in the struggles of her poor neighbors that, when reassigned to the United States in 1976 for three years, she was devastated: "I entered into a time of sadness and deep loneliness and wept over my separation from the people I love, the Sisters, the Fathers, all. I saw the tortured people who fight for justice today in the place of Christ, and I pictured

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81. Maura Clarke to parents, Palm Sunday 1970, SFATP, box 8, file 2, MMA.

82. Clarke to family, October 15, 1970, SFATP, box 8, file 3, MMA.

83. Clarke to family, December 25, 1972, SFATP, box 8, file 3, MMA; Kay Kelly to Judith Noone, June 25, 1982; a copy of the letter was sent by Kelly to the authors.

84. Noone writes that the guardsmen, amazed at Maura's action, released their captive. Markey, however, after personally interviewing several of the *barrio* men who had witnessed Maura's actions, was told that the guardsmen did not release their prisoner. Noone, *Same Fate*, 71; Eileen Markey, *Radical Faith: The Assassination of Sister Maura* (New York: Nation Books, 2016), 177, 293–294, note 65.

the rulers and the military as the high priests. I envisioned the poor . . . as the tortured Jesus.”<sup>85</sup> Maura ached to return to Nicaragua where she could again partake in the suffering of the poor and, through them, that of Jesus.

The spiritual growth and insights revealed in her notes foreshadowed a difficult decision in her future, but for now, Maura knew that justice in Central America depended in part on making the American public aware of the people’s struggle. Consequently, over the next three years and with another sister, she dedicated herself to what Maryknoll called “reverse mission.” They visited churches and schools throughout the U.S. Northeast, relating what they had seen and experienced in their mission work. Their words at times angered some in the audience who believed it was unpatriotic to criticize U.S. foreign policy. When this happened, Maura, with her calm demeanor and gentle nature, sought to defuse tensions.

In July 1977 Maura joined an occupation of the Nicaraguan consulate to the United Nations. When the New York police arrived to arrest protesters, it was the usually reserved Irish-American nun who forced herself to step forward and convince officers to let the protesters leave peacefully of their own volition.<sup>86</sup> Likewise, at a September 1978 anti-Somoza protest in Boston, Maura, who dreaded public speaking, was called on to substitute for a speaker who had canceled at the last moment. Overcoming her nervousness, she stepped forward and spoke from the heart, without notes, about what she had witnessed in her mission work. She concluded with an eloquent appeal to President Carter and Congress to terminate support for the dictator.<sup>87</sup>

During her three years in the United States, Maura closely followed events in Nicaragua. Especially valuable were letters she received from her sister missionaries. When Somoza was overthrown in 1979 and various opposition groups joined together with the intent of creating a new reformist government, their letters brimmed with excitement and hope. Maura pined to return to Nicaragua and rejoin her companions, as well as the poor she had previously accompanied in their struggles. Yet, she felt a certain discomfort at not having participated in all of their suffering: “Somehow you have all taken on a new strangeness . . . and I fear not being able to relate to you . . . after all you’ve been through and endured.”<sup>88</sup>

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85. Clarke, Notes written during an eight-day retreat, quoted in Noone, *Same Fate*, 71.

86. Markey, *Radical Faith*, 188–190.

87. Noone, *Same Fate*, 73.

88. Clarke, note to the Nicaraguan sisters, [no date, but probably late August 1979], SFATP, box 8, file 10, MMA. It is uncertain whether this note was ever mailed.

Maura was then presented with a choice that would haunt her: Archbishop Romero was calling for experienced missionaries to volunteer for service in El Salvador, and she felt that perhaps this was where God wanted her. When Romero was assassinated, her family and friends pleaded with her to stay out of harm's way. Ironically, the archbishop's death only strengthened her sense of a calling to El Salvador. In a moving letter to her parents while visiting Nicaragua, Maura shared her decision: "I would really like to stay . . . in Nicaragua where there is so much to do, but I know I must go to El Salvador to see if it is right for me to be there. . . . Don't worry about me. The Lord takes care of us all. . . . We must not be afraid. No matter what happens we are one with God and with one another."<sup>89</sup> Eight days later, on August 5, 1980, Maura left for El Salvador and soon wrote, "Somehow I believe the Lord wants me here and He will show me what He wishes little by little."<sup>90</sup> Invigorated by years of immersion into the lives of the poor, her spirituality now relied on total trust in God.

Within three weeks of her arrival, Maura did indeed perceive a crucial role for herself when Sister Carla Piette drowned in a flash flood while transporting a refugee. Along with Sister Ita Ford, Carla had only recently begun the dangerous work of resettling refugees displaced by war. Maura attended her funeral services in Chalatenango, heard the people testify to Carla's life of courage and sacrifice, and was moved to take her place.

In Nicaragua, the Somoza regime avoided killing priests and nuns, but Maura knew that in El Salvador her religious identity would no longer protect her. Several priests, even Archbishop Romero, had been gunned down. Realization of the dangers caused her to ponder her own mortality: "I am beginning to see death in a new way. . . . We have been meditating a lot on death and the accepting of it. . . . It is an atmosphere of death. The work is really what Bishop Romero called '*acompañamiento*' [accompanying the people]. . . . This seems what the Lord is asking of me, I think, at this moment."<sup>91</sup>

In another letter, written after a meeting with Christian base community leaders, she revealed with passion another major source of inner strength:

These are the most rugged . . . and faith-filled men and women who are religious leaders of their various pueblos. It takes courage for them to continue any celebrations of the Word or meetings because anyone suspected of being in an organization or attached to the church is in serious

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89. Clarke to parents, July 28, 1980, SFATP, box 8, file10, MMA.

90. Clarke to Dave, August 21, 1980, SFATP, box 8, file 11, MMA.

91. Clarke to Kay Kelly, October 21, 1980, SFATP, box 8, file 12, MMA.

danger. I was so impressed . . . by this little group. . . . The poor really strip you, pull you, challenge you, evangelize you, show you God.<sup>92</sup>

Shortly before her death, Maura wrote two additional letters. In the first, a candid letter to her parents, she revealed: “The situation is very tragic. People are fleeing . . . looking for some kind of safety as the so-called death squadron strikes anywhere and everywhere...It is a much more vengeful, confusing and frightening case than that of [Somoza’s] Nicaragua.” Yet her total reliance on God was evident: “Each day we trust the Lord to guide our ways as to what he wishes of us. . . . At times one wonders if one should remain in such a crazy incredible mess. I only know that I am trying to follow where the Lord leads, and in spite of fear and uncertainty at times, I feel at peace and hopeful.”<sup>93</sup> In the second letter, sent to friends, she wrote:

The way innocent people, families, children are cut up with machetes and blessed temples of the Lord thrown and left for the buzzards to feed on . . . seems unbelievable but it happens every day. . . . The pain goes on and there are many hungry people hiding and struggling. Being here with Ita and working for the refugees has its sweetness, consolation, special grace and is certainly a gift. The courage and suffering of these people never ceases to call me.<sup>94</sup>

This letter, written ten days before she died, graphically illustrates the depths of Maura’s spiritual life. Her words also reveal that, by the end of her life, she had discovered why God—and the Salvadoran people—had called her to Chalatenango.

### **Sister Ita Ford: “It’s a privilege to come to a church of martyrs. . . .”**

Ita Ford (1940–1980) was born in Brooklyn, New York. In 1952, her father’s cousin, Maryknoll Bishop Francis Ford, died after being brutalized in a prison camp in communist China, becoming an important symbol in the 1950s struggle against communism.<sup>95</sup> That her martyred relative’s story was a significant factor in Ita’s early religious development seems safe to assume. A trip to the Soviet Union and Poland in 1961 further reinforced both her anticommunist convictions and her resolve to enter Maryknoll that same year.

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92. Clarke to Mary Manning, August 11, 1980, SFATP, box 8, file 10, MMA.

93. Clarke to parents, [early] October 1980, SFATP, box 8, file 12, MMA.

94. Cited in Noone, *Same Fate*, 129.

95. Jean-Paul Wiest, “The Legacy of Bishop Francis X. Ford,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 12 (July 1988): 130–135.



Sister Ita Ford, MM

During her three years in formation, Ita craved intellectual stimulation and demonstrated a somewhat analytical approach to prayer. As she wrote a friend, “I’m not a fan of much of the symbolism attached to religious life. But there is a definite relationship to be established with God, and maybe with less sentiment it could be clearer.”<sup>96</sup> Ita was crushed when illness forced her to leave religious life just before making first vows. She spent the next seven years as an editor for a Catholic publishing house, which coincided with the dissemination of new concepts emanating from Vatican II; consequently, when she reentered Maryknoll in 1971, she had undergone a profound evolution of thinking.

By the time she was assigned to Chile in 1973, Ita was conversant in mission theology’s new currents. This is evident in a letter to a friend as she noted that she would now be able “to get some idea of *población* work . . . since the movement is away from institutions and toward living with the people in their [own] reality.”<sup>97</sup> Ita was aware that recent mission theory deemphasized both living in semi-cloistered convents and erecting U.S.-like parish structures, instead calling for immersion into the lives and culture of the poor. In Chile, she hoped to practice what she had learned in theory.

Ita spent most of the next seven years living and working in Chile at Población La Bandera with three other sisters, including Carla Piette. Carla

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96. Ita Ford to Jean Reardon, August 18, 1963, SFATP, box 7, file 5, MMA.

97. Ford to Katherine Monahan Gregg, June 9, 1973, SFATP, box 7, file 6, MMA.

and Ita became friends who challenged themselves and each other to a deeper commitment to the poor. Their efforts were severely tested when, only two months after Ita arrived, the government of Salvador Allende was overthrown in a U.S.-assisted coup. Four decades of peaceful democracy were replaced by seventeen years of dictatorship. This was a time when not only the people of La Bandera were terrorized but also the sisters. The horrors they faced, however, would forge courage in them and solidarity with their neighbors. Sheila Cassidy, a British medical doctor who regularly joined Ita and Carla in communal prayer, expressed in her memoirs how impressed she was with their spirituality made manifest in empathy:

These were not pious foreign missionaries coming in to preach a message of brotherly love and then returning to their comfortable American-style house, but educated young women who lived in a little wooden house like [the people] did, who traveled on foot and by bus as they did and who shared their bread and their friendship and their talents. . . . The coup had been a great proving time, for the nuns had stayed in their home and their house had been searched along with those of their neighbours. They had shared the terror . . . when the *población* had been surrounded and the tanks had driven between the little houses and over some of them.<sup>98</sup>

The Maryknoll sisters did what they could to alleviate the suffering around them. They volunteered at refugee and food distribution centers and visited the National Stadium, where those who had been arrested were interrogated, tortured, and sometimes executed. Cassidy herself was arrested and tortured, but when allowed visitors, Ita and Carla were there, bringing books, treats, and a breviary—and also smuggling in the Eucharist.<sup>99</sup> The sisters placed their own lives in peril by trying to acquire information on the status of neighbors who had “disappeared” or been incarcerated. After their house was ransacked three times as police held them at gunpoint, Ita struggled to explain their terror in a letter to family and friends: “Until you experience [life under the dictatorship], or somehow make someone else’s experience your own, it never is truly real. We are privileged to have shared this, to know and feel a little of the suffering of the powerless, of those without a voice.”<sup>100</sup>

Ita and Carla often prayed together, sometimes late into the night, as they tried to make sense of the mystery of Christ’s passion. Ita’s reflection,

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98. Sheila Cassidy, *Audacity to Believe* (Cleveland: Collins World, 1978), 112-115. Because Carla and Ita were still working in Chile at the time of publication, Cassidy gave them the pseudonyms “Anna” and “Frances.”

99. Brett and Brett, *Martyrs of Hope*, 182.

100. Ford, “Try to Imagine,” reflection sent to friends and relatives, January 1974, SFATP, box 7, file 4, MMA.

published in an internal Maryknoll newsletter, indicated how her spiritual thinking was evolving:

I see Chile deeply experiencing the paschal mystery, with the light of Easter still to come. We can't wish away the suffering. Like Christ, how many times have we asked with the people, "Father, if it's possible, let this pass." Yet it seems the cup cannot pass without our drinking it.

The challenge that we live daily is to enter into this mystery with faith. . . . Am I willing to suffer with the people here, the suffering of the powerless? . . . Can I let myself be evangelized by this opportunity? Can I look at and accept my own poorness as I learn it from other poor ones?<sup>101</sup>

Ita was willing to be stripped of the privileges that came with her nationality and class status because this removed the barriers holding her back from total reliance on God. She began to understand better the disconnect with her own culture: "Our concepts of time, efficiency, providing for the morrow, a certain 'calculating' side of us doesn't jibe with the culture of the poor. . . . Working with the poor calls for a great restraint and modesty . . . so as not to overpower, overcome, or take over."<sup>102</sup> Yet it was difficult to articulate these new spiritual insights: "I can't give a job definition to what we do in reality. We're there to be with, to discover with the people the coming of brotherhood and justice and trying in some way to be part of that . . . with those who have been really put down, oppressed in various ways."<sup>103</sup>

Walking with the poor took its toll on Ita's physical, emotional, and spiritual health. In 1978, when she returned to Maryknoll for a year of renewal, she was depressed and physically drained.<sup>104</sup> Deeply distressed that so many Americans were ignorant of Chileans' suffering under Pinochet, she was described by a friend as a "seething volcano."<sup>105</sup> She began seeing a psychiatrist and a spiritual director. Maryknoll Father John Meehan, her spiritual director, later recalled: "From the first she was very open and honest. . . . She found prayer cold, empty, dark and useless but kept trying. In what proved to be a very short time the Spirit began to touch her. . . . From that point on she began to experience true contemplative prayer and the peace, love and joy that accompany it."<sup>106</sup>

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101. Ford, *Orientation*, Maryknoll Sisters, May 1977, SFATP, box 7, file 4, MMA.

102. Ford to Jane Buellesbach and others, March 3, 1978, SFATP, box 7, file 7, MMA.

103. Ford, interview with Maureen Flanagan, 1978, in *"Here I Am, Lord": The Letters and Writings of Ita Ford*, ed. Jeanne Evans (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005), 114–116.

104. Mildred Ford to Judith Noone, January 28, 1982, SFATP, box 6, file 9, MMA.

105. Quoted in Noone, *Same Fate*, 42.

106. Noone, *Same Fate*, 43.

Ita's retreat notes reveal that she was healing as she emerged from her dark night of the soul: "The Lord is bigger than my . . . hang-ups. . . . If the new creation is on its way or here, I don't want a malnourished, deformed, neglected self—but one that's alive—that hands on the good news, that lives it. . . . What seems to be slowly happening is an acceptance of the truth of who I am . . . how I've been gifted for others."<sup>107</sup> While in the United States, she used these gifts to inform her fellow Americans of the Chilean reality and, in doing so, revealed her own deepening beliefs: What was important, she said in an interview, "is building the Kingdom [of God], trying to understand just what the future might be, if there really were bread for all the people, if there really were justice."<sup>108</sup>

Ita's renewal year was fruitful and she looked forward to returning to Chile. Just before she left, however, an auto accident forced her to remain in the United States for another six months. While convalescing, Ita heard Maryknoll's request on behalf of Romero for Spanish-speaking missionaries to work in El Salvador, and, like Maura, she began to wonder if God was calling her there. After returning to Chile, she made her decision. She informed her mother in a letter:

The last week or two . . . have been mostly spent letting the El Salvador possibility roll around inside me. Then I went to the new [Maryknoll] House of Prayer . . . [and] went through the old Ignatian process of the pros and cons, besides reading my guts. What I came to and feel good with is a decision to go. . . . I realize this isn't the greatest news I've ever given you and, in fact, one of the cons was that the family would not be overjoyed, but I think it's a good decision.<sup>109</sup>

Three weeks before she left for El Salvador, Romero was assassinated, plaguing Ita with anxiety. Though deeply disappointed that he would not be her mentor, she stuck to her plan. After meeting Salvadoran catechists and other church workers dedicated to continuing Romero's legacy in spite of persecution, Ita wrote, "It's a privilege to come to a church of martyrs and people with a strong committed faith. . . . I have a strong conviction that I'm where I should be, though the particulars of the future are not very clear yet."<sup>110</sup>

After consulting with Salvadoran church officials, Ita and Carla—herself a newcomer to El Salvador—made the risky decision to aid the refugees of army massacres and "clean-up" sweeps in war-torn Chalatenango, knowing

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107. Ford, "Retreat Notes, August 1978–August 1979," in Evans, *Here I Am*, 120, 122.

108. Ford, interview with Flanagan, in Evans, *Here I Am*, 116.

109. Ford to Mildred Ford, March 2, 1980, SFATP, box 7, file 7, MMA.

110. Ford to Regina McEvoy, May 3, 1980, SFATP, box 7, file 7, MMA.

that by aiding victims government forces would deem them suspicious. Ita wrote, “Historically this is not the ideal time to arrive on the scene—but the Lord got us here for some reason.”<sup>111</sup> They saw mangled bodies and other atrocities almost daily as they transported food and emergency aid and shuttled refugees to church shelters; but strangely, as they articulated in a report to Maryknoll superiors, this “crazy situation” had led them to “a total dependence and trust in God.”<sup>112</sup>

Ita arrived during Easter season and drew a parallel between the disciples in disarray after Jesus’s death and the Salvadorans who had lost their beloved archbishop:

I arrived in El Salvador during the liturgical reading of Acts; . . . coming into a church that had just lost its leader; listening not only to testimonies of him, but also to the personal testimonies of the delegates of the word and catechists . . . who . . . have been threatened because of their association with the church. . . . People are making choices and are being killed for those choices.

Her faith was evident as she saw her own role—and Carla’s—begin to take form:

Now it’s the cycle of Pentecost . . . the time of my own empowering to participate. The gift of the Spirit is very real and important to me, especially his teaching, enlightening, leading me/us into the truth . . .

To believe that we are gifted in and for Salvador now, that the answer to the questions will come when they are needed, to walk in faith one day at a time with Salvadorans. . . . This seems to be what it means for us to be in El Salvador.<sup>113</sup>

Carla and Ita’s dangerous outreach to refugees provided other profound insights, which Ita tried to convey in a letter to her niece on her sixteenth birthday:

Yesterday, I stood looking down at a 16-year-old boy who had been killed a few hours earlier. I know a lot of kids even younger who are dead . . .

The reasons why so many people are being killed are quite complicated. . . . One is that many people have found a meaning to life, to sacrifice,

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111. Ford to Rachel Lauze, May 17, 1980, SFATP, box 7, file 7, MMA.

112. Ford and Carla Piette, “Three Months Experience in El Salvador,” Report to the PANISA and Chile Regions, July 20, 1980, SFATP, box 5, file 3, MMA.

113. Ford, “Some reflections,” June 1, 1980, SFATP, box 7, file 8, MMA.

114. Ford to Jennifer Sullivan, August 16, 1980, SFATP, box 7, file 8, MMA.

to struggle and even to death! And whether their life spans 16 years or 60 or 90, for them their life has had a purpose. In many ways they are fortunate people . . .

I hope you come to find that which gives life a deep meaning for you. Something worth living for, maybe even worth dying for. . . . I just encourage you to start looking . . .

Maybe . . . no one else will talk to you like this, but then, too, I'm seeing and living things that others around you aren't. . . . [This is] my birthday present to you. If it doesn't make sense right at this moment, keep this and read it sometime from now.<sup>114</sup>

Containing more than advice to her niece, the letter revealed how far Ita had advanced on her own spiritual journey. Her experiences were forcing her to ponder the possibility of her own violent death. She had come not only to accept this but, if it was God's will, to actually embrace it because accompanying the poor had given her own life "a deep meaning worth dying for."

One week later, on August 23, 1980, Carla died in a flash flood—but not before she pushed Ita to safety through the window of their jeep as it tossed about in the raging river. Carla's drowning threw Ita into depression. It had long been their custom to pray together and reflect on the suffering of the poor. In Chalatenango they had accepted the possibility of their own violent death, but prayed that if this were their fate, they would die together.<sup>115</sup> That she alone had survived was difficult for Ita, yet her brush with death bonded her more closely to the refugees, reinforcing her commitment to them. Maura recognized this and immediately volunteered to help. The work would continue.

In November, the Maryknoll sisters in El Salvador left for Nicaragua to attend their annual regional assembly. Maria Rieckelman, a Maryknoll psychiatrist who came from the United States for the event, reported that Maura spoke of the terror she had witnessed "as if she were walking through it with the sense that God was going to bring good out of that tremendous evil."<sup>116</sup> But Ita, still grieving for Carla, was not faring well, and Maria suggested that she leave El Salvador. Ita promised to think about it, but as the assembly progressed, she began—almost miraculously—to recover from her depression and told Maria that she wanted to return and continue her work with refugees.<sup>117</sup>

On December 1, as the gathering concluded, Ita read a sermon by Archbishop Romero that included the following words: "Christ invites us not to

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115. Maggiore, *Vessel of Clay*, 128.

116. Noone, *Same Fate*, 132.

117. *Ibid.*, 133.

fear persecution because, believe me, brothers and sisters, 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 to be found dead.”<sup>118</sup> That same evening, Maryknoll Sister Madeline Dorsey read to the assembly these prescient verses of Psalm 18:

The waves of death rose about me,  
The torrents of destruction assailed me.  
The snares of the grave entangled me.  
The traps of death confronted me.  
For the poor who are oppressed and the needy who groan,  
I myself will arise, says the Lord.

“Maddie,” Ita asked, “where in the world did you find that prayer? Nothing ever grabbed me so much as that.”<sup>119</sup>

Although Maura and Ita planned to take a taxi from the San Salvador airport the next evening, Dorothy and Jean insisted on picking them up. Always looking for a little fun, Jean reminded Paul Schindler to “get back to Libertad early—we’ll have a party tonight with the Maryknollers.”<sup>120</sup> Before the evening was over, however, the “four churchwomen,” as they came to be called, would be murdered on a deserted roadside by National Guardsmen.

Having embraced the poor, Dorothy, Jean, Maura, and Ita knew the same fear of death and torture as the poor. They did not choose martyrdom, but they did choose to remain in a nearly intolerable situation. In so doing, they came to know firsthand the God of those with no power. They prayed the prayers of the poor as they struggled through their fears, as they grew to trust God unconditionally, as they surrendered their lives to God’s protection, and as they worked to bring about a new world. They were no longer ordinary people. Their spiritual transformation had made them extraordinary.

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118. Oscar Romero, *A Martyr’s Message of Hope* (Kansas City, MO: Celebration Books, 1981), 105.

119. Madeline Dorsey, interview with Noone, July 1981, MMA, cited in Noone, *Same Fate*, 134.

120. Carrigan, *Salvador Witness*, 242.