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Sr. Dorothy Stang, Martyr of the Amazon

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

On Feb. 12, 2005, Sr. Dorothy Stang walked along a dirt road deep in the heart of Brazil's Amazon, on her way to meet a handful of poor farmers bearing up under harassment from illegal loggers and ranchers. She trudged along, until two hired assassins blocked her way. In response to their challenge, she produced maps and documents proving that the government had designated the land as a reserve for the landless poor. "Do you have a weapon?" they asked. Yes, she answered, showing them the Bible she carried for decades. She opened it and began to read aloud: "Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice. Blessed are the peacemakers ..." Then, she said, "God bless you, my sons."

The two shot her six times and ran. Her body lay on the dirt road all day, nearby witnesses later said, because they were afraid they would be shot if they moved it. As it rained, her blood mixed with the dirt. The news pierced my heart. I felt the same stab of pain and glory as when I heard the news 27 years ago of the murders of Ita Ford, Maura Clarke, Dorothy Kazel and Jean Donovan. And I've followed with great interest the trials of Dorothy's assassins. Now Orbis Books has published a powerful biography, *Martyr of the Amazon: The Life of Sister Dorothy Stang* by Roseanne Murphy. I urge you to get a copy and ponder her life. You'll feel, like I do, evangelized, inspired and challenged by this great saint and martyr.

I suspected early on that Sr. Dorothy had attained great moral heights. Anyone who leaves their homeland, spends four decades serving the poorest of the poor in Amazon, and defends the forest -- long before anyone ever thought of an environmental movement -- must possess enormous commitment, faith and vision.

In Dayton, 1931, she was born, one of nine in a lively and devout Catholic family. At 17, she entered the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, and in 1953 she was sent to serve the poor, teach children, and assist at Most Holy Trinity parish in the desert of Sunnyslope, Ariz. After many good years, she volunteered to join a mission to Brazil, and in 1966 off she went -- later to become a citizen there. In the years before she was killed, she was hailed with honors for her work. She learned the languages and set up remote parishes. Walked the forest and met with the poorest farmers. Set up dozens of base communities and taught them the Gospel. She launched 23 schools and created a structure for the poor to claim their land. A tidy sum of work. The base community movement, liberation theology, the environmental movement -- she brought them forth, like a vineyard from a wasteland, along with the other church workers.

Feisty and energetic and loving, one of the great saints. Surely she'll be canonized one day. To that end she remained faithful to the poor, to the ruined Amazon, and so, to the Gospel and the God of justice and compassion. Beautiful stories come down to us. How she fed the hungry, built community, lived in destitution. How she confronted illegal loggers and corrupt ranchers, the class who stole land from the poor, kept them in misery, and bought off the police, the military and the government. Death threats rained down on Dorothy for years, along with insults and hate mail. Ranchers took aim at the community center for women that she had founded and riddled it with bullets. On one occasion the police arrested her for passing out "subversive" material. It was the United Nations's Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Another time, she escaped by a hairs-breadth an attempt on her life.

Yet she carried on and included the ranchers in her prayers for peace. Her defense of the poor was fearless. She did her homework, studied the laws, barged repeatedly into government offices to lodge heated complaints. The poor, she said, were promised land, but here they are being driven off, loggers and ranchers behind it all, and the government turning a blind eye, turning a blind eye, as well, toward the destruction of the forest. She stood fearless even as she witnessed over the years the marriage of powers, commercial interests and the military. Together they threatened and terrorized and forced many of her programs to collapse. But she remained positive and hopeful, virtually always smiling.

"That I've been able to live, love, be loved and work with the Brazilian people, help them find confidence in themselves, to profoundly sense God's presence in their lives and then be a creative influence in society from which a more human society can be born, I thank all of you," she wrote her family and friends on her 60th birthday in 1991. "It's a chain reaction. We can give positive input-energy into life but we need to be charged also. In the midst of all this violence there are many small communities that have learned the secret of life: sharing, solidarity, confidence, equality, pardon, working together. God is present -- generator and sustainer of all life. Thus life is productive and transforming in the midst of all this."

Over the years, Dorothy wore a favorite T-shirt that read: "The death of the forest is the end of our lives." She knew first hand what the destruction of the Amazon meant, not only for Brazil but for the planet. In 1991, she took a sabbatical program in Oakland, California to study creation spirituality with Matthew Fox (and lived around the corner from me.) Afterwards, she attended the historic 1992 first Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. A few weeks later, she wrote her family, "Tell all that we must make great efforts to save our planet. Mother Earth is not able to provide anymore. Her water and air are poisoned and her soil is dying of exaggerated use of chemicals, all in the name of profit. Pray for all of us and for a world where all can live -- plants, animals and humans -- in peace and harmony." In 2002, the death threats intensified. The mayor of the nearby town said, "We have to get rid of that woman if we are going to have peace." A list circulated of people with "bounties" on their heads. Atop the list was her name -- Stang, \$20,000.

But she was undeterred. "I know that they want to kill me," she said, "but I will not go away. My place is here alongside these people who are constantly humiliated by the powerful." Visiting her family and community in Ohio a few months before she was killed, she told one sister, "I just want to sink myself into God." Her absence gave the authorities space to work a different tack. On her return she was met with a trumped-up charge, organizing armed rebellion. This should put her in her place, water down her gumption. And off to trial she went. It was in the middle of it that she died. "I look at Jesus carrying the cross," she said a few days before her death, when asked by a novice about her prayer, "and I ask for the strength to carry the suffering of the people." A day before she died, she said: "If something is going to happen, I hope it happens to me, because the others have families to care for."

At her funeral two thousand people marched. Hundreds of reporters descended from around the world. "Today, we are not going to bury Dorothy. We are going to plant her," her community said. "Dorothy vive!" the crowd returned. Brazil's president announced days later the creation of two new national parks in the rain forest. He declared the expansion of another and placed eight and a half million acres more under environmental protection. And he suspended logging in the most hotly contested areas. Dorothy is rising in her people and in the land. She will rise in us, too, if we join her campaign. I urge you: Let Dorothy inspire you--her great spirit, her work for justice and peace, her service to the poorest, her defense of the earth. Especially her trust in God, her steadfast determination, her carrying on -- no matter what. She will teach us how to do likewise, how to live in hope despite these despairing, deadly times.

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John Dear's new book, "Transfiguration," is available from www.amazon.com, and the DVD he is featured in, "The Narrow Path," is available from www.sandamianofoundation.org. This weekend, he will speak in Louisville, and next week, in Chicago, Syracuse and New York. For info, see: www.johndear.org. See also: "Brazil Justice Network" at www.braziljusticenetwork.org; "Rainforest Action Network," at www.ran.org; and "Brazil Network" at www.brazilnetwork.org.

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