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30 years later, Salvadoran martyrs' struggle for justice lives on

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

Dec. 2 marks the thirtieth anniversary of the abduction, rape and killing of four U.S. churchwomen in El Salvador -- Maryknoll Srs. Ita Ford and Maura Clarke, Ursuline Sr. Dorothy Kazel, and Maryknoll lay missionary Jean Donovan.

Their shocking deaths awoke millions to the death and destruction the U.S. government was waging in El Salvador, and the deaths which continue today around the world.

After Jean Donovan died I had the privilege of meeting and befriending her parents and I worked with them for years to make the incident of her death and its implications more public.

I remember Jean's mother telling me that she thought the four women had been killed because Ford had marched into the military headquarters in the Salvadoran state of Chalatenango -- into a room full of soldiers on death-squad duty -- right up to the general and demanded that he release a recently captured campesino.

Ita was a diminutive woman and with typical Salvadoran machismo the general ignored her. So she upped the ante and stood on his shoes. From a slightly higher vantage point she looked up at his face and pointed her finger toward his nose. Release the campesino, she demanded.

Next day he was free. But Ita's name appeared a few days later atop Chalatenango's death list.

Ita's passion was originally not focused on El Salvador, but Chile, where she served for years with her co-worker and best friend, Sr. Carla Piette.

In early 1980 Archbishop Oscar Romero issued a call for help, so Ita and Carla volunteered to leave their beloved Chile and move to El Salvador. Carla arrived on the evening of Romero's death; Ita arrived on the day of his funeral.

In the months that followed, as blood flowed, Ita and Carla found themselves caught in the middle of the war.

In the total chaos of violence, the best they could do was chauffeur church workers and displaced people. During one of those trips, on Aug. 23, 1980, the two women were caught in a flash flood as they crossed a little creek in their jeep. The surge capsized their jeep, filled it with rushing water. During the struggle Carla managed to push Ita out the window.

All of them, jeep included, were swept away. Ita barely survived. Several days later Donovan found Piette's naked, battered body twelve miles downstream.

It's been thirty years now, and Jacqueline Hansen Maggiore, a lifelong friend of Piette, has just published her biography, *Vessel of Clay: The Inspirational Journey of Sister Carla* (University of Scranton Press, 2010).

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We finally hear the story of the fifth U.S. churchwoman who died in El Salvador in 1980. I find the book compelling, inspiring, and consoling.

Carla was a teacher, parish leader, prophet, clown, poet and scripture scholar, Maggiore writes. Committed to radical poverty and "the poor of the poor," Carla entered the Maryknoll Sisters in 1958, and served as a missionary in Chile from 1964 to 1979.

Throughout this intense work among the poorest of the poor Carla battled depression, yet somehow found the strength, the author writes, to give of herself with "energy, empathy, and life-enhancing humor."

Ita was assigned to work in Carla's village in Chile in 1973 and the two became fast friends.

On Sept. 10 of that year Ita's father died, so Carla and a friend drove Ita into central Santiago to purchase a plane ticket. They arrived just as the coup establishing a military dictatorship began.

Within minutes of their entering the city bombs went off at *La Moneda Palace*, the presidential palace. Chile's president, Salvador Allende was killed, tanks and soldiers filled the streets, and martial law began.

Within weeks seven thousand people were imprisoned in the city's stadium. Under the U.S.-backed coup and dictatorship, General Augusto Pinochet came to power. His death squads killed tens of thousands of people.

For years the repression and killings continued. And over three hundred missionaries and priests were ordered out of the country. At least three were killed. Ita and Carla went to the stadium every day during those initial months to try to help people.

"The Lord is calling me to be poor with His poor," Carla once wrote a friend from Chile.

Maggiore's book helps us understand the profound commitment of the Maryknoll sisters exemplified by

Carla, Ita and Maura. They lived very simply in poor villages just as the other people did. Their transportation was their own feet. They shared their food and helped as they could. Their lives were a constant self-giving, the "love in action" which Dostoyevsky called such "a hard and dreadful thing." Carla, like Ita, owned nothing.

In 1976 Carla returned to the states for a sabbatical, made the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius -- the thirty day silent retreat -- and recommitted herself to the poor of Latin America.

She told one friend that she was sick of the consumerism, greed and waste among the people of the U.S. and hoped never to return. She underwent extreme culture shock whenever she was in the States, and while there she challenged everyone she met to shed their possessions and side with the Third World poor.

In 1979, after fifteen years of work among Chile's poorest, she set her sights on Central America. With Ita, she was discerning whether or not to respond to Romero's call and go to El Salvador.

First, she tried Nicaragua. She arrived in Ocotol on the Honduran border in January, 1980, not long after the Sandinista revolution. Though she loved the Nicaraguan people, and would have been a great asset in the village which became a key battleground in Reagan's contra war, both Carla and Ita were mesmerized by Archbishop Romero and wanted to help him. They chose to move to El Salvador.

Like others who responded to Romero's call, the two women were shocked by the daily horrors and massacres perpetrated there by the U.S.-backed death squads.

Carla was inside the Cathedral during Romero's funeral as the military opened fire on the crowds outside, killing over thirty. Ita arrived just as the crowd was fleeing. They had plopped themselves from day one into an erupting volcano of violence, trying to serve Christ in the poor.

During her five months there Carla chauffeured the poor, picked up the murdered bodies, delivered food and medicine, and served the church in Chalatenango with Ita.

The horror they witnessed every day is hard to imagine. Jean Donovan wrote in her journal after visiting Ita and Carla a few days before Carla died: "In Chalatenango, there are bodies lying all over the place."

In this nightmare, Carla looked diligently for God. She called life among the poorest of the poor "a daily circus act." The day before her death, Carla wrote a friend, "We dolly along in this crazy circus of life where so often the Divine Circus Master doesn't clue us into the act for tomorrow yet always gives us the strength to perform."

"I leave the future in the Circus Master's hands," she wrote another friend.

Ita barely survived the flood, and certainly would not have survived had Carla not pushed her up through the jeep window.

The torrent left her not only physically injured, but emotionally devastated. Still, she was determined to be part of Carla's funeral preparations. She wrote to Carla's friends in the weeks afterwards.

"Carla's death has meaning because her life was full of meaning," she wrote. "May the same be true of us."

Vessel of Clay is a powerful tale about another great churchwoman who gave her life to Christ in the poor. My only disappointment was that it ended abruptly with Carla's death; I wish there was a final chapter leading up to the Dec. 2 deaths of the other four women.

My own theory is that Carla's death shook Ita deeply, fortified her to the bone -- so that her fearlessness doubled to the point of standing on the general's shoes. In her heart of hearts, death no longer had dominion. She was free to die in the campesinos' stead.

So much has happened in the thirty years since -- beginning with the deaths of millions and millions of more poor people around the planet, the ongoing warmaking of the United States, and the ongoing collapse of the institutional church.

Like Ita, Maura, Dorothy and Jean, Carla shows that in the midst of this circus life, we can still follow Jesus by serving those in need and offering compassion. Like Carla, we can leave the future in the Circus Master's hands.

As we remember these great churchwomen and do what we can for justice and peace, I think -- as Ita wrote of Carla -- our lives too will be filled with meaning.

Good resources to study the lives of the four women killed in El Salvador include *Salvador Witness: The Life and Calling of Jean Donovan*; *The Same Fate as the Poor*; and *Here I am, Lord: The Letters and Writings of Ita Ford* (all from Orbis), plus *In the Fullness of Life: A Biography of Dorothy Kazel* (Dimension).

This week, John will speak in Portland and Sacramento. John's collection of the writings of Nobel Laureate Mairead Maguire, *The Vision of Peace*, has just been republished by www.wipfandstock.com. John's recent book, *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* (Orbis), along with other recent books, *A Persistent Peace* and *Put Down Your Sword*, as well as Patricia Normile's *John Dear On Peace*, are available from www.amazon.com. To contribute to Catholic Relief Services' "Fr. John Dear Haiti Fund," go to: <http://donate.crs.org/goto/fatherjohn>. For further information, see: www.johndear.org.

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