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'The women won't let us go'

Cheryl Wittenauer | Nov. 30, 2010

On Dec. 4, 1980, three Maryknoll sisters pray beside the bodies of the four American Catholic women who were kidnapped and slain two days before in El Salvador. (AP)

Isabel Legarda was only 8 years old when the abduction, rape and shooting death of four American churchwomen 30 years ago in El Salvador drew the world?s attention to the tiny Central American country, raised questions about U.S. support for rightist forces there, and inspired a movement of religious activism.

The 38-year-old Filipina-American, a Boston-area anesthesiologist and mother of two, is among those who say the life, witness and martyrdom of Ita Ford, Maura Clarke, Dorothy Kazel and Jean Donovan still hold meaning today.

Legarda has assembled a multiethnic and ecumenical mix of artists to perform next month in Boston the New England premiere of ?Missionaries,? award-winning composer Elizabeth Swados? choral drama based on the women?s letters, journals, lives and work.

Swados? latest work, ?Resilient Souls,? which premieres next month in New York, explores how people were affected by the women?s death, and how it changed their own commitment to the poor. (See story [1].)

?This story doesn?t just resonate with Catholics,? said Legarda, whose ?Missionaries? cast and crew include a pagan, an atheist, a Jew, a Unitarian and Protestants. She said she wanted a ?village of people? to tell a story with universal meaning -- that the women sacrificed everything for their faithfulness to El Salvador?s poor in

the early, brutal days of its as-yet-undeclared civil war.

?We still have situations that demand people?s commitment to justice, whether in Sudan or Burma or the Philippines,? Legarda said. ?There?s a tinderbox everywhere that requires people to give of themselves, to give everything for love.?

Pilgrims still flock to El Salvador where Maryknoll Srs. Ita Ford and Maura Clarke, Ursuline nun Dorothy Kazel, and laywoman Jean Donovan walked, worked and died, their names and faces enshrined in Salvadoran and U.S. centers and schools.

A generation ago, their deaths raised skepticism about the human rights records of close U.S. allies, and caused Americans to question their own government, said U.S. policy analysts and the women?s family members.

Young people today, who did not experience the politics of the time, are moved nonetheless by the women?s faithfulness to difficult service, said Timothy Matovina, professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana.

At Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, where alumna Donovan will be the focus of a symposium in February, at least one student who experienced her story on a recent trip to El Salvador was inspired to change his major, enter the Peace Corps and live a ?more authentic life,? said Tony Vento, Newman Catholic campus minister.

Mary Burns, a Sister of Charity of Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada, said the four churchwomen?s story became an important turning point for religious women, at the very time congregations were talking about being faithful to the poor.

?It kind of stayed with me; I didn?t know why,? said Burns, who later founded the Maura Clarke-Ita Ford Center for women in Brooklyn, N.Y. ?The women won?t let us go. Even if we wanted to, we can?t.?

Ford and Clarke had arrived in El Salvador only a few months before Salvadoran national guardsmen overtook them as they left San Salvador?s airport with Kazel and Donovan, and killed the four women on the night of Dec. 2, 1980.

The crime, at the start of the last decade of the Cold War, came amidst U.S. political and financial support to El Salvador?s rightist government. Statements at the time by U.S. Secretary of State Alexander Haig and U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Jeane Kirkpatrick suggested the women had invited trouble, perhaps by running roadblocks or exchanging gunfire.

Robert White, U.S. ambassador to El Salvador at the time, said both U.S. officials ?made statements that were shameful, that they knew were not true, to advance a political agenda, and showed no honor or respect for the memory of these women.?

Clarke?s sister, Julia Clarke Keogh of Long Island, N.Y., said the women?s families expected ?a meaningful

investigation? into who ordered the killings and carried them out. ?The U.S. government gave us nothing,? she said, except ?cookies and coffee? and heavily redacted documents.

Ford and her friend and Maryknoll partner Carla Piette were working in Chile in 1979 when Archbishop Oscar Romero of San Salvador asked for experienced, Spanish-speaking missionaries to come to El Salvador to provide sanctuary for war refugees and accompany his people. Piette arrived on March 24, 1980, the very day Romero was assassinated while celebrating Mass in San Salvador. Ford arrived a few days later.

Piette biographer and friend Jackie Maggiore of suburban Milwaukee said Piette and Ford lived and worked with other sisters in El Salvador before settling that August in Chalatenango, where the war had intensified. They delivered food to people forced into hiding in the mountains, and shuttled women and children to safe houses. Catechists, priests and community leaders were among those targeted and slain, and the sisters had to be smart about every move.

?It was a horrific time, a kind of madness? that Piette described in her letters, Maggiore said. Her accounts described soldiers entering hospitals to kill those recovering from war wounds, and corpses littering the streets.

On the evening of Aug. 23, Piette and Ford, joined by two seminarians, left Chalatenango to deliver a just-released prisoner to his village, despite a looming rainstorm. They got caught in flash flooding that upset their vehicle. Piette pushed Ford out the window to safety, and Ford and the men survived. Piette?s body was found near the village of San Antonio Los Ranchos, which remembers the ?Martyr of Charity? in an annual pilgrimage, and at a wall of murals and busts of her and Romero.

Maggiore recalled that the night of Aug. 23, 1980, she dreamed she received a telegram from her friend that said, ?I?m coming home.?

?I am so convinced it was her saying she is safe,? said Maggiore, who read of Piette?s death two days later in the newspaper.

Journalist David Helvarg has written that in his interview with Ford a few weeks before her murder, she recounted that when she emerged from the water after the accident and walked for hours to get to a town, all she could think was, ?Why her, God? Why did you call her and not me?? She went on, ?I don?t know. Maybe I?ve been chosen for another purpose.?

After Piette?s death, Clarke, who had served 20 years in Nicaragua, agreed to join Ford in El Salvador. The oldest of three children of Irish parents in Rockaway Beach, N.Y., Clarke had grown more emboldened and determined to stand with the poor, said friends and family.

Gail Phares of Raleigh, N.C., a former Maryknoll sister in Nicaragua, said Clarke evolved from a person of caution to one who was able to tell National Guardsmen to release a truckload of teenage boys who had been collected off the streets of Managua, potentially never to be seen again.

?Over a period of time, she became stronger and stronger in love with the people,? said a friend, Maryknoll Sr. Peg Dillon. ?Their crosses become part of your faith journey. You step up to the plate.?

Dillon remembers Clarke as very friendly and engaging, a person of good humor and deep faith, who had a way of leaning into a person, to give her full attention. ?She was always late,? Dillon said. ?We?d say, ?Maura, the bus is leaving.? ?

Historian and Virginia Tech professor Marian Mollin, who is writing a biography of Ita Ford, said the Brooklyn-born nun was cosmopolitan, funny, smart and intense, a woman so intellectually engaged that she maintained

her *New Yorker* magazine subscription even in Chile.

Heartbroken when rejected by Maryknoll for health reasons in 1964, she reapplied and entered in 1970 just as thousands of women were leaving religious life.

?That calling must have been something she couldn?t resist,? said Mollin, a friend of Ford?s niece, Miriam Ford. ?What an example of living your life according to your ideals, of being part of a community that gave you strength, guidance and identity to do this really hard work.?

Meanwhile, Kazel and Donovan were providing direct services to war refugees in the coastal community of La Libertad.

Kazel, who had been in El Salvador since 1974, and Donovan, who arrived in 1979, were part of the Cleveland diocese?s long-standing Latin American mission team. Kazel was slated to return to the United States in June 1980, but didn?t want to leave, and was granted an extension, her friend Ursuline Sr. Sheila Marie Tobbe recalled.

But she wasn?t without fear. She confided to Tobbe that she and Donovan wondered if the murders of an Italian priest and two teenage boys from their parish were intended as a warning to leave.

Donovan, the youngest of the four women, was from an upper-middle-class family, and was engaged to be married. Her decision to join the Cleveland mission team was the result of an adult faith journey, and she was weighing the pleas of her fiancé and an Irish priest friend to return home to safety.

But the Salvadoran children, ?the poor, bruised victims of this insanity,? kept her there, she wrote two weeks before her death.

?We felt we were safe as Americans,? said Fr. Paul Schindler, a priest who was part of the Cleveland diocese?s mission team in El Salvador then and now. Still, he said, ?we kept a low profile.?

The night of Dec. 1, 1980, on the eve of the murders, Schindler, Donovan, Kazel and a Vincentian sister had dinner at Ambassador White?s home and spent the night there, at his wife?s urging.

Schindler recalled that Donovan, whose father had designed U.S. helicopters, told White that she had seen U.S.

helicopters in El Salvador?s war zone as she shuttled refugees. Schindler said he was to see Donovan and Kazel again the next evening, but ?they never made it.?

White, who retired from the Foreign Service in 1981, said whether the women are remembered ?depends on the living, how many people are actively concerned, and keep their memory alive.?

For his part, White, senior fellow at the Center for International Policy, which promotes U.S. foreign policy based on demilitarization and international cooperation, said the ?best memorial is to stop thinking we can fix other countries? challenges.?

?I spent 25 years in the State Department and it was never explained to me how the security of the United States was involved in which side won in El Salvador,? he said. ?There was no evidence that it was anything else but an authentic revolution. It was not imported from the Soviet Union or Cuba.?

He said U.S. intervention only served to extend the war and El Salvador?s misery, increase the number of casualties, and destroy the environment and the nation?s industrial capacity.

A 1993 State Department report cited by *The New York Times* said the ?act of barbarism? against the women ?did more to inflame the debate over El Salvador in the United States than any other single incident.?

Events in the U.S. and El Salvador planned by the Maryknoll and Ursuline sisters, the Berkeley, Calif.-based SHARE Foundation and others will mark the 30th anniversary and consider its meaning for the rest of us. For Marie Dennis, director of the Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns, one lesson rises to the top.

?We?ve ... been told we have to be afraid of anyone different from us,? Dennis said. ?That is so far from the experience of these women. In spite of the fact they were living in a dangerous situation, they still found great life in El Salvador in those years.?

[Cheryl Wittenauer is a journalist in St. Louis who covered election observers from Missouri and Kansas who helped monitor El Salvador?s national election in 1994, the first since the signing of peace accords in 1992 following 12 years of civil war.]

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