

## **Remembering those murdered in El Salvador 30 years ago.**

Commemorative Service December 2, 2010

Cathedral of St. Raphael, Dubuque, Iowa

*Homily written by Sr. Pat Farrell*

Isn't it striking to begin tonight's celebration in darkness? It is the darkest time of the year and the days just keep getting longer. We are all too aware of the darkness in our environment—a recession, a polarized congress and country, two wars, and all the darkness and vulnerability we carry in our own personal lives, our families, our churches. It is also the beginning of Advent and we rouse one another to hope in the God who is Light in our darkness. And tonight, specifically, we remember and celebrate the four church women, Ita, Maura, Dorothy and Jean, with a light that represents each one. How is it that their lives and their martyrdom are light for us? What does it mean for us to gather here tonight, 30 years later, in their memory?

Let's look first to the Scripture reading we just heard. It's the second Suffering Servant song from 2<sup>nd</sup> Isaiah. The context of this reading is one of darkness. The people of Israel are in exile, suffering persecution and disruption. This reading, from the book of consolation, communicates that God is with this people, suffering with them. The sign of that is the figure of the Suffering Servant. The image of this ideal servant of God, faithful even in the face of overwhelming suffering, offers comfort. This servant accomplishes her mission modestly and quietly, not crushing the bruised reed, not whipping people into conformity but helping to bring about a genuine transformation. She announces the victory of justice, the triumph of light over darkness. But it doesn't look like victory in human terms. Death and suffering remain, but the Suffering Servant is a light in that darkness. Like our four church women, she is not afraid to walk right into intense suffering. It has no real power over her. To triumph is simply to be faithful. For Israel, and for the people of El Salvador, the presence of a faithful one is comfort and light. Tonight we celebrate these four faithful Suffering Servants.

To celebrate them, let's recall their stories, most of which is familiar to us. These four women went to El Salvador at a time of incredible horror. Landless peasants living in extreme poverty had begun to organize and to demand some share of the land and the resources of the country. They ruffled the feathers of the wealthy and the powerful who responded with disproportionate repression and slaughter. The US jumped into the conflict to defend its economic and geo-political interests. The situation escalated into a full-blown civil war with campesinos taking up arms to defend themselves and the US

supplying more than a million dollars a day in military aid to squelch them. The US also supplied military advisors schooled in the scorched earth techniques used in Vietnam. Drain the sea to kill the fish meant killing civilian populations in order to do away with guerrillas by eliminating their support system. That translated into aerial bombings of whole villages, of the civilian population in areas of rural poverty. Union leaders and campesino organizers disappeared, were tortured and killed. It was a desperate situation, funded largely by US tax dollars. That was the world the four church women entered. For each of them it was a choice to go to El Salvador and to stay in El Salvador.

Dorothy Kazel, an Ursuline sister, went in 1974 as part of the Cleveland mission team. She lived and worked in the port city of La Libertad. Her five year commitment was up in June of 1980, the year the women were killed, but she asked for and was given an extension. La Libertad was not one of the war zones of the country, though no place was really safe or untouched by the conflict. It was a place where many people went as internal refugees fleeing the violence. As the violence in the country increased, so did the influx of people coming to areas like La Libertad in search of safety. Many orphans were brought to the area. The Cleveland team did pastoral work, giving particular attention to displaced persons and orphans. Dorothy wanted to respond to that need and chose to stay even as the need and the tension and the violence grew. Of the four women, Dorothy was the one who had been in El Salvador the longest.

Jean Donovan, a 27-year-old lay woman, joined Dorothy as part of the Cleveland team early in 1979. She was young and lively and loved life. Jean was from a privileged background, had completed a business degree, and was seriously anticipating marriage to a man who visited her in El Salvador. Despite his urgings to return sooner, Jean also decided to stay. She worked especially with the orphaned children and she couldn't bring herself to leave them in spite of the danger.

With Ita Ford I will take the liberty to dwell a little longer on her story because I had the opportunity to get to know her a bit. Ita grew up in an Irish family in Brooklyn. In 1964 she tried to enter Maryknoll and was not accepted because of health issues. In 1970 she applied again and was accepted, at the time when women all over the country were leaving religious congregations. Ita's first missionary assignment was to Chile and she arrived in 1973 shortly before the coup that put Pinochet in power. She worked in the working class neighborhood of La Bandera in Santiago and her work was very colored by the intensity of disappearances and repression under the dictatorship. She became very close friends with Carol Piette, referred to in Spanish as Carla. Ita had gone home for an extended stay in the late 70s and was in a car accident so her return to Chile was delayed

while she recovered. During the time that she was in the States the situation in Central America was becoming more and more critical and Archbishop Romero of San Salvador made an international plea for experienced, Spanish-speaking missionaries to come and help the people of El Salvador. Carla Piette responded and began corresponding with her friend, Ita, encouraging her to go with her. Ita returned to Chile in January of 1980, just as I was arriving to work there. She was one of the first people I got to know because she would frequently hang out at the house when I stayed my first month in the country. In fact, she was one of the group of four sisters who gave the orientation for newly arrived foreigners which was my introduction to life in Chile. Ita was a very petite little woman, rather intense, always reading and analyzing the social and political reality. She was quick-witted, funny, smart, and very dedicated to Maryknoll. Every week her mother sent her the Week in Review section of the New York Times. She loved her work in Chile and was dedicated to accompanying the people in the difficult years of dictatorship. So she was not initially inclined to go with her friend Carla to El Salvador. She was looking for a new place to begin to work in Santiago. I was expected to work in Arica, Chile, but was very interested in staying in Santiago myself, so at one point we talked about the possibility of doing something together in Santiago. But as time went on and each of us discerned, I went to Arica as planned and she decided to join her friend Carla in El Salvador. Carla arrived in the country on March 24, the very day that Archbishop Romero was assassinated. Ita was very worried and also disappointed since she had very much been looking forward to working with a bishop like Oscar Romero. She left only a week or so later. I was at her farewell party before she left where her friend Carolyn Lehman prayed that she would have the courage to give her life if that should ever be asked of her. I never really imagined, however, that 9 months later that would really happen.

In El Salvador Ita and Carla quickly ended up in the war-torn area of Chalatenango. The violence was at its height. There were massacres of entire villages, disappearances, and general chaos everywhere. She and Carla dedicated themselves to an on-the-road kind of ministry. In their jeep they carried food supplies in and out of crisis areas. They helped people escape to safety and responded to all kinds of emergencies. It was dangerous work and they had to be very careful, continually analyzing how to respond. They certainly had moments of fear. Ita used to encourage Carla by saying, "Don't worry about it. If we are killed it will be over quickly." One day in late August Ita and Carla were taking a prisoner who had just been released back to his village, even though it was raining hard. As they were crossing the river near San Antonio Los Ranchos it rose in a flash flooding style and carried the jeep downstream. ....rest of story....

Ita was deeply affected by the death of her friend. She was also very alone and unable to continue the work she and Carla had done alone. It was too dangerous for a woman alone. Maura Clarke responded quickly and generously. Soon after Carla's death she came to accompany Ita. Maura had been in Nicaragua for 18 years and loved it there, but quickly left it all to join Ita and to support her in her work and in her grieving. Maura was also Irish and also a New Yorker from Queens. Her presence was a great comfort to Ita and together they continued the work with people in crisis in Chalatenango.

In late November they decided to attend a Maryknoll retreat in Nicaragua. It would be a time to rest and recuperate. Ita's major motive for going, however, was because she knew that Maria Rickleman would be there. She is a Maryknoll sister and psychiatrist who traveled the world offering support to Maryknollers in different settings. Ita was still struggling so much with the drowning death of her friend Carla and was looking forward to talking to her. It was when Ita and Carla were returning that Dorothy Kazel and Jean Donovan went to pick them up at the airport near La Libertad. We know the rest of the tragic story. They were driven off the road by National Guardsmen to a remote place where two of them were raped and all four were shot in the head at close range.

In Nicaragua, the night before Ita died, she quoted these words of Romero to her Maryknoll friends in Nicaragua: "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."

Ita and Maura were buried in the cemetery of Chalatenango next to Carla Piette. A funeral Mass was celebrated at the cathedral there and during the Mass the priest David Rodriguez suddenly appeared and sang a song that he had written for the occasion. David Rodriguez had received numerous death threats and had gone into hiding. He appeared at the funeral of Ita and Maura and sang the song that we heard this evening sung by the children. He then disappeared and went back into hiding.

Meanwhile, I was back in Chile. When we got the phone call from Peg Moran in Santiago I had a little initial shock, instantly remembered Carolyn's prayer at her farewell party, and then had this spontaneous gesture on my part (do it). I just felt strengthened, proud. Ita had been faithful to the end, in the most difficult of circumstances. Then I thought, "If she can be faithful, maybe I can be too. But the struggle is over for her. The rest of us still have a lot of work to do. And we will do it." So, I have an overwhelming sense that we remember these martyrs in order to be strengthened. When people who

look no different from me so dramatically lay down their lives, it gives me strength to be able to do the same. The Spirit of God is no less alive in us than in them.

A second memory from Chile that remains with me is the memorial liturgy for Ita and companions celebrated in the cathedral of Santiago. The theme of the liturgy was "When you have done all this, say "I am a mere servant. I have done only what was required of me." The message was clear to me. The church women are not heroines. They are simply followers of Jesus doing what all of us are called to do---to lay down our lives through faithful, courageous living.

I also went to work in El Salvador, six years after the death of these women, and often felt like I was walking around in their footsteps. I was initially surprised to realize how relatively short a time the women had been in the country. The impact they had was through their presence and accompaniment of the people. They didn't have to come and live through the horrors that Salvadorans couldn't escape. But they did. They could have left. But they didn't. Their witness was that of the Suffering Servant. They chose to enter into the suffering. In many ways I think their impact was greater in the States. They are really our martyrs. The news of their death made Americans look at what our government was doing in El Salvador, the massive funding of such horrendous loss of life. It made us question how US tax dollars were being used, and to begin to insist on some verification of the human rights situation. It made many people sit up and take notice and to oppose that ward. Their deaths shed a great deal of light on the darkness of the situation in El Salvador.

When I was in El Salvador, we, too, were surrounded by so much death. It was kind of amazing to me that many of the people who lost loved ones in the war seemed to be able to manage it pretty well as long as they could believe that the person's death contributed to a better future for others. They would often say "We cannot allow them to have died in vain." That meant that the community was responsible to continue the struggle for which others had given their lives. I think that the death of these four women commit us in a similar way to continue to be vigilant to how our tax dollars are being spent now to finance the slaughter in other countries. The hundreds of undocumented immigrants who have died in the Arizona desert commit us to working for justice for immigrants. We cannot allow their deaths to have been in vain. Dorothy Stang's death in the Amazon in Brazil commits us to doing whatever we can in our own settings for environmental justice. Her death cannot be in vain.

So here we are tonight, 30 years later, gathered in their memory. What does their story say to us now? What is their challenge to us in 2010? Aren't we still engulfed in darkness, longing for the light? Aren't we still in need of strengthening for the struggle that lies ahead? Do we even have the courage of the Suffering Servant to deliberately walk into the suffering in our world? Perhaps the memory of these women can help to pierce the numbness of the complacency we can so easily fall into. The words Melinda Roper, then president of Maryknoll, still speak to us of these women:

“God, in His/Her loving kindness, has raised up witnesses in our midst. God is calling each of us to a more radical discipleship—one which will not be understood by the powerful of our day. We must be wise as serpents in naming and denouncing the evil which pervades our world. We must be filled with compassion for those for whom suffering from lack of basic necessities has become a way of life. We must be moved to action which will clearly identify us with the poor. Above all, let us not be filled with fear. Let us be filled with courage and hope, for “in the tender compassion of our God, the dawn shall break upon us, to shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

So, we continue to remember these four women with what Scott Wright describes as subversive memory “in the sense that the Beatitudes are subversive: they remind us that the world is not meant to be as it is currently constituted, where the poor are excluded, the hungry forgotten, those who grieve hidden from view, and the victims blamed for their own persecution. Rather, the poor are blessed because theirs is the Reign of God. Life, not death, will have the last word.”

Elizabeth Johnson says of that kind of remembering: “Memory that dares to connect with the pain, the beauty, the defeat, the victory of love and freedom, and the unfinished agenda of those who went before acts like an incalculable visitation from the past that energizes a person. Remembering the great crowd of female friends of God and prophets opens up possibilities for the future; their lives bespeak an unfinished agenda that is now in our hands; their memory is a challenge to action; their companionship points the way. The community of memory and hope becomes through its prayer a community that struggles for justice, peace and the well-being of the earth.”

We gather tonight as a remembering community. We proclaim in the lives of Ita Maura, Dorothy and Jean the victory of justice, a light for the nations. And no darkness can overcome them. Light the candles! They have more right to exist than all the darkness.