booklets

FRIENDS OF GOD, PROPHETS OF THE PEOPLE

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Clara María Temporelli

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by Clara María Temporelli

Clara María Temporelli (Argentina), a religious sister of the Order of Maria Our Lady, is a professor of psychology with licentiate and doctorate degrees. She is currently giving classes in Mariology in the theology and philosophy faculty of the Universidad del Salvador in Buenos Aires, Argentina. She was Provincial Superior of Argentina and the Southern Cone (2006-11) and has been a member of the Theological Area of Cristianisme i Justícia study center. Her main activity has been accompanying and training people's movements and base Christian communities. Among other publications she has authored *María, mujer de Dios y de los pobres [Mary, Woman of God and of the Poor]* (2008), *"Amigas fuertes de Dios", ¿amenaza? ¿para quiénes? ["Strong Women Friends of God: A Threat? For Whom?]* (2014) and *María a la luz de la fe del pueblo latinoamericano [Mary in Light of the Faith of the Latin American People]* (2014).

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1. INTRODUCTION

"Thought is born of events and of lived experience, and it should be kept closely linked to them since they are the only indicators of the right direction."[1]

Hannah Arendt

God continues to act, speak, and reveal himself in history in many ways, but he does so especially through his friends such as the martyrs Léonie Duquet, Alice Domon, Ita Ford, Maura Clarke, Dorothy Kazel, and Jean Donovan.[2] These women will be contemplated from the perspective of being "friends of God" because by their lives they have become prophets and ecclesial cornerstones; they beacons lighting our way and fountains that refresh and renew our strength as we struggle on behalf of the faith.

From the very start I encourage readers not to remain indifferent to the facts presented on these pages but to realize that we all form part of a vital current, one to which we are all heirs. Past and present mingle together in a single flow so that, as the French historian Marc Bloch puts it, "incomprehension of the present is the deadly result of ignorance of the past."[3]

We present the lives of these six faithful witnesses so that everyone will "give them credit for the fruits of their efforts and praise them for their works in the city squares" (Prov 31,31), but also so that we may understand how and why persons seemingly so fragile managed to pose a grievous threat to the powerful of this world. These martyrs, made doubly invisible as women and as nuns, emerge from anonymity to teach us that faith, confidence in God, and resistance are indispensable virtues in the pursuit of life. These women are exemplars of sensitivity, courage, and the refusal to yield before threats, fear, and persecution. They displayed the gift of loving life and loving other persons, especially the wretched of this world. They put us in touch also with other less positive experiences which are just as much a part of our world –the experiences of uncertainty, horror, and death that brought on their martyrdom.

Latin American and Caribbean societies have been subjected to repressive and authoritarian political systems which have terrorized their peoples and produced among them an attitude of "chronic fear." Thousands upon thousands of persons have been persecuted, deprived of freedom, tortured, raped, murdered, or exiled. The situation is made worse by the close alliance of the military forces with economic power and the mass media. These secular powers have joined together to lead globalization in the direction that suits them. Added to this is the ecological question: the search for alternative energy sources vs. maintaining the prevailing system.

We have to seek an alternative: another way of producing and consuming, another way of treating the Earth. The present system has come up against the limits imposed by nature. There is no solution that does not require change; if we do not change, we will destroy the planet. As long as economic interests continue to prevent the change that is needed, the present power structure will persist in its devastation both of persons and the Earth itself.

Around the world, therefore, women committed to their beliefs and to the Earth are rising up to give irrefutable testimony, even at the cost of their lives. They are denouncing these political systems that deny people even their most basic human rights.

May these pages serve as a reminder and an acclamation of these women who have given a testimony both valiant and valuable.

2. MYSTICISM, PROPHECY, AND JUSTICE

"For you who revere my name
the sun of righteousness shall rise,
with healing in its rays."
(Malachy 4,2)

Their experience of the consecrated life is the deep well from which the martyrs drank. Their social, historical, and spiritual context inspired them in their processes of insertion and inculturation, and it led them to commit themselves to the suffering and impoverished people with whom they lived, and to defend them to the death.

2.1. … and the spring was glimpsed

With the Second Vatican Council and the conferences of Medellín and Puebla,[4] the Church in Latin America and the Caribbean had a glimpse of spring. As the Church felt the gentle breeze blowing, breathed in the perfume of the orange blossoms, and beheld the blossoming almond trees, she began to let herself be guided by the Spirit that dwells in all creation. Leading her by the hand along paths of humanization, the Spirit announced to her a dawn at midnight. As in the ancient prophecies, the splendor of life shone brightly in the faces of humanity.

There was hope. The men and women of God walked alongside the poor in the search for justice. Immersing themselves in the culture of their time, they did not condemn it but tried to be considerate, compassionate, and courageous with one and all. John XXXIII and Paul VI opened the hearts of Catholics to the world, to other Christian churches, to other religions, to all nations and races. They let loose forces that nothing and nobody could stop: liberation theology, the Latin American Conference of Religious, the Christian base communities –all of these embodied new options, displacements, insertions, methodologies, and critical analyses. People began to dis-

cover and admire the diverse cultures that give our world its richness. There arose a new spirituality, a new way of following Jesus, a new understanding of his project and his cause. We could see the Kingdom becoming visible in our history through dynamic re-organization of personal relations and social structures. Solidarity incarnate became the byword of the Council.

In this context, the consecrated life reached previously unthinkable realms, bringing life to the poor and suffering masses as well as to itself. Consecrated women inserted themselves with coherence and boldness into this process of "displacement," "exodus," and "radical options."

2.2. Martyrdom as a sign of love

From the earliest days of Christianity the faithful have suffered persecution for the sake of the Gospel. The martyrs and the witnesses[5] are the supreme expression of the following of Christ: by giving their lives they manifest the power of love for others, which is at once vulnerable and overwhelming. It is they who give credibility to the Church and to Christian faith.

Since the Second Vatican Council scores of consecrated women and men have become part of the Latin American martyrology. The number of Christians martyred in recent decades has been greater than the number martyred in the time of the Roman Empire. The difference is that now Christians are killed, not only for believing in Jesus Christ, but for having committed themselves to the crucified peoples of today.

Before Vatican II, theologians held that the main motive and the necessary condition for martyrdom was *odium fidei* [hatred of the faith], but our theological understanding of martyrdom was broadened by the Council. The text of *Lumen Gentium* (42) does not speak of profession of faith or *odium fidei*, although it presupposes them. It prefers to speak of martyrdom as a sign of the love that opens a person up into a total donation of self. The word thus recovers something of its original meaning of "witness."

Jesus did not die because of his enemies' confusion or a judicial condemnation. Neither the Jews nor the Romans were confused: Jesus' actions and his proclamation of the Kingdom presented a threat to the established political and religious system. Jesus was killed because he announced the Kingdom, stood in solidarity with the lowly, and defended the victims. His death should not be considered apart from the rest of his life. It was the same with John the Baptist, Stephen, and so many other men and women who were persecuted when they questioned or threatened the interests of the powerful. A martyr, therefore, is basically a person who is committed to following Jesus and is dedicated to his cause to the point of being willing to die for it. Martyrs are persons who are willing to pay for their commitment to the following of Jesus by offering their lives and accepting persecution, accusations, and humiliations.

That was the definition of martyrs proposed by Pedro Arrupe, superior general of the Society of Jesus: "The religious life, the world, and the Church need persons who are martyrs.

Impelled by love of Jesus, they identify with those who are suffering; they live with them and are even willing to give their lives to help them. They are courageous women and men who defend human rights even to the point of sacrificing their own lives if necessary."[6]

It is this context of injustice and violence that helps us to understand better the death of innocent persons like Alice, Léonie, Ita, Maura, Dorothy, Jean, and so many others. In their lives Jesus passed through Argentina, El Salvador, Colombia, Brazil, and other lands, and he did so during a period of horrific political violence. And Jesus continues to pass through our lands today, amid all the greed and ambition, because proclaiming his message unleashes personal histories of faith, hope, and commitment. The memory of Jesus creates social history and ecclesial community.

3. ALICE DOMON AND LÉONIE DUQUET: COMMITTED TO THE STRUGGLE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

Between the 8th and the 10th of December, 1977, the Argentine army carried out an operation in which thirteen persons were kidnapped and "disappeared."[7] Among them were Alice Domon and Léonie Duquet. At the end of that same December, several bodies appeared on the Atlantic coast. They were buried in the General Lavalle Cemetery, near the mouth of the La Plata River.

In 2005 the Argentine Team of Forensic Anthropology exhumed seven bodies, of which five could be identified. They were the bodies of the religious sister, Léonie Duquet; a militant of the Communist Party, Ángela Auad; and three of the mothers who had founded the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo: María Eugenia Ponce de Bianco, Azucena Villaflor de Devincenti, and Esther Ballestrino de Careaga. Eight other "disappeared" persons have still not reappeared, among them Sister Alice Domon.

By decision of her family, Léonie was buried in Santa Cruz parish in the San Cristóbal neighborhood of Buenos Aires, since this was "the last spot of free earth that her feet had touched."

3.1. Caught in a world and a country in convulsion

In order to understand what happened to two French nuns named Alice and Léonie, we need to explain what was happening in Argentina and in the world during the decade of the Sixties. These were critical moments of the cold war being waged between the United States and the Soviet Union, a struggle for power that was causing conflicts both large and small in almost every corner of the planet. It was also a time of anti-colonial wars in Algeria and Vietnam and of widespread cultural revolution in China. Great leaders like Martin Luther King and

Nelson Mandela were appearing on the world stage. Paradoxically, even as the destruction of everything seemed so close at hand, it was a time when everything also seemed possible: people were inspired by ideologies like socialism and other utopian paths to try to create a world that was more human and more just.

Argentina, immersed in a convulsed historical process and characterized by great political instability, experienced all this in its own special way. The Peronism which had dominated Argentine politics for many years was banned, and a harsh military dictatorship was established in 1966. At the head of the military junta was Juan Carlos Onganía, a pre-conciliar Catholic to whom the hierarchy rendered homage by refusing to label him a dictator. The era of U.S. intervention began, and the "doctrine of national security" was adopted as the basic principle of government, reaching its greatest force from 1976 on. The Church began to experience a great internal division, one side identifying with the army and the military government, and the other side becoming ever more committed politically with the poor.

The Movement of Third-World Priests (MSTM) was born in those years, formed mainly by priests who were serving in the working-class neighborhoods and the impoverished slums (*villas miseria*).[8] Some 1,300 priests from all over Latin American joined the organization. When the Latin American bishops met in Medellín in 1968, the Movement sent them a letter, asking them to make a clear distinction between the unjust violence of the oppressors and the just violence of the oppressed; it was a distinction which the bishops accepted up to a certain point.

On 17 November 1972, General Perón again became president, and soon after that he received representatives of the MSTM. Some of them found the meeting unforgettable; others thought the president treated them paternalistically. What is certain is that it was the beginning of the end of the priests' movement. After five years of meetings, keen analyses of national and ecclesial reality, and theological-pastoral orientations for the people of God, the movement finally dissolved, unable to overcome its political and theological differences.

When Perón died on 1 July 1974, he was succeeded by his wife, María Estela Martínez de Perón, beginning a new and tumultuous period which ended on 24 March 1976 with her destitution and imprisonment by the military commanders. The military dictatorship then made General Videla the de facto president and began a campaign of state terrorism, during which all political, social, and trade union organizations were implacably repressed, with the aim of imposing "order" on the population and eliminating all dissident voices. Thus commenced the bloodiest and most authoritarian regime in the history of the country.

3.2. An existential itinerary of commitment and discipleship

The lives of Léonie and Alice were so closely woven together that it is difficult to talk about one without mention-

ing the other. Being members of the same congregation, the Foreign Missionaries of Paris, they both left France to work in Argentina. Once there, they lived and prayed together; they shared spiritual ideals and apostolic labors; they forged a relationship of friendship that united them until death. Since therei lives were ruled by the ideal of following Jesus Christ, they committed themselves to helping others, especially the most deprived.

Léonie Renée Duquet

Léonie was born in 1916 in the rural village of La Chenalotte in the French department of Doubs. In 1949 she traveled to Argentina to found the first house of her congregation in that country. Residing in Hurlingham in the diocese of Morón, she worked as a catechist of persons with special needs. She formed part of a group directed by a priest named Cacagno, a cousin of Videla, the general who was dictator of Argentina precisely in the years when Léonie was kidnapped and murdered. Ironically, she knew Videla when he was younger since he had sought her help for his disabled son, Alejandro, whom Léonie cared for and taught in the Casa de la Caridad of Morón.[9]

Léonie's commitment to the poor kept growing, and when the military coup took place in 1976, she decided to become actively involved in the defense of human rights. She would explain her attitude by repeating the phrase, "Keeping quiet would be cowardice."

A letter she wrote reveals to us what her life was like at that time:[10]

"Every morning and every afternoon, until 8 or 9 o'clock at night, I am in the catechetical center. … My work is in the parishes, and this allows me to speak to the priests and urge them to get involved in liturgical and catechetical renewal. Many of the rural priests would be surprised if they saw what is happening here.

One sister is helping at a summer camp for children with Down syndrome; it is her first experience in South America. Every month I have meetings with the catechists of the diocese. I'm enthusiastic about my work in the poor neighborhoods with the children and the young people."

"You should see how much the young people here know about politics and the problems of the Third World caused by countries like the United States and Europe. We hopefully await 25 March [1973]. … There is a great desire for peace and a determination to rebuild this country which has now sunk into misery. Our sisters are collaborating with the workers of the tobacco estates in the province of Corrientes; the workers are demanding work, a fair wage, and justice in their lands. One of the sisters went on a hunger strike for ten days, … a non-violent means for obtaining justice. … They are happy, and we support them. … The country is restless, always struggling. South America will teach our old continent a few lessons! Open your own eyes and the eyes of your students…"

"We were very disillusioned by the Synod [of 1971]. The Argentine bishops are traditionalist. … The economy here is difficult: inflation is at 30-40%, but wages increase only 5%. … I have to play the role of priest since the chapel is right next to my house. I have to struggle with the traditionalists since I'm called a communist and a 'third-worlder.' Keeping quiet now would be cowardice; it would be death. There is always the joy of giving oneself and sacrificing for others."

"The elections were in the people's favor, and we're happy about that. The regime of the last fifteen years is responsible for kidnappings and is provoking rebellion. It is being supported by the United States, which has put its boots in South America. …

I am well despite what's happening (surveillance, persecutions). When one is with God, what is there to fear?"

Léonie was a good friend of Alice Domon. When Alice began to feel threatened and experienced persecution, Léonie gladly offered her support by taking her into her house. Alice continued to be threatened and often had to change her place of residence. She was experiencing what Jesus had stated two thousands years before: "The Son of Man has no place to rest his head" (Matt 8,20).

Alice Domon

Alice was born on 23 September 1937 in Charquemont, also in the department of Doubs, France. In 1957 she entered Léonie's congregation, attracted by the their charism of "becoming all things to all people" (1Cor 9,22). Arriving in Argentina between 1965 and 1967, she met Léonie Duquet and, like her, dedicated herself to catechizing persons with special needs.

Although Alice had not received any political formation, she was living in a place where politics was everything: there were people's organizations, active political movements, denunciations of concentrated economic power, discontent with the succession of military governments… It was impossible to escape from the political commotion of her situation. "For this I was born," she wrote in a letter to her family:

"Every night we make our meditation based on the reality around us, on what we have seen during the day."

Alice's prayer was a meditation on the sufferings of those who felt forsaken; it was a fervent plea before God, an attempt to understand in the light of faith the injustices that she was combating as a militant Christian. Let us listen to her directly through her letters:

"Today the house is finally complete: a single room of wooden boards, 2.7 by 3 meters in size, one door, one window, a cement-fiber roof. During the day the beds are stacked on top of one another so that we can open the door. We will try to live in the spirit of Jesus the Nazarene, without work programs or meetings. All we want to do is share the people's lives. Where we

live is what in France is called a *bidonville* [slum]. Many people here suffer poverty, injustices, contempt. We have the good luck of working with a priest who has been living in this *villa miseria* for two years, and he knows the place well."

"I live here with Sister Montserrat (Bertrán), and we get along well. It's not just friendship or mutual sympathy. We hardly knew one another before, but it was the work that has united us and made us go beyond the call of duty. I feel free with her, and I trust her enough so that I can tell her everything and confide in her about any topic. This simplifies our relationship and makes the community aspect more visible. The people tell us, 'You really seem to love one another,' or 'It must be nice living the way you two do.'"

"This life in community presupposes true friendship and deep esteem of the other person. If it were not so, one could get very bored and end up with a case of nerves. A house with so few comforts lends itself to intimacy; everything has a special value. For example, take the candle when it's dark: if you argue with your companion, you have nowhere else to go to find quiet; you have to fix things up right then and there."

"We will have to earn the people's friendship. … For that we need time and availability; we need to be poor like them in order to understand them. That means being completely divested of oneself and *of everything.* There is almost no common topic of conversation. That's why our work as domestics is important: it unites with the women. You can tell them: 'It's the same for me'."

Every day more and more people from rural areas and the neighboring countries were migrating to the *villas*. Alice was wondering how it was possible that there could be so much hunger in the rural areas. As the daughter of French farmers, she was very familiar with republican principles, so she had a hard time understanding the feudalism that still prevailed in many parts of Latin America.

At the beginning of 1971, the bishops in the provinces of Chaco and Corrientes supported the formation of the Agrarian Leagues and helped the peasants to organize. They spoke of justice and the right to life, and they sent priests to help the rural population. Encouraged by the Church, the peasants became newly aware of their dignity and united together to demand their rights. They became ever more opposed to the regime that had kept them enslaved for countless years. With the collaboration of priests and nuns, they kept moving ahead with their organizations. Alice realized that, if she worked with the rural folk, she could help them avoid having to migrate to the city, where escaping from poverty was nearly impossible. But before leaving for Corrientes to join the Agrarian Leagues, she asked the people of her *villa* for their opinion. The people were saddened by the thought of her leaving, but they generously

accepted her decision to move to the country and to help others who were even poorer than they.

In 1976 a military officer was named governor of the province, and he issued a warning regarding the sisters: "We have a mission, and that mission consists in keeping an eye on those women." The military considered Alice an undesirable presence, and they told the peasants: "If you associate with the sister, we will arrest all of you." In view of this opposition, Alice felt obliged to leave the village, where she had been living with a family; she returned to live with the sisters in the city.

Then came the raids. Truckloads of soldiers invaded the little house of the sisters. They seized some slides, the text of a declaration of the Brazilian bishops, some notes from a spiritual retreat, and a Sunday liturgical poster. Raids were also carried out in the houses of active members of the Agrarian Leagues. Since they lacked electricity, telephones, and paved roads, the people in the countryside were highly vulnerable. A little later the governor "prohibited" Alice from working in the rural areas. Again she decided to leave the work so that none of the people would be harmed. She sought work as one of the harvesters –or "swallows" as they were called. About that time she wrote: "I'm looking for something else before deciding to return to France."

During her absence, the soldiers returned to the sisters' house and violently assaulted it, as if it were fortress. Once inside, they bound two Bibles together with tape to form a cross. The message was clear.

3.3. Sharing the "passion" of Jesus, seeking God in the midst of pain and anguish

When the rural situation became intolerable, Alice knew that she had to leave. She returned to the capital, Buenos Aires, where she met with a number of persons who were looking for their disappeared family members. She joined with them, and together they tried to find a way to break the silence. About that time the bishop of Quilmes, Jorge Novak, cofounded the Ecumenical Human Rights Movement (MEDH) and set up a Justice and Peace Office. It was there that Alice heard and recorded the testimony of the many people with disappeared sons and daughters. Together with Léonie, she provided them support, both spiritual and material.

She also went to the courts and the ministries, where she met the "Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo." She joined up with them. Every week she took part in the "Thursday protest" in front of the Casa de Gobierno –until one day the police decided to intervene. Since there were more than 400 protestors at the demonstration, the police requisitioned all the buses circulating in the area, emptied them of passengers, and filled them with the arrested demonstrators. Alice was among them; they questioned her but this time they let her go free.

The only journalist who was able to interview Alice in those days was Jean Pierre Bousquet; he met her when she was representing the MEDH in a march led by the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo. In his book, *Las locas de la Plaza de Mayo*[11] *[The Crazy Ladies of the Plaza de Mayo],* he writes: "There

was nothing remarkable about her at first sight. Rather, she seemed a little coarse, but when she was speaking to someone she loved, a very sweet light emanated from her face." Alice spoke to Bousquet about her work in Perugorría and her efforts with the Paraguayan community in Buenos Aires, but what she stressed most was her commitment to the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo:

> "I learned that the Ecumenical Movement assisting them needed help, and I didn't hesitate."

She also told the journalist:

> "I don't play any special role. I am simply a sister who has made a vow to bring help to the neediest members of the parish. I don't do politics. That's not my function. I make absolutely no pretence of changing society, but I believe that we cannot be absent wherever there are people who are suffering. It's not a matter of dispensing kind words or expressing consolation and then being indifferent to their fate. It's a matter of being there with them and helping them materially and spiritually. All I need to do is live my life at their side so that they can see that I as a religious sister am one with them and also in perfect conformity with my vocation.
>
> There is no way to be indifferent to what those mothers are experiencing, to their suffering and their courage. That is the only reason why I agreed to this interview. You journalists must also do your duty: you must make known what these women are suffering. We have no right to remain silent. Whatever the kidnapped persons may have done –and I don't even try to find out about that– there is no right to torture anybody the way they are torturing these women."[12]

3.4. Disappearance, kidnapping, torture and murder

In December 1977 Sisters Alice and Léonie, along with the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo and other human rights activists, prepared a manifesto containing the names of the disappeared persons and demanding that the government reveal their whereabouts. The manifesto was published in the newspaper *La Nación* on 10 December 1977. Among the signatories was "Gustavo Niño," the false name used by the army captain Alfredo Astiz to infiltrate the group that was meeting in Santa Cruz parish.[13]

Most of that group were kidnapped on 8 December at the parish. Alice was among them. On 10 December they kidnapped 71-year-old Léonie. The soldiers tricked Léonie when they went looking for her, telling her that Alice was in the hospital and wanted to see her.

Alice was taken to the clandestine detention center located at the Army Graduate Academy of Mechanics (ESMA), controlled by the Argentine military. She remained there approximately ten days, during which time she was constantly tortured. Léonie suffered the same fate.

When the French nationality of the nuns gave rise to an international

scandal, the military reported that the two of them had been kidnapped by the guerrilla group called the "Montoneros." On 15 December 1977 the newspaper *La Nación,* under the headline, "Alive and in Good Health," reported that the superior of their religious order in France had announced that Léonie and Alice had been detained by a guerrilla organization and that they were "alive and in good health." The article stated that the information came from the apostolic nuncio in Argentina.[14] Between the 14th and 18th of December, the two sisters and other detained persons were transferred in a sedated state to the military airport of Buenos Aires. They were then taken in planes and thrown alive into the sea off the coast of Santa Teresita; they died upon hitting the water. With a perverted sense of humor, the marines referred to them as the "flying nuns."[15]

Many years later, on 27 October 2011, a tribunal in Buenos Aires condemned ex-captain Astiz to life in prison for committing crimes against humanity in the ESMA, the principal detention center during the years 1976-83. When Astiz heard his sentence, he put an Argentine badge in the lapel of his jacket and flashed a mocking grin.

The lawyer for the victims, Sophie Tonon, stated: "Alice's and Léonie's families and I, as their lawyer, are happy that Argentine justice has made the same decision, 35 years after the event, that France made more than 20 years ago." Her allusion was to the decision of the Appeals Court in Paris condemning Astiz to life in prison in 1990, even though the laws of impunity in Argentina prevented him from being judged there.

3.5. Two lives, two styles, one and the same Gospel

From the time Léonie and Alice arrived in Argentina until the time they were murdered, they underwent a notable transformation. They moved from a very traditional conception of the Church and religious life, which they shared with many other nuns, toward a vision of Church in which pastoral work with the poor played a major part.

The spirit of renewal and the new sense of justice inspired by the Council led the sisters to side with the most vulnerable people, and they did so at a time when major sectors of Argentine and Latin American Catholicism were engaging with socialism and declaring that the Church could not remain apart from the liberation projects being promoted by many political organizations and various social groups. Alice's ambivalence in defining her work, which she always claimed was non-political, gives evidence of how difficult it was for her to break with the traditional conception of consecrated life, which was different from the kind of option she had made and the work she was actually doing. Léonie showed exceptional acuity in her political analyses of the 1973 electoral process and the massive popular support for Peronism, to which she felt drawn. Her experience of living in a very poor district naturally committed her to social policies that were aimed at the transformation of society, without much need for grand theoretical definitions.

Alice and Léonie were certainly two very different persons, but their lives flowed together into a shared final

destiny. Their crime consisted in taking on the cause of the impoverished; their stance provoked the reaction of a cruel, unjust system which destroyed them. By eliminating the witnesses, their adversaries were attacking the Gospel itself.

The sisters would certainly not permit us to speak of their holiness. They would say simply that they tried to carry the Gospel to the inner depths of the people's misery. They experienced the passion of the victims; they announced and bore witness to the resurrection in the light of Jesus Christ.

Very few social or political activists dared to raise their voices against the dictatorship. The hierarchical Church possessed privileged knowledge of what was going on in the country since it was the institution to which most of the relatives of the victims went in search of assistance. The Church knew what was happening, but many of its members kept quiet out of fear –it was a complicit silence. Others, taking a stand for justice, suffered persecution and were victims of the dictatorship; some were murdered.

Such was the case of Alice and Léonie and of so many other martyrs. Their acts of solidarity become suffering; their words became silence; their silence became witness; and their witness revealed the greatness their humanity.

4. ITA FORD, MAURA CLARKE, DOROTHY KAZEL, AND JEAN DONOVAN: WOMEN OF GOD, INCREDIBLY RESISTANT

In 1980 the long war began in El Salvador, pitching the government security forces against the forces struggling for social reform.

On 2 December 1980, four women from the United States –three religious sisters and one lay missionary– were kidnapped, raped, and murdered. Maura Clarke and Ita Ford were Maryknoll sisters, Dorothy Kazel was a Ursuline sister, and Jean Donovan was a lay missionary. By their life and their death these women united their fate to that of thousands of other victims, mostly poor people unknown to the larger world. But the victims also included priests and even the archbishop of San Salvador, Oscar Romero, who had been murdered a few months before, on 24 March of that same year. Around one million Salvadorans were displaced by the conflict, more than 75,000 lost their lives, and another 9,000 "disappeared" and nothing more was ever known of them.

4.1. A long, bloody civil war (1980-92)

During the 1960s and 1970s El Salvador experienced serious social and political disturbances, the result of oppression, lack of freedom, economic inequality, and widespread poverty. The situation kept getting worse, until finally the people's movements began to organize into guerrilla forces and engage in armed conflict with government troops.

The conflict between the army and the guerrilla forces became a civil war that lasted twelve years. The Salvadoran soldiers were trained, financed, armed, and advised by the United States, which at every moment provided security and support to the Salvadoran government. Every unit of the

army and the national police was in charge of a "death squad" that carried out violent actions (murders, kidnappings, extortions, threats, and other crimes) against persons identified as guerrillas or suspected of supporting the struggle against the government.[16]

On 24 March 1980, Archbishop Óscar Romero of San Salvador was assassinated during a Mass he was celebrating in the chapel of the Divine Providence Hospital. This murder took place right after Romero had urged the United States to withdraw its support for the Salvadoran military regime and had commanded the soldiers of the military junta to stop the repression.

In December 1990 the guerrilla group, Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), launched what would be its last offensive on a national scale. During the offensive they used for the first time earth-to-air missiles, with which they downed several planes. Once a balance of forces was achieved, the Salvadoran government agreed to a negotiation process between the warring parties. The process concluded with the signing on 16 January 1992 of a peace accord by which the guerrillas demobilized and incorporated themselves into the country's political life.

During the years of armed conflict, any communications media that openly denounced the repression and the murders committed by the military government were subject to persecution and violent assaults. Caution was therefore essential. Moreover, most Salvadoran newspapers functioned as businesses and not as channels for defending political causes. As a result, the only way for the political opposition to make its voice heard was to use the publications of the Catholic Church.[17]

As the years went on, international press correspondents began to arrive, especially from the United States. At the risk of losing their lives, they made know to the world what was happening in El Salvador. During the war, more than thirty journalists died by violence.

4.2. Extraordinary ordinary lives

Let us now with these few lines describe the existential itinerary of these women in order to learn more about their lives, their motives, and their option to remain faithful to the very end.

Ita Ford

Ita was born in Brooklyn, New York, on 23 April 1940. From her youth she desired to join the Maryknoll congregation and be a missionary. When she finished her university studies, she worked for a while as an editor in a publishing firm but then in 1971 joined the Maryknoll Sisters.

While studying Spanish at Cochabamba, Bolivia, she got to know the tremendous social inequalities that existed in Latin America: "I am experiencing things that I cannot understand. There is such a great incongruence that it's difficult to believe. … One would have to spend a lot of time here to understand it."

In 1973 she went to Chile, just before the September 11 military coup that overthrew President Allende. The years of the Pinochet dictatorship were

bitter and harsh: thousands of persons were tortured, kidnapped, imprisoned, murdered. Ita lived with Sister Carla Piette in a poor neighborhood in the outskirts of Santiago. During this time of repression, fear, and increasing poverty, the sisters accompanied the people and helped them in any way they could.

In the midst of this reality, Ita wrote:

> "Is it my desire to suffer the people's impotence along with them? What can I tell them? I have no solutions. I don't know the answers, but I will walk with them, I will be with them. Can I let myself be evangelized by this opportunity? Can I accept my poverty as I learn it from the poor?"

In 1980 Ita and Carla responded to the call of Archbishop Romero and to that of their congregation, which was very concerned about the repression that Salvadorans were suffering. In El Salvador Ita and Carla would join with several other sisters who had been working in Nicaragua, where the civil war had ended after the dictator Somoza fled the country. While they were on their way to their new mission, they learned of the assassination of Archbishop Romero. This event gave rise to a profound ecclesial crisis; the archdiocese appeared to be rudderless. Carla and Ita evaluated the situation, consulting with the vicar general of San Salvador, the new apostolic administrator, the Jesuit province, and some of the pastoral workers. Finally they decided to work with the refugees in Chalatenango.

The sisters began their work with the refugees in June of that same year, and they soon came to realize the magnitude of the violence the Salvadoran military dictatorship was using in its attempt to destroy every possible instance of opposition. In Chalatenango the sisters accompanied and helped the rural folk who were victims of persecution. In those days Ita wrote:

> "I don't know whether it's in spite of or because of the horror, the terror, the wickedness, the confusion, and the complete lack of justice, but I do know that it is good to be here. We use our talents in the belief that we have gifts that are needed today in El Salvador. I know that the answers to the questions will come when they are needed. We have to walk with faith, one day at a time, along a road full of obstacles and detours. It seems that this is what it means for us to be in El Salvador."[18]

On 23 August 1980, the sisters drove out in a jeep to collect a man experiencing political persecution; to protect him they planned to him to their own house. On their way back, they were surprised by a fierce storm, which carried their jeep downstream when they tried to cross a river. Carla pushed Ita out the window of the vehicle so that Ita was able to grab hold of a branch and survive. The next morning, the lifeless body of Carla was found, leaving Ita deeply distressed.

Meanwhile the Maryknoll sisters relocated, and Maura Clarke, who had arrived in El Salvador shortly before, joined up with Ita in Chalatenango.

Maura's sisters, friends, and relatives remember her as a woman full of life and faith, possessing a free and searching spirit, which is what gave her a strong sense of commitment.

Maura Clarke

Maura was born in Queens, New York, on 13 January 1931; at the age of 19 she entered the Maryknoll Congregation. Several years later, in 1959, she went to Nicaragua, where she taught and did pastoral work in Siuna, a small diocese of 5000 inhabitants in the eastern part of the country.

Maura was shocked at the contrast between the wealth of the Canadians who owned the gold mines and the poverty of the miners who worked there. The wife of the mining company manager offered the sisters an unoccupied house for their retreats and meetings. Maura used it a couple of times, but she felt uncomfortable there and decided to stop using it. She preferred to be simply a neighbor and friend of the poor families.

The country at that time was under the dictatorship of the Somoza family, who had been in power since 1937 and who ran the country as if it were their own personal property. Although Siuna was far from Managua, the people there heard the many rumors about the tortures, the murders, and the kidnappings carried out by the National Guard. As the regime became more repressive, the people began to organize and fight for their democratic rights and for social and economic transformation in the country.

In 1968 the sisters decided to move to places that were in greater need of their services. Maura went to the Miralagos neighborhood on the outskirts of Managua, where thousands of people, forced off their lands by agro-industrial projects, lived in ramshackle hovels. The sisters worked in the parish and did what they could to provide shelter, food, and medical services to these displaced persons. They were living on the third floor of the parish center when the powerful earthquake of 1972 struck, devastating large parts of Managua. They managed to escape from their residence through a window and immediately began to attend to the injured; they also worked with others to remove the bodies of the dead from the ruins.

People said of Maura:

> "She was very generous. … She was used to living in poverty. … She always saw the good side of people. She was very gentle, and people felt loved by her."

Maura was so compassionate and conciliatory that she almost seemed timid, but she made up her mind to support the resistance movement. When agents of the National Guard were trying to capture some youths, she stood in front of the military vehicle and shouted: "You can't take those young people with you! Let them go!" The soldiers let the young men go, and the people who witnessed the scene always remembered it as a historic moment. "If a person as peaceful as Maura can prevail over the National Guard, then what are we capable of doing ourselves?"

Maura and some other sisters accompanied a rural woman, Amanda

Pineda, when she testified at a trial of fifteen members of the National Guard who had raped her repeatedly during four days. Maura also joined her neighbors in a protest against the excessive charges of the water company.

In 1977 she returned to the U.S. to work in the "World Conscience" program, giving talks about the situation in Nicaragua. On one occasion she stated:

> "I see this work as a way to rouse concern for the victims of injustice in the world. It's a means for bringing about change and for alleviating the suffering of the poor and the marginalized, the non-persons of our human family."

Maura was not in Nicaragua on 19 July 1979, the day the Somoza dictatorship fell, but she rejoiced when she heard the news. Having living there twenty years, she knew that system well. She saw with her own eyes how a large part of the international aid that reached the country after the 1972 earthquake had ended up in the pockets of the dictator, his family, and his friends. She was not at all surprised by the spirit of joy, hope, and relief that she found in the people when she returned to Nicaragua one year later, in 1980. She said that she herself experienced a "bubbling of the spirit." She wrote the following to her parents:

> "I would like to stay in Nicaragua, but I know that I have to go to El Salvador to see whether it's the right place for me. Don't worry about me. The Lord takes care of all of us. Pray that God's work to free his people, here and everywhere, will grow in strength. We must not fear. Whatever happens, we are united with God and united with one another."

Maura kept thinking about Archbishop Romero's insistent call for help; she began to discern whether this was to be the new way for her to serve. She went to El Salvador to study the possibilities. Taking on such a great pastoral and human challenge in times of persecution was a difficult decision. After Carla's death, she decided to take her place and work together with Ita. While dedicating herself to pastoral work with the victims of repression, she wrote:

> "We have refugees, women, and children at our door, and some of their stories are incredible. What is happening seems impossible, but it's happening. The patience and the faith of the poor in the face of this terrible pain summon me to respond and to live from what is deepest within me."

The Maryknoll head office sent a sister to inform the community that they had no obligation to remain in El Salvador and that they should assess the risk that staying entailed. In the end all the sisters expressed their desire to remain for they believed that such was the will of God.

The first warning arrived at the beginning of November, tacked to the door of the parish house where Maura and Ita lived. The message consisted of a drawing of a knife thrust into a human head and a written message:

"This is what is going to happen to anyone who comes to this house because priests and nuns are communists."

The Maryknoll Sisters in El Salvador traveled to Nicaragua to attend a meeting of all the sisters who were working in Central America. The main emphasis of the program was on the situation in El Salvador. All the sisters supported the presence of Maryknoll in that country, and they committed themselves to inviting other sisters to join the ones already there.

On the night of 1 December, the eve of their deaths, the Cleveland sisters were having dinner with the U.S. ambassador when a second threatening message was left at their house in Chalatenango. Just a few hours before, Ita had read these words of Romero at the meeting in Nicaragua:

> "Christ urges us not to fear persecution because those who commit themselves to the poor have to run the same risks as the poor: being disappeared, being tortured, being arrested, reappearing as a corpse."

Ita and Maura left Nicaragua to return to El Salvador. That same day, in Chalatenango, a death-squad list appeared, with the names of the sisters and all the parish staff. It was accompanied by this message: "This is a list of the people we are going to kill, and we will begin tonight." A politician informed the U.S. embassy that he had heard a radio transmission in which someone said: "No, they didn't arrive on that flight. We'll have to wait for the next one."[19] This message suggested that the National Guard was waiting for Maura and Ita to arrive at the airport. They had something planned.

Dorothy Kazel

Dorothy was born in Cleveland, Ohio, on 30 June 1939. At the age of 21 she joined the order of Ursuline Sisters in Cleveland, where she received a good part of her formation. In 1967, expressing her desire to serve the Hispanic and indigenous peoples, she offered to go as a volunteer to El Salvador. Her request was not granted at that time, so she began to work with the poor and marginalized people where she was living. In 1974 she again offered herself for service in El Salvador, and this time her request was granted.

In El Salvador she joined a group of missionaries from the diocese of Cleveland; it was made up of nine persons working in three parishes. Her main job consisted in visiting families and preparing the faithful to receive the sacraments. At the end of the 1970s, just before the sharp increase in violence in the country, the mission team took on some new challenges. They were described in this way by Fr. Stephen de Mott:

> "Dorothy spent more and more of her time taking people, especially women and children, to the refugee centers. She wrote about the bodies that she saw day after day along the road, revealing the reality of the unhinged, diabolical violence."

During those years the people's organizations were being repressed by both army and paramilitary forces, and tension kept growing. Dorothy record-

ed on tape her impression of how these forces perceived the work she was doing in the parish:

> "They always call us communists. The Guard is the group that commits all the murders. They are stationed right in front of the church so that whenever we have activities they hear what we are saying. But we don't say anything 'bad' or communist, as they claim we do."

This harsh reality made Dorothy question her own faith. Her efforts to comprehend the reality and the suffering of the people gradually transformed her. Meanwhile, death continued to hang over the mission, and they all prayed and reflected on what steps to take. In those months the team had expanded their ministry to include transporting refugees and distributing food; in this way they were able to respond to the needs of the victims of the violence. Dorothy and Jean transported the people fleeing from the repression in Chalatenango. In September 1980, feeling indignant about the role her own country was playing in the repression, Dorothy wrote a letter to President Carter:

> "I am Sister Dorothy Kazel, an American missionary working in the country of El Salvador. I am writing to you as the result of an experience I had yesterday afternoon, which horrified me all the more as an American because of the aid our country gives the Salvadoran government for 'vehicles and communication.' Early on the morning of 22 September, soldiers of the Salvadoran army raided several houses in San José Villanueva. This military contingent, equipped with powerful trucks and communications equipment, advanced steadily along the highway toward the rural villages.
>
> Around 6:00 or 6:30 in the morning, they killed ten or more persons in one village; they then continued further on and killed ten or more additional persons. One of the murdered persons was an old man walking with his three cows. Another was a young man who was going down to a spring to bathe himself. A 12-year-old girl was holding in her hands the words of a song written in honor of one of the martyred priests. The soldiers called her a subversive and killed her. What is most frightful is that I am an American and that my government has supplied the money for the 'heavy equipment' which allows the army to reach even the remotest villages easily and to kill innocent people because of false information about them. I would like to know what you think of this situation, Mr. President, and whether you know how many innocent persons we are helping the army to kill. How can you justify all this?"

Even as she witnessed so much death and suffering, Dorothy radiated profound faith in God's active presence among the poor, faithful people. Before her death she wrote to the Cleveland diocese:

> "If we look at El Salvador as a whole, we discover that it is a coun-

try writhing with pain, suffering daily the loss of a great many people. At the same time, it hopes and longs for peace. Our church leaders display indestructible faith and courage in ceaselessly proclaiming the word of God, even when this means, in a real sense, 'giving one's life' for others. Such faith is astonishing, and it shows clearly that Jesus is here with us. Yes, we have that spirit of hoping and longing for his Kingdom, but we also are certain that it will come because we can celebrate it right now with Jesus."

She also wrote:

"December is coming. What will it bring us? First, it will bring Advent, a time of expectation and hope. Even though we see how this country with all its suffering is every day losing more of its people, still it hopes and it struggles for peace. I believe that two traits in this people are important for us: 1) they hope for peace and bear their suffering with much patience, and 2) they struggle and shed their blood for this peace. The faith and the courage with which these people ceaselessly preach the word of the Lord mean risking one's life for others in a realistic sense."[20]

Jean Donovan

Jean was born in Westport, Connecticut, on 10 April 1953. After gaining a Master's in Business Administration, she worked as the manager of a company. Though she was on her way to a successful professional career, she was looking for something more in her life. As a result, in 1979 she became a lay missionary for the diocese of Cleveland with this express intention:

"I want to draw close to God, and I don't know any other way to do so."

When she visited Ireland, Jean got to know the world of the poor for the first time. There she met Brother Crowley, who had been a missionary in Peru. He introduced her to a new way of understanding the world, one that made her question her own life and initiated her in the following of Jesus. This experience led her to opt for different values and a new way of life. She spent four months training to be a lay missionary at Maryknoll. The director of the training program described Jean this way:

"Intelligent, affectionate, and apostolic. Despite her playful spirit, or maybe because of it, I think she will be a good missionary."

From Maryknoll she traveled to Guatemala to study Spanish. She arrived in El Salvador in August 1979, when the repression was intensifying and the Church was being viewed with suspicion by government forces. She worked as an administrator of the Caritas office and helped Dorothy Kazel distribute food to the poor and the refugees. Her mother commented:

"Jean took her commitment to the poor very seriously. She was motivated by Saint Francis of Assisi and by Archbishop Romero. She

was especially dedicated to the children."

Jean was an eager follower of Archbishop Romero and regularly went to the cathedral to hear his homilies. After Romero was murdered, Jean and Dorothy spent the night in vigil by his coffin. On 30 March 1980 they were present at his funeral Mass, which was interrupted by gunfire and bombs that provoked a stampede. The massacre left 44 persons dead and hundreds wounded. Thinking that the day of her own death had arrived, Jean joined the people who were desperately fleeing into the cathedral in search of safe refuge.

Though surrounded by violence, the sisters continued their work. They used their little white truck to pick up people who were displaced from their homes by the repression. They distributed medicines to the sick and the wounded, and they carried them to clinics. They could not take them to the public hospitals for fear that they would be killed. As they traveled around the communities and the rural parishes, they performed many works of mercy: accompanying people in danger, delivering food to inaccessible places, hearing testimonies of killings, and making sure that mutilated bodies found on the roadside were properly buried. Dorothy and Jean also helped Ita Ford and Maura Clarke in Chalatenango. The four of them were christened the "rescue team."

In the autumn Jean went to Ireland on vacation. When her friends tried to persuade her not to return to El Salvador, she laughed and told them: "They don't kill blonde, blue-eyed Americans!"

While the country was being devoured by violence, Jean felt personally challenged to try to understand what was happening and to change the situation. This task represented a test of her faith:

> "I am 26 years old. I should be married. I shouldn't be running about doing this. But then I start to think: I have so many things I want to do. It's difficult when I see my friends already married and having children. It's something I have thought about … Will I have children some day? I wonder if I am denying myself that. I don't mean to, but perhaps that's what I'm doing. Later on, when I sit down and converse with God, I ask him: 'Why are you doing this to me? Why can't I be a suburban housewife?' He still hasn't answered me!"

Jean came from an upper-middle-class family. Her father was an engineer, the chief designer in a company that made helicopters for the Vietnam war. Her family's patriotism and her own patriotic inclinations clashed with what she was seeing in El Salvador and the role the United States was playing there. With Reagan's 1980 election victory and his anti-communist platform, U.S. policy became even more destructive. Jean's mother recalled:

> "The situation was getting progressively worse in El Salvador after the elections in the United States. … Military officials thought they had been given a blank check, with no restrictions. Who would say that

such was not the case? Jean told us that she feared that there was going to be widespread slaughter in El Salvador."

On 26 November 1980, Jean, Dorothy, and other members of the Cleveland team attended an ecumenical service with the U.S. ambassador, Robert White, and his wife. There Jean informed the ambassador that she had seen Huey-type U.S. helicopters flying over El Salvador. White told her: "We don't have any of those here." She insisted that the helicopters were American; she recognized them because her father had helped manufacture them years before. The helicopters had been entering El Salvador from Honduras, a country that was being used by the United States as a base for its numerous military advisors. At the end of the service Ambassador White told Jean: "We have to talk about this more. Those helicopters should not be in this country." He then invited the missionaries to have supper at his residence on 1 December. They ended up talking with the ambassador until late in the night, and the missionaries remained in his residence until the next day.

On 2 December, Maura Clarke and Ita Ford returned to El Salvador from Managua. When they were seen getting off the plane, members of the National Guard phoned their commander to get instructions. Five guards in plain clothes were keeping watch outside the airport when Maura and Ita were picked up by Jean and Dorothy. As the four women left the airport, the guards stopped the vehicle; they took the woman to an isolated area, where they beat them, raped them, and shot them to death.

Several local people saw the sisters' white truck driving toward a solitary location, they heard assault-rifle and handgun shots, and they saw five men flee from the scene in the same truck.

The next morning the bodies of the four women were found on the road, and the local authorities ordered them burned. The local folk told the priest of the town what had happened, and the news reached the bishop and the U.S. ambassador.

The U.S. government handled the case very badly. Officials of the Reagan administration claimed that "investigations" indicated that "the women had failed to stop at a checkpoint" and that "there was an exchange of gunfire." Other voices suggested that the women "were not simply nuns; they were political activists."

As U.S. military aid to El Salvador increased, Jean's mother wrote:

> "At the very least, Jean deserves that her murderers not be rewarded by her native country."

Despite this, one of the officials responsible for the murders, General Casanova, was named minister of defense in Duarte's "democratic" government.

Those who want impunity for war crimes have used the law of amnesty to ensnare El Salvador and its history. The deeds that must be judged are complex, and they have national and international repercussions, but leaving things as they are is a betrayal of the victims, the country's history, and the rest of the Americas. At the nation-

al level, the problem lies in the lack of political will and of juridical means to put an end to impunity; the government hopes to conceal its past criminal acts by erasing them from people's memory.

There is an urgent need for El Salvador to lay claim to dignity, truth, and justice, values that are indispensable if there is to be peace in the country. Healing the wounds of the past is a pledge for the present and the future. Genuine reconciliation can arise only from a national commitment to make just reparation to the victims of the conflict.

4.3. Prayer and discernment before the prospect of death

In presenting the lives of these women, we have shown that all of them knew the reality of El Salvador and were aware of the danger they were facing. They had witnessed the murder of Archbishop Romero, and they felt death encircling them. Nonetheless, they never stopped helping the victims of violence; they stayed with them, they prayed for them, and they met together constantly to discern what their next steps should be.

In varying ways they expressed their dilemma: should they return to the United States or remain in El Salvador and so be ready to lose their lives? It was a decision determined by love, which was ready to sacrifice life in necessary. From the depths of their being arose the exclamation, "Here I am, Lord!", and it was expressed in diverse manners.

The decision of Ita and Maura to go to El Salvador was the result of years of prayer, in which they learned to read the signs of the times as part of their mission. Their education had prepared them to be teachers, but the needs of a church caught in the midst of a civil war summoned them to take a step further on the road to the Cross.

Ita described how she was suddenly inundated with a joy and a love that come only as gifts: "I began to experience true contemplative prayer, accompanied by peace, love, and joy."

In the midst of the violence and the lack of rule of law, she could say: "It is a privilege to be part of a church of martyrs and of people with strong, dedicated faith."

Maura secluded herself in order to dedicate a couple of days to prayer and silence. When she went to the United States, she carried with her the situation in Nicaragua:

> "I entered into a period of sadness and profound loneliness, and I wept at being separated from the people I love: the Sisters, the Fathers, all of them. I have seen people tortured because they fought for justice, as Christ did, and I imagined the government officials and soldiers as the high priests. I saw the poor –Ricardo, Asunción, Dionisio– as the tortured Jesus."

Maura and Ita were convinced that they were where they should be, and that brought them peace:

> "We keep giving what we can, because life here is threatened by evils much worse than death, such as ha-

tred, manipulation, vengeance, and selfishness."

Often the days were difficult, and Maura was troubled by her interior struggle:

> "My fear of death is challenging me because young children, enchanting boys and girls, adults, and old people are being shot to death and slaughtered with machetes. Their bodies are thrown on the roadways, and burying them is prohibited. Our God must have a new life of unimaginable peace and joy prepared for these precious ones, these unrecognized martyrs. I cry out, 'Until when, Lord?' and then fear seizes me. When death comes near me, I ask, 'Will I be faithful?'"

But Maura reaffirmed her commitment with the other sisters of Central America. She said that she would stay in El Salvador to search for the disappeared, to pray with the families of prisoners, to bury the dead, and to work to undo the bonds of oppression, poverty, and violence: "The days will be difficult and dangerous, but I have confidence in God. I want to stay." Later she wrote: "I believe that I am doing what is right. I am beginning, and the Lord is teaching me. I am at peace even though I know that I will have difficulties, failures, and frustrations, especially because of the terror that surrounds us. God is present in his seeming absence."

The renewed decision of Jean and Dorothy to continue in their mission was also the result of their long periods of prayerful reflection and their desire to help the poor with their missionary presence. Dorothy wrote:

> "Today we talked a lot about what might happen. Most of us are planning to stay. I thought I should tell you but nobody else, because I don't think the others can understand it. I want you to know what I think and to keep it in your heart. If the day comes when others need to understand it, please explain it to them."

Bound together as friends by the mission, Jean and Dorothy were aware of the constant surveillance of the military. Jean used to say in her prayers:

> "I believe that the suffering one undergoes is God's way of leading us to the desert and preparing us to meet him and love him completely."

Before her death she wrote:

> "I have decided more than once to leave El Salvador, and I *could* leave if it were not for the children and the poor victims who are being hurt by this madness. Who is going to help them? What heart can opt for 'reasonableness' in the midst of this sea of tears and impotence?"

All these women decided that remaining in El Salvador meant being in the right place, the best place for them to express their fidelity to the Gospel. They made God's love visible by leaving everything, to the point of giving their lives among the people whom they loved. The four missionar-

ies found it easy to enter simply and lovingly into the world and the lives of the victims, by accompanying them, talking with them, and sustaining their lives.

4.4. Women who gave their own lives

The lives of these women were at once ordinary and extraordinary. Their experience had taught them to be open to new situations where the needs were greatest.

Friendship played an important role. Ita Ford and Carla Piette had lived and worked together in Chile before going to El Salvador. People who were close to them describe them as opposites, one extroverted and the other more reserved, but they were also in many ways alike. They shared what was fundamental:

> "What they shared most deeply was a seriousness about life, which included humor as well as pain. It was a seriousness that was impatient with all that was false or anything contrary to the Kingdom of God. Some say that their friendship was like that of David and Jonathan. Ita's gift of friendship was the fruit of her attentive listening to life, her sensitivity to different situations, her need to understand, her reluctance to pass judgment, and her ability to accept people as they were and to respect what they were saying."

It was Carla who saved Ita's life by sacrificing her own. For Carla's funeral Ita chose the text which speaks of there being no greater love than giving your life for your friends.

Through their friendship and their experience of community, they were able to survive the countless conflicts with government authorities and the constant surveillance of the military. What allowed them to accompany this persecuted, intimidated people was their sense of mission, which was built on a foundation of prayer, affection, and shared effort.

Dorothy, Ita, Maura, and Jean reveal to us the situation of women in Latin America and the Caribbean: women who are beaten, raped, and murdered. The crucified Christ is personified in these four women who were closely united to the people they loved. Despite the risks they ran, they drew from their creative, courageous hearts the strength they needed to remain true to those who were suffering. In this way they kept their promise to bestow on others the love that beat in strongly their hearts.

5. STRONG FRIENDS OF GOD AND THE POOR

The biographies of these four sisters highlight the role played by women in the Church and in the struggle to have justice done for the people. They show clearly the great value of their feminine qualities: their boundless care and commitment, their simplicity and poverty, their sense of equality, their sense of compassion, their closeness to others, their ability to accompany people who are suffering, their fortitude in conflict, their capacity for discernment and for making decisions, their lucid analysis of the social reality, and their undeniable leadership and popularity.

These women are concrete symbols of the ways in which Latin American and Caribbean religious life attempts to reach places where no one else dares to go. Jon Sobrino expresses this reality very clearly when he writes of Maura, Ita, Dorothy, and Jean:

> "These four women have given us the best that the United States has to offer: faith in Jesus instead of faith in the almighty dollar; love for persons instead of love for an imperialist plan; thirst for justice instead of lust for exploitation. Thanks to these four American women, the churches of El Salvador and the United states became sister churches. El Salvador gave them new eyes, with which they contemplated the crucified body of Christ in our people. El Salvador gave them new hands, with which they cured Christ's wounds in the people of our land. The United States of America gave us women who left their own land to give of themselves, and with great simplicity they gave everything. They gave life itself."[21]

In our world today there are still situations which require us to "give all for love." Alice, Léonie, Maura, Ita, Dorothy, and Jean spent their lives doing good. Who was threatened by that good? Who feared them and why? People are killed when they disturb others or when they are feared. These women were killed out of "hatred for love," but it is a love that keeps spreading and shining as it seeks to protect the powerless.

NOTES

1. Arendt, Hannah (1988). *Entre la historia y la acción*. Barcelona: Paidós, p. 87. [*Understanding and politics*, Parisan Review, 1953]
2. There are also other martyrs such as Teresa Ramírez Vargas and Dorothy Stang. For a more exhaustive treatment of these lives of commitment, cf. Temporelli, Clara María (2014). *Amigas fuertes de Dios, ¿amenaza? ¿para quiénes?* Medellín: Orden de la Compañía de María.
3. Quoted in Rosanvallon, Pierre (2003). *Histoire conceptuelle du politique*. París: Editions du Seuil, p. 28.
4. The conferences of the Latin American Bishops held in Medellín (Colombia) in 1968 and in Puebla (Mexico) in 1979 applied the teachings of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) to the Latin American Church. The conferences marked an important turning point for that Church.
5. The word "martyr" derives from the Greek word *martys*, which means "witness."
6. Cf. Pedro Arrupe, 19 March 1977.
7. In Latin America the verb "disappear" (*desaparecer*) has a transitive as well as an intransitive meaning. Death squads "disappear" people, that is, "make them disappear."
8. The so-called *villas miseria* or *villas de emergencia* were the unplanned urban settlements on marginal lands; they lacked basic services such as electricity, running water, sewers, and gas. Their inhabitants came mostly from the interior provinces of Argentina and from neighboring countries, attracted by the possibility of finding work in the large cities.
9. Seoane, María (2001). *El Dictador.* Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana.
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16. Cf. "Realidad nacional", *Carta a las Iglesias*, El Salvador, 4 February 2009.
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19. Cf. Warburg Ph. and Zorn, J. (1982), *Justice in El Salvador, a Case Study: A Report on the Investigation into the Killing of Four U.S. Churchwomen in El Salvador*, New York: The Committee, p. 22.
20. *Carta a las Iglesias*, El Salvador, December 1988, p. 7.
21. *Carta a las Iglesias*, El Salvador, December 1995, p. 10.

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Cristianisme i Justícia
Roger de Llúria, 13 - 08010 Barcelona
+34 93 317 23 38 - info@fespinal.com
www.cristianismeijusticia.net

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