4 Churchwomen of El Salvador

36 years ago this month, 4 American churchwomen were murdered in El Salvador. Their names were Maura Clarke, Dorothy Kazel, Jean Donovan and Ita Ford. Dorothy was an Ursuline Sister, Ita and Maura were Maryknoll Sisters and Jean was a lay missionary (Ayala).

It was December 2nd of 1980 and a civil war was raging in El Salvador. Dorothy and Jean had just picked up Ita and Maura from the La Libertad airport after their return from a conference in Nicaragua (Pfeil) when they were abducted, beaten, raped, shot and left in a shallow grave by five Salvadorian National Guardsmen (Ursuline Sisters of Cleveland). They were murdered for living out their faith and standing up for human rights in solidarity with the poor. They died like modern day martyrs.

In El Salvador they embodied “the Spirit of Vatican II” (O'Malley) and the Church’s teachings on preferential option for the poor (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace). Their work consisted of activities such as “sacramental preparation, catechesis, distribution of relief aid, working with refugees to search for food, medical supplies and shelter, as well as taking the sick and the wounded to safe medical clinics” (Pfeil). They were caring for their brothers and sisters: body, mind and soul!

As the violence grew darker around them, these women, and many others like them, decided to stay in El Salvador because that is where they experienced God’s love. They saw the Salvadorian people as lights of Christ’s love in the darkness. Dorothy is quoted as saying that in this darkness they were “waiting, hoping, yearning for a complete realization of the Kingdom…a realization of peace.” (Pfeil) What a beautiful quote to meditate on and consider in the season of waiting and preparation this advent!

In their work they were living examples of the gospel of Matthew: “Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.” (Matthew 16: 24-25). Dorothy had been a 3rd grade teacher (AudiovisualesUCA), Jean an accountant engaged to be married (Dear), Ita and Maura grew up in middle class New Yorker families (Pfeil). They gave up those safe, comfortable lives and entered a world of unstable violence to live in solidarity with the suffering, loosing their lives in the process and becoming beacons of light for us all.

Taking a cue from Dorothy Day, lets not idealize or put these women on a pedestal as untouchables, lets not dismiss them so easily! They were human beings. They were normal everyday people. “Seeing them as larger than life…is that the way we distance ourselves from the reality of their choices, thus insulating ourselves from the demands of living the Works of Mercy in the Spirit of the Beatitudes in our own circumstance?” Instead let them be a light, call, a challenge to us as we live a “lifestyle of comfort and security well established by our privileged place in the world economy.” (Pfeil)

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Works Cited


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