

DEAR GOD,

*A new weekly series of articles, children's letters to God
from around the world...*

Dear God,

Why aren't you friends with the devil?

My teacher says he used to be an angel.

Did you have an argument?

When we argue at school our teacher makes us say sorry.

Would you let him back if he said sorry?

Maybe then he wouldn't do all those bad things.

Thank you, Lee



Dear God

*When will it be the end of the world? I know it is going to happen,
so, I want to know when it is so I can get ready.*

I'd like to have enough time to say goodbye to everyone.

*Are you going to make another world afterwards
or are we just going to all go to heaven forever?*

Yours, Henry



Dear God,

Are you really invisible? I'd like to meet you, but it would be strange if I can't see you.

Was Jesus really your son, or did you just tell him what to say?

Do you get angry when I'm naughty? I'll try to be good.

That's everything for now.

Barney

(from C. Reilly's Dear God, Silverdale Books, 2007)

'SAINTS' OF THE WEEK - Maura Clarke and Companions

Martyrs of El Salvador (d. 1980) – Feast Day: 2 December

"One cries out, 'Lord, how long?'" And then too what creeps into my mind is the little fear or big, that when it touches me very personally, will I be faithful?" - Maura Clarke

On a December morning in 1980 a small assembly of priests, nuns, and peasants gathered in a cow pasture in El Salvador to witness the exhumation of four North American women. One by one their broken and dishevelled bodies were dragged from the shallow grave: Maura Clarke and Ita Ford, both Maryknoll Sisters; Dorothy Kazel, an Ursuline Sister, and Jean Donovan, a lay missionary, both from Cleveland. They had been missing since December 2 when Dorothy and Jean, in their distinctive white minivan, had left for the airport to pick up Maura and Ita on their return from a meeting in Nicaragua. Two days later some peasants alerted church authorities and led them to the site of this hasty burial.

Each woman had followed a different path. Maura and Ita had spent many years in mission in Nicaragua and Chile. Dorothy Kazel was the longest in El Salvador. Jean Donovan, only twenty-seven, had wrestled with the possibility of marriage and the security of a lucrative career before choosing, instead, to remain in El Salvador. But for each one, called by Christ to live out her faith in solidarity with the poor, the path had led to the same cow pasture.

It was a possibility they had all wrestled with and faced up to. After all, they had all to one extent or another been touched by the witness of Archbishop Oscar Romero, assassinated only nine months before. In words

which Ita Ford quoted on the night before she died, he had said, *"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."*



The death of the four women had an enormous effect on the North American church, galvanizing opposition to U.S. funding for the Salvadoran government. But at the same time, the deaths provoked a backlash on the part of apologists for these policies. As one American official noted, *"The nuns were not just nuns, the nuns were also political activists...on behalf of the Frente [the guerrillas]."* The U.S. Secretary of State went so far as to describe a *"prominent theory"* that the churchwomen may have been killed *"in an exchange of fire"* after they were believed to be running a roadblock. This *"prominent theory"* had little to do with the readily determined facts of the case: that the four women were targeted for assassination by Salvadoran officers; that soldiers, dressed in civilian clothes for a *"special assignment,"* had followed the Sisters on their way home from the airport; that the women were killed many hours later in a different place; that they were shot in the head at close range; and that before being killed two of them were raped.

In fact, the four women were anything but *"political activists."* Their work, in support of the Salvadoran church, involved ministering to the needs of refugees; shepherding priests on the run; delivering supplies; offering solace to isolated and terrified catechists. These were nightmare years in El Salvador. The women's work confronted them with scenes from hell. They saw villages where the security forces had committed massacres and then refused to allow the survivors to bury the dead. *"The other day,"* wrote Maura, *"passing a small lake in the jeep I saw a buzzard standing on top of a floating body. We did nothing but pray and feel."* They each had identified with the church's *"preferential option for the poor,"* believing that the effective witness to the gospel was inseparable from the witness to life and solidarity with the oppressed. In El Salvador this was enough to label one a subversive.

And yet in bearing witness to the cross they were also witnesses to the resurrection. Among the believing poor of El Salvador there was not only death, but a faith and a stubborn hope that inspired them to carry on or at least, kept them from fleeing. As Ita wrote to her sixteen-year-old niece:

This is a terrible time in El Salvador for youth. A lot of idealism and commitment are getting snuffed out here now. The reasons why so many people are being killed are quite complicated, yet there are some clear, simple strands. One is that people have found a meaning to live, to sacrifice, struggle, and even die. And whether their life spans sixteen years, sixty or ninety, for them their life has had a purpose. In many ways, they are fortunate people.

Brooklyn is not passing through the drama of El Salvador, but some things hold true wherever one is, and at whatever age. What I'm saying is that I hope you can come to find that which gives life a deep meaning for you, something that energizes you, enthuses you, enables you to keep moving ahead.

Jean Donovan, at twenty-seven, was the youngest of the four, and the only laywoman among them. From a privileged background, with a degree in business and a promising career, she had been drawn to the mission in El Salvador and stayed on even when the risks became clear. Two weeks before her death she wrote, *"Several times I have decided to leave - I could almost except for the children, the poor bruised victims of adult lunacy. Who would care for them? Whose heart would be so staunch as to favour the reasonable thing in a sea of their tears and loneliness? Not mine, dear friend, not mine."*

The history of the church is written in the blood of martyrs. But these four women represented a different kind of martyrdom, increasingly common in our time. Their murderers dared to call themselves Christians, indeed defenders of Christian values. And they died not simply for clinging to the true faith but for clinging, like Jesus, to the poor.

See: Donna Whitson Brett and Edward T. Brett, Murdered in Central America (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1988); Penny Lernoux (with Arthur Jones and Robert Ellsberg), Hearts on Fire: The Story of the Maryknoll Sisters (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1993)