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Thirty Years Later: Remembering the U.S. Churchwomen in El Salvador and the United States

*Theresa Keeley**

On December 2, 1980, Salvadoran National Guardsmen—armed by the U.S. government—raped and murdered four U.S. missionaries: Maryknoll Sisters Ita Ford and Maura Clarke, Ursuline Sister Dorothy Kazel, and Maryknoll lay missionary Jean Donovan. Thirty years later, in late 2010, I traveled to El Salvador as part of a delegation to commemorate the anniversary of their deaths. Returning to the United States in early 2011, I attended a memorial for them in Washington, D.C., and expected to see continuity with the past: the promotion of the missionaries as a source of inspiration and expressions of anger at the U.S. role in El Salvador. The women continued to inspire, but the focus on the U.S. government was nearly absent. Instead, commemorative events in El Salvador evoked disappointment with the institutional Catholic Church, and the Washington, D.C., remembrance stressed Maryknoll Sisters' political influence. These differences underscored that remembering the U.S. churchwomen was not just about one memory, but different kinds of memories for different communities.

Keywords: U.S. churchwomen; Maryknoll; Kazel, Dorothy; Ford, Ita; Clarke, Maura; Donovan, Jean; El Salvador; Washington, D.C.; martyrdom; commemorations

In late 2010 and early 2011, I attended two events commemorating the thirtieth anniversary of the murders of Maryknoll Sisters Ita Ford and Maura Clarke, Ursuline Sister Dorothy Kazel, and Maryknoll lay missionary Jean Donovan. They were raped and killed by Salvadoran National Guardsmen on December 2, 1980. The women had been helping people fleeing their homes during a civil war, one in which the U.S. backed, trained, and equipped the government forces. The first thirtieth-anniversary commemora-

*The author would like to thank Katherine Massoth, Jim and Pat Keeley, and the anonymous reviewer for their suggestions.

tion was held in late 2010 in El Salvador; the second was in early 2011 in Washington, D.C.

I expected these commemorations to maintain continuity with past events highlighting the women's legacy. In 1980, the women symbolized different things to different people, including the radical expectations of living out the gospel and the need to respond to the violence in El Salvador. The women's lives moved people and were paired with anger at the U.S. role in El Salvador. The events in 2010 and early 2011 revealed that the women continued to inspire. Both Salvadoran delegates and D.C. attendees reflected on the churchwomen's positive influence on their lives, and they celebrated the churchwomen's accompaniment of the Salvadoran people. The most significant change thirty years later was that little, if any, attention was paid to the U.S. government's role in their murders. Instead, Salvadoran delegates expressed frustration at women's place in the Catholic Church, while speakers in Washington, D.C., emphasized the Maryknoll Sisters' involvement in U.S. political debates, not U.S. policy toward El Salvador. These differences underscored that remembering the churchwomen was not just about one memory, but different kinds of memories for different communities. As historian David Lowenthal recognizes, "The past we construe is contingent on our background, our outlook, our own present."¹ Ultimately, who was remembering shaped how the women were commemorated.

Response to the Churchwomen's Murders

The women's deaths shone a light on U.S. policy toward El Salvador, then in the grips of a twelve-year civil war. From 1980 until 1992, about 75,000 Salvadorans lost their lives and still more bore the lingering effects. One million people were displaced, 350,000 were wounded, and tens of thousands were tortured, raped, conscripted, imprisoned, or abducted.² The United States backed the Salvadoran government, providing economic and military aid, including training. The women's murders prompted President Jimmy Carter to temporarily cut both economic and military aid to El Salvador.³

The immediate response to Carter's decision was divided. The *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* called "the ruthless assassination of four American missionaries

1. David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country: Revisited*, 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 338.

2. Erik Ching, *Stories of Civil War in El Salvador: A Battle Over Memory* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 3.

3. U.S. Department of State, Daily Press Briefing, December 5, 1980, ES00923, El Salvador Collection 1977–1984, Digital National Security Archives (hereafter DNSA), George Washington University, Washington, D.C.

. . . a shocking crime [that] . . . has precipitated a badly needed review of the consequences of U.S. economic and military aid to El Salvador.”⁴ Similarly, the *Salt Lake Tribune* argued, “For the United States to continue sending aid, of any kind, to El Salvador would be a ridiculous and wanton act; it would be tantamount to being an accessory to murder.”⁵ By contrast, the *Orlando Sentinel Star* warned, “As shocking and tragic as these deaths are, however, they do not constitute a sufficient reason for determining the overall relations between the two nations.”⁶

For many people of faith, especially Catholics, the women highlighted how the Salvadoran church accompanied the poor. Just days after the women were killed, Minneapolis’s Archbishop John Roach, President of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, telegrammed president-elect Ronald Reagan: “The murder of the four U.S. missionaries in El Salvador brings home to American Catholics and all American citizens the daily experience of violence which is the lot of the poor in El Salvador.” Roach pleaded for the U.S. government to separate itself “in a clear and visible manner from the repression of the security forces and other military groups which seem to operate with impunity throughout the country.” He stressed that these were not simply murders. Rather, “the tragic martyrdom of these four women should be seen in light of the work they were doing as part of the Church in El Salvador. The Church there has made a fundamental decision to accompany and support the poor in their struggle for human dignity, human rights and full participation in the life of their country.”⁷

The women’s deaths, which “hit the US like a thunderbolt,” prompted self-reflection. Director of the Religious Task Force on Central America, Margaret Swedish, shared, “For many people of faith, people with open hearts . . . these deaths reached into a deep untapped well of faith, and there they discovered the meaning of the crucified Jesus in our world today.” The women stirred a sense of personal responsibility as they “confronted us with the reality of the ‘Two-Thirds’ world and with the sin of the First World.”⁸

4. Editorial, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, December 11, 1980.

5. Editorial, *Salt Lake Tribune*, December 8, 1980.

6. Editorial, *Orlando Sentinel-Star*, December 9, 1980.

7. Telegram, Archbishop John Roach to Ronald Reagan, December 5, 1980, Co046 El Salvador, box 1, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Simi Valley, California (hereafter RRPL).

8. Margaret Swedish, *A Message Too Precious to Be Silenced: The Four US Church Women and the Meaning of Martyrdom* (Washington, DC: Religious Task Force on Central America, 1992), 22–23.

The deaths motivated many, especially women, to become active in opposing U.S. policy toward El Salvador.⁹ A banner, unfurled at San Francisco's cathedral in early December 1980, encapsulated the feelings of many: "U.S. DOLLARS KILL U.S. NUNS."¹⁰ Shortly after the murders, memorial Masses were held throughout the country, including San Francisco, Chicago, Washington, D.C., and New York, which drew over 2,000 people. After Mass, many took to the streets, with marches occurring in Minneapolis, Miami, Boston, Milwaukee, Portland, and Baltimore. Activists in New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles joined in hunger strikes, while those in Washington, D.C., fasted for five days.¹¹ In subsequent years, those whose lives the churchwomen had impacted commemorated the anniversary of their murders through interfaith prayer services, Masses in English and Spanish, Salvadoran dinners refugees prepared, petitions to government officials, and protests and acts of civil disobedience, including by women religious. These events occurred across the United States in Wheeling, Denver, Des Moines, Oahu, San Antonio, Spokane, New Orleans, Racine, Las Vegas, and Santa Fe, as well as outside the United States, including in San Salvador and Managua.¹²

Yet not all Catholics responded the same way. The *Wanderer's* editor argued that nuns and priests were dying in El Salvador because of their politics, not their religious beliefs or affiliation:

If Catholic priests and nuns openly and actively side with Marxist revolutionaries, it should surprise no one that they risk being killed by those

9. Stephanie Russell, "Catholics Protest Salvadorean Arms," *National Catholic Reporter*, March 6, 1981.

10. Marjorie Hyer, "Four Murders Trigger U.S. Catholic Protests," *Washington Post*, December 10, 1980.

11. Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador, "Murder of Nuns Sparks Protests," *El Salvador Alert!*, December 14, 1980, Sr. Betty Ann Maheu Files, inspected by the author (now in the Maryknoll Mission Archives, Maryknoll, New York).

12. For examples, see Capitol Rotunda Event, Washington, D.C., December 2, 1982, folder Central America Religious Study Group, box 6, and Press Release, Denver Area Justice & Peace Committee, December 3, 1981, folder Guilty of the Gospel, box 6, Quixote Center Papers (hereafter QCP), Marquette University, Department of Special Collections and University Archives, Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Letter, C. I. "Ozzie" Venzor to Edwin Meese, December 24, 1981, 053000-059999, Co046 El Salvador, RRPL; Flyer, Rally and March, December 1984, First United Methodist Church, Des Moines, folder 4, box 31, and Press Release, Archdiocese of Santa Fe, "The Memory Grows in New Mexico: Four American Church Women who Died Eight Years Ago in El Salvador," November 17, 1988, folder 13, box 31, Religious Task Force on Central America, Maryknoll Mission Archives, Maryknoll, New York; Cable, Kenneth W. Bleakly to Department of State, December 3, 1981, ES02264, El Salvador Collection 1977-1984, DNSA; "Misa y marcha en aniversario de caída de monjitas Maryknoll," *Barricada*, December 3, 1982, box 10, Central American Historical Institute Records, Swarthmore College Peace Collection, Swarthmore, Pennsylvania.

on the opposing side. The brutality and aggression unleashed within those engaged in a war for survival make little distinction as to rank, or status, or office among the ‘enemy.’¹³

The *Wanderer* was not alone in questioning the women’s behavior. Following the murders, Reagan administration officials described the churchwomen as “not just nuns” but “political activists” and as gunrunners who died in a shoot-out, contrary to the evidence.¹⁴

The rape and murder of the four women even split the friends and families of Maryknoll Sisters. Reflecting on the murders, Sister Marge Kehoe described her frustration and inability to convey the poverty and oppression she witnessed in Lima, Peru: “Most comfortable people don’t want to hear such things.” In a 1981 letter to friends and family, she discussed U.S. foreign policy and “tried to arouse some social consciousness, hinting at social action.” Despite a “cool response” by some, the churchwomen’s murders prompted her to include in a Christmas letter “a stronger step with my friends than I have ever done before.” Kehoe felt it was the right thing to do, although she was uncertain of the outcome. “It may result in my losing friends, but I don’t know whether I could continue to call people friends who couldn’t share this sense of outrage over Maura and Ita.”¹⁵

As in the United States, the women’s work and death served as a symbol for some Salvadorans’ commitment to the poor. The Democratic Revolutionary Front (FDR), an association of sixteen leftist organizations, explained in a telegram to the Maryknoll Sisters, “Their outstanding lives and their unjustified deaths will be part of the history of our people’s struggle for total liberation.”¹⁶

But the women’s legacy was more complicated, as San Salvador’s archdiocesan newspaper pointed out, because their murders—not those of Salvadorans—prompted U.S. action. The paper praised the women’s “dedication, devotion, and sacrifice” as well as their love for the oppressed Salvadoran people. Their deaths brought attention to a larger, long-ignored structural problem. Archbishop Óscar Romero—assassinated just months earlier in March 1980—warned that U.S.-supplied weapons furthered

13. A.J. Matt, “Bishops at the Precipice,” *Wanderer*, February 12, 1981.

14. “Ambassador Kirkpatrick: Reagan-Appointed Democrat Speaks Her Mind on World, Politics,” *Tampa Tribune*, December 25, 1980; U.S. Congress, Senate, “Foreign Assistance Legislation for Fiscal Year 1982, Before the Committee on Foreign Affairs,” 97th Cong. 1st sess., 1981, 163.

15. “Reflections on Death and Violence in El Salvador,” *Missionary Spirituality Report*, Fall 1981, 8–9.

16. Janice McLaughlin and Constance Pospisil, “Tribute to Ita Ford,” December 12, 1980, ES00980, El Salvador Collection 1977–1984, DNSA.

repression, but U.S. aid continued. As the paper pointed out, only after the four women's murders did the U.S. take notice and suspend aid. The paper commented in frustration, "Ten thousand Salvadoran deaths could not accomplish what their four murders have."¹⁷ The women's case presented a double-edged sword for their cause. While bringing attention to the violence in El Salvador and to U.S. foreign policy, focus on the women's deaths risked obscuring the Salvadorans who had also been suffering and dying.

Maryknoll agreed. As the men and the women of Maryknoll jointly declared shortly after the murders, "The deaths of our Sisters should not overshadow the murders of nearly 9,000 lesser-known people in that country in recent months and the terrible suffering of countless others due to the spiral of violence tormenting the Salvadoran people."¹⁸ From the time the women's bodies were found to the present day, Maryknoll has repeatedly stressed the bigger picture: the women should not monopolize the story.

Broader Solidarity

The protests the women's murders inspired existed within an older and larger context of solidarity efforts to oppose U.S. intervention in Latin America. In the 1950s and 1960s, Cubans in the United States who supported Fidel Castro pushed for change in U.S. policy toward the island. After the 1973 coup of General Augusto Pinochet, Chileans, together with others, condemned the human rights abuses of his regime and the U.S. government's support.¹⁹ Similarly, exiles and activists based in the United States denounced U.S. backing for dictators in Brazil and Argentina who also abused their people's human rights.²⁰

Cold War concerns determined policy. Latin American elites branded any movement for change as communist, as did the U.S. government, par-

17. Editorial, "Religiosas asesinadas las mato la corrupción," *Orientación*, December 14, 1980, box 38, Brockman-Romero Papers, Special Collections and Archives, DePaul University, Chicago, Illinois.

18. Melinda Roper and James P. Noonan, "Joint Statement Concerning Recent Events in El Salvador," December 31, 1980, ES01095, El Salvador Collection 1977–1984, DNSA.

19. Van Gosse, "'El Salvador is Spanish for Vietnam': The New Immigrant Left and the Politics of Solidarity," in *The Immigrant Left in the United States*, ed. by Paul Buhle and Dan Georgakas (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 304–307, 309–310.

20. James N. Green, *We Cannot Remain Silent: Opposition to the Brazilian Military Dictatorship in the United States* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); William Michael Schmidli, *The Fate of Freedom Elsewhere: Human Rights and U.S. Cold War Policy toward Argentina* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017); Patrick William Kelly, *Sovereign Emergencies: Latin America and the Making of Global Human Rights Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

ticularly after the Cuban Revolution. To stop communism, the U.S. government provided its Latin American allies with aid, including military training and arms. Although communism did inspire some activists, the Central American movements sprang from homegrown causes; they were not Soviet- or Cuban-directed. But U.S. officials failed to recognize how societal inequities bred unrest, how local elites opposed change even through the political process, and how states' use of force to inhibit calls for reform contributed to the formation of guerrilla movements.²¹

U.S.-based solidarity efforts regarding Central America strengthened during the 1970s. Nicaraguans, Salvadorans, and Guatemalans demanded an end to U.S. support for Nicaraguan dictator Anastasia Somoza Debayle, and for the Salvadoran and Guatemalan governments. They formed organizations, held protests, and published newspapers. Missionaries, changed by their experiences in Latin America, and especially their exposure to liberation theology, added their voices to this call. Besides raising awareness within their own communities, some lobbied Congress through organizations such as the ecumenical Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA).²²

The 1979 Sandinista triumph over Somoza led to more U.S. government and public attention on Central America. U.S. officials worried that the revolutionary fervor would spread, particularly to neighboring El Salvador, but others railed against the state violence in Central America and the U.S. policy that sanctioned it. Most notable was Nobel Peace Prize nominee Archbishop Romero, who in February 1980 publicly called on President Jimmy Carter to end U.S. military aid. Romero's assassination, weeks later in March, highlighted El Salvador's plight to the outside world and plunged the country further into civil war. Tensions increased with Ronald Reagan's election as president in November 1980. His victory brought concerns that the United States would abandon human rights in its foreign policy and that in the short-term there would be more human rights violations because allies no longer feared U.S. rebuke. These concerns proved prophetic when six FDR leaders were taken in broad daylight, tortured, and shot in late November in El Salvador. Just days later, the four churchwomen were raped and murdered. Although Carter cut aid to El Salvador, he restored it before Reagan's inauguration. Once in office, Reagan increased aid both to the Salvadoran government and to the Contras—the counterrevolutionaries seeking to overthrow the Nicaraguan government. In response to U.S. foreign

21. Theresa Keeley, "Transnational Activism in U.S.-Central America Relations in the 1980s," in *A Companion to U.S. Foreign Policy: Colonial Era to the Present*, ed. by Christopher R.W. Dietrich (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2020), Vol. II, 1048–1067.

22. Keeley, "Transnational Activism in U.S.-Central America Relations."

policy and increasing violence, particularly in El Salvador and Guatemala, the solidarity movement opposing U.S. intervention grew. Transnational support groups between the United States and Central America were established, including the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES). Along with national organizations, over 2,000 local groups joined these efforts during the 1980s. Many North Americans involved in the movement traveled to Central America to witness the impact of U.S. policy and then returned to share their experiences.²³

The Delegation

I traveled to El Salvador in late 2010 as part of an eight-woman delegation with *Centro de Intercambio y Solidaridad* (CIS), a non-governmental organization based in San Salvador that seeks “to promote solidarity and cultural exchange across borders between the Salvadoran people and others in the search for development and dignity.”²⁴ Salvadorans, together with U.S., European, and Canadian solidarity groups, founded CIS in 1993. CIS attempts to promote “non-violent means of social transformation through our educational and cultural exchanges and programs.”²⁵ From November 28 to December 6, 2010, we visited places associated with the churchwomen, including where they worked, were murdered, and where the Maryknoll Sisters were buried.²⁶

Two other North American groups sponsored delegations. The Salvadoran Humanitarian Aid, Research, and Education Foundation (SHARE), an international non-profit working with Salvadoran communities to promote structural change, brought forty-nine people, including three men. SHARE co-sponsored its group with Pax Christi, USA and the Leadership Conference of Women Religious.²⁷ Maryknoll sponsored about forty delegates, including several Maryknoll priests.²⁸

Familiarity with El Salvador and the churchwomen varied among our eight delegation members.²⁹ Three were sisters of the Society of Helpers, an international missionary order, one of whom had lived in El Salvador from

23. Keeley, “Transnational Activism in U.S.-Central America Relations.”

24. Centro de Intercambio y Solidaridad, “History and Mission,” <http://www.cis-elsalvador.org/index.php/en/about-cis/history-and-mission.html>, accessed January 7, 2011.

25. CIS, “Orientation Packet,” February 2007, in author’s possession.

26. Dorothy Kazel and Jean Donovan were not buried in El Salvador.

27. “LCWR Participates in Delegation to Honor Martyrs in El Salvador,” *LCWR Update*, January 2011, 4.

28. Cheryl Wittenauer, “Pilgrims Celebrate Lives of US Churchwomen,” *National Catholic Reporter*, December 20, 2010.

29. I have avoided naming delegates and others we spoke with in El Salvador to protect their privacy.

1987 to 1997 organizing delegations of North Americans. She used every opportunity to educate us about the country and described the experience as “coming home.” She brought her friend of thirty years, a seventy-four-year-old companion who wanted to better understand her friend’s work in El Salvador. A second sister was a Mexican from Puebla who worked with gangs and youth in Chicago. She visited El Salvador six years earlier for the twenty-fourth anniversary of Archbishop Romero’s murder. The final sister, a healing touch practitioner and administrative worker from St. Louis, came to El Salvador at the Helpers’ invitation. Of the other three women, only one had been to El Salvador previously. A social worker from Cleveland in her forties, she went several years earlier with a group focused on medical care. She was familiar with the women because her archdiocese’s Latin American Mission Team had sent religious and lay workers, including Dorothy Kazel and Jean Donovan, to El Salvador since 1964. Her knowledge of the churchwomen led her to join the delegation. The final two delegates—Protestants from the Los Angeles area—joined to visit the women’s business group and scholarship program sponsored by their church group. One, a psychologist in her late forties, knew of the churchwomen from *Choices of the Heart*, a made-for-TV movie starring *Little House on the Prairie*’s Melissa Gilbert as Jean Donovan. Her friend, also in her mid-forties, had recently left a legal job and was not familiar with the churchwomen.

My own understanding of Salvadoran history, the Catholic Church, and the Maryknoll Sisters influenced my observations. I had been studying the women and the broader political context for two years, including a stay at the Maryknoll Motherhouse to use the archives. During meals, I spoke informally with the sisters about their decisions to join the order, their experiences as missionaries, and their opinions about the churchwomen’s murders and the Reagan administration’s response. I formally interviewed Sisters Teresa Alexander and Madeline Dorsey, who served in El Salvador with the murdered churchwomen. In the summer of 2008, I spent a month in El Salvador on a family homestay, improving my Spanish and visiting nearby historical and cultural sites.

CIS sought to use the anniversary of the churchwomen’s deaths to educate people from the United States about the political situation in El Salvador and the continuing influence of U.S. government and business interests on the country. As an advertisement explained, “CIS invites you to be a part of the journey of these women martyrs by accompanying the Salvadoran people in their struggle for social justice today and building global solidarity.”³⁰ CIS tapped into North Americans’ interest in the churchwomen to draw their attention to El Salvador.

30. CIS Flyer, in author’s possession.

While the churchwomen were a gateway to awareness about El Salvador, our trip emphasized solidarity and subsequent sharing. It was not about North Americans controlling the agenda; Central Americans invited North Americans, and the hosts determined the delegations' direction and focus. While "tensions" existed, scholar William Westerman contends that it was "a partnership, a vision of reciprocal hospitality as a form of solidarity." A key aspect "was introducing North Americans to Central American religion, culture, and social conditions" to create "a long-range transformation or conversion of a people." In the 1980s, for example, delegates from Central Baptist Church in a wealthy Philadelphia suburb returned from El Salvador to share stories, raise money, and carry out weekly protests outside of Senator Arlen Specter's Philadelphia residence.³¹

CIS envisioned our delegations as representing El Salvador to the United States and stressed the need for us to share our experience when we returned home. Either a church or organization sponsored all but one of my co-delegates, with the intent that she would share her experience upon her return. As the orientation packet explained, CIS anticipated that what delegates "learned [would] be incorporated into peace and justice work, whether you take a domestic or international solidarity focus."³²

Pilgrimage

Although our trip was called a delegation, in some ways "pilgrimage" more accurately conveyed both attendees' and organizers' motivations. According to sociologist Luigi Tomasi, the tradition of pilgrimage stressed "penitence, expiation, purification and redemption," and concerned "*destination and faith*," while the post-medieval focus became the "*experience of traveling*," emphasizing "the changes that took place in the person during the journey." Although pilgrims still "seek out the sacred," today "the concept of penitence has faded, and so too has the hardship of the journey—the physical pain, that is, of actually walking the road."³³ Our trip resembled a pilgrimage in two respects. First, we followed the women's path to where they worked, where their bodies were

31. William Westerman, "Reciprocity and the Fabric of Solidarity: Central Americans, Refugees, and Delegations in the 1980s," in *International Volunteer Tourism: Critical Reflections on Good Works in Central America*, ed. by Katherine Borland and Abigail E. Adams (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 43, 45, 47.

32. CIS, "Orientation Packet."

33. Luigi Tomasi, "Homo Viator: From Pilgrimage to Religious Tourism via the Journey," in *From Medieval Pilgrimage to Religious Tourism: The Social and Cultural Economics of Piety*, ed. by William H. Swatos, Jr. and Luigi Tomasi (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002), 13, 20 (emphasis in original).

found, and where they were buried. Second, the trip aimed to prompt a sense of change—even guilt or penance—for U.S. government actions.

Several times throughout the week people living in El Salvador used the word “pilgrimage” to describe our trip, as did U.S.-born Jesuit Dean Brackley who moved to El Salvador in 1990. At least three of our delegation were seeking a transformative religious experience. One sought to “recharge,” envisioning a purer, or at least more desirable, form of Catholicism in El Salvador. Two others described themselves as undergoing a “spiritual crisis.” One noted how her parish recently consolidated with two others, leaving her without a sense of community. The other said feelings of being lost and disillusioned prompted her to join.

Seeking to spur action and transform individuals by evoking penitence, CIS’s goal for the delegates evoked pilgrimage. When asked why it was important for people from the United States to visit El Salvador, our group coordinator/translator cited Brackley who asserted that once a person comes to El Salvador, that person is never the same. She expressed frustration with visitors to El Salvador who do not take action. They should feel something, whether “guilt” or something else, and communicate that to others. From the expectations of the sponsors and providers of the experience, a delegation is thus not an individual experience; participants have an obligation to share what they have seen. The translator’s use of the word “guilt” evoked the older notion of pilgrimage, perhaps viewing the delegations and the participants’ response as a way to amend for past and present U.S. policies. The idea tapped back into why some people in the United States were spurred to action thirty years earlier, out of a sense of responsibility and atonement for their nation’s foreign policy.

Women’s Roles in the Catholic Church

Though the delegation focused on the churchwomen’s legacy, the itinerary provided a broader introduction to Salvadoran life. The women’s stories became a window to discuss conditions in El Salvador. Since the civil war’s end in 1992, arriving delegates were less likely to be familiar with El Salvador and its history. Between our arrival on Sunday and the commemorative events on Thursday and Friday, we learned about Salvadoran history, the civil war, and the political climate. We met with an elections officer, women who ran a cooperative that sold eggs, high school students who received scholarships through CIS, and members of a community struggling to obtain land rights.

Our first meeting was with a church activist and former guerrilla, whose message resonated with my co-delegates who sought spiritual recharge. For

five hours, he explained how his involvement with the church led him to push for change in El Salvador and eventually join the guerrilla movement. He recounted how his current parish priest criticized those who opposed the government during the war, he shared his sadness and frustration with the church while also emphasizing his faith. Afterward, several co-delegates connected his witness to their own disappointment in the church's treatment of women. Their takeaway was the church's insensitivity to alternative voices, be they poor, women, or both.

My co-delegates' sense of feeling unheard and marginalized resurfaced during a December 2 Mass at the Santiago Nonualco chapel, built where the churchwomen's bodies were discovered. At this U.S.-organized event, delegates and Salvadorans packed the small chapel and overflowed into the grassy area outside. Five priests crowded the altar, in stark contrast to the overwhelmingly female congregation. Although one woman read, the homily had little to do with the churchwomen. The priest shared that when reading the lives of the saints as a child, he never felt a connection to them. The implication was that we could relate to the churchwomen and that, like them, people could serve God in their own way. However, his praise for women who made tortillas and taught their children to pray reinforced traditional gender roles. The most prominent woman at the Mass was the cantor, a catechist who knew one of the murdered churchwomen. Nearly all of my co-delegates departed the Mass bewildered, and some were angry. The purpose was to celebrate the churchwomen and their lives, one sister said, yet men held the place of honor.

My co-delegates' frustration might have reflected more than the memorial Mass, tapping into broader discussions about women's role in the church. The Vatican was in the midst of conducting two investigations of U.S. sisters. One focused on the failure of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious to support church teachings regarding the all-male priesthood and homosexuality.³⁴ The investigations evoked memories of the church under Pope John Paul II when then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, later Pope Benedict XVI, served as Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. He curbed the influence of liberation theologians and restated the impossibility of female ordination. The Vatican's decision to investigate unleashed a firestorm of protest. It prompted Archbishop Joseph Tobin, Secretary of the Vatican's Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, to suggest that the Vatican should acknowl-

34. Thomas C. Fox, "Vatican Investigates U.S. Women Religious Leadership," *National Catholic Reporter*, April 14, 2009, and Laurie Goodstein, "U.S. Nuns Facing Vatican Scrutiny," *New York Times*, July 2, 2009.

edge the “depth of hurt and anger” arising from the investigation and to pursue a “strategy of reconciliation.”³⁵

There was an older link between women’s roles in the church and U.S.-Central America policy, although none of my co-delegates mentioned it. During the 1980s, both opponents and supporters of U.S. foreign policy tied their views of U.S. military intervention in Central America with women’s roles in the church. The Quixote Center, which lobbied to change U.S.-Central America policy in the early 1980s, contested the church’s policies toward women and often connected the two struggles. As the Quixote Center described in a letter to supporters in October 1983: “In the tradition of Quixote, we work at being frustrating to the forces of injustice. Sometimes we’re not understood when we challenge Reagan’s policies in Central America or the Vatican policies of sex discrimination.”³⁶ Likewise, in criticizing their co-religionists, conservative Catholics often pointed to the connection between those who protested U.S. policy and those who promoted a greater role for women in the church. In critiquing the Quixote Center for “organizing El Salvador protest vigils,” the traditionalist *Wanderer* noted that Quixote Center founder Jesuit William Callahan also started the pro-women’s ordination group, Priests for Equality.³⁷

The Churchwomen’s Place in El Salvador

While frustrated with the celebration at the chapel, my co-delegates responded more positively to a Mass at the cathedral on December 5. Here, and at a nearby memorial monument to the churchwomen, they felt the women’s sacrifices were validated and viewed as part of a larger Salvadoran story, just as Salvadorans and the Maryknoll Sisters stressed in 1980.

Salvadorans’ remembrances in 2010 closely associated the churchwomen with Archbishop Romero’s legacy. During the Sunday Mass offertory at San Salvador’s Metropolitan Cathedral of the Holy Savior, celebrants brought to the altar a basket of food and items reminiscent of the churchwomen, including a sign that read “*Hermanas Maryknoll*” (Maryknoll Sisters) with the four women’s names. Unlike prior events that week, the inclusion of the churchwomen did not appear to be organized by, or primarily for, the benefit of visiting U.S. delegations. Our delegation members brought up the offertory

35. “Vatican Official Speaks of a ‘Strategy of Reconciliation’ With Women Religious,” *National Catholic Reporter*, December 7, 2010.

36. Letter, Staff of the Quixote Center to Friends of the Quixote Center, October 1983, folder 1983, QCP.

37. John Boland, “Catholic Leftist Group Organizing El Salvador Protest Vigils,” *Wanderer*, April 9, 1981.



Offertory items, including a “Hermanas Maryknoll” (Maryknoll Sisters) sign, before the altar at San Salvador’s Metropolitan Cathedral of the Holy Savior (All images courtesy of the author).

only after a sister associated with the cathedral approached our group before Mass. Later, the priest said a few words about the women before moving on to his homily’s main focus: the need for the “arms of peace” in the country. He noted how Maryknoll Sisters accepted Archbishop Romero’s request for foreign religious volunteers to go to El Salvador in early 1980. By explaining how the women lived in Romero’s spirit, he incorporated them into the Salvadoran community, rather than primarily as U.S.-born missionaries.

The churchwomen’s inclusion in the cathedral celebrations placed them on a particular side of the religious-political divide, as the former guerrilla indicated on our first day. Romero supporters praised his courage for speaking out against violence in the country. Likewise, the churchwomen stood with the poor and oppressed against the powerful. Their pastoral work had political—and life-threatening—implications. Maryknoll saw the churchwomen the same way: as “martyrs for justice.”³⁸ But Romero’s opponents accused him of fomenting civil war, and Salvadoran conservatives rejected the notion of Romero and other religious as martyrs, arguing instead that political subver-

38. McLaughlin and Pospisil, “Tribute to Ita Ford.”

sion, not faith, led to their deaths. Under this interpretation, Archbishop Romero and others brought violence upon themselves. “Martyrdom is never just a religious issue,” explains religious studies scholar Anna L. Peterson. “Martyrs dramatize the limits that faith imposes upon allegiance to civil power and provide a model for believers’ correct response to a political situation.”³⁹

The divisions manifested themselves in the cathedral, with space marking political differences. Upstairs, the well-dressed congregants attended Mass surrounded by highly-ornate decorations and frescoes. Downstairs, celebrants sat on folding chairs surrounding the altar, near Romero’s crypt. Before and during Mass, crowds gathered around the body to pray and pay their respects. I watched an elderly man approach Romero’s crypt. He shuffled his feet then struggled as he lowered himself to his knees. He rested his weight on Romero’s tomb while placing atop Romero an old hat emblazoned with “FMLN” (*Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional*), the guerrilla group that fought the U.S.-backed Salvadoran government. As some people searched for seats, others scurried around the room, selling newspapers, CDs with Romero’s last homily set to music, and a 2011 calendar commemorating the archbishop’s life. Like a calendar of saints, it listed by month the priests and sisters killed in El Salvador, including the churchwomen. FMLN party pamphlets and political broadsheets were also distributed.

Whether to attend Mass upstairs or downstairs, and especially whether to visit Romero’s tomb, marked someone politically and religiously. Although the Salvadoran Catholic Church was not restricted like the church in Eastern Europe during the Cold War, El Salvador’s economically and politically powerful used violence to restrain those who worked for structural change, including those who supported liberation theology, like Archbishop Romero.

Just as participation in the Mass downstairs marked the delegates’ allegiances, the churchwomen’s inclusion in the Monument to Memory and Truth in San Salvador’s Parque Cuscatlán identified them with a particular side. Built in 2003 without federal government approval, the eighty-five-meter black granite wall about a mile from the cathedral recalls the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C. It lists nearly 30,000 Salvadoran dead and missing from the war. The women’s names appear individually in the alphabetical list of deaths and also collectively under 1980 massacres as “*Religiosas Maryknoll*.”

The 2010 commemorations took place during El Salvador’s battle over the war’s memory. As historian Erik Ching attests, since the war’s end, there has

39. Anna L. Peterson, *Martyrdom and the Politics of Religion: Progressive Catholicism in El Salvador’s Civil War* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 15, 66.

been a proliferation of published life stories. More than books, they represent “a narrative battle . . . between four memory communities”: civilian elites, military officers, guerrilla commanders, and rank-and-file participants.⁴⁰ This struggle took center stage when the Salvadoran presidency changed hands. In 2009, for the first time since the 1992 peace agreements, the conservative party, *Alianza Republicana Nacionalista* (ARENA), lost the presidency to the FMLN. The FMLN rejected ARENA’s call for the country to move forward and disassociate from its past. Instead, as an FMLN official explained to our delegation, the government attempted to “recuperate the memory of the war.” President Mauricio Funes used the anniversary of high-profile murders to acknowledge the government’s role and ask for forgiveness. On March 24, 2010, the thirtieth anniversary of Archbishop Romero’s assassination, the Salvadoran government marked the event for the first time. Funes not only declared March 24 a national day of commemoration, but he also sought forgiveness for the state’s actions that killed thousands of innocents. As Funes explained, “It is my greatest wish that this act in the name of Monseñor Romero can serve to bring consolation and that we no longer live with resentments.”⁴¹ As part of these remembrances, a mural of Romero and a plaque with Funes’s remarks were unveiled in San Salvador’s international airport.

The U.S. Government

While Funes and the FMLN pushed the Salvadoran government to recognize its role in the war, there was little mention of the U.S. government’s part. My co-delegates did not reference it, although some Salvadoran community leaders did. To me, the topic was the metaphorical “elephant in the room.” Beyond involvement in the civil war, the United States continues to play a role in El Salvador. In 2001, El Salvador adopted the U.S. dollar as its legal currency, and the country’s economy depends on remittances from Salvadorans living in the United States. Salvadoran gangs also developed in the United States. After escaping civil war with their families, some young Salvadorans in the Los Angeles area joined gangs, in part to protect themselves, among other reasons. The U.S. government later deported many of the gang members back to El Salvador.

One reason for the U.S. government’s absence from the commemorations was the celebration’s focus on five churchwomen, not four. The Maryknoll Sisters included Sister Carla Piette, who died in August 1980 during a flash flood, not at the hands of the Salvadoran National Guardsmen. After

40. Ching, *Stories of Civil War in El Salvador*, 3, 5–6, 10.

41. Alex Renderos, “El Salvador Publicly Marks Archbishop Romero’s Killing for First Time,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 24, 2010.



The banner outside of the Santiago Nonualco chapel shows five women: Carla Piette, Jean Donovan, Maura Clarke, Ita Ford, and Dorothy Kazel.

Piette's death, Maura Clarke traveled to El Salvador and assumed Piette's work with Ita Ford assisting refugees. By including Piette, Maryknoll moved the focus from how the women *died* to how they *lived*. This shift was evidenced in the cards—"Crossing Borders"—that the Maryknoll Sisters distributed in remembrance of the women:

30 years have passed since Sisters Maura, Ita, Carla, Jean and Dorothy united their lives in death with their dear Salvadoran people. Today we remember them and all the people who with valor resisted the face of injustice. They inspire our lives and renew our hopes of justice and peace in the land. Just as our sisters crossed various borders over and over again, today we are ready to cross other borders of place, thought, and the heart. This calls us to be more conscientious in the search and the achievement of a full life.⁴²

The card, which did not explain how the women died, placed them within Salvadoran history. The banner outside the Santiago Nonualco chapel featured the faces of all five women, as did the 2010 thirtieth anniversary T-shirts sold outside the chapel. The 2005 twenty-fifth anniversary shirts only depicted four.

Maryknoll organized a memorial to all five women at the site where Piette died. On December 3, the Maryknoll group and our delegation met at the Chalatenango riverbank, where five people held photos of the women and

42. Translation by the author; in author's possession.



Panels from the mural at Chalatenango depicting Salvadorans running across the river. A small “U.S.A.” appears on the right side of the soldier’s collar.

shared words of remembrance. Everyone else reflected in silence, holding red carnations to symbolize the women’s martyrdom. Then a Salvadoran priest spoke briefly. We processed to a nearby church for Mass, holding the photos and carnations, as some Salvadorans sang. Including Piette among the five stressed the sisters’ works, rather than those responsible for their deaths.

Despite the absence of U.S. government representatives and words about U.S. policy, artwork illustrated U.S. influence. As we processed to the church for Mass, I noticed a small “U.S.A.” on a mural. Unveiled on October 20, 2010, the mural depicts the town’s history, including a scene from the massacre at Sumpul River in May 1980. Fleeing from advancing Salvadoran troops in the midst of an anti-guerrilla operation, Salvadorans attempted to cross the river into Honduras. Salvadoran National Guardsmen and members of the paramilitary group ORDEN killed at least 300 civilians as Honduran forces blocked their entry.⁴³ As the mural’s website explains, the officer has “U.S.A.” on his uniform, “recalling that the US government and military fully supported the Salvadoran military with massive financial aid and training of soldiers and officers, despite being aware of the atrocities being committed.”⁴⁴ While U.S. soldiers played no part in the massacre, the figure in the mural symbolizes the larger U.S. role.

Similarly, in the chapel at the *Universidad de Centro America* (UCA)—where the Salvadoran army murdered six Jesuits, their housekeeper, and her

43. Boutros Boutros-Ghali, *From Madness to Hope: The 12-Year War in El Salvador* (New York: United Nations, 1993), <http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/file/ElSalvador-Report.pdf>; “El Salvador Community Mural: Chalatenango,” <http://elsalvadmural.blogspot.com/>.

44. “El Salvador Community Mural: Chalatenango.”



Chapel of the *Universidad de Centro America* (UCA), San Salvador. The wooden panel on the right shows two guns and “1,000,000,” indicating the amount of aid the U.S. government sent each day to the Salvadoran government.

daughter in 1989—a wooden cross hangs above the altar, with two painted wooden panels on each side. The lower part of the right-hand panel shows two guns and “1,000,000.” In the center, guns block the doves of peace, while broken pillars symbolize the cracked church. Unlike the barely noticeable “U.S.A.” on the mural, the 1,000,000 is prominent. But the viewer must know the context to understand the message. It refers to the \$1 million a day the United States sent to El Salvador during the Reagan presidency.⁴⁵

Washington, D.C.

In contrast to the commemorations in El Salvador, the January 6, 2011, Washington, D.C., event explicitly referenced the U.S. government. Maryknoll Sisters President Janice McLaughlin explained that the sisters and Maryknoll Office of Global Concerns, which includes Maryknoll priests and brothers, were holding this first commemoration event in Washington, D.C., to celebrate the women. They also wanted to thank colleagues and friends who worked to bring those responsible for the murders to justice, to put a stop to the repression in El Salvador, and to end the U.S. government’s complicity. Among those friends was Ita Ford’s brother, Bill Ford, who received a posthumous award.⁴⁶

Bill Ford was a tireless advocate for the churchwomen. As the 2008 *New York Times* obituary for him observed, Ford’s position was “an unusual

45. 135 Cong. Rec. 30493–30494 (1989).

46. Email, Sister Janice McLaughlin to Julia Clarke Keogh, December 20, 2010. I received a forwarded copy of this invitation from Peter Keogh, Maura Clarke’s nephew.

stance for a lawyer who had been on the staff of the New York law firm where Richard M. Nixon and John Mitchell had worked before Mr. Nixon became president and Mr. Mitchell became the attorney general.” After his sister’s murder, Bill began to investigate Ita’s work in El Salvador. The U.S. response to her murder transformed his view of the government. As he made clear in 1981, “You can’t take seriously the inscription at the base of the Statue of Liberty if at the same time you are sending arms, ammunition, trucks and police equipment to a junta which is murdering its own citizens.” U.S. support for the Salvadoran government—“which is no more than a group of gangsters in uniform”—had “radicalized” him, he said.⁴⁷

Ford was the driving force behind the criminal and civil lawsuits filed against those responsible for the churchwomen’s deaths. In May 1984, a Salvadoran judge convicted a deputy and four National Guardsmen of murder—the first armed forces members convicted of murder in El Salvador. Nine years later, the United Nations Truth Commission concluded that the guardsmen received orders to murder the churchwomen and that Defense Minister José Guillermo García and National Guard Director Carlos Eugenio Vides Casanova were among those who obstructed the investigation.⁴⁸ In 1999, under the U.S. Torture Victim Protection Act of 1991, the women’s families sued García and Vides Casanova, who were by then living in Florida with U.S. resident status.⁴⁹ Though this first lawsuit under the act was unsuccessful, three Salvadorans later sued the men for torture, and a 2006 circuit court upheld an award of \$54.6 million to the victims.⁵⁰

The Washington, D.C., commemoration was held in the Rayburn House Office Building’s Gold Room, with over 100 people overflowing the available chairs into the spaces between. More formal than the Salvadoran events, suits in D.C. were a contrast to the sandals worn at the Salvadoran commemorations. In both locations, women comprised a majority. Attendees included family members of Ita Ford, Maura Clarke, and Dorothy Kazel, Maryknoll Sisters, Salvadoran Ambassador Francisco Altschul, and the White House Director of the Department of Health and Human Services Center for Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships, Alexia Kelley. Other than interns from Catholic-minded organizations and Maryknoll’s

47. Dennis Hevesi, “William P. Ford, 72, Rights Advocate, Dies,” *New York Times*, June 3, 2008.

48. Boutros-Ghali, *From Madness to Hope*.

49. Pamela Mercer, “2 Salvadoran Generals Sued by Families of Slain Churchwomen,” *New York Times*, May 13, 1999; David Gonzalez, “2 Salvador Generals Cleared by U.S. Jury in Nuns’ Deaths,” *New York Times*, November 4, 2000.

50. Patricia Zapor, “Event Marks 30 Years, Honors Brother of US Nun Slain in El Salvador,” *Catholic News Service*, January 7, 2011.

Office of Global Concerns, the churchwomen's younger family members, and the occasional Hill staffer wandering in for free food, I, in my early thirties, appeared to be among the youngest present.

Maryknollers' Influence

Given the event and setting, I expected mention of U.S. policy toward El Salvador; however, this was largely absent. Speakers for the event included Democratic Congress members Jim McGovern of Massachusetts, Marcy Kaptur of Ohio, and Nita Lowey of New York, former Senator Chris Dodd of Connecticut, and Assistant Secretary of State Michael Posner. They shared the churchwomen's and Maryknoll's effect on their lives, but political conversation centered on Maryknoll's influence, not that of the U.S. government.

After introductory remarks from Marie Dennis of the Maryknoll Office of Global Concerns, Representative McGovern spoke. First elected to Massachusetts' third district in 1996, he was previously a senior aide to Congressman Joe Moakley. In that role, McGovern led the Moakley Commission, which examined the 1989 murders of the six Jesuits, their housekeeper, and her daughter in El Salvador, the first U.S. congressional investigation of human rights abuses in another country.⁵¹ He shared personal and heartfelt remarks revealing how Bill Ford had profoundly influenced him. As McGovern explained, Bill "taught me a lot about courage, determination, and faith." In fact, "one of the reasons I have such a commitment to human rights is because of Bill Ford." McGovern mentioned that Ford went to El Salvador once a year to visit his sister's grave and to "harass the embassy."

Like McGovern, Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor Michael Posner spoke of how the Maryknoll Sisters inspired him. Not raised Catholic, Posner found serving as the legal representative for the churchwomen's families and Maryknoll "life changing." He recalled people telling him that the fight was pointless because they were battling both U.S. security interests and El Salvador's "culture of impunity." He shared that with the State Department of the 1980s, "humanity and compassion was [sic] not there," which made them more determined. Posner's remarks highlighted shifts within the U.S. government since the Reagan administration. In the 1980s, he fought the Department of State; in 2011, he was part of it.

Mary Anne Ford accepted the award on her late husband's behalf and shared the transformative effect of the churchwomen, especially Ita, on her

51. Congressman Jim McGovern, "About Jim McGovern," <http://mcgovern.house.gov/index.cfm?sectionid=2§iontree=2>, accessed January 11, 2011.

and her husband. Bill did not really know what Ita's ministry in El Salvador entailed, but her death "transformed" them when they better understood Ita's life by meeting those who knew her. After Ita died, Bill was "out with pamphlets, educating people," while Mary Anne prayed the rosary that others would be convinced of their cause. As she explained, Bill's mission was "not just seeing justice, but that the lives of the women would be remembered."

While McGovern and Posner focused on the personal impact of the churchwomen and Bill Ford, the remaining congressional members praised the Maryknoll Sisters for their political involvement. I found the emphasis odd, especially since the Reagan administration and conservative Catholics frequently questioned Maryknollers' status as religious, arguing that they were inappropriately involved in politics. Speaker of the House Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill, Jr. (D-MA), a Catholic, opposed U.S. aid to the Contras based on advice from the Maryknoll Sisters.⁵² His position infuriated Reagan officials as well as fellow Catholics. Assistant Secretary of State Elliott Abrams described O'Neill's position, "The basis of his substantive view was ludicrous: this Maryknoll nun. The Speaker's information base was irresponsibly narrow."⁵³ Similarly, after losing a narrow vote to fund the Contras in April 1985, frustrated CIA Director and fellow Catholic William Casey remarked, "If Tip O'Neill didn't have Maryknoll nuns who wrote letters, we would have a Contra program."⁵⁴ Henry Hyde (R-IL), another Catholic, blamed O'Neill for the Iran-Contra scandal, in which the government secretly sold arms to Iran and then funneled the money to the Contras. Hyde claimed O'Neill's opposition forced the Reagan administration to find alternative means to support the Contras, and he specifically critiqued O'Neill's reliance on Maryknoll Sisters for taking him down a misguided path.⁵⁵ Among the crowd, there seemed to be a general understanding of Maryknollers being a thorn in the side for the Reagan administration, or at least their ties to

52. Philip Taubman, "The Speaker and His Sources on Latin America," *New York Times*, September 12, 1984.

53. John A. Farrell, *Tip O'Neill and the Democratic Century* (Boston, MA: Little Brown, 2001), 613.

54. Bob Woodward, *Veil: The Secret Wars of the CIA, 1981-1987* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 402.

55. U.S. Congress, "Iran-Contra Investigation: Testimony of Dewey R. Clarridge, C/CATF, and Clair George, Before the Senate Select Committee on Secret Military Assistance to Iran and the Nicaraguan Opposition and House Select Committee to Investigate Covert Arms Transactions with Iran," 100th Cong., 1st sess., 1987, 164. For a more detailed discussion of O'Neill's stance and the White House response, see Theresa Keeley, "Reagan's Real Catholics vs. Tip O'Neill's Maryknoll Nuns: Gender, Intra-Catholic Conflict, and the Contras," *Diplomatic History* 40, no. 3 (June 2016): 530-558.

O'Neill, but no one mentioned how those critiques frustrated Maryknollers. While opponents saw the women as meddling in politics, the sisters stressed that faith motivated their actions.

Representative Nita Lowey (D-NY), whose district includes the Maryknoll Motherhouse, was the first Congress member to note Maryknollers' political impact, highlighting her relationship to her constituents, not the murdered churchwomen. She shared how the sisters visited her to discuss foreign policy concerns and how she did not always agree with them, but, saying each word slowly for emphasis, she stressed, "Your voice is so respected." She concluded, "I look forward to working with you and learning from you." Entering Congress in 1993 after the Salvadoran civil war's end, her remarks about Maryknoll's political influence held a different meaning than the other speakers: you remain relevant.

When Senator Chris Dodd (D-CT) spoke of Maryknollers' influence, he placed the murdered churchwomen within his own experience, echoing the theme expressed at the chapel in El Salvador: women's supporting role. In his first public appearance since leaving the Senate, Dodd explained that he was first elected in November 1980, a month before the murders. "I remember the horror," he said, of "the four Maryknoll Sisters who were assassinated." Dodd "was put" on the Foreign Relations Committee because there was little interest in serving on it. He immediately made Latin America his focus, prompted by his time with the Peace Corps in the Dominican Republic. As he joked, "No offense to the Ursulines and Jesuits who taught me, but the Peace Corps experience was one of the most influential in my life." It was odd that Dodd referred to the Ursulines, yet did not remember that one of the churchwomen, Dorothy Kazel, was one. He also stumbled over the women's names and even appeared to forget one. He told the audience that the first congressional amendment he offered, in September 1981, was to curtail aid to El Salvador. Excited and proud of his success, Dodd proclaimed, "I beat [Jesse] Helms," the long-serving conservative senator. The deaths of the women "made a difference" to that victory, he explained, as did the ten Republican colleagues who supported his effort. Dodd was relaxed, spoke extemporaneously, and based on the smiles and nods he received during his words, he was well respected and admired. Some attendees even seemed to know him personally, but I was shocked when no one seemed bothered by Dodd's failure to speak accurately about the churchwomen. The murdered women and Maryknoll were simply supporting actors in his story.

Representative Marcy Kaptur (D-OH) continued the theme of Maryknoll's influence and expertise. First elected to Congress in 1982, she asked O'Neill whom he listened to on foreign policy matters, and he said, "I listen to the nuns." Kaptur, Dodd, and Lowey probably stressed Maryknollers'

impact in political debates because that is what they appreciate—and strive for—as politicians. They were attempting to show respect for Maryknoll and illustrate the community’s continuing relevance, but unfortunately, they seemed unaware of how those associations caused pain and controversy for Maryknoll. One Maryknoll sister, who was a missionary in Nicaragua in the 1970s and 1980s, shared with me her unhappiness regarding the emphasis on political influence. Discussing the sisters’ influence on O’Neill, she curtly remarked it was time to move beyond it. For her, these events elicited pain; for Dodd and Kaptur, they were a badge of honor.

While the congressional representatives stressed Maryknoll’s sway on U.S. politics, women religious used the evening’s theme—“Crossing Borders”—to tie the churchwomen to broader issues of injustice. Sister Janice McLaughlin wrote to invitees that the event sought to remember “all of the borders the women crossed as they followed the call to be missionaries, including the final border of heroic death.” But, “Crossing Borders” was about more than the women. It encompassed those “forced to migrate from place to place because of injustice and war,” and it meant using “insights of the past to strengthen us as we stand at new frontiers today.”⁵⁶ In addressing the crowd, McLaughlin noted the five churchwomen’s contribution, as occurred at the Salvadoran commemorations, but, unlike celebrants in El Salvador, McLaughlin further noted that Ford, Clarke, Kazel, and Donovan had been murdered. She spoke of U.S. government culpability in the women’s deaths and in those of thousands of Salvadorans. She connected the 1980s struggle for justice in El Salvador to Salvadorans’ attempts to immigrate to the United States today. Adrian Dominican Sister Patricia Siemen then moved the conversation beyond political borders. Founder and director of the Center for Earth Jurisprudence at Barry University, she emphasized the need to consider the spiritual and ecological concerns of the earth. McLaughlin’s and Siemen’s approaches evoked Maryknoll’s 1980 call for the women’s murders to not be seen narrowly; instead, they should shine a light on conditions in El Salvador and on U.S. foreign policy. McLaughlin and Siemen recognized the broader human rights—and no doubt, political—implications, whereas several politicians focused on Maryknollers only as political actors.

The final speaker, Sister Rebecca Macugay, vice president of the Maryknoll Sisters, highlighted the women’s legacy in El Salvador. As a delegate to El Salvador for the thirtieth-anniversary commemorations, she shared how the churchwomen form part of Salvadoran remembrances. Each August on the anniversary of Piette’s death, villagers come to the river with her photo, as we and the Maryknoll representatives did weeks earlier in El Salvador.

56. Email, McLaughlin to Keogh.

However, for the first time in 2010, the Salvadorans also brought photos of their deceased or missing loved ones. Macugay concluded that “remembering Carla has given birth to other remembrances.” She explained how the four women’s names were included on the Wall of Truth and Memory and remarked, “Remembering our sisters has now become a Salvadoran event.” For her, Salvadorans’ inclusion of the churchwomen with their dead was a testament to Maryknoll’s work in El Salvador. As she explained to the *National Catholic Reporter*, “It may be time to finally let the women go—while taking inspiration from them—to live in the present and serve today’s poor.” Macugay spoke of the “grief and sadness” that “gradually has turned to peacefulness” because “their death wasn’t in vain.”⁵⁷

Conclusion

Both the commemorations in El Salvador during late 2010 and in Washington, D.C., in early 2011 revealed the kaleidoscopic nature of memory. Based on their own experiences, participants in these events saw different aspects of the women’s legacies. At the U.S.-organized events in El Salvador, my co-delegates linked the churchwomen’s work to the spirit they wished to see in the Catholic Church today and their disappointment with the church’s failure to recognize women’s contributions. Although this showed continuity with responses in 1980, my co-delegates in 2010 seemed to connect the women to the church and not to U.S. government policies because their faith linked them to the women and they journeyed to El Salvador for primarily religious reasons.

Likewise, Maryknoll’s priority for the churchwomen to be recognized as members of the Salvadoran community showed continuity with the past. Shortly after their murders, Maryknoll stressed that the women were four of the thousands who had been killed in 1980 alone. They hoped that the women’s deaths might bring attention to conditions in El Salvador, without overshadowing what was happening in the country, and to poor Salvadorans in particular. At the Washington, D.C., event in 2011, Sister Macugay shared with pride how the women are now part—not the central focus—of Salvadoran remembrances. To the Maryknoll Sisters, it was not important to merely remember the women; the context mattered. The churchwomen’s inclusion in Salvadoran-led commemorations validated the churchwomen’s, and in a broader sense, Maryknoll’s, decision to accompany the poor of El Salvador.

At the same time, there were divides over how to remember them. Senator Dodd and Representative Kaptur, for example, linked the churchwomen

57. Wittenauer, “Pilgrims Celebrate.”

to the Maryknoll community's push for change in U.S.-Central America policy during the 1980s. For members of Congress, Maryknoll's lasting legacy was in the political arena, yet Maryknoll did not and does not share this view. In this way, the politicians' responses revealed more about themselves, as did the responses of my co-delegates to women's role in the church.

While discussions regarding the churchwomen's influence, women's roles in the church, and Maryknoll's legacy recalled past commemorations, there was a stark break regarding the U.S. government. In 1980, the responses to their deaths exposed perspectives about the Catholic Church and U.S. foreign policy, but a response to the U.S. government's influence during the Salvadoran and D.C. commemorations was nearly invisible. This silence was partly due to Maryknoll's focus on celebrating the five churchwomen's lives, not how they died. More importantly, however, it exposed the often-unacknowledged link between U.S.-Central America policies of the 1980s and contemporary issues of justice, especially immigration.