

Sr. Ita Ford, MM, A Saint for our Time

Thirty years ago, on December 2, 1980, four women, two Maryknoll nuns, an Ursuline nun, and a lay volunteer were stopped by the military in El Salvador as they travelled from the airport. In a lonely cow pasture, they were tortured, raped, and murdered by soldiers of the military junta, with the encouragement of their commanders.

This is the story of one of those women, a martyred Irish- American saint who, remarkably, appears to be just like each of us. Yes, she had heroic characteristics; yet she had vulnerability and the same doubts and fears that we all have. Her life, much like ours, was shaped and formed by the people who loved her, by her family, her friends, and the wonderful Maryknoll community. She had faith that her life was molded and shaped by God. She had an intense love for Christ and the Church, zeal for a ministry of social service and justice, and a zest for life. She had an intense passion to help the poor and victims of injustice and grew into her ministry. She lived among us and in our time. The martyred saint is a Maryknoll nun, Sister Ita Ford.

Each of the four women has a great story of her own and I will tell them at some time in the future.

Why focus on Ita? Her family lives in my parish, St. Cassian, Upper Montclair, NJ. I know them well and I was friendly with her brother Bill, a prominent New York attorney. Bill relentlessly pursued her murderers until their capture and adjudication some years later. There is a stained glass window in our parish church dedicated to these heroic women. So, while I never met her, I feel a kinship with Ita and always sit in the pew next to the window commemorating her memory and that of her colleagues. In some way, it is strange that I never met Ita. We had many friends and acquaintances, including her Montclair family, in common. Our paths just never crossed.

Her legacy of letters and personal reflections has so captured me that I feel as if, through them, she is having a conversation with me. I am absorbed in her life, her joy, her spirituality, her sorrow and difficulties, her triumphs and failures. They are all part of the incredible human and spiritual growth that unfolds with her life story. She is a saintly model for all of us. She was an extraordinary woman, small in stature but deceptively tough and strong. She well emulated her Irish forebears. The legendary warrior, Queen Maeve, could have been her patron. She died ignominiously like the Lord she served so well, but her spirit continues to live, and breathes life into every word that I write about her and into every activity of Maryknoll in Latin America.

Ita Ford was born in Brooklyn, New York on April 23, 1940. She joined the Maryknoll Sisters in 1961, immediately after completing college at Marymount. After only three years in the order and just before her Profession, she was forced to leave the order because of health problems. Ita then worked as an editor at Sadlier Publishing Company in New York City for seven years.

During this time she experienced great personal growth, was recognized for her professional competency, taught religious education class in the local parish, and had an apartment at Sheridan Square in Greenwich Village. She made many friends including a young attorney whom many of her friends thought she would marry. She also experienced great interior restlessness. She never lost her zeal for ministry and the joy she experienced as part of the Maryknoll community. She reapplied and was again accepted to Maryknoll in 1971. This was a milestone life event but Maryknoll and ministry held the first place in her heart. She also loved the New York lifestyle and all the cultural enrichment that New York City could offer and she knew exactly what she was giving up. Ita's letters describe the joy of being part of the Maryknoll community.

She wrote of the ongoing continuing education required to support her activity and the nurturing spirituality. She especially enjoyed her studies in theology and spirituality with the Jesuits at St. Louis University while preparing for her Profession. She carried on a continuing correspondence with the great friends she made among other sisters and priests who were also preparing for, or already serving in the missions.

After language school at Cochabamba, Bolivia, she was assigned to a Maryknoll Mission in Chile. While in Chile, she watched the chaos that occurred after a US-backed military coup overthrew President Salvador Allende. Maryknoll had a base in Santiago, and Ita lived in La Bandera, a squatters type village of 80,000 poor people on the rim of Santiago. She worked with Sr. Carla Piette to minister to an impoverished population that was severely oppressed by its government. The Archbishop of Santiago and the Maryknoll community agreed that the best approach to mission was to live among the poor and attempt to build small Christian communities through which the gospel could be proclaimed. It was not an easy task but she did it well. She so identified with the poor that there were times when she felt guilty about having the security of Maryknoll as a safety net. During this period her father died and that magnified the isolation she felt missing her father as her family structure began to change. There were also language problems. Ita had a good foundation in classical Spanish but the language spoken in Chile was colloquially local, with only the first syllable of each word spoken. They could speak faster if they did not have to say the whole word. It took about six months for Ita to adjust to that.

While she was still working in Chile, Archbishop Oscar Romero put out a request for more assistance from Maryknoll to minister to the poor in El Salvador. Ita responded to Romero's call for help, but did not arrive in El Salvador until a few weeks after his violent assassination while he was celebrating Mass. Ita and Sr. Carla began working in Chalatenango with the Emergency Refugee Committee to help the homeless and the poor in their struggle to survive against the military dictatorship. In August 1980, Ita and Carla were caught in a flash flood during which their jeep overturned and sank. Tragically, Carla drowned but not before she pushed Ita out of the jeep. Ita was carried by the raging torrent about two miles downstream until she was able to grab a tree root and climb to safety.

Carla's death had a profound effect on Ita, but she remained in El Salvador, and with the help of her friend and coworker, Sr. Maura Clarke, began to heal. She went to Nicaragua for a regional assembly of the Maryknoll Sisters over Thanksgiving weekend where her friends observed that her old spirit had returned by the time the assembly was over on December 1. She left the next day with a renewed spirit and eagerness to help the poor.

Ita and Maura flew back to El Salvador where they were met at the airport by Sr. Dorothy Kazel, and Jean Donovan, coworkers from the Cleveland Mission Team. Along the way they met the destiny that each knew was realistic, but feared nonetheless. Like the Lord they served so well, they poured themselves out for the people they loved. No one wants to be a martyr. No one rushes toward death. In El Salvador, the ground was saturated with the blood of tens of thousands of those who stood against the government in solidarity with their countrymen. The sisters became like so many of the poor with whom they lived and worked, *simply disappeared*. The outcome was always a real risk, one which they accepted. In a letter back to Maryknoll headquarters written just a few days before her death, Ita warned about the violence in El Salvador and insisted that volunteers be made aware that ministry there could be life-threatening. How Prophetic! She was just forty years old, a time of life when most of us are just getting comfortable with our core identity and looking forward to the most productive time of our lives.

The definition of a saint includes profound faith, a vibrant spirituality, a life devoted to Christ and the Church, and being a role model for Christian living. This would provide an outline for a biography of Ita Ford. That biography would demonstrate incredible human and spiritual growth throughout her short life. Yet, she was a marvelous human being. She knew all the not so pious words of two languages and used them eloquently. She gave up smoking, drinking, and dating to enter Maryknoll the first time. She started smoking again during her Sadlier days and never gave it up. She knew the health benefits of wine and Guinness. She made many friends throughout her life and worked hard to communicate with all of them.

The foundation of her spirituality was a deep awareness of the grace of God's love for her. Her favorite poems were Francis Thompson's, *The Hound of Heaven* and *Ash Wednesday* by T.S. Eliott. Both describe God's relentless pursuit of us, His love for us despite our frailty. Through the awareness of God's love for her, she reasoned that she was lovable, could love herself, and with that, love the wonderful friends she made along the way, the sisters of her community, and the people with whom she worked. She seemed to relish that experience of loving and being loved and it carried her through the many trials of ministry that most of would consider impossible. It gave her a *joie de vivre* and made her fun to be around despite her intensity.

Her most quoted scripture passage seems to be Jeremiah, 18, 5; God is the potter and we are the clay to be shaped and fashioned by him. Her awareness that God was fashioning and shaping her life gave her great hope and confidence.

The theological and spiritual formation programs of Maryknoll and their community support programs are excellent. They provided for Ita the intellectual foundation for heroic Christian living.

The death of the four missionaries was noted with horror throughout the world. Ita and Carla spoke often about the violence of El Salvador, the terror of the death squads, and the possibility that they too would become victims. Ita had made many reports to her Maryknoll superiors about the undeclared civil war and how the government of the United States was actually supporting the terrorism. After their death, Jean Kirkpatrick, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations and Secretary of State, Alexander Haig, publicly supported the notion that the nuns were subversives and paid the price for taking such risks. Subsequent investigations proved their statements false and vicious.

We can identify with Ita by being aware of the love that God has for us, our own "loveableness," and the ability to love and be open to the many people in our own lives with whom we relate. We can become aware of the action of God in shaping our lives and develop the intellectual foundations. We can all study our faith more and read and reflect on the scriptures. We are all missionaries in the sense that our Church really needs us. Christ lives in us, His Spirit impels us and wherever we are God is praised, the environment is blessed, and salvation is proclaimed.

President John F. Kennedy once wrote, "The courage of life is often less dramatic than the courage of a final moment but is no less a mixture of triumph and tragedy. Persons do what they must in spite of obstacles dangers and pressures." Ita constantly called on her faith to bring her courage and, through prayer, lived through her fear to continually help the poor of El Salvador. She seemed to be always prepared for the final moment. She had a certain inner freedom and an incessant joy, as part of her Irish and Christian heritage, to face up to her oppressors in spite of whatever fears she might have experienced. May we all have that same courage. Rejoice and be great.

Respectfully submitted,

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