

Solidarity for the 21st century ***Remembering the martyrs of El Salvador***

The following talk was given in San Salvador by Marie Dennis, director of the Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns, on the 25th anniversary of the martyrdom of Ita Ford, Maura Clarke, Jean Donovan and Dorothy Kazel.

We are here to honor the memory of four women martyred 25 years ago and of 75,000 others, including Archbishop Oscar Romero, who gave their lives for social justice and for human dignity. When corpses were piled high in the public garbage dumps outside this city - when bishops, generals, the nuncio and government officials demanded neutrality from the Church - these four chose to accompany a people made profoundly vulnerable by war and by repression. They lived the virtue of solidarity, not neutrality. Poor people, they believed, were one place of God's revelation in history - an opening where the God of hope and possibility was discovered in the midst of suffering and fear.

When they were killed, for people of faith in the United States and elsewhere in the North, they put a familiar, human face on the thousands of Salvadoran lay people, religious and priests who also were martyred here in those years and they gave great energy to a whole movement learning to act in solidarity with the people of Central America.

Solidarity - (according to Joe Donders) not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of others, but a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good.

Maura, Ita, Dorothy and Jean lived a solidarity that, even in these very different times would serve us. The Maryknoll Sisters, in the reflection paper they prepared for this conversation, described solidarity as a posture that is rooted in the identity of each person as a creature of God, a creature endowed with immense dignity, a treasure - who is created for interdependence within our human and earth community. They called us to a spirituality of family solidarity, which sets us free to transform our broken world.

In *Like Grains of Wheat*, Margie Swedish and I describe solidarity as the practice of accompanying people and the rest of creation marginalized by institutionalized violence, and of engaging in a process of social, economic and environmental transformation that is rooted in right relationships. We talked about a spirituality of solidarity shaped by a process that included several steps or stages:

- Moving across boundaries to see with new eyes the reality of the world in which we live.
- Having our hearts broken by the injustice we see, by ecological destruction - and broken open by new relationships
- Finding life and joy and faithfulness at the margins, even in the midst of great suffering
- Going home, reinserting in our own society as people who were changed, challenged - and are there committed to challenging the status quo
- Becoming people of hope who believe that a better world is possible - and making or renewing a commitment to work for that better world.

These are times very different from the “era of the martyrs in El Salvador, Latin America.” These are times defined by globalization with that phenomenon implies; by excessive wealth concentrated in the hands of a small minority in almost every country of the world and intransigent poverty lived by a global majority; by increasingly evident ecological catastrophe; and by a growing awareness of the intrinsic interconnectedness of humans with each other and with the rest of creation.

What might solidarity look like now and toward what might such a process lead us? That is the question we will all reflect upon this afternoon, but let me offer a few examples around the theme of *security*, which is becoming the “communist threat” of the 21st century.

Three months ago we watched a painful drama unfold in New Orleans that brought to the surface deep frustration and anger – and spectacular beauty. Immediately, there arose across the country – around the world - a gut level sense that life was precious and that everyone had a right to a dignified rescue from that dreadful situation. When it became evident that some people were much more vulnerable to the ravages of nature than others – that poverty (with its roots in racism) was the determining factor in how one fared, people across the country – around the world - were outraged.

Four years earlier, in the midst of the horrific aftermath of the terrorist attacks in the U.S., the same intuition was evident – to honor the sacredness of every life, to save lives – every life possible. Period. Nothing else mattered – color of skin, language spoken, legal status in the U.S., level of income. Everyone asked immediately how they could help.

We saw with new eyes and our hearts were broken – the beginning of solidarity.

Deep in the human heart, I believe, is an indelible sense of the value of each human life and an instinct for solidarity that accompanies, responds to, needs to shape our conversation around a topic that is too often manipulated for political gain or ideological reasons, yet will be central in many ways to the future of the human community and the integrity of creation.

According to Franciscan theologian Bryan Massingale, “Security in the biblical worldview is an outcome of pursuing [a] more comprehensive vision of shalom. When shalom is established through the pursuit of justice, then true security is found...Security is a state of being that flows from the inclusion of all in the bounty of the earth.” Inclusive human security, as opposed to national security or personal financial security, guarantees access to food, clean water, healthcare, education and employment *for all*. It recognizes the right of people to deep democracy - to participate in important political, economic and environmental decisions that affect their lives and it respects the integrity of creation.

This kind of security - inclusive human security - would emerge from a “globalization of solidarity,” international cooperation to meet the basic needs of all people in a manner that nurtures right relationships within the community of all life – human and beyond.

The experience of solidarity between U.S. people and the people of Central America in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s taught us about interdependence and about security rooted in transnational

community. That rich and deep experience of solidarity exposed the lie that the security of a wealthy and powerful few is threatened by the majority's desire for and right to a dignified life. In fact, we learned what the poor of Central America already knew - that the security - the very survival - of the majority of people and of the earth herself is profoundly threatened by the desire of the wealthy and powerful to maintain wasteful and destructive lifestyles.

It is clear now that true, inclusive security has to be rooted in global community - in the globalization of solidarity.

At issue is how we define security, from whose perspective and through what lens.

And it seems to me that the global groaning we are now experiencing is about shifting (especially in the global North) from one definition to the other:

... from pursuing security by building higher walls and stronger fences, hiring fiercer guards, inventing more powerful weapons systems, or dominating the global economy

... to pursuing security through the adoption of a new - or perhaps a very old - cosmivision that sees and values the whole community of life - and through collaborative attention to ensuring that the basic needs of all human beings everywhere are met.

I believe that the role of the Church - of faith communities and of educational institutions is key in facilitating such a shift.

Religious leaders, pastors, educators and the media have to help us

- grapple with our own fear and insecurity, enabling us to live with vulnerability - even see it as necessary for faithful living in solidarity with the majority of people who are always vulnerable;
- rework our value system from the ground up - reclaiming the positive (exhibited on 9/11 and in response to recent hurricanes) and eliminating rather than orchestrating the violent and destructive;
- reset our priorities from the accumulation of power, wealth and consumer goods to nurturing right relationships with other people and the rest of creation;
- move from individualism to emphasize community - ultimately the global community;
- learn to be present, to listen, to wait - to relinquish our need for instant gratification;
- develop our skills for social, political and economic analysis and historical consciousness that might help us move beyond sound bytes to understand root causes;
- deal with our collective fear of aging and death; and
- reexamine our symbols and myths to strip them of their ability to isolate and blind us - helping us as a people to rethink our way of being in the world, our relationship with the rest of creation.

“Unless the grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains alone. But if it dies, it bears much fruit.” (John 12: 23-26)

Unless a seed falls to the ground and dies... the last words of Archbishop Oscar Romero were about the price of liberation - the cost of global solidarity, of inclusive human security. His witness and that of Ita, Maura, Dorothy and Jean can give us courage to move in that direction - courage to birth a solidarity fitting for the intensely integrated and bitterly divided world of the 21st century.

Let me end with a little story:

In 1986 with about 20 other internationals, I accompanied a group of about 500 Salvadorans back to their own land near Suchitoto, which was then still under intense conflict. Many of them had been living at Calle Real refugee camp in San Salvador for seven years and they were bone tired of being unable to plant crops and care for their families. After a few very difficult days we were arrested - forced by the Salvadoran military to leave the returning families a few heavily mined kilometers from their destination. We and they were not sure they would survive. But they did. They planted their crops and when they reaped their first harvest of beans and corn a few months later, they sent each of us a little packet of black beans and corn kernels. I have treasured them since as powerful symbols of courage and life – and solidarity.

I lost my first cousin in the World Trade Center – he worked at Cantor Fitzgerald and left his wife and two very young children. About a week after the attack I wound my way down to the site of the devastation and planted a few of those seeds from El Salvador in a small park as close as I could get to the destruction. In some ways it was a futile gesture – indicative of my inability to imagine a more practical gesture of support for his family. On the other hand, those seeds carry great weight – the weight of what might blossom were we to open our hearts as a nation to a way of life given to global solidarity.

Over a year later I returned to Ground Zero with my family. After they went on their way, I found my way back to that little park just to see it after the debris had been cleared – there was a tall stalk of corn where I had planted the seed. It was unbelievable, but a powerful sign of hope to me. The seeds of the solidarity that nourished us – North Americans and Central Americans together will bear rich fruit personally, nationally and globally - if we are willing to risk planting them again.

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El Salvador
December 3, 2005