

could be so staunch as to favour the reasonable thing in the sea of their tears and loneliness."

The then US Ambassador to El Salvador, Robert White, was there when the four women's bodies were unearthed. He had met and got on well with Donovan a few days earlier, and did everything in his power to get his government to hold to account the security forces in El Salvador – whom they were supporting with financial and military assistance. Yet the killings had coincided with the election of a new American president, Ronald Reagan. He refused to waver in his commitment to keep the region as "America's backyard" and sacked White. His United Nations ambassador, Jean Kirkpatrick, disgracefully described the dead women as political activists, "not nuns as we know nuns".

GOSPEL IMPERATIVE

Kirkpatrick was wrong. The three sisters were following, not a political manifesto, but Gospel imperatives to side with people who were poor, hungry and marginalised. That, too, was what inspired Donovan in her work as she kept extending her stay in El Salvador. There have been films, documentaries and plays that have explored their martyrdom and kept their witness alive for subsequent generations, but as yet no official cause before the Vatican. Maura Clarke and Ita Ford are, though, buried, following the practice of their order, where they served and died. Their graves in Chalatenango are still well-tended by locals.

Peter Stanford is a Catholic writer and broadcaster (peterstanford.org). His latest book, *Pilgrimage*, is published by Thames & Hudson.

Mass text

ENTRANCE ANTIPHON

**God is in his holy place,
God who unites those who dwell in his house;
he himself gives might and strength to his people.**

FIRST READING 2 Kings 4:42-44

PSALM Psalm 144

**RESPONSE You open wide your hand, O Lord,
and grant our desires.**

1. All your creatures shall thank you, O Lord, and your friends shall repeat their blessing. They shall speak of the glory of your reign and declare your might, O God. **R.**
2. The eyes of all creatures look to you and you give them their food in due time. You open wide your hand, grant the desires of all who live. **R.**

3. The Lord is just in all his ways and loving in all his deeds. He is close to all who call him, who call on him from their hearts. **R.**

SECOND READING Ephesians 4:1-6

GOSPEL ACCLAMATION

**Alleluia, alleluia!
A great prophet has appeared among us;
God has visited his people.
Alleluia!**

GOSPEL John 6:1-15

COMMUNION ANTIPHON

**Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.
Blessed are the clean of heart, for they shall see God.**

Next Sunday's Readings:

Exodus 16:2-4, 12-15
Ephesians 4:17, 20-24
John 6:24-35



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SUNDAY BULLETIN

THINKING FAITH

MAURA CLARKE, JEAN DONOVAN, ITA FORD AND DOROTHY KAZEL

"We always thought they were safe," Father Paul Schindler told me when I met him in 2019, as he remembered his friends and co-workers, the three American religious sisters and one lay worker whose kidnap, rape and murder in December 1980 in El Salvador caused international outrage. "They [the Salvadoran National Guard] had attacked priests but they'd never attacked nuns. We felt somewhat invincible." A priest of Cleveland diocese, he had been working in El Salvador between 1972 and 1982 and retired there later to continue his work.

On the first day of that fateful December, Dorothy Kazel, a forty-one-year-old Ursuline sister, and lay missionary Jean Donovan, twenty-seven, who were both working with Father Schindler in the 65,000-strong parish of La Libertad, drove to the airport in San Salvador to pick up Ita Ford, forty, and forty-nine-year-old Maura Clarke, who had been attending a gathering of their Maryknoll order in Nicaragua. The plan was to give them a lift back to the town of Chalatenango, near La Libertad, but the plane was late. As the four were about to set off after dark, the National Guard pounced in a premeditated attack. Their bodies were found in a shallow grave on a rural road the next morning. A simple memorial outside a small modern church marks the spot today.

The four knew they were running risks. El Salvador was deep in a civil war, and eight months beforehand the country's Catholic leader, Archbishop Óscar Romero, who had challenged the activities of the army and its death squads, had been gunned down at the altar. Whether they knew they were facing the same fate is unclear. Ita Ford, Father Schindler recalled, was a "tough nun", unafraid to go "toe-to-toe" with army colonels in the region when her parishioners or the refugees she cared for, displaced by the war, had been illegally detained or targeted. Her name had appeared on a list of subversives, including church people, posted on the front of the local cathedral in Chalatenango, but she had dismissed it. "I'm too dumb to be afraid," she had joked, "too dumb to be killed."

Jean Donovan, who had a fiancé waiting at home for her and a career as an accountant beckoning, had written to a friend shortly before her murder: "I am not up for suicide," explaining that there had been many times when she had been ready to return home, but it was the children she worked with in the parish that made her stay – "the poor, bruised victims of this insanity... Whose heart

Martyrs of our times



Peter Stanford tells the story of four Catholic women martyred in El Salvador.



25 JULY 2021

17TH SUNDAY IN
ORDINARY TIME

YEAR B

DIVINE OFFICE WEEK 1