

# A Cloud of Witnesses

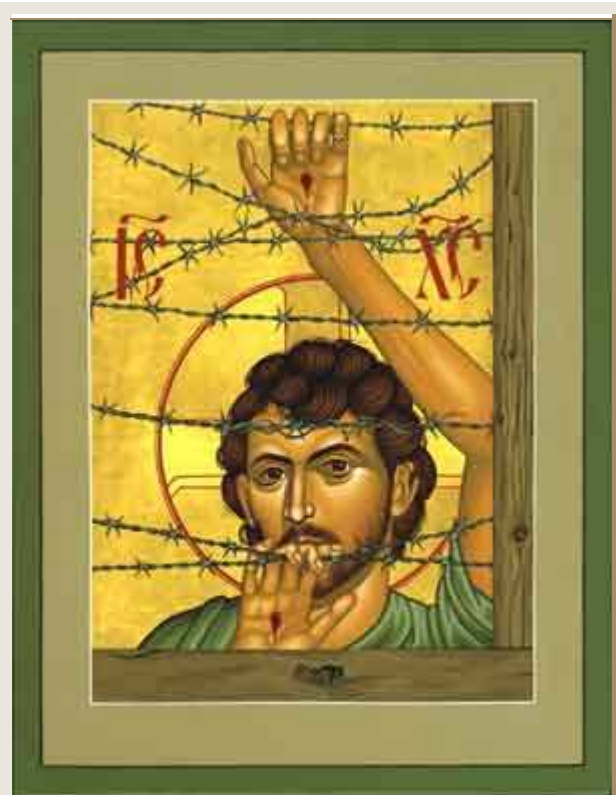
Text by Fr. Richard Rohr, OFM

## Moses

Moses founded the people Israel after two foundational moments -- a burning bush that revealed God's presence and holiness in the natural world -- and an immediate commission to do something with that religious experience. As he drew near the burning bush, the voice said, 'Take off your shoes, for the place where you are standing is holy ground'... "And Yahweh said to him, 'I have heard the groans of my people enslaved in Egypt. I am well aware of their sufferings ... I send you to Pharaoh to bring the children of Israel out of their bondage.'" (Exodus 3). This encounter is the beginning point of the entire Judeo- Christian Tradition, and its history has been a recurring attempt to keep those two moments tied and together. Authentic spiritual encounters invariably lead to social encounters of the most risky kind.



**The Burning Bush by Marc Chagall,**  
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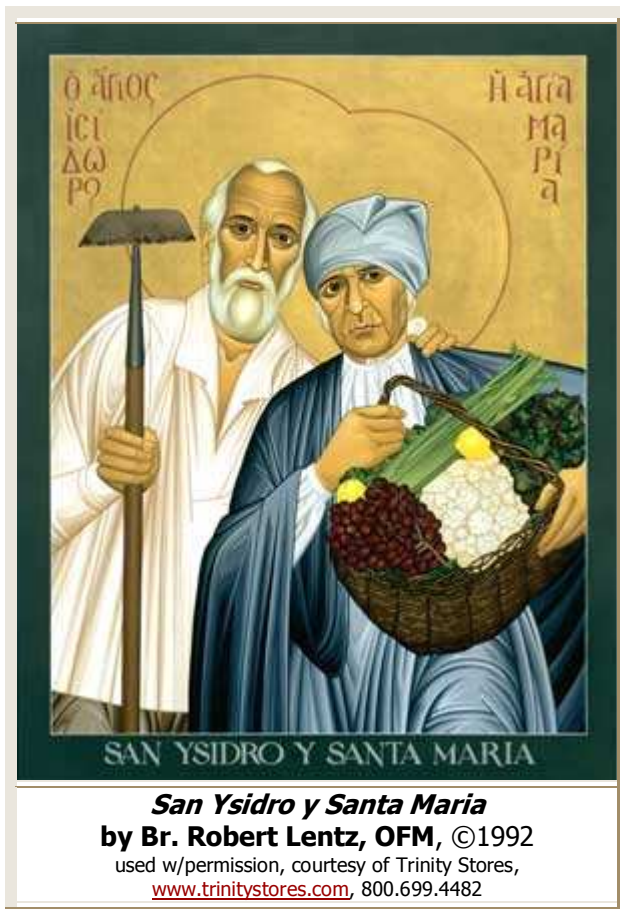
**Christ of Maryknoll**  
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## Jesus

Jesus, whom many of us call the Christ, basically did two things publicly: preached and healed, preached and healed, and the preaching often merely explained the healing. Yet this very healing of the suffering of the world was actually considered subversive, most especially by religion itself. Jesus' beginning point was not sin, but suffering and its healing: "He said, 'Go back and tell John what you hear and what you have seen, the blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised to life, and good news is proclaimed to the poor, and happy is the one who is not shocked by this'". (Matthew 11:4-5). Yet we have been shocked by it for over twenty centuries.

## Mary of the Disappeared

Here we see an icon of Mary, the Mother of Jesus, holding not her son, but only a crown of thorns. She is an image of every woman who holds the pain and absurdity of history, as Mary did as she stood in dignity at the foot of the cross. The "mano blanco" was the terrorist sign in El Salvador in the early 1980's. Mary stands for all those who are marked for death because of their identification with truth and love. Her strong position of **STANDING** at the foot of the cross is forever an image of solidarity and dignity, and the Christian pattern by which evil is transformed. The prophet Simeon had told her, "And a sword will pierce your heart, that the inner thoughts of many will be laid bare" (Luke 2:35). The "Sorrowful Mother" has been an icon of strength and meaning for generations of Christians.



## Isidore and Maria

This being the only man and woman who were ever canonized saints independently, Isidore and Maria of 11th century Spain represent all the campesinos and humble workers of the world, the little people who just live their lives and do not let political corruption destroy them or manipulate them. Saints Isidore of Seville and Maria de la Cabeza lived a life of simple farming, daily piety, and heroic charity for those even poorer than themselves. The two could never decide which was more important-to plow the fields or to pray! So they decided to do both, at the same time. They taught us that you can do both-and linked the worlds of action and contemplation, marriage and commitment to a larger vision as a marriage. Isidore and Maria image "partnered holiness" and assure us that we can often do it better as a couple, a marriage, or as a team.

## Bartolome de las Casas

This tireless Dominican priest of the 16th Century made trips for fifty years back to the imperial courts of Rome and Spain to insist on the rights and inherent dignity of the native peoples of the Americas. He had to prove to Christians, who thought they knew the Scriptures, that Native peoples were also children of God. Opposed and persecuted by the new aristocracy of Mexico, he became much more concerned for the salvation of the Spanish conquistadors than for the Native peoples of Chiapas Mexico where he was bishop. He refused absolution to any Spaniard who would not free his slaves, and when persecution forced him back to Spain he said, "I leave in the Indies Jesus Christ, our God, scourged and afflicted and beaten and crucified not once, but thousands of times." This is all the more amazing, when one realizes that he first came to the Americas as the royal chaplain to the Spanish conquest of Cuba and enjoyed the private service of Indian slaves himself.



***Bartolome de Las Casas***

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***Black Elk***

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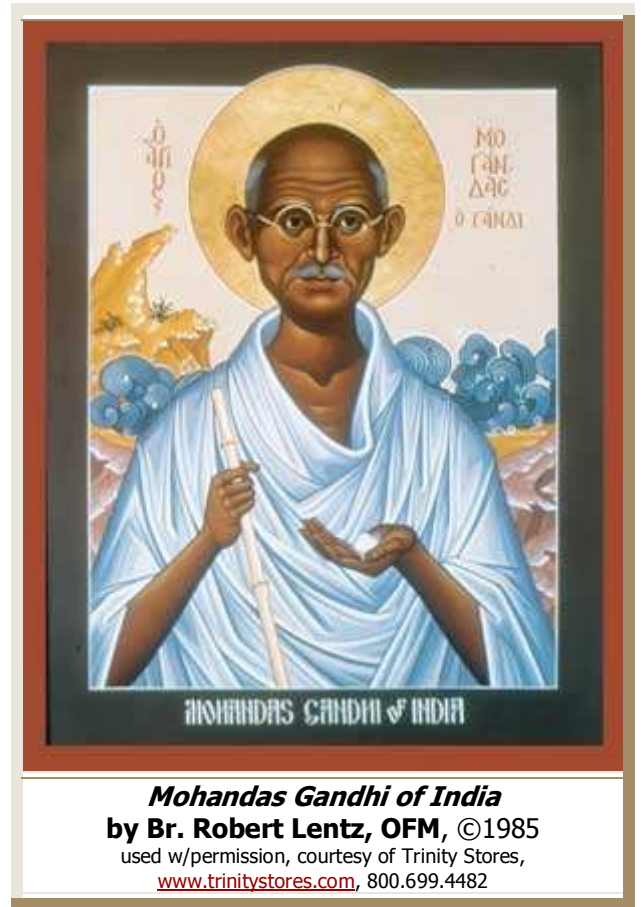
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## Black Elk

Nicholas Black Elk remained both a Lakota Medicine Man and a Catholic Catechist until his death. He is representative of the many Native leaders like Chief Joseph, Crazy Horse, Chief Seattle, and Sitting Bull who tried desperately to bridge the gap between their own Native religion and the new Christianity that had been given to them. Almost always they ended up "martyrs" to this cause, as American treaties were broken and their own often turned against them. Yet they remained bridge builders to the end, by the strength of their twice tested spirituality. Native peoples invariably lost at Western political games, in many ways because they did not know how to play them. It all looked so illusory and pretentious from their religious perspective. Like Jesus himself, they tried to ignore such political systems, but then were invariably ground up by the wheels and deceits of power.

## Gandhi

It took a Hindu to teach Christianity its own political strategy. Mahatma Gandhi not only is called the Father of the nation of India, but he is the modern inspiration for the rediscovery of the teaching of Jesus on simplicity, fasting, and non-violence. He loved Jesus, but saw little reflection of him in institutionalized Christianity. He believed that Jesus was not calling people to a new religion, but to a new life, and a different way of living in this world. Following a common pattern of prophets and larger than life people, he was assassinated by one of his own in 1948. Mohandas Gandhi is now recognized by most of the world as a truly "Great Soul", who has redirected history, but just as Jesus and St. Francis, from his chosen position of powerlessness instead of any position of formal power. Although a trained lawyer, he did not use the law or his role to aggrandize himself, but only to liberate others, and to do what he called "experiments with truth".



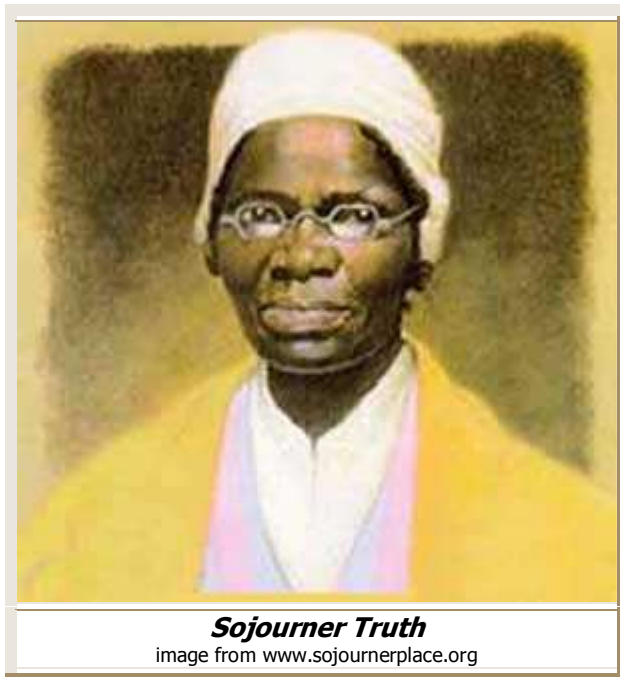
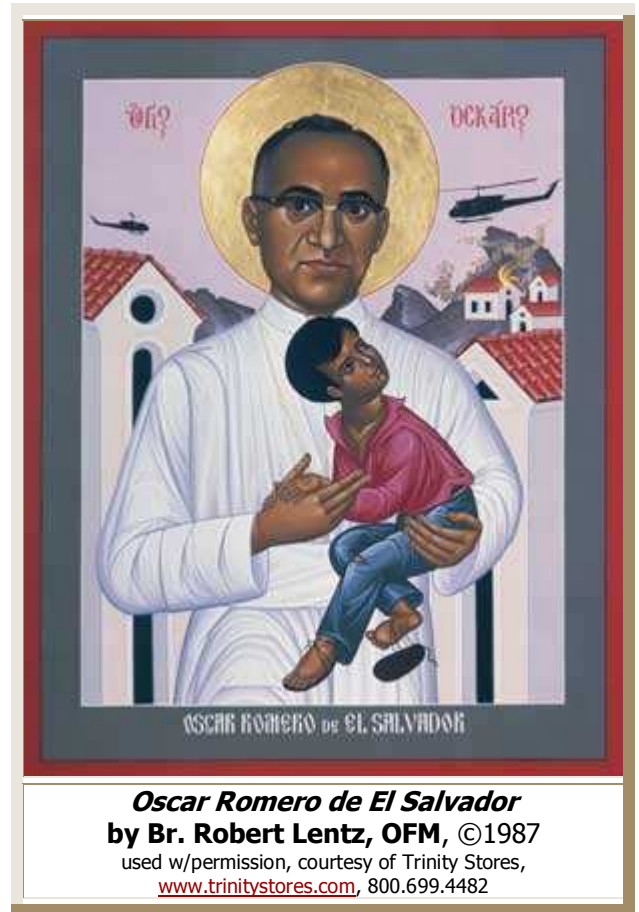
## Mother Jones

Mother Jones, born Mary Harris Jones, was born in County Cork, Ireland in 1830, and when later asked where she lived, she said, "I live in the United States, but I do not know exactly where. My address is wherever there is a fight against oppression. I abide where there is a fight against wrong." She became a tireless agitator for the rights of the laboring class, an advocate against all forms of oppression, and as some have said, "a general hell raiser"! Although raised Catholic, she had little use for the ministers of organized religion who seemed to be preoccupied with merely in-house concerns and their own particular denomination. Her talks were steeped, however, in the language of the prophets and the Gospels, and she compared labor unions to God's work in organizing the oppressed Israelites in Egypt. Mother Jones critiqued Christianity by the values that Christianity had taught her, but itself seldom lived.

## Oscar Romero

Few contemporary figures have so perfectly represented both the marriage and the conflict between politics and spirituality, as this courageous Archbishop of El Salvador, who was martyred at the altar in 1980. "I rejoice", he said "that our church is persecuted precisely for its preferential option for the poor and for seeking to become incarnate in the interests of the poor..."

How sad it would be in a country where such horrible murders are being committed if there were no priests among the victims". He, of course, became its most visible victim among thousands. He has become El Salvador's much acclaimed martyr and patron, and illustrates the price that we might pay for uniting our politics with our spirituality. He also symbolizes a basically very fearful man, who overcame his fears, and ended up the most courageous of all.



**Sojourner Truth**

image from [www.sojourneyplace.org](http://www.sojourneyplace.org)

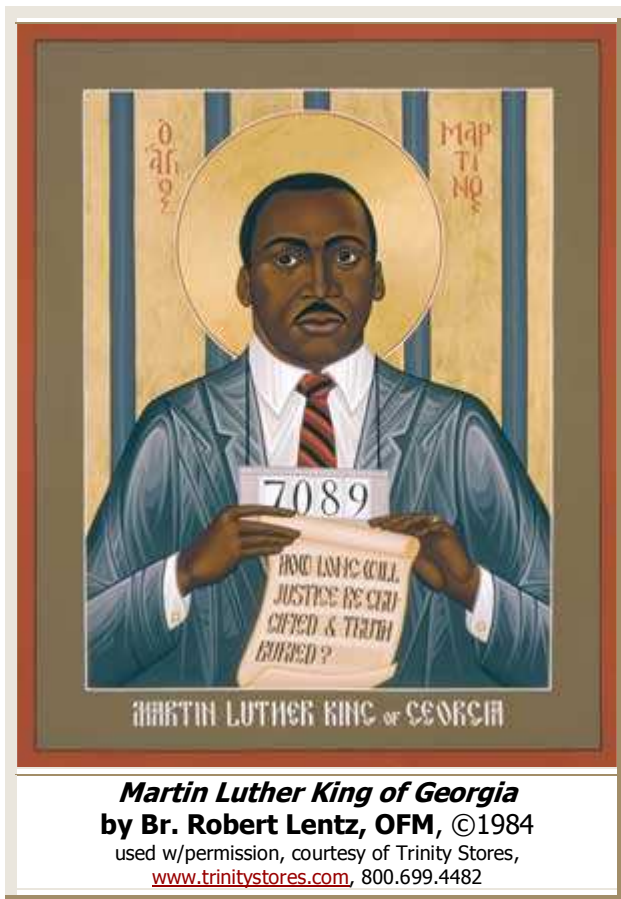
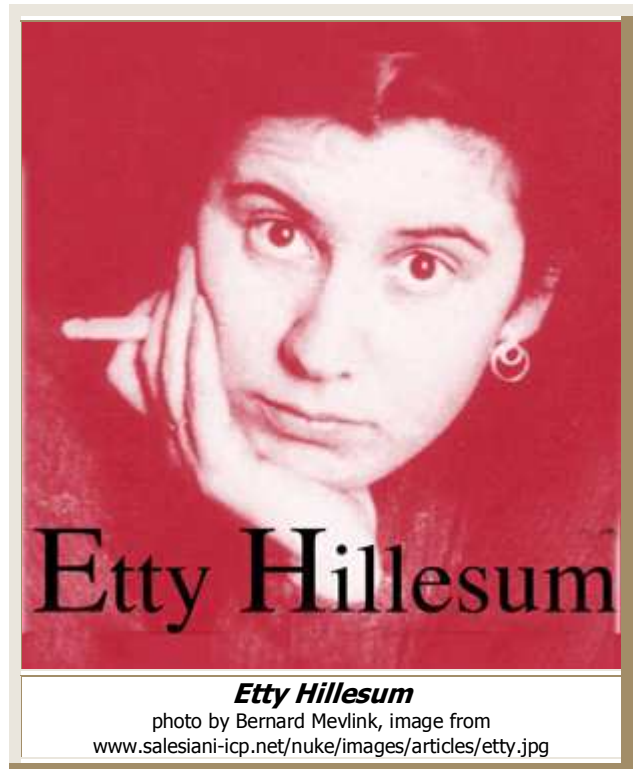
## Sojourner Truth

Sojourner Truth was born a slave in New York in 1797, and at the age of 46 took on the role of a prophetess and preacher throughout the Eastern United States. She was heckled and persecuted at every turn, yet never lost either her passion, her courage, or her very clever sense of humor. She fought not just for the abolition of slavery, but for the rights of women, and became one of the most influential figures of her time--and that without any formal education, any elected position, or any ordination or certification by any church. She took the name Sojourner Truth because she said that her calling was "to travel and sojourn up and down the land, showing the people their sins and being a sign unto them". She said that she carried on "a continuous conversation with God" and he always

heard her prayers. Most of them were not answered until well after she died.

## Etty Hillesum

Etty Hillesum is a Jewish woman killed at Auschwitz in 1943 at the age of twenty nine. Her diaries, published under the title *An Interrupted Life* seem almost incomprehensible to people inclined toward hatred, vengeance, or any narrow understanding of justice. Instead of rejecting God or hating her persecutors, she feels sorry for both of them, and offers her life for them. She actually wants to "help" God in his sad task! She is simultaneously a modern, even secularized woman, who nevertheless reveals a knowledge, trust, and love of God that puts her in the category of a mystic, saint, and martyr. She reminds us of St. Augustine's ancient warning that "God has many that the church does not have, and the church has many that God does not have". No one reads her diaries and remains unchanged.



## Martin Luther King

In Martin Luther King, America -- and the world -- discovered that the age of the Biblical prophets was not over. He spoke like one, he acted like one, he suffered like one, and he died like one in 1968, changing the moral landscape of the United States. Almost single handedly many times, he confronted the racism and the deceitfulness of American politics and practice, always with the Scriptures as his justification and rationale. When he linked racism with militarism, and also opposed the Vietnam War, he lost much of the support of his own people. Martin Luther King represents many things for us, but one of them is the cost of insisting on the big picture, which Jesus called the Reign of God. He was arrested and put in jail at least 85 times by the very government which later proclaimed a national holiday in his honor.

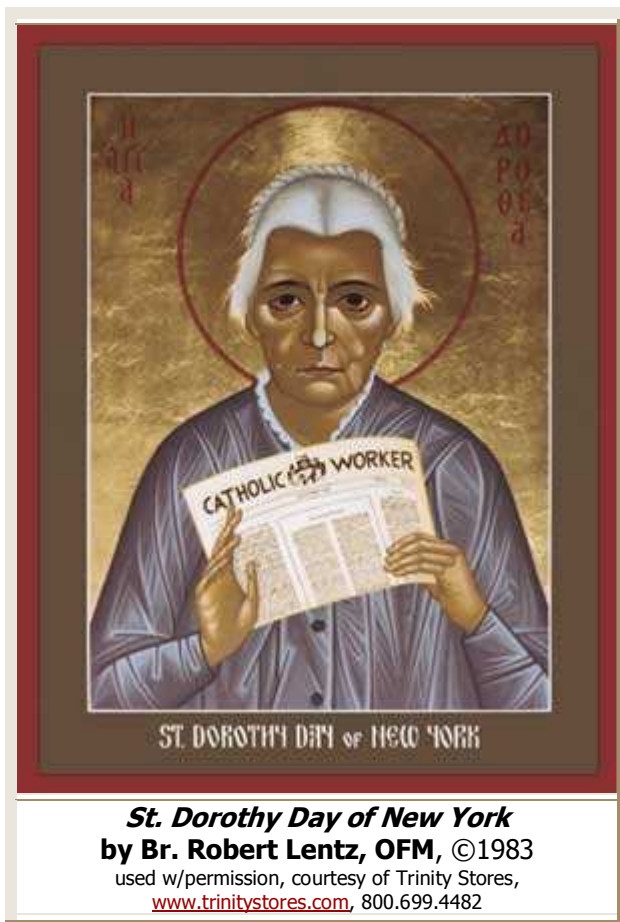
## Martin Niemoeller

Martin Niemoeller was a Lutheran pastor and theologian in Nazi Germany, who was originally a German war hero in World War I. Later, he was one of the very few who openly opposed Hitler and the Nazis, the anti-Semitism he had grown up with, and eventually he opposed the atomic bomb and all war, after re-studying the Sermon on the Mount. He founded the "Confessing Church" for which he was arrested and sent to Sachsenhausen and Dachau labor camps. He is most known for his famous quote: "First they came for the Communists, but I was not a Communist so I did not speak out. Then they came for the socialists and the Trade Unionists, but I was neither, so I did not speak out. Then they came for the homosexuals, but I was not a homosexual, so I did not speak out. Finally they came for the Jews, but I was not a Jew, so I did not speak out. And when they came for me, there was no one left to speak out." He represents that small minority that can admit and repent of their own mistakes, and he continued to do the same till his death in 1984. Today, January 14 would be the 114th anniversary of this birth.



**Martin Niemoeller**

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**St. Dorothy Day of New York**  
by Br. Robert Lentz, OFM, ©1983

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## Dorothy Day

Dorothy Day, who founded her Houses of Hospitality and the Catholic Worker movement and newspaper in New York in the 1930's and 40's, combined a radical social critique with almost daily Mass attendance and a sometimes soft Catholic piety and practice. She remains for many Americans an icon of a proper and pricey integration of politics and spirituality. Her Catholic Worker houses have spread all over North America, and they insist on both hands-on service to and solidarity with human suffering. Her vision combined immediate service, healing and education of persons, along with public and institutional critique-each a necessary and needed level of social justice ministry. When people asked her if she was a saint, she said, "Don't try to dismiss me that easily"! The Archdiocese of New York has, nevertheless, appealed for her to be formally canonized as St. Dorothy Day of New York.

## Cesar Chavez

Cesar Chavez was born in 1927 into a Mexican American family in the Southwest, and never advanced beyond the 7th grade. Nevertheless, his church upbringing gave him a passion for justice for farm workers, and the skills of organizing for civil and community rights. It became the United Farmworkers Union. He arose with his wife every morning at 4 AM and on their knees they prayed the rosary, and then he set out for another day of work for the workers. He was supported by Dorothy Day, Robert Kennedy, the California Franciscans, and also by very personal disciplines of fasting, nonviolent practice, and voluntary poverty. "It is my deepest belief that only by giving our lives do we find life. I am convinced that the truest act of courage, the strongest act of manliness is to sacrifice ourselves for others in totally nonviolent struggle for justice. To be a man (sic) is to suffer for others. God help us to be men!" he said to his Chicano brothers.



**Simone Weil**  
image from [www.subversiv.com](http://www.subversiv.com)

## Simone Weil

This most amazing French woman symbolizes the high price we must pay for solidarity with the oppressed, for interfaith dialogue, and for intellectual integrity. She would eat no more than the available rations of the poor, and earn no more than they could earn, which finally led to her early death in 1943. Although a Jew who loved the Gospel of Christ, she agreed to live on the margins of both groups -- without baptism, refusing the comforts of group reassurance, she tried to live her whole life "waiting for God" and critiqued both the Marxists on the Right and the intellectuals on the Left. Always she paid the price of standing in between, and mending the breach, desiring to be a sign of contradiction and reconciliation for both her Jewish, Christian and secular friends. Her writings show her to be an astute intellectual, a mystic and saint, and a social strategist all at the same time.

## Dom Helder Camara

This holy Archbishop of Recife in Brazil lived to see most of his reforms undone by his own successor bishop and by his country, yet he remained happy and non-violent until the end. He is most known for his statement: "When I feed the poor, they call me a saint, but when I ask 'WHY ARE THERE POOR PEOPLE?', they call me a communist." His offices were repeatedly machine gunned and ransacked by the government, and for 13 years he was banned from any public speaking. Despite it all, he seemed to feel connected to everything and in love with everything, and believed that God's plan was always to use a small group that he called an "Abrahamic minority". He was content to be a part of that small leaven until his death. He recognized God's presence in all things, and like a modern St. Francis, would talk to the birds and animals, sometimes even in the presence of important people. He was the bishop who convinced the other bishops at the II Vatican Council to take off their rings and religious jewelry, and to dress more simply as Jesus did.



**Dom Helder Camara**

image from [www.dhnet.org.br](http://www.dhnet.org.br)



**Franz Jaegerstaetter**  
by Fr. William McNichols

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## Franz Jaegerstaetter

On August 9, 1943 this Austrian peasant was beheaded by the Nazis at the age of 36 as an "enemy of the state". Without any support, and even opposition, from his church, his bishops, his parish priest, his neighbors, and even his wife, he single-handedly refused to serve or support National Socialism when it annexed Austria. He chose obedience to Christ over obedience to the state, and he said that "not everything which the world considers a crime is a crime in the eyes of God, and some things which the state considers a crime are actually commanded by God". His hopeful canonization by the Catholic Church is being held off for a generation, so that the rest of his countrymen who lived in his time, will not be embarrassed by their own blindness and complicity in the Nazi atrocities.

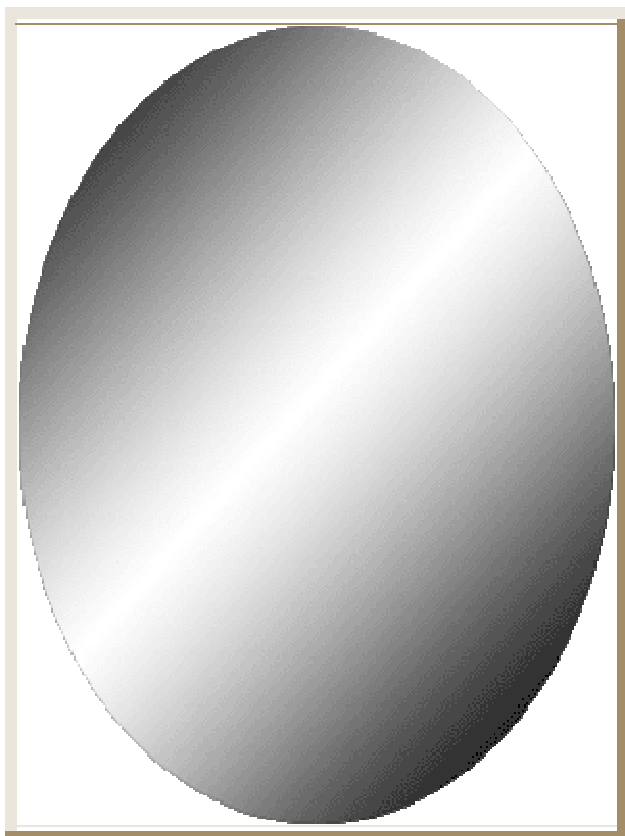
## The Martyred Women of El Salvador

Maura Clarke, Ita Ford, Dorothy Kazel, and Jean Donovan, were four American missionaries serving in El Salvador during the nightmare years of the early 1980's. They had been strongly influenced by the Gospel and what was called "liberation theology". They had given their lives to work with the poor of Latin America, nothing more. On December 2, 1980 they were raped and killed by Salvadoran officers, which killing was actually justified by the US government, who said that they "were not just nuns, but nuns who were also political activists on behalf of the guerrillas". Each woman in her own writings and conversations knew the risks they were taking, simply by being there. Jean Donovan, the youngest with a promising career back in Cleveland, wrote to a friend two weeks before she was killed: "Several times I have decided to leave -- I almost could except for the children, the poor bruised victims of adult lunacy. Who would care for them? Whose heart would be so staunch as to favor a reasonable thing in a sea of their tears and loneliness? Not mine, dear friend, not mine."



**Sr. Ita Ford, MM - Sr. Maura Clarke, MM -  
Jean Donovan - Sr. Dorothy Kazel, OSU  
(L to R, top to Bottom)**

image courtesy of Maryknoll Magazine, used with permission



### THE MIRROR image

And finally, we present a blank icon, a mirror as it were, which will be placed at the front of the ballroom. We hope by the end of this time together, we can each find our own unique face in that mirror. What is our gift? What is our precise way of putting together our spirituality with our politics?