



LADY EGERIA

SISTERS: EXEMPLARY FIGURES

BY

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Sister Hellen Prejean

THE CIRCLE OF LIGHT

The death penalty is one of the greatest moral issues, yet most people rarely think about it. Sr. Hellen Prejean was the spiritual adviser of a convict in the death row at Angola Prison in USA. After witnessing his execution in 1984, she wrote a book about the experience: Dead Man Walking. The resonance was enormous around the world and the book became a major movie. Since 1984, Sister Hellen has accompanied six men to their deaths. She has been instrumental in sparking national dialogue on the death penalty in the USA and helping to shape the Catholic Church's newly vigorous opposition to state executions. Sr. Prejean now travels around the world giving talks about her ministry.

This is how Sr. Helen Prejean describes the first time she witnessed an execution, a defining moment in her life and vocation: "I was scared out of my mind. I went into the women's room because it was the only private place in the death house, and I put my head against the tile wall and grab the crucifix around the neck. I said, "Oh, Jesus God, help me. Don't let him fall apart. If he falls apart, I fall apart. "I had never watched anybody be killed in front of my eyes. I was supposed to be Patrick Sonnier's spiritual advisor.

I was in over my head. All I had to in the beginning was to be a pen pal to this man in Louisiana's death row. Sure, I said, I could write letters. But the man was all alone, he had no one to visit him. It was a current in the river, and I got sucked in. the next thing I knew I was saying, "OK, sure, I'll come visit you".

He had suggested that on the prison application form for visitors, I fill in "spiritual advisor", and I said, "Sure". He was Catholic, and I'm a Catholic nun, so I didn't think much about it; it seemed right. But I had no idea that at

the end, on the evening of the execution, everybody has to leave the death house, everybody but the spiritual advisor. The spiritual advisor stays to the end and witness the execution.

Patrick had tried to protect me from watching him die. He told me he'd be OK. I didn't have to come with him into the execution chamber. "The electric chair is not a pretty sight, it could scare you," he told me, trying to be brave. But I said "No, no, Pat, if they kill you, I'll be there". Then I remember how the women were there at the foot of Jesus cross, and I said to him, "You look at my face. Look at me, and I will be the face of Christ for you. "I couldn't bear it that he would die alone. I said, "Don't you worry. God will help me".

And there in the women's room, just a few hours before the execution, my only place of privacy in that place of death, God and I met, and the strength was there, and it was like a circle of light around me. If I tried to think ahead if what would happen at midnight I came unravelled, but there in the present I could hold together and be strong".

A Wake-up call

Sister Helen Prejean was born on April 21, 1939, in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. She joined the Sisters of St. Joseph of Medaille in 1957 (now know as the Congregation of St. Joseph) and received a B.A. in English and Education from St. Mary's Dominican College, New Orleans in 1962. In 1973, she earned an M.A. in Religious Education Director at St. Frances Cabrini Parish in New Orleans, the formation Director for her religious community, and has taught junior and senior high school students. That seemed to be her destiny: education.

She was already 42 when she had wake-up call, a kind of vocation within the vocation, to go and share the life of the poor and that made her eventually the apostle of the death row. This is how she speaks about it: "Here's the real reason why I got involved with death-row inmates: I got involved with poor people. It took me a while to wake up the call of the social gospel of Jesus. Other members of my religious community woke up before I did, and we had fierce debates on what our mission should be.

In 1980, when my religious community, the Sisters of St. Joseph of Medaille, made a commitment to “stand on the side of the poor”, I assented, but only reluctantly. I resisted this recasting of the faith of my childhood, where what had counted was a personal relationship with God, inner peace, kindness to others, and heaven when this life was done. I didn’t want to struggle with politics and economics. We were nuns, after all, not social workers.

But later that year, I finally got it. I began to realize that my spiritual life had been too ethereal, too disconnected. To follow Jesus and to be close to Jesus meant that I needed to seek out the company of the poor and struggling people. So in June 1981 I drove a little brown truck into St. Thomas, a black, inner-city housing projects.

Growing up a Southern white girl on the upper class, I had only known black people as my servants. Now it was my turn to serve them. It didn’t take long to see that for poor people, especially poor black people, there was a greased track to prison and death row. As one Mama in St. Thomas put it: “Our boys leave here in a police car or a hearse.”

Dead Man Walking

Sr. Helen came out of the execution chamber that night having watched a man die in front of her eyes, whose last words were words of love. And when she turned to hi Bible, thumb worm and underlined, she found that in the front of his Bible, where birth, marriages, and deaths are recorded, he had written in his own handwriting the date of his own death.

She wrote: “Out of this experience has come a fire that has galvanized me and that cannot die in me. In the Catholic Church, when we receive sacraments, we say that an indelible mark is left on our souls. Being present at Pat’s death has left an indelible mark on my soul. I think of it as a kind of second baptism in my life, for it forever committed me to pursuing the gospel as it relates to poor people and the quest for justice.

“And it is this that has made me speak out about the death penalty ever since, and I will continue to do so to my dying day. I cannot not tell this story and proclaim the gospel message as I came to understand it that night. And it was this experience that let me to write the book *Dead Man Walking: An Eyewitness Account of the Death Penalty in the United States* (1993). I

had made a promise to Patrick before he died: “Patrick, I will tell your story across this land. “I didn’t know what I was saying. Perhaps then your death can be redemptive for other people”.

The title refers to the sentence uttered by the warden with the strap-down team when they come for the convict, to take him to the death chamber. “Please, God, hold up my legs!” was Pat’s prayer on that day. It was the last piece of dignity he could muster. He wanted to walk. Sr. Helen walked with him. God heard his prayer. She wrote: “I saw this dignity in him, and I have seen it in the other men I have accompanied to their deaths. I wonder how I would hold up if I were walking across a floor to a room where people were waiting to kill me”.

Sister Helen’s book was nominated for a 1993 Pulitzer Prize and was number one on the New York Times Best Seller List for 31 weeks. It also was an international best seller and has been translated into ten different languages. In January 1996, the book was developed into a major motion picture starring Susan Sarandon as a Sister Helen and Sean Penn as a death row inmate. The film was directed and written by Tim Robbins. Susan Sarandon won the award for Best Actress. Sister Helen and Dead Man Walking have been the subject of numerous media stories and reviews in the U.S., Canada, Spain, Holland, England, Scotland, France and Australia.

Almost 20 years after beginning her crusade, the Roman Catholic sister has witnessed five executions in Louisiana and today educates the public about the death penalty by lecturing, organizing and writing. As the founder of “Survive”, a victim’s advocacy group in New Orleans, she continues to counsel not only inmates on death row, but the families of murder victims, as well. To add the innumerable honors, awards and commendations that have since the come her way, she is also a member of Amnesty International. On December 18,2000, she presented Kofi Annan, Secretary General of the U.N. with 2.5 million signatures from people all over the world who are calling for a moratorium on the death penalty.

Prejean’s second book, *The Death of Innocents: An Eyewitness Account of Wrongful Execution* was published in December 2004. In it, she tells the story of two men, Dobie Gillis Williams and Joseph O’Dell, whom she accompanied to their executions. She believes that both men were innocent. The book also examines the recent history of death penalty decisions by the Supreme Court of the United States.

In 1998, Prejean was given the Pacem in Terris Award, named after a 1963 encyclical letter by Pope John XXIII that calls on all people of good will to secure peace among all nations. Pacem in Terris is Latin for “Peace on Earth”.

Racism, poverty and violence

Sr. Helen doesn't see capital punishment as a peripheral issue about some criminals at the edge of society that people want to execute. She sees the death penalty connected to the three deepest wounds of the American society: racism, poverty and violence. She wrote: “In this country, first the hangman's noose, then the electric chair, and now the lethal-injection have been almost exclusively reserved for those who kill white people. In regard to this first and deepest of America's wounds, racism, we'd have to change the whole soil of this country for the criminal-justice system not be administered in a racially biased manner.

The second wound is poverty. Who pays the ultimate penalty for crimes? The poor. Who gets the death penalty? The poor. After all the rhetoric that goes on in legislative assemblies, in the end, when the net is cast out, it is the poor who are selected to die in this country. Finally, the third wound is our penchant for trying to solve our problems with violence. Jesus Christ, whose way of life I try to follow, refused to meet hate with hate and violence with violence. I pray for the strength to be like him”.

She has found strength from the victims of violence and their families who have been healed by God's grace and been able to overcome their desire for revenge. “They are incredible human beings with great courage, and to me they are living witnesses of the gospel and the incredible healing power of Jesus in midst of violence”. Sr. Helen Prejean is now firmly in the place of all the champions of absolute non violence: Saint Francis of Assisi, Gandhi, Martin Luther King and she would like to take with her there the Christian community and the whole of humanity.

Reckoning and the place of the Church

The U.N. Universal Declaration on Human Rights states that there are two essential human rights that every human being has: the right not to be tortured and the right not to be killed. Pope John Paul II however, in his encyclical “The Gospel of Light” still upholds the right of government to kill

criminals, even though he restricts it to cases of “absolute necessity” and says that because of improvements in modern penal system such cases are “very rare, if not practically non-existent”.

Likewise, the U.S. Catholic Bishops in their 1980 “Statement on Capital Punishment”, strongly condemn the death penalty for the unfair and discriminatory manner in which it is imposed, its continuance of the “cycle of violence”, and its fundamental disregard for human dignity, but also affirm in principle the right of the state to kill. It is an application for the right of self-defence.

Sr. Prejean has no doubt that in the future they will abolish the death penalty in America. She believes that one day all the death instruments – electric chairs, gas chambers and lethal-injection needles – will be housed behind velvet ropes in museums. She has worked very hard for a moratorium of all the executions and she will continue doing so in order to reach the point when the death penalty is abolished everywhere in the world. She also believes that we cannot wait for the Church leadership to act. We have to put our trust in the church as the people of God; things have to come up from the grassroots.

The dilemma however remains. In the Philippines, some years ago, the then President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, on the occasion of her visit to the Pope, suspended all executions and the suspension is still standing. In the meantime, however the extra-judicial killings have grown exponentially and innocents are executed daily criminals. And what about the case of Mexico where the narcotraffic has claimed tens of thousands of victims in a short time, without mentioning terrorism...?

The absolute abolition of the death penalty is still a noble ideal, but the increasing criminalization of our societies makes it a distant target and something that still many people do not think work and be ultimately beneficial to society at large.

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Sr. Mary MacKillop (1842-1909)

A PIONEER AND A SAINT

This is the life of Sr. Mary MacKillop, the first Australian saint in absolute. Audacious, compassionate and a woman ahead of her times, in 1866, she put on a black dress and took religious vows in order to dedicate herself to the education of the immigrant children. She was only 24. Soon many young women joined her. The order The Sisters of Saint Joseph spread like a bush fire to all parts of Australia. The sisters followed farmers, miners, railway workers to isolated outback regions. Sr. Mary was a stubborn pioneer: in order to be free to send her sisters to the poor wherever they needed their presence, she faced the opposition of the Church authorities even to the point of being excommunicated. She was a force of nature. She resembles the contemporary pioneer woman and saint of the American Far West, Frances Xavier Cabrini. Mary MacKillop will be canonized on October 17 by Benedict XVI in St. Peter's Square in Rome.

The second part of the XIX century saw a massive emigration of poor people from the countries of Europe to America and Australia. Millions left their homeland and faced the unknown in search of land and livelihood. Scattered over immense territories, they suffered isolation and the lack of facilities essential for their lives and the healthy development of their children. On their wake went an army of religious men and women: they build schools and hospitals in the remotest areas and were often the only hope of the pioneers. Some years ago, I was in Denver, Colorado, guest of a large school of the Loreto sisters. I remember praying the rosary in the cemetery where rows of dozens of white tombstones spoke of the sacrifice of the many consecrated young women of the frontier, courageous companions of the millions of poor Catholics who tamed the Far West.

Convicts were the first to settle Australia. They were followed by hundreds of thousands of poor people coming from different nations. Convicts didn't seem particularly impressed with the champions of Christianity. When Governor King ordered that they attend Church on Sundays, they responded by burning the church to the ground. Similarly, many convicts had tattooed onto their backs images of crucifixes or angels holding cups of blood. This gave the impression that when they were being flogged, Christ himself was being flogged.

The Convicts were obviously good judges of character as some of Church personnel had acted in a manner that ran contrary to Christianity's message. However not all Christian missionaries were bad people. One shining light was Sr. Mary MacKillop. Like Jesus himself, Mary was a troublemaker. She worked tirelessly for the poor, since her early youth when she realized the plight of the immigrant children who were abandoned without education. For them she became the Founder of the Sisters of saint Joseph at the early age of 24 and paid for her single minded commitment to the most isolated of them with the opposition of the Church authorities.

Mary MacKillop was considered to be a woman ahead of her time for many reasons. First in Australia, she wanted her sisters to be under the government of a sister superior-general who would be free to send them wherever there was a need. She wanted her sisters to live as the poor did, in small communities of two or three members, and in houses that were poor like those of the people. She encouraged the sisters to live in isolated places where Mass and the sacraments may have been available to them infrequently. She saw all persons as being equal before God, regardless of social status, religion, race or age. Finally, she had a vision for the whole of Australia when it was still a country of individual colonies.

Early life history

Mary MacKillop was born of immigrant parents from Scotland, in Melbourne, a city that by then was only seven years in existence. Living arrangements were primitive. Mary's parents had arrived separately but had known each other in Scotland. Mary was born to Alexander and Flora MacKillop on Jan. 15, 1842, the first of eight children. Her father was unable to stay in stable employment so the circumstances of the family were

constantly changing. They often depended on relatives for a home and the means to live.

At an early age Mary went out to work, first in a stationery store and later as a teacher and then as a governess. She was a fine horsewoman, loved nature and had a great affection for her family. When Mary was a governess in the southeast of South Australia, she noted that there was little or no education for rural children and especially for Catholic children. She had a dream of becoming a sister but had to put that dream aside to help support her family.

While she was a governess she met the charismatic young priest, Father Julian Tennyson Woods, whose parish was very large, almost the size of England. He shared Mary's dream and encouraged her. When she was 24 years old she believed that she was free at last to follow her dream. She did not want to join any of the few religious congregations already present in Australia as their work was mainly confined to the cities. In 1866, she and her sister Lexie opened the first school in a disused stable in Penola and so the congregation of the Sisters of St. Joseph was born.

Mary was advised to move to Adelaide, where the new congregation expanded and soon spread to other colonies and to New Zealand. The sisters begged for their support and only asked parents for any payment they could afford. Many could not pay anything. Soon Mary established homes for unmarried pregnant girls, for women coming out of jail and for destitute elderly. In almost no time, Mary had attracted scores of young women to her congregation, and houses were established in a number of cities and outback missions throughout the territory. At a time when almost no public services were available for the poor, the Sister of Saint Joseph won the admiration and gratitude of the Australians of all classes and religious persuasions. Generally, the Sisters were prepared to follow farmers, railway workers and miners into the isolated [outback](#) and live as they lived. They shared the same hardships whilst educating their children.

Excommunicated

An unusual event then happened in her life: Mary MacKillop was excommunicated, on September 22 1871, by bishop Laurence Sheil of Adelaide. On that occasion, she and 47 sisters were also expelled from the Congregation of St Joseph and forced to find accommodation and

employment wherever they could. During this time, Mary dressed incognito. She had been ordered not to communicate with any of the sisters and anyone associating with her was liable to excommunication. Priests too were threatened with suspension if they supported any of the sisters. A few of them however remained loyal friends. Most notable among them were the Jesuits from Norwood.

Mary received refuge from friends and, eventually, from a Jewish businessman who provided a house for her and some of the women forced to leave. The Jesuit fathers thought that an injustice had been done and continued to give her the sacraments. Five months after the excommunication, the bishop realized his error and, from his deathbed, sent one of his priests to remove the sentence of excommunication. During the time of excommunication, Mary would not have an unkind word said about the bishop and continued to pray for him.

The main reason for the excommunication, as well as the lingering opposition of some bishops which continued even after the resolution of that episode, was Mary's determination to be the only one, as Superior General, to give assignment to the sisters. The aim was always to give priority to the needs of the far flung immigrant population, especially the children, in the isolated Australian outback. The small number of the Catholic population and the often extreme circumstances can explain the harshness of the disciplinary decision and the stubbornness of the resistance.

MacKillop travelled to Rome in 1873 to seek papal approval for her [religious congregation](#) and was encouraged in her work by [Pope Pius IX](#), who marveled at the news of her excommunication. The authorities in Rome assured MacKillop that the congregation and their rule of life would receive final approval after a trial period. While in Europe, MacKillop travelled widely to observe educational methods. When she returned in January 1875, after an absence of nearly two years, she brought approval from Rome for her sisters and the work they did, materials for her schools, books for the convent library, several priests and, most of all, 15 new young women from [Ireland](#) for her religious family.

Mary was once more elected unopposed as Mother Superior-General in 1899, a position she held until her own death. After a [stroke](#) in New Zealand in 1902, she became paralyzed on her right side. For seven years, she had to

rely on a wheelchair to move around, but her speech and mind were as good as ever. Even after suffering the stroke, the Sisters had enough confidence in her to re-elect her in 1905. Mother Mary MacKillop died on August 8 1909, in the Josephite convent in [North Sydney](#).

On the margins of society

Mary MacKillop is remembered both for the works she did and for the person she was. As Pope John Paul II said in 1995, at the time of her beatification, in Sydney, “Because the love of God inflamed her heart, she tenaciously defended the weak, the poor, the suffering and all those on the margins of society. She worked to assist women and families in distress and to eradicate ignorance among the young. In her, the unwanted, the unloved and those alienated from society found comfort and strength”. She lived the Gospel imperative to love one's neighbor as oneself. She gave dignity to the poor and especially to women in a harsh and difficult environment.

She treated the first peoples of the land, the Aborigines, with a respect that was not often accorded them. As a governess she befriended the local aboriginal children and taught some to read and write. Blessed Mary had received from her mother a profound belief in the Providence of God. She lived by that belief and imbued her sisters with that same trust. Her living faith, her active hope, charity and openness to the action of grace nurtured her daily life and were evidenced in the exercise of all the virtues. With courage, gentleness and compassion she lived with isolated rural "battlers," urban slum dwellers and the ordinary working class people.

She exhorted her sisters to be faithful to their constitutions and rules, to pray individually and communally, to have devotion to the Blessed Sacrament, to live constantly in the presence of God and attend Mass whenever a priest was available. She was loyal to the Church and had particular care for priests in their apostolate. She would never allow a sister to say a word against a priest or bishop. She lived by the spirit of the law and not just the letter. She did not recoil from changing the rule for individual sisters when circumstances demanded it. Her friendships with persons from all levels of society are well documented. Her friend, Joanna Barr Smith, an Anglican lady, wrote toward the end of Mary's life, "Living or dying ... I am ever the

Sr. Anne Montgomery (1926-2012)

A Doer of the Word

One of the legends in the USA peace movement, Sister Anne Montgomery was a member of the Religious of the Sacred Heart for more than 60 years. She spent over three years in prison for many civil disobedience actions against war. She dedicated many years teaching in Harlem, and several years living with the Christian Peacemaker Team in Hebron, Palestine-Israel. She was a tiny person, well under five feet, but she didn't fear to go to prison and offer her life for the cause of peace. Her friend Fran Tobin wrote of her: "Contemplative and a lover of the poor, Anne stood simply and strongly against that which harmed people and the earth, regardless of the cost to herself". She died at 85, after a protracted fight against cancer.

Sometime in 1980, a group of eight peace activists entered the General Electric Plant in King of Prussia, Pennsylvania, USA, in order to demonstrate against the nuclear arms. They called themselves "The Plowshares Eight". Two of them were the famous brothers and religious priests Daniel and Philip Berrigan. Sr. Anne was with them, one of the only two women members of that peaceful commando. This is how she describes the action: "It turned out that it was easy to get inside. I helped distract the guard, then we went inside, and there they were—the nuclear nosecones. We were able to hammer on a nuclear nosecone to symbolize the need for nuclear disarmament.

We used the Isaiah quote as the basis for our witness: "They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and study war no more"(Isaiah 2:4). We said people should start dismantling these weapons. It was a symbolic action, but it was also real because we made those nosecones unusable. The police arrested us and I spent eleven weeks in jail".

In the 1970s, she had been working with students in Albany and Harlem. Her awareness about peace action came from people who were poor and

knew the government wasn't there for them. Eighteen year olds had just got the right to vote but didn't use it because they felt it was useless. Then she heard Daniel Berrigan S.J. speak on the need to witness to the Gospel. It helped her to understand the issue of nuclear weapons from a spiritual perspective, that nuclear weapons were evil, and were the greatest reality and symbol of what was wrong. The combination of her work with the poor and meeting Dan Berrigan challenged her to join the demonstrations and get involved.

In July 1982, the group went to the Electric Boat shipyard in Groton, Connecticut. Four of them, including Sr. Anne, got into a canoe and boarded the Trident "U.S.S. Florida," and hammered on several missile hatches. Then they went to the storage yard and hammered on two Trident sonar spheres. They waited there three hours before they were arrested. She spent the most time in prison, nearly two years, for the Pershing Plowshares action, for trespassing at the Martin Marietta plant in Orlando, Florida. There the protesters hammered and poured blood on Pershing II missile components and on a Patriot missile launcher and displayed a banner which read: "Violence Ends Where Love Begins."

Sr. Anne reminisces: "Certainly the Plowshares Eight actions stand out because they set in motion a whole movement, but they also stand out because of the sense of vulnerability I felt in the face of our nation's addiction to power and greed, in the face of such blasphemous power. On Labor Day, 1989, we swam in freezing water for an hour and a half in the Thames River, in Connecticut, to reach the Trident nuclear sub which was being readied for sea trials. Three boarded it from a canoe; those of us who were swimming got caught in the tide. Some reached the side and hammered on it.

I'll never forget the vulnerability of our action in the face of the most powerful and deadly weapon on earth. If we want to change hearts and minds we have to come from that position of vulnerability and trust in God". Sr. Anne was 63 when she participated in that action. She adds: "In all these actions, the Holy Spirit is with us in a very real way. People are able to enter places, and witness to the evil that's there in a way that's unexpected. Doors open, people look the other way, and you're able to get where you want to go. Sr. Anne would go on to do six Plowshares actions, the last of which took place in 2009 when she was 83.

A Journey of Faith

Sr. Anne Montgomery was born on November 30, 1926, in San Diego, California, USA, to Rear Admiral Alfred E. and Alice Smith Montgomery. The family moved several times during Anne's childhood before settling in Pennsylvania. She joined the Society of the Sacred Heart in Albany, New York state, in 1948, at 22, professing final vows in 1956. She graduated with both a bachelor's and master's degree from Manhattan Ville College, and later earned a second master's degree from Columbia University in New York. She taught at several Sacred Heart-run schools, including those in New York City and Albany, where she experienced the challenges faced by poor and minority people.

In 1975, Sr. Anne completed training to work with children with learning disabilities and returned to New York to work with school dropouts in East Harlem. The work led her to the Catholic Worker in New York and to the collaboration with the more famous lay woman peace activist Dorothy Day. By 1980, she moved into full-time ministry as a peace advocate, becoming known among faith-based activists on both the East and West coasts. Sr. Anne was truly a contemplative at heart.

As more people were trying to understand plowshares actions and the role of nonviolent resistance to bring about true disarmament, Fr. John Dear, S.J. approached Sr. Anne about collaborating on a book about the Plowshares actions and nonviolent resistance. She agreed and together they co-edited *Sword Into Plowshares*, (Harper and Row, 1987). Keenly aware that "our struggle is not against flesh and blood but the principalities and powers of this world," (*Ephesians* 6:12), Sr. Anne provided compelling insights into how nonviolent resistance actions are really experiments in truth that should be seen as acts of "divine obedience," rather than civil disobedience. She wrote:

"Civil disobedience is traditionally the breaking of a civil law to obey a higher law, sometimes with the hope of changing the unjust civil law...But we should speak of such actions as "divine obedience", rather than civil disobedience. The term "disobedience" is not appropriate because any law that does not protect and enhance life is no real law. In particular, both divine and international law tell us that weapons of mass destruction are a crime against humanity and it is the duty of the ordinary citizen to actively oppose them."

Ministry of presence at Hebron

Sr. Anne's commitment to standing with and for the victims led her to many war-torn areas. In January 1991 she was part of the Gulf Peace Team Camp on the Iraq/Saudi border calling upon the US not to bomb Iraq. Sr. Anne would return to that country many more times. She was among those activists who held a month-long liquids-only fast in 2000 aimed at ending U.S. support for U.N. sanctions against Iraq. According to UNICEF and other human rights groups, the sanctions were responsible for the deaths of a million Iraqis, including 500,000 children.

Sr. Anne later became a member of the Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT), serving in Iraq, the Balkans, the West Bank, and Hebron, where she stayed for seven years. Explaining her witness in the West Bank, Sr. Anne said in an interview, "We say we're on the side of the people who have the biggest guns pointed at them. In this case, we think the Israeli occupation is wrong. It's wrong to take people's land, to destroy their homes, which is what the Israeli military does. As long as this unjust occupation continues, there can't be peace." In Israel, her ministry was one of "accompaniment and presence", walking with Palestinian children, harassed and bullied by the largely American illegal "settlers."

Sr. Anne's work is the fruit of years of reflecting on the meaning of religious life and her responsibility to the social teachings of the Catholic Church. She wrote: "Who's going to do this if we don't? If anyone should take a risk, it should be the religious. That's what many religious orders were set up to do, but we've lost that spirit through the ages". And on a more personal note: "I couldn't do this work without faith in God. What gives me hope is the ordinary people who get involved, who take one step out of their comfort zone and join the work for peace. We're all learning that when we powerless people come together, we have power. I also have hope in knowing that God's power and God's nonviolence are stronger than violence and war. Love is stronger than evil, hate, fear or war".

The Last Battle

Sr. Anne's final Plowshares action took place in 2009, when she was 83. For it she served a two-month jail term and four months of house arrest in 2010. Her extraordinary community of the Sacred Heart actually commissioned her at the time of her sentencing: "We send you, Anne, on behalf of the Society of the Sacred Heart, to continue your prophetic, educational mission with

courage and grace, whether within the walls of prison or without, making known the love of Jesus for our world and all people". This is the pure flowering of a Vatican II religious community.

Following the 2010 Disarm Now Plowshares trial conviction, Sr. Anne lived with her community in Redwood City, California. It was there that she discovered that she had cancer. From there, in March 2012, in a letter to friends, describing her cancer she wrote: "I have been on chemotherapy for cancer, and it seemed to be helping, but, last weekend I had breathing problems and tests showed a lung full of fluid and that continuing any chemo, etc. would not help. I have been blessed by so much support, personal, and medical, that I know I must share that in some way with all those across our world who lack so much and are near desperation, especially for their children.

I also know that the Spirit prays at the heart of the universe and that creation is on an ongoing journey of death and resurrection, however mysterious that process is. Because it is energized by Love, we can enter into it rather than count on our own weak efforts and vulnerabilities and worry about failures. When I made my final vows, our group was named: "Joy in the Faith". I am coming to believe that that must somehow be possible since it is promised in the Beatitudes and that those who have nothing show us the way.

I am constantly filled with gratitude to you all who have done the nitty-gritty work of peace and nonviolent action and invited me to join you. I hope to be able to do so in a new way. As Phil Berrigan said in his last letter, that work must come from our own vulnerability. Much love, Anne". Sr. Anne accepted on behalf of Christian Peacemaker Teams the 40th annual Peace Award of the War Resisters League. The War Resisters League advocates nonviolence as the method for creating a democratic society free of war, racism, sexism and human exploitation. The League was founded in 1923. Previous award recipients have included Dorothy Day and Daniel Berrigan, SJ.

A week before she died she was also given the 2012 Courage of Conscience Award from the Peace Abbey in Sherborn, Massachusetts. On August 27 2012, God called Sr. Anne Montgomery home to her eternal reward. All who knew her lost a very special friend. The Church lost one of Jesus' most steadfast disciples and prophets. And the world lost an extraordinary peacemaker.

Sr. Dorothy Stang (1931-2005)

THE ANGEL OF THE AMAZON

Silver-haired American nun Dorothy Stang, who was killed aged 73 on an Amazon road, looked more like an elderly American holidaymaker than a modern-day martyr. When the two gunmen intercepted her as she walked to a meeting of poor farmers, she opened her Bible and began reading to them. They shot her six times. Her death was the conclusion of a life totally spent in defense of the Amazon forest and its poor inhabitants. In her simple t-shirt there was a slogan: "The death of the forest is the end of our lives".

On the morning of February 12, 2005, in the countryside of an isolated town called Anapu, in the immense Amazon area, Sr. Dorothy Stang, an American religious woman living and working in Brazil for almost forty years, woke up early to walk to a community meeting to speak about the rights of the Amazon. Ciero, a farmer she had invited to the meeting, was afraid that he was going to be late. As he hurried on, he was a couple of minutes behind the sister, but he was able to see her and so he was able to hide from the two armed men who followed her.

As she progressed on she was blocked by the two men, Clodoaldo and Raifran, who worked in a livestock company. They asked her if she had any weapons, and she claimed that the only weapon would be her Bible. She then read a passage from the Beatitudes, "Blessed are the poor in spirit..."

She continued a couple of steps but was suddenly stopped when Ciero called her, "Sister," as she was held at gun point by Raifran. Then Clodoaldo nodded and Raifran fired a round at Sr. Dorothy's abdomen. She fell face down on the ground. Raifran fired another round into her back, then fired all four remaining rounds into her head.

Her body lay on the dirt road all day, nearby witnesses later said, because they were afraid they would be shot if they moved it. As it rained, her blood mixed with the soil, an extreme symbol of her love for that land which had become hers. She fell as a martyr: the conclusion of a heroic commitment.

Thousands of people, from peasants to politicians, converged on the remote Amazon town to bury the bullet-ridden body of the elderly American nun. After an all-night vigil, mourners filed slowly past the flag-draped coffin of Sr. Dorothy, in the small, single-roofed church of Anapu, the jungle town of seven thousand residents that Sr. Dorothy had adopted as her own. Some held up a handkerchief stained with her blood, her cloth shoulder bag or saplings to symbolize the jungle she had died defending.

A crowd followed her coffin down a dirt road to the graveyard, singing: “They killed one more sister, but she will rise again. The people will not forget”. “I feel like a river without water, a forest without trees. It is like losing a mother” one of the presents exclaimed. Nearly one thousand five hundred kilometers in the southeast, in the capital Brasilia, cabinet ministers compared Sr. Dorothy Stang to Chico Mendez, the celebrated defender of the rain forest who was gunned down in 1988.

A dream come true

Sr. Dorothy Stang was born on July 7, 1931 as one of nine children to a devout Roman Catholic family in Dayton, Ohio, USA. She was a well-loved character and was popular among her family and peers. As a young girl, Dorothy had always had her heart set on becoming a missionary. It was a dream of hers to educate poor children and spread the message of Christ to those who have not heard of Him.

Driven by this passion, the young Dorothy joined the Sisters of Notre Dame of Namur in Cincinnati, shortly after completing high school, in 1948. In 1956 she took her religious vows. From 1951 to 1966 she taught elementary classes at St. Victor School in Calumet City and St. Alexander School in Villa Park, Illinois and Most Holy Trinity School in Phoenix, Arizona. They were places of poor people, reflecting the transformation that was taking place in the USA religious orders, after Vatican II.

It was the time when the progressive practices of liberation theology were sweeping through the Catholic church in Latin America. Priests and nuns exchanged their habits for jeans and T-shirts and left the cloisters to work in shanty towns and poor rural communities, alongside the poor and dispossessed. Sr. Dorothy was one of them.

Her missionary dream finally came true in 1966 when she was assigned to a post in Coroatá, Brazil. There, she immersed herself among the poor peasants and farmers who dwelled in the Amazon basin. It soon came to her attention that many of the villagers were not aware of their land rights and the wealthy land owners and ranchers were taking advantage of them. Sr. Dorothy began to study the laws of Brazil and campaigned to prevent the villagers from being further exploited.

Insertion

Sr. Dorothy made frequent visits to the villages scattered throughout the Amazon basin. She taught the women to sew and sell clothing to finance the building of a dam which provided electricity to the community. She was responsible to teach the men of the villages to be faith leaders. She set up dozens of base communities and taught them the Gospel. She launched 23 schools and created a structure for the poor to claim their land.

Feisty and energetic and loving, she remained faithful to the poor, to the ruined Amazon, and so, to the Gospel and the God of justice and compassion. Beautiful stories are told of her dedication: how she fed the hungry, built community, lived in destitution. How she confronted illegal loggers and corrupt ranchers, the class who stole land from the poor, kept them in misery, and bought off the police, the military and the government.

The CPT (Land Commission) had been created by the Brazilian bishops in 1975 in response to the mounting violence in the Amazon region, as landowners used gunmen to clear peasant farmers from disputed land and Sr. Dorothy became an active member of it. Like all CPT workers in the Amazon, she knew that her life was threatened, although she believed that being a nun would protect her.

Actually, death threats rained down on Dorothy for years, along with insults and hate mail. Ranchers took aim at the community center for women that she had founded and riddled it with bullets. On one occasion the police arrested her for passing out "subversive" material. It was the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

A Dangerous Fight

Over the years, the work became progressively more dangerous for the Sisters in Brazil and for the farmers and their families. As the world discovered the vast possibilities offered by the rich natural resources of the Amazon rain forest, people with more limited and self-centered goals began to plan ways to capitalize upon them. Gradually, loggers, ranchers, land speculators, and agribusiness became the dominant forces in the region, victimizing the poorer farmers and destroying the rain forest.

The Amazon rain forest is one of the largest remaining virgin forests on earth. Its original trees and vegetation comprise 40% of all the tropical rainforests in the world. The forest hosts 50% of the world's plant species and is home to 20 million people. In addition, 20% of the earth's fresh water reserve runs through the Amazon River basin.

Sr. Dorothy understood that the rain forest, also called the earth's lungs, plays a critical role in the exchange of gases between the biosphere and the atmosphere. Her frustration grew as she witnessed the destruction of this natural resource so vital to her people's and the planet's future. She saw the forest and the people plundered for financial gain by illegal logging operations, land speculators, and cattle ranchers. She witnessed political leaders allowing the destruction to continue.

Hired killings of human rights advocates, environmentalists, and farmers account for one-third of the violent deaths in the region each year. The goal of these calculated murders is to eliminate opposition to the clear-cutting and burning of the forest so that fields of soy beans can be planted, trees can be logged, and cattle can graze. Another goal of the killings is to eliminate those who empower and educate the peasants; and finally the killings are meant to intimidate the farmers and keep them ensnared in an endless cycle of debts, akin to slavery. Sr. Dorothy became a prime target.

She was undeterred

"That I've been able to live, love, be loved and work with the Brazilian people, help them find confidence in themselves, to profoundly sense God's presence in their lives and then be a creative influence in society from which a more human society can be born, I thank all of you," she wrote to her family and friends on her 60th birthday in 1991. "It's a chain reaction. We can give positive input-energy into life but we need to be charged also. In the midst of all this violence there are many small communities that have learned the secret of life: sharing, solidarity, confidence, equality, pardon, working together. God is present -- generator and sustainer of all life. Thus life is productive and transforming in the midst of all this."

She knew firsthand what the destruction of the Amazon meant, not only for Brazil but for the planet. In 1991, she took a sabbatical program in Oakland, California, to study creation spirituality. Afterwards, she attended the historic 1992 first Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. A few weeks later, she wrote her family: "Tell all that we must make great efforts to save our planet. Mother Earth is not able to provide anymore. Her water and air are poisoned and her soil is dying of exaggerated use of chemicals, all in the name of profit. Pray for all of us and for a world where all can live -- plants, animals and humans -- in peace and harmony."

In 2002, the death threats intensified. The mayor of the nearby town said, "We have to get rid of that woman if we are going to have peace." A list circulated of people with "bounties" on their heads. Atop the list was her name: Stang (\$20,000). But she was undeterred. "I know that they want to kill me," she said, "but I will not go away. My place is here alongside these people who are constantly humiliated by the powerful."

In 2004, although she knew she was putting her life even more at risk, she went to Brasilia to give evidence before a congressional committee of inquiry into deforestation. She named logging companies who were invading state areas. Environmental organizations reckon that 90% of the timber from Para state is being illegally logged. Loggers reacted by calling her a terrorist and accused her of supplying peasant farmers with guns. She and other local leaders began to suffer direct death threats, but she refused to be intimidated and continued her work with the farmers.

Visiting her family and community in Ohio a few months before she was killed, she told one sister, "I just want to sink myself into God". "I look at Jesus carrying the cross," she said a few days before her death, when asked by a novice about her prayer, "and I ask for the strength to carry the suffering of the people." A day before she died, she said: "If something is going to happen, I hope it happens to me, because the others have families to care for." Then, in that fatal morning, the gunmen came.

Recognitions

Before her murder, Sr. Dorothy was named "Woman of the Year" by the state of Para for her work in the Amazon region. She also received the Humanitarian of the Year Award from the Brazilian Bar Association for her work of helping the local rural workers. Since her death, Sr. Dorothy has been widely honored for her life and work by the United States Congress and by a number of colleges and universities across the United States. She was posthumously awarded the 2008 United Nation Prize in the Field of Human Rights.

Her story is narrated in countless articles in newspapers and magazines and described in books. The most remarkable is the powerful biography, *Martyr of the Amazon: The Life of Sister Dorothy Stang* by Roseanne Murphy. In 2008, the American filmmaker Daniel Junge released a documentary titled *They Killed Sister Dorothy*, narrated by Martin Sheen in the version in English. In 2009, Evan Mack composed an opera based on the life of Sr. Dorothy Stang. *Angel of the Amazon* depicts her life's work, her devotion to her mission with Brazilian peasant farmers, and the events that sent her on a path of martyrdom.

This is what Fr. John Dear SJ, champion of pacifism, wrote: "I suspected early on that Sr. Dorothy had attained great moral heights. Anyone who leaves their homeland, spends four decades serving the poorest of the poor in Amazon, and defends the forest -- long before anyone ever thought of an environmental movement -- must possess enormous commitment, faith and vision".

In her writings, she left the sentence which is a whole program: "I don't want to flee, nor do I want to abandon the battle of these farmers who live without any protection in the forest. They have the sacrosanct right to aspire to a

Minister Bernard Kouchner, who helped found the charity *Doctors Without Borders*, said that the sister's faith could move mountains. He said it had been a joy to work with her. Jewish and Muslim leaders in France also issued emotional statements about her passing.

As President Nicolas Sarkozy took part, together with some of France's best known figures, in the *requiem* mass in Notre-Dame cathedral, Sister Emmanuelle's publisher released a tape she herself had prepared to promote her posthumous memoirs. It went: "When you hear this message, I will no longer be there. In telling of my life - of my whole life - I wanted to bear witness that love is more powerful than death. I have confessed everything, the good and the less good. Where I am now, life does not end for those who know how to love."

In addition to the tape recording entrusted to her publishers, Sister Emmanuelle also left a funeral address that was read out to the dignitaries who attended the service in Paris: "Today, when you have once more taken the trouble for me, my soul and my heart are close to your soul and your heart. I want this dear meeting to go forward in joy. I have chosen light-hearted hymns. Sing them joyously and will full voice. I want to give you thanks full of recognition for what you have done and what, I know, you will do again for thousands of children around the world...*Yalla!* Let's go," she declared in concluding, using the Arabic term she had learned in Cairo.

With the rubbish pickers

Sister Emmanuelle was born Madeleine Cinquin in Brussels, Belgium, on November 16, 1908, of a Belgian mother and a French father who was a manufacturer of lingerie. When she was six, her father drowned at sea, and she witnessed the event from the beach. Later in life she would say that it was this tragedy that determined her future: "That Sunday morning, the little girl understood that you cannot hang on to the appearances, like the foam of the waves. In my unconscious, my vocation dates from that. I sought the absolute, not the transient". "

By the age of twelve, Madeleine wanted to be a nun. She was inspired by Father Damien, a Catholic Priest who helped lepers in Hawaii, now a saint. As a young woman however she did not shun from enjoying the pleasures of being a bright young thing during the Roaring Twenties, or from taking up

smoking in a typical act of rebellion, or from being attracted to handsome young men. But in 1929, after studying religion and philosophy at the Sorbonne, she joined the order of Notre-Dame de Sion, taking the name Sister Emmanuelle.

These nuns ran several renowned French schools around the Mediterranean. She was assigned to teach literature in Turkey, where she came into contact with Jewish and Muslim intellectuals. She taught in schools for well-off Turkish children but made a point of showing them the hardships of life by taking her classes to carry out sociological studies in poor areas. She later continued her teaching career in Tunisia and then in Alexandria, Egypt. After forty years of teaching, in 1971, when she was 62 years old, Sister Emmanuelle finally got permission from her congregation to start working with the poor. A real vocation within a vocation as it was the case with Mother Theresa of Calcutta.

In fact it was retirement that enabled Sister Emmanuelle to fulfill her dream. With the blessing of her superiors, she settled in Cairo, hoping to dedicate herself to the lepers. When this proved impossible, the Pope's representative in Egypt suggested she help the thousands of refuse collectors known as the '*zabaleen*'. The *zabaleen*, which means 'filth or rubbish', lived on the outskirts of Cairo at a rubbish dump called Ezbet El Nakhl.

Ezbet El Nakhl was a squalid, brutal world of rats, lice and poverty, of cheap alcohol and of violence between children and against women, a dirty and unhygienic place where the rubbish of the metropolis was stored and sorted mostly by young people. The children were uneducated and had no way of entertaining themselves so they used to get into trouble. Sister Emmanuelle moved into Ezbet El Nakhl and lived in a small single room hut with very few possessions. She traveled into the city everyday at 5 o'clock in the morning for mass at the city convent. Sister Emmanuelle lived with very little food and had to put up with the many problems that the *zabaleen* lived with, like white worms in food supplies and housing, fleas and disease.

"She was living right among them, the garbage collectors, the pigs, the whole mess. I had never seen anything like this in my life," said Dr. Mounir Neamatalla, a leading Egyptian expert in environmental science and poverty reduction who worked closely with her throughout the 1980s. "You could

see one of the worst qualities of life on the planet, but in this inferno was an enterprising population that worked like ants," he said.

The "Salam" Center

Sister Emmanuelle had not been at Ezbet El Nakhl long when she decided to open a school in her spare room. She accepted any child of any religion who was willing to learn. She often took her small class on field trips to the pyramids and other famous places around Cairo. She started teaching children and men basic Arabic. Her classes were very successful, and many passed Arabic reading and writing exams; including herself.

Sister Emmanuelle was desperate for a youth club and center to help the *zabaleen*. She set about collecting funds from local charities and around Europe. She finally achieved this two years later. A kitchen, club, pool, football field and lounge were set up for the youth of the Ezbet El Nakhl. She called it the '*Salam Center*,' which is Arabic for peace. It was opened on March 29 1979 and the center also provided social, medical, cultural and educational help.

When Sister Emmanuelle was satisfied with her work at Ezbet El Nakhl, she moved on to Mokkatam; a refuse collector's dump which was in worse situation than Ezbet El Nakhl. There were thousands of families living on a gravesite and their conditions were terrible. Sister Emmanuelle started the work of collecting money from charities to build a factory for composting material, which she finally achieved. Sister Emmanuelle's work in the rubbish slums contributed greatly to the progress of the living conditions in the refuse collector's lives.

She reluctantly left Egypt in 1993, at the age of 85. Two years after her departure, a young Comboni missionary, Fr. Luciano Verdoshia, who was lecturing in Dar Comboni, the Institute of Arabic and Islamic Studies of Cairo, took up Sister Emmanuelle's legacy and started working with the *zabaleen*. He is still there, carrying on with his charitable work.

A media personality

Upon her return to France, Sister Emmanuelle continued to speak out for the needy, regularly appearing on French television, her white hair swept up into a gray scarf and her eyes sparkling behind large glasses. She had made her first appearance on French television in 1990, and her mixture of infectious enthusiasm, humor and the unquenched moral indignation with which she hit into bourgeois complacency and political corruption soon made her a firm favorite.

She aged to be almost centenarian, always active and full of *joy de vivre* and when her strong body started to show the signs of decay, she expressed her feeling in one of her books: “Old age is the greatest self-emptying. I had the naivety of thinking that old age would not concern me. I could not imagine this exhaustion that invades my body from head to foot. We have to accept moment by moment this powerlessness that becomes bigger every day. It is very hard, but at the same time, it is very good for our spiritual life: it frees us from our “ego”. I was intoxicated by the joy of relentless activity. Today, my poverty is inaction. It is possibly the greatest grace of my life because I am now in the naked truth”.

Sister Emmanuelle’s Vocational Journey

Sister Emmanuelle was also a writer, she published several books. The last one was; “*At one hundred years of age, I would like to tell you*” (2008). In those books, it is possible to follow the stages of her vocational journey.

Her childhood was marked by the sudden death of her father at sea. She writes: “The wild beauty of the sea had become the tragic mask of my sorrow. The beautiful foam on top of the waves had become just salty water, the water of my tears. My subsequent life was built on that drama. Since the beginning I knew that in this world happiness is very fragile”.

The call of the Absolute

That unforgettable infancy experience was confirmed later on in her successive years. “The more I was able to enjoy the simple moments of happiness in my life, the less I was clinging to them. I have always known that they were not destined to last. I enjoyed them intensely, in the fullness

of the moment, like instants of a marvelous grace which rendered my life something enchanted. I did not try to prolong them or stop the happiness that was happening to me. I have accepted their transient nature like the foam of the waves”.

Since very young, Sister Emmanuelle experienced inner emptiness. She writes: “I liked to enjoy myself, go dancing, go to the movies. But all this used to leave me with nothing at all. When I was living in Brussels, I used to often call at London just to enjoy myself and be back. And then? I also used to call at Parish, enjoy myself and be back. All the same, I felt emptiness. That emptiness was, as it were, “devouring” my youth. I have tried to fill that emptiness. Very soon I looked for an enduring, limitless love in God, the love that my worldly life had denied me. I wanted an absolute. That absolute was Christ’s love in my heart, that I would later carry to thousands of children whom society marginalized”.

Formation as joy

“I entered the convent at 21. As a postulant I was dressed in a ridiculous uniform that made me look like a widow. And yet, when I put it on for the first time, I experienced an incredible happiness – the happiness of being at last free. Up to that moment, money was never enough for my clothes. Now I needed not to run after fashionable shoes or hats. I wanted to be beautiful at any cost. I aimed at pleasing and being admired, struggling to attract the attention of men. Suddenly, all this was no longer necessary. It was the beginning of my inner accomplishment. At last my heart was satisfied”.

Confirmation

The restlessness of youth had given place to the firmness of commitment and consecration. Sister Emmanuelle found happiness in teaching because of obedience and especially when her eager longing for the poor was fulfilled. The deep happiness that followed was the confirmation of a choice well done.

She writes: “My greatest happiness I experienced when we opened officially the Girls’ High School in the slums of Cairo. That day I really shed tears of joy. It was the crowning of so many efforts aimed at changing the life of the girls who were treated as slaves, forced to marry at 10 or 12 years of age. Their much older husbands used to beat them brutally, the first wedding

Lady Egeria (IV Century)

THE EYES OF EGERIA

Every year Christmas brings us the fascination of the Holy Places where Jesus was born, the Bethlehem Basilica and the Midnight Mass there. And this since the beginning of the Church. Lady Egeria was a noble woman from Galicia, Spain, who made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land about the years 381–384 A.D. She wrote a report of her journey in a long letter to a circle of women at home which survives in a later copy. Her firsthand account is, at the same time, a charming testimony of the observations of a Christian woman on the lengthy pilgrimage and, given its antiquity, a work of major significance for the fields of archaeology, church history and comparative liturgy.

We can imagine the diligence of the monk of Montecassino who, in the XI century, copied the parchment on which Lady Egeria, at Constantinople, had written a very long letter-journal of her amazing journey to the Holy Places to her “sisters” of the women guild to which she belonged. A feminine writing for a women’s community. Some of the fatigue of the silent, solitary monk has gone lost since part of the letter was not found. But the pages which have reached us describe one of the most interesting and remarkable journeys of antiquity thanks to the work of the ancient and silent amanuensis.

We can also imagine the happiness of Gian Francesco Gamurrini, historian and archeologist living and working in the city of Arezzo in Italy, when in 1884, in a monastic library of his city, he read for the first time after seven centuries the forgotten pages copied by the unknown monk. Hiding his own emotions, Gamurrini spread on the large table of the reading room a map of the Middle East and tried, moving a pencil, to follow the route of the pilgrim Lady Egeria. He was amazed by the enormous size of the enterprise of the brave ancient woman. He had discovered the lost journal of the most important Christian pilgrimage of the ancient Roman time.

In the only representation we have of her, Lady Egeria has deep, dark, kind of melancholic eyes, with marked rings under them, long nose, the hairs well parted and a line of green precious stones around the neck. The simple earrings are sparkling. The whole countenance has a thoughtful look with a certain nobility which befits an intellectual, educated and pious woman.

Certainly she was a brave woman: a woman alone on the roads of the Middle East. From Constantinople to Sinai, from Egypt to Jerusalem, from Mount Nebo to Edessa, from Palestine to Mesopotamia. Certainly she was animated by the strength of the Spirit, by the irresistible desire to visit the Holy Places, to go and pray on Job's tomb and see the place of the Burning Bush on Mount Sinai. She wanted to see with her own eyes the land described in the Bible.

A natural born narrator

Much of the surviving information about Lady Egeria comes from a letter written by the 7th century Galician monk Valerio of Bierzo. What we know is that her name was Egeria and she set out on her long journey from the far away province of Spanish Galicia. She traveled because of a religious quest: Christianity was the new creed of the Roman empire; people could now at last reach Jerusalem in order to kneel on Christ's empty tomb. She traveled in order to pray. With devotion, in every place, she read pages from the Scripture which was like the compass of her pilgrimage, and prayed.

But she traveled also to satisfy her desire and intellectual curiosity. She showed to be a strong woman: she climbed laboriously the side of mount Sinai, was adamant to reach Jacob's tomb, she faced deserts and mountains, crossed unsafe territories, she wanted to pray at the river Jordan where John the Baptist was baptizing. She wanted to see with her own eyes the sea which opened up in front of the people of Israel escaping from Egypt. She moved about all the routes of the Middle East. But she stayed at length in the holy city of Jerusalem. And left for us a detailed description of the liturgies of the IV century Church.

Lady Egeria is a natural born narrator: with minimum of means she achieves suggestive results, like in this passage: "We arrived in place where the mountains through which we were passing, opened up and formed an immense valley which extended in front of our eyes, almost flat and very beautiful and beyond the valley the Holy Mountain of God appeared: Sinai".

In another passage she wrote: “ It was a sycamore tree, an immense plant, almost as vast as a dome. In its shade meetings and village assemblies take place. It is a holy tree. They say that it was planted by the patriarchs”. That is what Lady Egeria jots down in her journal and adds: “The sycamore tree is extremely old but it still gives fruits and whoever is afflicted by ailments comes to this tree to get branches and leaves to be used as medicines and receives a benefit”. We are in Lower Egypt, in the delta of the river Nile. Lady Egeria listens attentively to the bishop of Ramesse. The holy man says that the tree is known as “the tree of truth”.

Studying Scripture on Location

Lady Egeria put down her observations in a letter now called *Itinerarium Egeriae*, or the Travels of Egeria. The surviving manuscripts do not have the beginning of her account. What we do have begins at Mt. Sinai, where she went to see all she could that might relate to the Exodus. Everywhere she went Lady Egeria found guides, monks, and religious leaders who would show her the sites, then she would read the Scriptures focusing on where she was and the Biblical significance of the place.

Evident in all her pilgrimage was a desire to deepen her understanding of the Scriptures by seeing the very places where biblical events occurred. Her description of the places visited is always subordinate to the truth of Scripture itself. At Sinai she climbed to the top of the mountain where the Glory of God had shown. Resident monks showed her where it was thought the golden calf had stood as well as the burning bush, whose roots-she wrote - were still well established!

After a stay in Jerusalem, Lady Egeria made other journeys to biblical sites: to Mt. Nebo where Moses died, now located in modern Jordan, and Harran, where Job's tomb and Abraham's house could still be seen, now in modern Turkey. Lady Egeria traveled the main caravan and trade routes. At times Roman soldiers provided an escort. Faithful monks provided hospitality and guidance along the way, continuing a tradition of hospitality dating from the earliest days of the Church.

The most interesting portion of Lady Egeria's narrative, however, is her account of the worship practices of the Christians of Jerusalem. At least six churches in Jerusalem were all established on places associated with major

events in the life of Christ. Daily and Sunday services at the churches focused on the particular importance of each site in Jesus' life, but the close proximity of all the churches soon led to a seasonal, annual series of celebrations, with each church playing a specific part in the yearly liturgy. Lady Egeria described this pattern of worship in detail.

The making of the Liturgical Year

A way of retracing, reliving, and re-enacting the last week of Jesus' life naturally grew up in association with these churches. Large crowds from throughout Jerusalem, as well as pilgrims from elsewhere, gathered to participate. In addition to the regular daily services at all the Jerusalem churches, additional times of prayers, hymns, and Scripture reading were held during Holy Week, or the Great Week as the Jerusalemites called it, to remember the events of Christ's last week on earth.

On Holy Tuesday the bishop led the people to the Eleona Church on the Mount of Olives and read to them Jesus' teachings to His disciples from Matthew 23-24. On Wednesday evening, a priest read the passage where Judas Iscariot went to the Jews to set a price for his betrayal of the Lord. The people moaned and groaned, and many were moved to tears. On Thursday, special services were again held at the Mount of Olives churches, and then the bishop and people went to Gethsemane. After a prayer and hymn, the Scripture describing the Lord's agony in the Garden was read. Lady Egeria noted that no one failed to be a part of the remaining ceremonies, tired though they might be from their long vigils and fasting.

In the early hours of Friday they made their way back to the church of the Holy Sepulcher, where the bishop read the Gospel accounts of Jesus before Pilate. Before returning briefly to their homes, the people went to Mount Zion to pray at the pillar in Caiaphas' house where Jesus was whipped. Friday was the most solemn day of the Great Week in Jerusalem. In the morning the wood of the cross Queen Helena had found was brought out for reverence. For hours pilgrims filed by to see the holy relic.

But for Lady Egeria, the three-hour service that began at noon was most meaningful. Nothing was done during all of that time except the reading from the Scriptures. And so, from 12 noon to 3pm, passages from Scripture were continuously read and hymns were sung, to show the people that whatever the prophets had said would come to pass concerning the passion

of the Lord can be shown, both through the Gospels and the writings of the apostles, to have taken place. And so, during these three hours, all the people were taught that nothing happened which was not prophesied, and that nothing was prophesied which was not completely fulfilled. Every one, young and old, was moved to tears with the realization that the Lord suffered for them.

In Jerusalem Lady Egeria found a greater emphasis on the preaching of Scripture than she had known in her home church. The people were always learning about the Bible and the love of God. As they walked to and from the various holy sites and heard the Scriptures read, they were able to involve themselves in the historical life of Jesus. As pilgrims like Lady Egeria came to the Holy Land, more and more Christians became familiar with the annual cycle of feasts commemorating the life of Jesus that had grown up there.

Many churches elsewhere had known nothing like the lessons from Scripture regularly connected with the feasts, but gradually these became part of the liturgy and worship of other churches. The Christian year, with its annual celebrations of all aspects of Jesus' life, soon became the established worship pattern of the church. At a time when few people had a copy of the Scriptures themselves, this annual cycle of Scripture reading connected with the life of Christ was an important way of confirming the Christians in their faith.

Baptism Was Not to Be Taken Lightly

Part of Lady Egeria's account has to do with baptism at Easter in Jerusalem. What follows is a portion of her description. As we can see, careful inquiry was made into the life and character of the candidate before final acceptance for baptism was given: "I must also describe how those who are to be baptized at Easter are instructed. Whoever gives his name does so the day before Lent and this is before those eight weeks during which, as I have said, Lent is observed here".

"On the first day of Lent, a throne is set up for the bishop in the center of the major church, the Martyrium. The priests sit on stools on both sides, and all the clergy stand around. One by one the candidates are led forward in such a way that the men come with their godfathers and the women with their godmothers. Then the bishop questions individually the neighbors of the one

who has come up, inquiring: "Does he lead a good life? Does he obey his parents? Is he a drunkard or a liar?" And he seeks out in the man other vices which are more serious".

“If the person proves to be guiltless in all these matters, the bishop notes down the man's name with his own hand. If, however, he is accused of anything, the bishop orders him to go out and says: "Let him amend his life, and when he has done so let him then approach the baptismal font." He makes the same inquiry of both men and women. If, however, someone is a stranger, he cannot easily receive baptism, unless he has witnesses who know him” .

Lady Egeria's record of her travels to the Holy Land provides a late IV century account of liturgical worship in Palestine. The liturgical year was in its incipient stages at the time of her visit. This is invaluable because the development of liturgical worship reached universal practice in the IV century. Lady Egeria provides a first-hand account of practices and implementation of liturgical seasons as they existed at the time of her visit. This snapshot is even before the universal acceptance of the December 25 celebration of the nativity of Jesus. Fantastic glimpse into old world Christianity!

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