

# WOMEN'S POWER



## SIX SAINTLY LAY WOMEN

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2021

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Wangary Maathai (1940-2011)

## **THE HUMMINGBIRD REVOLUTION**

Annalena Tonelli (1943-2003)

## **“I AM A NOBODY”**

Dorothy Day (1897-1980)

## **THE GRAND LADY OF PACIFISM**

Lady Zilda Arns (1934-2010)

## **JUST A LITTLE SUGAR AND A PINCH OF SALT**

June Keithley-Castro (1947-2013)

## **THE VOICE OF EDSA REVOLUTION**

Maria Bonino (1953-2005)

## **THE DREAM OF A LIFETIME**



Wangary Maathai (1940-2011)

## **THE HUMMINGBIRD REVOLUTION**

*Everyone can make a difference. “You don’t need a university degree to plant a tree”, professor Wangari Maathai used to say. Through her Green Belt Movement, she mobilized thousands of women to plant millions of trees in Kenya. This is the lesson that the outstanding woman, pioneer of the African environment, has left us, passionate as she was in bringing forward her apparently “crazy” objective to the point of receiving the Nobel Prize for it in 2004. A convinced Catholic, she was a member of the Legion of Mary throughout her life. Cancer took her prematurely away in 2011.*

“One day a terrible fire broke out in a forest and the enormous wood was suddenly engulfed in wild flames. All the animals were frightened and escaped from their dens towards only one direction. They arrived at the bank of a big river with a strong current and, turning back, they could only stare at the fire which was consuming their habitat. They felt discouraged and powerless. They all were lamenting the destruction of their home: the wood. Each one of them thought that there was nothing to do in order to stop the fire...except the hummingbird.

On its part, the hummingbird decided to try. It run to the stream, collected the little water it could and aimed at the forest fire. There it released on the fire the few drops of water that its beak was able to collect. Then it went back to the stream and repeated the operation. It did it again and again, going to and fro tirelessly. All the other animals stared at the hummingbird in disbelief. Some of them even tried to dampen its enthusiasm with comments as such: “Stop, leave it! The enterprise is too hard, you are too small, you are going to burn your wings, your beak is so tiny... It is impossible to extinguish all that fire!” But the hummingbird continued undaunted. At last the lion shouted: “What are you doing?”. The hummingbird without stopping answered: “I am doing what I can”.

It was May 2006 and it was with this little story that professor Wangari Maathai, the Kenyan woman who two years before had received the Nobel Prize, started her *lectio magistralis* for the 58<sup>th</sup> Conference of the Association of International Educators, NAFSA, in front of seven thousand members from all over the world, gathered at Montreal, Canada. “What are you doing?” the neighbors had asked Wangari when they saw her plant her first tree in her garden. She answered :”I am doing what I can”.

She then did the same in the middle of the local market. To the women friends who were staring at her, she explained: “I want to fight against the indiscriminate cutting of trees, the disappearance of the forest, soil erosion, desertification, water pollution, and also against poverty, famine and the slavery of women forced as they are to walk for hours searching for firewood”.

She invited them to do the same: “You don’t need a university degree to plant a tree” she said. This is how the first tree nurseries were born in many villages of Kenya’s Central Province. Then the initiative spread everywhere in Kenya. The first environmentalists from Sweden arrived and were fascinated by the hundreds, thousands of women who had become “skilled foresters without a degree”.

Wangari had an idea: “The seedlings are free. Even the work of the women is free. A little incentive however would not be bad”. Since then, because of international funding, for each seedling planted and still surviving after three months, the women started receiving few shillings. The government made available to Wangari some public places in the capital, Nairobi, and the Minister of Forestry promised to provide the seedlings free of charge. This was the Green Belt Movement, the brain child of professor Wangari Maathai.

### ***First woman university professor***

Wangari Maathai was born on April 1, 1940, in the Nyeri District in central Kenya, of a family of simple means belonging to the Kikuyo ethnic group. She was however privileged to live in a part of the country of a breath-taking beauty, close to Mount Kenya, which the Kikuyu people call *Kiri Nyaga* (the Creator’s House) and to the Aberdare Range, the largest forest and water reservoir of the country. As she beautifully writes, the experiences of her very young age shaped her love for the land:

“Nothing is more beautiful than cultivating the land at dusk. At that time of day, in the central highlands, the air and the soil are cool, the sun is going down, the sunlight is golden against the ridges and the green of trees, and there is usually a breeze. As you remove the weeds and press the earth around the crops you feel content, and wish the light would last longer so you could cultivate more. Earth and water, air and waning fire of the sun combine to form the essential elements of life and reveal to me my kinship with the soil.

When I was a child I sometimes became so absorbed working in the fields with my machete that I didn't notice the end of the day until it got so dark that I could no longer differentiate between weeds and crops. At that point I knew it was time to go home, on the narrow paths that crisscrossed the fields and rivers and woodlots”.

As all the girls of the same age, Wangari was dreaming of going to school. She was more courageous than most and it was not difficult for her to fulfill her desires. She received quality education first with the Consolata Sisters and later with the Loreto Sisters. This was the solid foundation on which she later on built her future in teaching, in politics and in civil responsibility.

She then got a scholarship to study in the United States of America from an initiative that was supported by one of the leading promoters of national independence, Tom Mboya as well as the Kennedy Foundation on behalf of the Kenyan youth preparing for leadership positions. In 1964 she took a diploma in Biology and in 1966 a degree in science at Pittsburgh University in Pennsylvania. In 1971, back in Kenya, she completed her doctorate at Nairobi University. She then started teaching at the university. She was the first woman in East Africa to gain a Ph.D and to hold the position of university professor.

Wangari's love for nature was soon tested by the population explosion and consequently by the need of growing ever more food. Moreover, in order to support the agricultural needs, people started cutting the nearby forests in order to extend their fields. In those years it was almost impossible to make the farmers understand that, in the long run, the deforestation would have devastating effects also in agriculture and in the whole environment. Therefore, when Wangari started the campaign in favor of the land, many people looked at her with hostility.

## ***The Green Belt Movement***

Notwithstanding the opposition, Wangari did not bend and even risking her personal safety, kept on with determination on the road she had started. For her, Mother Nature, as she used to say, needed first to be respected in order for people to enjoy the benefits of her goodness. In harmony with the African spirituality, Wangari cared first for the indigenous trees the roots of which contributed considerably to check the soil erosion, and in particular, the *mugumu tree*, under the shade of which the most important meetings of the community were taking place since the ancestors used to value it as a manifestation of the vitality and creative power of God. Wangari had a special concern towards the young generations, aware as she was of the many implications of inheriting a totally exhausted land, robbed of its resources.

The efforts to keep the integrity of the environment found a concretization in 1977 with the birth of the Green Belt Movement that Wangari started and promoted. The main objectives of the initiative were to exercise pressure on the politicians in order to foster laws respectful of nature and spread the education about the environment among the youth, especially mobilizing the women. Kakura Forest, Uhuru Park and the Great Lakes Region will be remembered as among the most relevant initiatives in which Wangari lavished her competence and energies.

Kakura Forest is the main green lung of Nairobi, a section of the urban area always in the sight of developers and corrupt politicians engaged in building construction. Uhuru Park is the second green lung of the capital, a welcoming area for the free gatherings of the population, especially the slum dwellers. In order to defend the integrity of these two zones, Wangari had to face opposition, mudslinging campaigns and even political emargination.

In the Great Lakes Region the huge African rivers: the Nile, the Congo and the Zambezi originate and this is where so many endangered animal species thrive. The Green Belt Movement became the spokesman of these areas and up to the present it maintains a network of educational activities. To plant trees is now a set feature in all the social gathering of the area.

Wangari had married in 1969 and had three children, but her powerful personality was too much for her husband who separated from her and eventually filed for divorce in 1979, saying that she was “a too strong-minded woman” and that he was unable “to control her”. Since then, Wangari’s life was a solitary even if successful battle.

### *Saving Uhuru Park*

As long as the women limited themselves to planting trees there was nothing for the politicians to be afraid of. So much so that in few years the plant nurseries had become six thousand and the “foresters without a degree” more than eighty thousand. They could be all potential voters at the moment of political elections. On the other hand, the new forests could only please the politicians whose saw-mills were indiscriminately laying waste the woods and whose foresters kept underselling the natural wealth of the country. But Wangari had something else in her mind.

“It is not only question of reforesting the country – she stated- but also of fighting for democracy and the respect of human rights”. She wanted especially to empower the women through seminars, laboratories, demonstrations and ecological initiatives in which science, social commitment and political education could go together. The Green Belt Movement became a network of initiatives concerning women education, family planning and campaigns against corruption.

The idea became popular also outside Kenya: in Tanzania, Uganda, Malawi, Lesotho, Ethiopia and Zimbabwe women got together to promote Wangari’s ideals. The experts in the environment from all over the world started appreciating Wangari. Several acknowledgements and awards started materializing, among them the Goldman Foundation Award (1991) which represents a kind of Nobel Prize among the ecologists. But the most pleasing acknowledgement was conferred to Wangari by her fellow women who called her their “Freedom Fighter”.

One of the most telling examples was when President Arap Moi himself wanted to build a 60 storey skyscraper right in the middle of the Uhuru Park, the central park of Nairobi, the capital. The budget for the building was of 200 million dollars. Wangari shouted: “Uhuru means freedom, but this skyscraper is the exact opposite, because it will destroy the last green island of the capital”. Wangari won and the project was abandoned.

The victory however was paid for dearly. The NGO Green Belt Movement was chased out of the government buildings and gangs close to Moi destroyed several seedling nurseries. A mudslinging campaign against Wangari was launched and president Moi himself called her “a crazy woman”. Of course the crazy trait shown by Wangari was her far-sighting commitment for the environment, something which is now taken for granted by the majority.

### *At the service of peace*

In October 2004 Wangari Maathai was awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace. The Nobel Prize at last came to an African woman, as representative of the heroic African women who are the backbone of their families and countries. In the written motivation for the award, “Wangari’s contribution to sustainable development, democracy and peace” are clearly mentioned. This sums up her steady commitment for the environment, her civic passion for the respect of human rights and the promotion of peace among peoples: a precious heritage worth keeping and valuing by everybody.

She wrote: “Although I was a highly educated woman, it did not seem odd to me to be working with my hands, often with my knees on the ground, alongside rural women. Some politicians and others in the 1980s and 1990s ridiculed me for doing so. But I had no problem with it, and the rural women both accepted and appreciated that I was working with them to improve their lives and the environment. After all, I was a child of the same soil. Education, if it means anything, should not take people away from the land, but instill in them even more respect for it, because educated people are in a position to understand what is being lost. The future of the planet concerns all of us and we should do what we can to protect it”.

In Africa, the binomial environment and peace constitutes an unbreakable reality: in fact in no other continent the desertification is worrying as the one that has happened in many African countries. And when the desert advances, the essential life infrastructures are lacking and entire peoples are forced to migrate in search of pastures, water, sustenance. Situations as such trigger strong tensions and social instability.

In her book *The Religion of the Earth*, Wangari Maathai several times quotes pope Benedict XVI’s Message for the World Day of Prayer for Peace (January 1, 2010) on the theme: “If we want to keep peace, we must respect creation”. Wangari, peaceful champion of the environment, lived for all this and in her person peace, solidarity and citizenship became one single reality. She was then an elected member of Parliament and served as assistant minister for Environment and Natural Resources in the government of President Mwai Kibaki between January 2003 and November 2005.

Wangari died of cancer in 2011. Now the indomitable messenger of the forests rests in the shade of the *Democratic Space*, in Kabele Campus of Nairobi University. In addition to the state funeral which took place in Uhuru Park and the religious ceremonies in Nairobi Catholic cathedral,



several moments of inter-religious, ecumenical prayer took place in the capital and five thousand seedlings were planted in her memory.

A convinced, practicing Catholic and member of the Legion of Mary for her whole life, Wangari Maathai was however always very discreet in the practice of her faith, but public was her appreciation for whatever could unite the faithful of different denominations and religions in building a society that was nature friendly and respectful of all its inhabitants.

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Annalena Tonelli (1943-2003)

## **“I AM A NOBODY”**

*This is how she defined herself, lost as she was, alone, in the great sea of suffering humanity in Somalia. An Italian lawyer and social activist, she volunteered to the service of the poor and sick for 33 years in Africa. Since very young, Annalena Tonelli (1943 - 2003) was attracted by the example of radical Christianity of Blessed Charles de Foucauld and in an extraordinary way imitated his example, ending her life like him by the bullet of an unknown assassin. She trained herself on the job to become an expert in successfully treating tuberculosis and in June 2003 was awarded the Nansen Refugee Award. She is a gigantic figure and by what she describes as the mercy sacrament, she showed an extraordinary understanding of the mystery of Christ's incarnation in those who suffer. She is still remembered with an incredible love by the Muslim population of the place where she lived and died.*

The area of Northern Kenya bordering with Somalia is a semi-desertic wasteland crisscrossed by tracks that often see bands of marauders belonging to the nomadic tribes that inhabit those desolated places roam about looking for robbery and looting. They are the notorious Shifta. Right in the middle of this God-forsaken part of Africa there is the little town of Wajir that was at that time the residence of Annalena Tonelli, the heroic Italian lay volunteer who had specialized in the cure of tuberculosis.

In 1984, following political and inter-clan clashes, the army of Kenya started a repression campaign against the Degodia Somali clan in the Wajir area known as the Wagalla Massacre. The Degodia were suspected of being Shifta or bandits along the roadways. The Kenyan military rounded up 5000 men and boys and brought them to the Wagalla Airstrip and forced them to lie on their stomachs, naked, for five days. Possibly a thousand were shot, tortured or died of exposure.

With incredible courage and determination, Annalena brought a couple of lorries and her Toyota Serf to the Wagalla Airstrip and attempted to collect the bodies and treat the wounded but was refused. Later she followed the tracks of the military vehicles who were dumping the bodies outside the Wagalla Airstrip. Some of the victims were not dead and she rescued them. She brought a journalist to photograph the genocide. She smuggled the photos out with Barbara Lefkow, the wife of an American diplomat, to put pressure on the international community.

The public denunciation of Annalena Tonelli helped to stop the killings but not before thousands died. The Wagalla Massacre is Kenya's worst human rights violation in its history. Arrested and taken in front of a martial court, Annalena was told that the fact she had escaped two ambushes was not a guarantee that she would survive a third one. Due to Tonelli's vehement protests over the Kenyan military's use of violence, the Kenyan authorities refused to extend her work permit. Annalena Tonelli subsequently relocated to Somalia, continuing alone her life of dedication to the poor.

### *On the steps of Charles de Foucauld*

Annalena Tonelli was born at Forlì in Italy on April 2 1943, the only daughter of Guido, manager of the local Farmers' Cooperative and Teresina Bignardi, who had also four sons. She studied law at the ancient Bologna University and got her doctorate, "only to please her family" as she later declared, because her deepest tendency was for humanitarian work.

Annalena left Italy for Africa in 1969. She was 26. She had already spent six years of service to the poor in the slums of her city of origin, to the children of the local orphanage, especially the little girls with mental handicap or victims of trauma, and to the Third World poor by means of the *Committee against the World Hunger* started in 1963 by her own initiative which will continue to operate in the future on behalf of Annalena's initiatives.

She later declared: "I left Italy determined to shout the Gospel message with my life on Fr. Charles de Foucauld's wake who had fired my existence. Thirty three years after, I am shouting the Gospel with my very life and I am on fire with the desire to keep on shouting it so until the end". Hers was a vocation already ripe at a very young age : "I chose to be for others: the poor, the suffering, the abandoned, the non-loved since I was a little girl and such I have been and keep on being and will continue to be until the end of my life. What I wanted was only to follow Christ. Nothing else interests me but Christ and the poor in Him. I am not married because this is the choice I made: I wanted to belong completely to God "

Annalena settled in Kenya, where she worked as a lay Christian missionary. She spent over a decade in the town of Wajir, caring for the destitute and the sick. She focused on tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment; moreover on campaigns for eradication of female genital mutilation, and special schools for hearing-impaired, blind and disabled children. The beginnings were not easy for her in Kenya: everything was against her: she was a young, white woman, unmarried: something absurd in that environment, where celibacy did not exist and was not a value for anybody, even it was considered a non-value.

### ***The Pilot Project***

In 1976, Annalena became responsible for a World Health Organization (WHO) pilot project for treating tuberculosis in nomadic people. This was because she had started to invite the nomadic tuberculosis patients to camp in front of the *Rehabilitation Centre for Disabled* she was running with other female volunteers who had joined her to serve polio patients, blind, deaf-mute, and disabled people. This approach guaranteed patients' compliance in taking the therapy over the needed six-month treatment, and it was adopted by WHO as DOTS (Directly Observed Therapy Short).

Annalena was able to feed daily more than three thousand people, cooking tons of maize flour, vegetables and beans in huge drums that had previously stored aircraft fuel. She herself was happy with only four hours sleep per night, she had only two gowns and a shawl and was satisfied with very little food; she only sometimes indulged herself with some Italian coffee and a few crackers.

She also created a school for the deaf at Wajir. The approach was original and it was at Annalena's school for the deaf that the Somali Sign Language was born for the first time. This success made that graduates of this school have gone to other parts of Somali-speaking Africa to start other schools for the deaf.

From the nomads of the desert Annalena said that she learned precariousness because of their awareness of the possibility of suddenly losing everything and therefore the necessity of starting afresh. She wrote: "They have taught me faith, unconditional abandonment, surrender to God, a surrender that has nothing fatalistic in it, but that is like a rock or like being rooted in God, our rock of refuge, a surrender which is trust and love. My nomadic friends of the desert have taught me how to do everything, start everything, accomplish everything in God's name".

As we have mentioned above, her staying in Kenya was marked by trouble and contradictions. She had to leave the country the first time in 1990; she went back the following year but after a while she had to run away from the danger of being executed. Eventually her working permit was denied and she moved across the border to Somalia. Annalena first settled in the southern port town of Merca, which during the colonial period was part of Italian Somaliland. She later moved to Borama, in the north-western Awdal region, a town of the former British Somaliland protectorate.

There she founded a 250 beds hospital for tuberculosis patients and later on for AID patients. She also started a school for deaf and handicapped children. She wrote: "The population is totally Muslim. There is not a single Christian person with whom I might share a word about my faith. Twice a year, around Christmas and Easter, the Catholic bishop of Gibuti comes to celebrate Mass for me and with me and gives me communion. The people here are praying so that I may convert to Islam. They hint it to me discretely, but they always add that God knows and that I will go to heaven even if I remain a Christian".

She was happy among them because of the strength of her vocation. She wrote: “ I run crazy, I lose my head over these shreds of wounded humanity: the more wounded they are, the more ill-treated they are, despised, voiceless, of no value in the eyes of the world, the more I love them. And this love is tenderness, understanding, tolerance, lack of fear, audacity. This is not a merit, it is a demand of my nature. But there is no doubt that in them I see Christ, the Lamb of God who suffers in his flesh the sins of the world, who shoulders them, who is in pain but with so much love...Nobody is outside God’s love”.

The respect and the love of the local community didn’t however spare her from martyrdom. Threatened for her witness and work, on October 5, 2003, two hired gunmen shot her in the head while she was coming back to the hospital and residence. Around her, as she lay on the ground, a circle of people quickly formed itself in order to protect her. They carried her to the hospital, but in vain: the wound was too grave and Annalena died. Once before she had escaped lynching by hiding in the maze of the village streets while an angry crowd was looking for her, accusing her of spreading the AIDS epidemics because she had started gathering the HIV positive patients in her hospital. This time violent death caught up with her, as it had with her model and protector Blessed Charles de Foucauld.

### ***Mother Teresa of Somalia***

Commenting on her sudden and tragic death, Mons. Sandro De Pretis, then vicar general of Gibuti, said: “With her work, Annalena was giving a witness about Christian love. She did not do direct apostolate, she was not there to convert, but only in order to be an instrument of God’s love”. Annalena herself gave the following witness about her life in one of the very rare public statements, on the occasion of the International Day of Voluntary Service at the Vatican in Rome:

“I wanted to follow Jesus and I chose to be for the poor. Since then, I am living to the service of the poor. Because of Jesus, I made a radical choice, even if poor as a real destitute I will never be able to be. I live out my service without a name, without the security of a religious order, without belonging to any organization, without a salary, not even the contributions for an old age pension. I shout the Gospel only with my life and I am on fire in order to keep on until the end.

This is my basic motivation, together with a passion for wounded and diminished human beings, those who are such without their fault, beyond race or culture or faith... Our life makes sense only if we love. Nothing makes sense, only love. My life has known so many dangers. Many times I have risked death. For years I have lived in the midst of war and I have experienced in the flesh of those who are mine, those I love, the badness of human beings, their perversion, cruelty and iniquity. I came out of it with the unshakable conviction that what matters is loving, only loving. Only thus life is worth living.”

When she was at Merka, in the former Italian Somaliland, the Italian government sent a warship in the vicinity and Annalena was invited aboard in order to receive a cross to the civic merit. They came for her with smaller craft and helicopters. There was a great ceremony. They told Annalena that in the aircraft carrier the Italian ambassador was waiting for her. At first she didn't want to accept, but eventually she understood that she had to comply. So she boarded the helicopter and went aboard and was solemnly awarded the cross to the civic merit in the presence of a rejoicing little crowd.

She said: “I never looked at that medal and I don't even know its value. I sent it immediately to my mother. As you may know, I am against such type of acknowledgements: they are the exact contrary of my life's choice. I wanted to be a nobody. I have succeeded in this. I live like a nobody, with no power or protection. I want to continue like this: this is the meaning of my life. When you do something for the others, nobody should come to know it”.

“Mother Teresa of Somalia”: this is how Annalena Tonelli was called because of her life spent day in day out on behalf of the lost, the least and the last: the sick, the poor...A life of selfless service cut short by a gunshot in Boroma, an isolated corner of Somalia. A devout Catholic, she found herself living and working in a pervasive Muslim society. She stated: “I try to live with extreme respect towards those whom the Lord has entrusted to me. I have assumed as far as possible their life style. I live a very sober type of life as far as accommodation, food, means of transport and dress. I have spontaneously renounced my western habits. I have looked for dialogue with everybody”.

Annalena Tonelli's life was enlightened by a deep faith in God. But it was also marked by violence and difficulties, due to the fact of being a woman in

a Muslim environment of extreme poverty and lack of financial and sanitary means. Notwithstanding all this, her message is one of hope. She is a very relevant witness of openness to dialogue, to meeting those who are different, destitute, dejected.

She stated: “The small ones, the voiceless, those who count nothing in the eyes of the world but much in God’s eyes, his favorite, need us and we must be with them and for them and it doesn’t matter if our action is like a drop in the ocean. Jesus Christ never spoke of results. He only told us to love one another, to wash one another’s feet, to forgive always... The poor are waiting for us. The ways of serving are infinite and left to our own imagination. Let us not wait to be instructed on the time of our service: let us invent, take initiative...And we shall find a new earth and a new heaven each day of our life”.

Annalena Tonelli demonstrated with her life that the primary way of ecumenism is that of living side by side with the others, those who are different, listening to them, keeping the Gospel within the heart and taking care of them in love.

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Dorothy Day (1897-1980)

## **THE GRAND LADY OF PACIFISM**

*Born in a godless family, active as a radical journalist, she discovered God because of the joy of expecting a baby. The father of the baby left her, when she decided to have the baby baptized. She faced life as a long loneliness with her only daughter Tamar, but God used her to gather the poor in the Catholic Worker movement and to give a voice to Catholic pacifism in the USA. She saw the Catholic Church as “the church of the immigrants, the church of the poor”. Survivor of innumerable social battles, she became an icon*

*of resistance and attracted the admiration of champions like Thomas Merton and Mother Theresa.*

At the beginning of August 1973, in California, hundreds of members of the Farm Workers Union of Caesar Chavez took part in a forbidden manifestation in support of their claim for fairer working conditions. About 150 of them were arrested by the police. Among the people arrested were thirty sisters and two priests. Extraordinary among the arrested was the tall figure of a very old woman, the Catholic radical journalist and activist Dorothy Day.

The photo of Dorothy seated on her folding chair and discussing amiably with scores of policemen armed to the teeth, appeared in the press of the whole nation. In prison, Dorothy became very quickly a legend. There was a lot of media coverage and Joan Baez visited them and sang for them in the prison. Most of the guards were Catholic, and they came to Dorothy and had their Bibles blessed and their rosaries kissed. At the moment of the release of the arrested, two weeks later, Dorothy refused to give back the prison uniform on which her friends had scribbled their names.

That was the last time Dorothy was arrested for taking part in an episode of civil disobedience. She was 75. Innumerable other times she had been arrested during her long life from that November 1917 when she went to prison for being one of forty *soufragettes* in front of the White House, protesting women's exclusion from the electorate. On November 29 1980, at the age of 83, Dorothy Day died peacefully at home, in the Catholic Worker community. At her side was her daughter Tamar Theresa representing also the eight grand children and many great grand children. After a lifetime of voluntary poverty she left no money for her funeral. It was paid for by the archdiocese of New York.

### ***Surprised by joy***

Dorothy Day, founder of the Catholic Worker movement, was born in Brooklyn, New York, on November 8, 1897. After surviving the San Francisco earthquake in 1906, the Day family moved into a tenement flat in Chicago's South Side. It was a big step down in the world made necessary because Dorothy's father, John Day, was out of work. When John Day was



appointed sports editor of a Chicago newspaper, the Day family moved into a comfortable house on the North Side. Young Dorothy had a gift for finding beauty in the midst of urban desolation. Drab streets were transformed by pungent odors: geranium and tomato plants, garlic, olive oil, roasting coffee, bread and rolls in bakery ovens. "Here," she said, "was enough beauty to satisfy me."

Dorothy won a scholarship that brought her to the University of Illinois campus at Urbana in the fall of 1914. But she was a reluctant scholar. Her reading was chiefly in a radical social direction. Dropping out of college two years later, she moved to New York where she found a job as a reporter for different socialist papers. She covered rallies and demonstrations, often taking part herself, and interviewed radicals and revolutionaries. Her conviction that the social order was unjust changed in no substantial way from her adolescence until her death, though she never identified herself with any political party.

Her religious development was a slower process. As a young journalist in New York, she would sometimes make late-at-night visits to St. Joseph's Catholic Church on Sixth Avenue. The Catholic climate of worship appealed to her. While she knew little about Catholic belief, Catholic spiritual discipline fascinated her. In 1924, Dorothy bought a beach cottage on Staten Island and began a common-law marriage with Forster Batterham, an English anarchist, opposed to marriage and religion.

They loved each other very much. They fished together, they walked everyday for miles and, little by little, an entire new world opened up for Dorothy. She started reading the Bible. Later she wrote: "I was happy but my very happiness made me know that there was a greater happiness to be obtained from life. It was in this time that I began consciously to pray more". A terrible doubt came over her. "Here you are - she told herself - in a stupor of content. You are biological. Like a cow. Prayer with you is like the opiate of the people". But she reasoned: "I am praying because I am happy, not because I am unhappy, I did not turn to God in grief, in despair - to get consolation, to get something from God".

Every hesitation ended in Dorothy when she realized in ecstasy that she was pregnant: "I will never forget my blissful joy when I was first sure that I was pregnant. Immediately I knew that I was going to have my baby baptized, cost what it may. I felt it was the greatest thing I could do for my child". The

cost was devastating: Foster did not like the pregnancy in the first place and said that if the baby was going to be baptized, he was going to leave her for good. The baby was born, a girl. The preparation for the baptism went ahead. When the day approached, Foster went out at sea to catch lobster for the celebration. The day came in July 1927 and the baby was baptized by the name of Tamar Theresa. All Dorothy's friends, anarchists and communists included, were invited and they came.

On the eve of the celebration Foster had left never to appear in Dorothy's life again. That was the starting of the long loneliness that Dorothy describes in her autobiography. She wrote: "I loved him in every way –as a wife, as a mother even. I loved him for all he knew and pitied him for what he didn't know. I loved him for the odds and ends I had to fish out of his sweater pockets and for the sand and shells he brought in with his fishing. I loved his integrity and stubborn pride."

The cost of the separation and loss lasted a lifetime. She wrote: "A woman doesn't feel whole without a man...For a woman who has experienced the joy of marriage, it is really hard. It took years for me not to wake up with the acute longing of a head leaning on my breast and an arm around my shoulders. I was experiencing a great sense of emptiness". 53 years later, Foster appeared at Dorothy's funeral.

### ***Bringing together faith and radical social values***

On December 28 1927, Dorothy was received into the Catholic Church. A special period commenced in her life as she tried to find a way to bring together her religious faith and her radical social values. She was praying to the Blessed Virgin Mary, with tears and anguish, that some way would open up for her to use what talents she possessed for her fellow workers, for the poor. In 1932, Dorothy met a Frenchman, Peter Maurin, an eccentric kindred spirit, a vagabond visionary, twenty years older than her. A strange team, they got along immediately like a house on fire.

Together they started the *Catholic Worker* newspaper and later opened Hospitality Houses for the poor and homeless whom Peter called the "ambassadors of God". It was the time of the great depression and thousands of people found themselves jobless and soon crowded the Hospitality Houses all over the United States. The *Catholic Worker* became a national movement. Over 100 of these houses are still functioning nowadays.

The Catholic Worker attitude toward those who were welcomed wasn't always appreciated. These weren't the "deserving poor," it was sometimes objected, but drunkards and good-for-nothings. A visiting social worker asked Dorothy how long the "clients" were permitted to stay. "We let them stay forever," Dorothy answered with a fierce look in her eye. "They live with us, they die with us, and we give them a Christian burial. We pray for them after they are dead. Once they are taken in, they become members of the family. Or rather they always were members of the family. They are our brothers and sisters in Christ."

The Catholic Worker also experimented with farming communes. But what got Dorothy into the most trouble was pacifism. A nonviolent way of life, as she saw it, was at the heart of the Gospel. She took as seriously as the early Church the command of Jesus to Peter: "Put away your sword, for whoever lives by the sword shall perish by the sword." For many centuries the Catholic Church had accommodated itself to war. Popes had blessed armies and preached Crusades. In the thirteenth century St. Francis of Assisi had revived the pacifist way, but by the twentieth century, it was unknown for Catholics to take such a position.

Wars did not lack during Dorothy's lifetime: the Spanish civil war, the Second World War, the Vietnam War. Every time she renewed her pacifist commitment, unmindful of the cost. Hospitality Houses had to be closed, the *Catholic Worker* lost thousands of readers.

One of the rituals of life for the New York Catholic Worker community beginning in the late 1950s was the refusal to participate in the state's annual civil defense drill. Such preparation for attack seemed to Dorothy part of an attempt to promote nuclear war as survivable and winnable and to justify spending billions on the military. Dorothy described her civil disobedience as an act of penance for America's use of nuclear weapons on Japanese cities. The first year the dissidents were reprimanded. Then every year until the rehearsal was cancelled in 1961, there were arrests.

Concern with the Church's response to war led Dorothy to Rome during the Second Vatican Council, an event Pope John XXIII hoped would restore "the simple and pure lines that the face of the Church of Jesus had at its birth." In 1963 she was one of 50 "Mothers for Peace" who went to Rome to thank Pope John for his encyclical *Pacem in Terris*. Close to death, the pope

couldn't meet them privately, but at one of his last public audiences blessed the pilgrims, asking them to continue their labors.

In 1965, Dorothy returned to Rome to take part in a fast expressing "our prayer and our hope" that the Council would issue "a clear statement, "Put away thy sword." She saw the unpublicized fast as a "widow's mite" in support of the bishops' effort to speak with a pure voice to the modern world.

Dorothy had reason to rejoice in December when the Constitution on the Church in the Modern World was approved by the bishops. The Council's described as "a crime against God and humanity" any act of war "directed to the indiscriminate destruction of whole cities or vast areas with their inhabitants." The Council called on states to make legal provision for conscientious objectors while describing as "criminal" those who obey commands that condemn the innocent and defenseless.

### ***On the way to sainthood***

Dorothy Day lived long enough to see her achievements honored. In 1967, when she made her last visit to Rome to take part in the International Congress of the Laity, she found she was one of two Americans -- the other an astronaut -- invited to receive Communion from the hands of Pope Paul VI. On her 75th birthday the Jesuit magazine *America* devoted a special issue to her, finding in her the individual who best exemplified "the aspiration and action of the American Catholic community during the past forty years." Notre Dame University presented her with its *Laetare* Medal, thanking her for "comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable."

Among those who came to visit her when she was no longer able to travel was Mother Theresa of Calcutta, who had once pinned on Day's dress the cross that is worn only by fully professed members of the Missionary Sisters of Charity. Long before her death, Dorothy found herself regarded by many as a saint. No words of hers are better known than her brusque response: "Don't call me a saint. I don't want to be dismissed so easily."

Nonetheless, having herself treasured the memory and witness of many saints she is a candidate for inclusion in the calendar of saints. In 2000, Cardinal John O'Connor, Archbishop of New York, initiated her cause for

canonization with the following words: “If any woman ever loved God and neighbor, it was Dorothy Day!” She worked for, lived with, and died among the poorest and most abandoned. In the drama of her life, she found first beauty, then truth and, ultimately, God in the poor. “Those who cannot see the face of Christ in the poor are atheists indeed” she said. “I firmly believe that our salvation depends on the poor”.

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Lady Zilda Arns (1934-2010)

## **JUST A LITTLE SUGAR AND A PINCH OF SALT**

*These, in a liter of water, make the simple serum against dehydration that saved the lives of millions of babies. This, together with faith, caring and discipline was the gospel of Dr. Zilda Arns, the founder of Pastoral de Crianca (Child Pastoral), a movement that involves about 250.000 volunteers in Brazil and has spread to more than 20 countries. She was called the Mother Theresa of Brazil and had been nominated several times for the Nobel Prize. Dr. Zilda Arns is possibly the most famous victim of the recent earthquake in Haiti. At her funeral, the president of Brazil Catholic Bishops' Conference, declared: "She died like she lived. She lived for the poor and died among the poor in the poorest country of the Western Hemisphere."*

Zilda Arns, Nobel Peace Prize nominee and founder of the *International Pastoral de Criança* (Child Pastoral), was killed on Tuesday, January 12, in the 7.0-magnitude earthquake that struck Haiti. She was at Port-au-Prince, Haiti, studying the implementation of her program in that island. Only moments before her death, she had spoken to the Assembly of

the Religious in these terms:“ I want to manifest my great joy to be here with you all, at Port-au-Prince, Haiti, in order to take part in the Assembly of the Religious. As sister of two Franciscans and three Teaching Sisters of our Lady, I feel most happy among you...”

And, after explaining with enthusiasm about her healing mission, she had concluded: “The results of our voluntary work, with the mystique of the love of God and neighbor, is in harmony with mother earth and all our sisters creatures, flowers and fruits, rivers, lakes, seas, woods and animals. All this shows us that the organized society can be protagonist of its own transformation. In this spirit, strengthening the ties that unite our community, we can find solutions to the grave social problems that affect our poor families. Like the sparrows that care for their small ones by building a nest high in trees or on the mountains, far from predators and closer to God, we must care for our children like for a sacred treasure, promote the respect of their rights and protect them”.

### *Worthy daughter of her parents*

One of 13 children, Zilda Arns was born to devout German-speaking parents in rural southern Brazil on August 25 1934. Two of her earliest memories were of seeing her father go door-to-door on his horse to help contain a smallpox epidemic and watching her mother arrange for a sick neighbor to be taken to the nearest hospital on the back of a cart, a journey of three hours. It was in her childhood that Zilda Arns had the inspiration for her future: “My mom studied homemade medicine in German books. She saw people and knew who needed to go to the hospital and who could be treated at home.” Another characteristic of the family was discipline. “We had to wake up very early to milk the cow” she said. According to her, this discipline was providential: “I have no difficulties starting very early and facing 15 hours of work”. In Zilda Arns’s days there was always work to be done.

Those selfless acts inspired her to contemplate life as a doctor, even though most of her siblings became priests or teachers. Having studied Medicine, she graduated from university in 1959, working in local hospitals tending to infants; she was then given charge of a string of clinics on the impoverished outskirts of the southern city of Curitiba. Zilda Arns quickly saw that many common ailments were preventable, and began teaching mothers basic pre- and post-natal care, as well as useful tasks such as sewing and cooking. It

turned out to be the perfect preparation for work that would make her famous.

Arns's determination to help the less fortunate was reinforced by personal tragedy. She lost her first child just days after giving birth. Her husband, Aloisio Neumann, drowned while rescuing a girl from rough seas in 1978. One of her five other children died in a car accident in 2003. A devout Catholic, she championed education, rather than charity, as the best way of tackling deprivation and frequently toured the country to meet with young mothers. Her work took her from the urban *favelas* of southern Brazil to the remote indigenous and riverside communities of the Amazon rainforest.

Zilda Arns was known as a pragmatic leader who made a point of working with those on the frontline of childcare, whoever they were. "In areas of prostitution, the prostitutes are the ones closest to the children," she told a Brazilian newspaper in a recent interview. "In areas controlled by drug traffickers I sometimes meet with leaders who are not from the world of drug trafficking. On other occasions, I meet with those who are."

### *Saving millions of babies*

The idea for the Child Pastoral came from the United Nations in 1982. The UN suggested to the archbishop of São Paulo, Dom Paulo Evaristo Arns, a plan to reduce infant mortality in Brazil. The archbishop saw it was a good idea but he knew he did not have time for such a program. However, he did have a hard working, dedicated sister who was a doctor and a widow. And so, with five kids of her own, Ms Arns took on the challenge. It is enough to say that in her first foray into infant mortality reduction, in a small city in the state of Paraná, she lowered the rate from 127 deaths per 1,000 births to a reduced 28.

Ms Arns had a basic principle: simple solutions for complicated problems because she did not deal with sophisticated people, but mostly poor, uneducated women and their children. Her serum, water with two parts sugar and one part salt, stopped dehydration, one of the greatest killers of infants. What Zilda did with her simple serum, combined with common sense care for pregnant women, seemed to be close to a miracle.

She took to the role with gusto, expanding her work in the clinics. Much of it was elementary stuff, but it was new to millions of uneducated mothers. Under her guidance, and with the help of trained volunteers, they were

taught the importance of vaccinations and nutrition and shown how to spot and prevent potentially deadly ailments such as diarrhea and dehydration.

In one of the most successful and copied moves, the Pastoral distributed millions of plastic measuring spoons to help prepare sugar and salt solutions to combat diarrhea. Another key initiative was the monthly Celebration of Life day, on which babies are weighed to check that they are growing satisfactorily. All of the work is faith-based. "I felt like God was calling me to take on my life's mission," Zilda Arns said. "I knew if we did it right we could save millions of lives." Her decision to rely on the Roman Catholic Church was vital, because Brazilians – and especially the poor – trust people of faith more than they trust people in government.

Today, the Pastoral is one of Brazil's best-known organizations, and Zilda Arns was one of the nation's best-known faces. The organization is present in 42,000 Brazilian communities, with 260,000 trained volunteers attending to 1.8 million children under the age of six. In communities where the Pastoral is present, the infant mortality rate is 11 per 1,000 births; in Brazil overall it is 22.5. In 2004 she set up the Pastoral for the Elderly, and her leadership of both brought her dozens of awards, including several nominations for a Nobel Peace Prize. Arns also helped the bishops' conference develop a pastoral program for AIDS victims, which currently cares for 100,000 patients, supported by 12,000 volunteers from 579 municipalities in 141 dioceses of 25 Brazilian states.

At the age of 75, Zilda Arns was too fragile to run the Pastoral on a daily basis; but she continued to visit communities across Brazil as well as many of the 20 countries into which it has expanded. She was in Haiti visiting a missionary organization when the earthquake struck.

### ***President Lula da Silva at her funeral***

On January 16, the funeral procession for Zilda made its way for seven kilometers past large crowds in the city of Curitiba, the capital of the state of Paraná, Brazil, to the seat of the state government, the Palácio das Araucarias, where a special mass was held in her behalf. She was then buried in the Campo Verde Cemetery. Brazil's president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva was among those who spoke there about Arns Neumann's life and accomplishments. Along the way crowds applauded and extended banners with messages of admiration and love for the woman who did so much for



children through the Child Pastoral, not only in Brazil, but in many countries around the world.

The representative of UNICEF in Brazil, Marie-Pierre Poirier, speaking at the funeral of Zilda Arns, declared that the organization will continue to work together with the Child Pastoral "until the last needy child in the world is taken care of." Poirier added that Zilda Arns was a much-valued member of the UNICEF family. He pointed out that it was UNICEF that had the idea for the Child Pastoral, but the person who turned it into reality was Dr. Arns, with strong organizational skills and leadership.

Zilda Arns was a deeply religious woman. She believed that hope, along with solidarity, is the antidote against poverty. "God did not create injustice, it was created by humanity. So the conclusion is: society needs to solve its inequities". Following her death in Haiti's capital, Port-au-Prince, one newspaper from the south of Brazil, where Arns was born, said that the earthquake had "stolen from the children a smile that had guaranteed them life and hope. For every ten words she spoke, one was about children."

In a note, Cardinal Arns stated: "I received with sorrow the news that my very dear sister has suffered with the good people of Haiti the tragic effects of the earthquake. May God in his mercy receive in heaven those who on earth fought for children and the defenseless. This is not the moment to lose hope."

Haiti is blessed with an extraordinary galaxy of faith-inspired organizations, many with a long history and deep roots. Catholic Relief Services has worked in Haiti for over 55 years, the Salvation Army since 1955. Baptists, Mennonites, Episcopalians, Jewish World Service, Salesians and countless other organizations have years of experience and an infrastructure in Haiti. They run orphanages, clinics, schools, programs for youth, and support for the aged. They work in slums and in villages, highlands and lowlands. In short, they are everywhere and they have a vast pool of knowledge, relationships, and experience.

In the weeks ahead, this galaxy of organizations and the communities that are behind them have the capacity to achieve the kind of miracle that Dr. Arns Neumann showed was possible. It will, however, take her kind of organization, coordination and discipline to translate potential into results. She exemplified skill and openness to partnership and both will be desperately needed in the weeks ahead. But her brand of hope and



Marcos set the election for February 1986. A superstitious man, he picked the 7th, his lucky number, as the date.

Coming so soon, the elections afforded the opposition scant opportunity to coalesce around a single leader. Nevertheless the anti-Marcos groups set aside differences and pledged support to Corazon Aquino, wife of the slain Marcos' opponent. Because Aquino had no past political ambition or experience, Marcos scoffed at this housewife who "belonged in the bedroom." His derision soon turned to alarm, as Corazon Aquino surprised her male opponent by displaying rare political poise and outdrawing him at election rallies.

Because the vote count by the government's Commission on Elections (COMELEC) had become suspect, citizens since 1953 had formed the National Movement for Free Elections (NAMFREL) to monitor polling places and to report results as ballot boxes were opened publicly. In 1986, some 500,000 people volunteered to monitor the election and the Catholic Radio Veritas advertised its intention to carry NAMFREL as well as COMELEC results around-the-clock until a victor was declared.

### ***Military Defection***

On February 15, 1986, amid cries of foul from the opposition and skepticism by foreign notably American political observers, the National Assembly declared Marcos the winner. Nevertheless Radio Veritas continued coverage of the NAMFREL count which showed Marcos losing.

On February 22, Radio Veritas broadcasted a conference by Defense Minister Juan Ponce Enrile and Acting Army Chief of Staff Fidel Ramos. Those listening were astonished to hear Enrile say, "I believe that the mandate of the people does not belong to President Marcos' regime. For a fact there have been some anomalies committed in the election . . . . Personally I believe that the president did not win this election. " Ramos, by his side, said earlier, "I am with Minister Enrile."

Cardinal Sin, speaking over Radio Veritas that night, urged the people to be calm and pray for a just and peaceful resolution to the crisis. He offered to mediate between the rebels and the president, but called on civilians to protect Camp Aguinaldo and Camp Crame where Enrile and Ramos were

taking their stand with some 400 armed supporters. "I would be happy if you can show them solidarity and support," Sin said.

His plea struck a responsive chord in a nation tired of political assassinations, presidential corruption, fraudulent elections and rule by decree. Within hours, thousands gathered outside the camp gates. By Sunday night, their numbers had grown to over a million, forming a human barricade that the soldiers and tanks sent by Marcos refused to attack.

### *The Mango Magsaysay Tune*

The journalist and broadcaster June Keithley was one of those who heeded Jaime Cardinal Sin's appeal to defend the beleaguered anti-Marcos group. Instead of heading for the military headquarters, or joining the growing crowd on EDSA, she went where her charisma led her: to Radio Veritas. Not many entertainers are led by their talent onto the largest stage conceivable: history itself. For an unforgettable four days in February 1986, Keithley became the voice of a people's uprising, a peaceful revolution that inspired other opposition movements and stunned the world.

In a very fluid situation, with potentially grave consequences for unarmed civilians caught between heavily equipped and highly trained military factions, Fr. James Reuter, a communications expert, realized it was vital to have a central source of information, a focus of coordination. He called on June Keithley, his protégé, to serve as that focus, that source.

In Radio Veritas, June worked with other anchors; they gave continuous updates, they issued appeals and cautions; not least, they found the perfect soundtrack for a revolution-in-the-making: "Mambo Magsaysay," the upbeat campaign jingle of the late president Ramon Magsaysay from three decades before. This was a crucial find. When the Veritas transmission tower was bombed by Marcos forces, the central source fell silent. Fr. Reuter eventually found an unused radio station (much nearer to Malacañang Palace than the Radio Veritas station was, and therefore more at risk), and asked June to anchor the broadcast.

In a later interview, June recounted her exchange with Fr. Reuter: how he asked her, how she could not say no, how he made a joke about the possibility of being discovered by Marcos forces and being killed in the process. When "Radyo Bandido", as it was called, went on the air, it was Keithley's voice, and especially her repeated playing of "Mambo

Magsaysay,” that convinced people that the new, unknown station was legitimate, the real voice of the revolution. For several hours, it was just Keithley and a couple of intrepid students who staffed the station; in time, a long line of nuns and civilians arrived in the station to serve as June’s bodyguard.

### *The Field Marshal*

In the twilight of the Marcos regime, a voice was heard across the land. It was a shrill voice of a girl over the radio, telling the people a catalogue of anomalies occurring during the February 1986 snap election called by President Ferdinand Marcos to validate his 19-year rule. “It was perhaps because of my voice—that shrill voice that people thought was that of a little girl’s—that people took notice,” June Keithley said in an interview with Gabriel Mercado for the book “Heroes,” recalling her two-week stint as radio broadcaster during the EDSA revolt. “They might have been wondering, ‘Who is that little girl who is actually telling the truth?’”

She was afraid her voice would irritate people listening to the radio. What really made the difference was that while the male broadcasters then were talking of electoral anomalies in general, this woman was relating in full detail a catalogue of ballot-box-snatching, voter intimidation and disenfranchisement. And in the national tumult that followed, the girl’s voice rallied radio listeners to help in toppling the dictatorship.

Fidel Ramos gave a grateful account of June Keithley’s role: “We needed to reinforce our military forces. This is why our call to the people to come and support us was very constant. And we were able to do this through June Keithley and the radio broadcasting crews of Radio Veritas who were on the job, calling on the people. This was the first time in military history, anywhere in the world, when private broadcast media, run by concerned citizens, were used to transmit or relay military orders or directives to military units in the field.” This extraordinary work continued and culminated with the Radyo Bandido guerilla operation. Ramos famously called Keithley “the field marshal of the EDSA revolution.”

But it was not just military forces defecting from the Marcos military who heeded June’s voice. By the second day, the character of the revolution-in-the-making had changed dramatically. It was no longer a military project; instead, it had become People Power.

### ***The Epiphany of June's faith***

June Keithley was born on March 10, 1947 in Manila to a Cebuano mother and an American father. She studied at St. Paul College, where she was mentored by Fr. James B. Reuter. While growing up, June found her being half-American somewhat a disadvantage, so she immersed herself in reading Nick Joaquin's stories and essays on Filipino culture. She married broadcaster Angelo Castro, Jr. and the couple had three children: Diego, Angelica and Gabriela. She became a TV personality, but it was when she appeared in Lino Brocka's movie "Lunes, Martes ... ," that disbelieving viewers were surprised to find that she could act, delivering arguably the most poignant piece of acting in that all-star ensemble.

Epiphany in her Catholic faith came for June in late 1985. Invited to lead the prayer at Rizal Park's Quirino Grandstand for the consecration of the nation to the Blessed Virgin Mary, her 10-year-old son Diego asked her to go with him. No longer a churchgoer at that time, she was foot-dragging, until she conceded. At home that night, she couldn't keep from crying, and on night after night thence. She realized it was the reawakening of her faith. It was little after her religious awakening that she was called to be involved in a unique way in EDSA Revolution.

During the administration of Corazon Aquino, June was conferred the Philippine Legion of Honor, becoming a reservist in the Armed Forces of the Philippines with the rank of general. During this time she was hosting a religious program called "The Woman clothed with the Sun" and in the following years she got involved in pilgrimages in honor of the Virgin Mary. Her books chronicled the experience of Marian devotees and visionaries.

### ***The Last Battle***

In 2009, June was diagnosed with breast cancer and told she had three years to live. Her husband, broadcast journalist Angelo Castro Jr. was later also diagnosed with lung cancer. There was even a time when the two were staying in the hospital at the same time, just across the hall. As she continued to undergo treatment for her cancer, she said that it was the love and care of her family, friends and doctors that saw her through each day. And her faith and eagerness to serve the Lord grew even stronger.

In 2013, during the 27th year commemoration of the EDSA People Power Revolution, she was able to be present and to receive the Spirit of EDSA award, together with Fr. Reuter who however had died the year before.



*dozen years with CUAMM-Doctors with Africa, in different countries of that continent before being called to seal her service with the supreme sacrifice. Since the foundation of CUAMM-Doctors with Africa, 1200 doctors, 250 nurses and other medical personnel have reached the heart of Africa. Maria Bonino represents all of them.*

Speaking to the Catholic movements for the promotion of women, in Luanda, Angola, on March 21, 2009, pope Benedict XVI pointed out to the example of Maria Bonino, the Italian pediatrician who had died four years before, in 2005, while at the service of the children affected by a lethal epidemic, in the hospital of Uige, a town between the capital of that country and the border with the Congo.

On that occasion, the pope said: “Doctor Maria Bonino had offered herself as voluntary doctor on behalf of various mission hospitals in her beloved Africa. Lately, in the last two years of her life, she had become responsible of the pediatric section of the provincial hospital of Uige, here, in Angola. Completely dedicated to the care of thousands of children who had approached the hospital for treatment, she accomplished her duty with the highest sacrifice while fighting against the haemorrhagic fever of Marbourg.

Herself victim of the contagion, she was transferred to the capital Luanda, but to no avail. She died there on March 24, 2005. She was only 52. The following day was Holy Friday. At the end of her life, when she was already dying, she wrote: “I believe that I have fulfilled the dream of my life”. The news of her sacrifice touched the heart of many people both in Italy and in the rest of the world”.

The epidemic of Marbourg was responsible for hundreds of deaths among the children. At present it was declared as dormant.

### ***With Doctors with Africa***

Maria Bonino was born at Biella, Italy, in 1953. She chose to pursue the medical career and qualified as a doctor at 25 years of age. Her dream was to serve Africa and its people. She prepared herself by following the courses with CUAMM-Doctors with Africa. This institution was initiated on



December 3 1950, at Padua, in Northern Italy, by the initiative of a doctor, Francesco Canova and the will of the then local bishop. The first idea was to gather young people who wanted to be missionary doctors and host them during their university studies and train them. The acronym stays for *University College for Aspirant Missionary Medical doctors*. The first doctor to reach his degree was a Nigerian young man by the name of Simon in 1964.

Dr. Canova, after a meaningful experience as a doctor in Palestine and Jordan, had even envisaged a University of Missionary Medicine. He had a prevailing interest for the human formation of the candidates more than fostering development in the field. Until few days before his death, he used to ride his bicycle to attend evening mass at the college. He had a great capacity of personal relationships: at Easter and Christmas he used to send to the volunteers in the field gifts of books that he had painstakingly chosen for them in the bookshops. This was in addition to an extraordinary voluminous correspondence that he was keeping with them even in the last 20 years of his life.

A turning point in the life of the organization was when, about 15 years ago, it was decided not to continue to offer preparation for the health profession in Italy but to train those young people who wanted to become medical doctors in their country of origin. A great satisfaction in this regard was in 2007 when a batch of 13 new doctors was proclaimed at Beira, in Mozambique, outside the capital Maputo. Besides the University of Beira, CUAMM-Doctors with Africa supports Nkozi University in Uganda and Addis Ababa University in Ethiopia in order to train doctors at local level.

### *For the love of her “tiny patients”*

Maria Bonino specialized in Pediatrics with special attention to the problem of the so called 3/5 children: the “tiny patients”, as she used to call them, who are below 3 years of age and weigh less than five kilos. From July 1981 to September 1983 she served in Ikonda Hospital in Tanzania as in charge of the pediatric ward and the section for the re-habilitation of the children affected by malnutrition. She then came back to Europe in order to pursue her specialization in tropical medicine which she obtained in 1984.

Then, after a period of service in Italy, we find her again in Africa, this time in Tenkodogo Hospital in Burkina Fasso where she headed the pediatric ward and looked after the malnourished children from 1986 to 1988. Then in

Tanzania again at Iringa Hospital from 1992 to 1994. From there she passed to Uganda as coordinator of health care in Arua District from 2001 to 2003 and from there to Lacor, St. Mary's Hospital, in Gulu District in the same country. In March 2003 she moves to Uige, in Angola, in what would be her last assignment.

Very moving because it reflects personal experience, is the statement of Dr. Peter Lochoro who represents Uganda, a country in which Maria worked extensively: "Looking at these doctors and admiring their service and dedication were the fundamental reasons that inspired me to become a doctor. In a certain sense, it is a debt that I am repaying with my work on behalf of CUAMM-Doctors with Africa, an organization with a clear mission: to operate so that the good health of the populations most in need may be recognized as a human right, by working together, not so much for them but with them".

Mons. Luigi Mazzucato, the then director of the institution, confides : "During one of my last trips to Uganda, I asked Dr. Peter Lochoro to introduce me to his mother. Peter lives in one of the most underdeveloped areas of Uganda. Upon my request, he led me to the village where he was born. I entered a hut that was very clean. The only furniture consisted of two chairs and a little bench. This multi-specialized medical doctor sat holding his old mother's hand for all the time of our visit. When a grand-child or any other relative was entering the hut, they all knelt in front of the old woman with great respect and devotion towards the elder of the family. We have a lot to learn from this lesson that Africa bestows on us in great simplicity". This was the spirit that animated Maria Bonino in approaching the African world: giving and receiving.

### ***"Our Catholic faith is everything"***

"I accuse Europe which knew since fifty years ago about the sickness caused by Marpourg's virus and yet in fifty years it didn't look for a cure. In this epidemic, very many children died, but, you see, these children are African and obviously they are considered second class persons. This attitude is not Christian, not even human." These words were uttered by old Gabriella Bonino, Maria's mother, on the occasion of her trip to Angola, to visit the tomb of her daughter.

She is a dignified lady, with an abundant head of white hair, a retired Latin and Greek teacher. Her eyes have the same spark as her daughter's when she refers her words: "Maria used to say: if I die in Africa, leave me where I am". It was the first time that *signora* Gabriella found the strength of coming to Angola; the fourth anniversary of Maria's death was approaching and she wanted to go to the cemetery where her daughter was buried, to see her tomb and to pray for her there.

She was present in the church of Saint Paul where pope Benedict XVI was meeting the Catholic Associations that promote the dignity of women and it was there that *signora* Gabriella met the pope and listened to his words that praised the example of doctor Maria and her sacrifice. The old lady was in tears and added: "I dare say that my daughter was encouraged to her spiritual inner experience of self-dedication by what she learned in our family. For us, our Catholic faith is everything. My husband, Maria's father, himself a medical doctor, used to say: We must act, be active, do something to remember other people, those in need".

She adds with a sigh: "It is sad to think that Maria had foreseen that something grave was happening. Many children were dying without a reason. Since October 2004, my daughter had given notice about the suspicious cases. Samples were sent to the USA and to South Africa. Only on March 22, 2005 an answer came, excluding Ebola but pointing out to the virus of Marbourg which had been discovered in 1967, but no therapy had yet been found. Unfortunately, two days after the answer came, Maria died".

### ***At all levels of the health system***

First NGO specialized in the health sector to be recognized in Italy, CUAMM-Doctors with Africa is now the biggest Italian health organization for the promotion and protection of the health of the African populations. It implements long-term interventions, even in areas which are war-torn or facing a humanitarian crisis. It operates at all levels of the health system, from mobile clinics to universities, offering high quality services accessible to all. To this aim it commits itself, in Italy and in Africa, to the formation of the human resources dedicated to scientific research and implementation of health cooperation. It campaigns for the affirmation of the basic human right to health for all, even the most marginalized groups, promoting the values of

solidarity, cooperation between peoples, justice and peace in the institutions and in the public opinion at large.

During these 60 years of existence, the organization sent more than 1200 doctors to Sub-Sahara Africa as well as 240 volunteers: nurses, technicians, etc...270 medical students from 35 countries of the developing world were hosted during their university studies. At present, the CUAMM operates in Angola, Ethiopia, Kenya, Mozambique, Uganda, Tanzania and Rwanda, in 16 hospital started or run by the organization, employing every given year around 80 people, mainly medical doctors but also nurses, physiotherapists and administrators.

In these sixty years of existence, the CUAMM-Doctors with Africa has produced some heroes who have given their lives in the field of duty: the most prominent is Doctor Maria Bonino.

### *The passion of sharing*

It was in the small African town of Uige that, in only ten days, the passion of Maria Bonino was accomplished. She was not attacked by murderers as it often happens to missionaries. She was killed by a mysterious, lethal disease which had caused the untimely death of many more person, especially children.

She has fallen because of her passion of sharing, victim among victims, in the silence which envelops those who offer themselves, without asking anything but only the privilege of being helped to give herself more and better, always aware of the risks she was running as foreigner, as woman and as Christian. She is one of the fifteen thousand Italian missionaries, religious and laity, who are operative across the continents, carrying in their hearts the timeless value of a faith which is still alive in the young generations, beyond the many temptations of our secularized society.

Not long ago, CUAMM-Doctors with Africa has published a document by the title: "Aids in Africa: the voices of the front line". The answer to the dramatic Aids emergency in Africa should not be silence, powerlessness and despair. The fight against AIDS is possible and the Africans have the bravery to face this challenge. This is the message that the CUAMM-Doctors with Africa is launching to the public opinion and to all those who care for the African continent and are engaged in working on its behalf. The

document, published in Italian and English, places in context the concrete efforts of the organization in the places and situations in which it operates.

Maria Bonino has fought her good fight against the poverty, sickness and isolation that touch so much of the African continent. A weak ripple about her heroic sacrifice appeared in the world media, too committed as they are with other wars which make up the news headlines. Maria Bonino belongs to that army that counts its victories in the number of lives snatched from famine, from the most insidious viruses, from ignorance.

It is a peaceful army that invests the generous energies of so many young lives, together with the never sufficient means offered by humanitarian organizations and the collection baskets of simple parishes in the construction of village schools, the digging of community wells and the equipping of bush hospitals in countries where the most elementary health structures are absent. To Maria Bonino's memory a foundation was instituted which aims at helping the African children, especially the many who are malnourished.

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*Fr. Lorenzo Carraro, MCCJ*  
*September 2021*