

Women religious, Salvadorans embark on journey of faith

By Teresa A. Parsons

On December 2, 1980, four North American churchwomen were brutally murdered by Salvadoran security troops.

Thousands of miles away in Rochester, N.Y., Sister Kathleen Weider, SSJ, was teaching high school.

She knew none of the women personally. Yet for her, news of the deaths of lay missionary Jean Donovan and Sisters Maura Clarke, Ita Ford and Dorothy Kazel was an awakening — the beginning of a journey that six years later has led her to commemorate their lives among the people they died serving in El Salvador.

Later this month, Sister Kathleen will join 30 women religious from nearly a half-dozen states and a variety of congregations in the December Delegation — a group organized by the Central American Refugee Organizing Project of Catholic Social Services in the Archdiocese of San Francisco. Their aim is to offer protection and support to Salvadorans reclaiming their homes and lands from their country's civil war.

From November 29 to December 6, delegation members hope to accompany Salvadorans on their return from refugee camps to the countryside. Not only will the American religious provide medical and pastoral expertise as well as extra hands to reconstruct homes, but they also will offer Salvadorans a measure of security from the military.

"Part of it is a means of simply being

present to people, bringing support and hope to them, and part of it is the protection that foreigners can provide," Sister Kathleen explained.

Delegates also plan to document the testimonies of the displaced Salvadorans, as well as church workers, and to share that testimony publicly when they return.

Sister Kathleen expects the experience to deepen her own commitment to work for justice in Central America. "It is we who will be touched by God's presence, by the faith and courage we will find in the people of El Salvador," she said.

After six years of civil war, an estimated 25 percent of the Salvadoran population are displaced from their homes, according to a report from the U.S. Office on Human Rights in El Salvador. Nearly 700,000 of them are still in the country, living in refugee camps and shantytowns.

Many of the displaced Salvadorans were forced out of their homes as part of a military de-population campaign, which has sought to destroy bases of support for guerillas in the countryside.

In one such operation last March, an estimated 31 civilians were killed, and more than 300 disappeared. Nearly 450 homes and 700 acres of farmland were destroyed.

Some 2,600 survivors were taken to refugee camps, where they joined thousands of others waiting helplessly for the war to end, unable to find work or grow their own food.

After years in the camps, many refugees are tired of waiting for peace, for land reform, and for other promises made by Salvadoran President Jose Napoleon Duarte. They believe it is their right to return to their homes, farm their own land and raise their families.

Thus began a grass-roots movement two years ago aimed toward repopulation. In January, 1986, the first large-scale effort was launched, when 58 families returned to the town of Tenancingo in Cuscatlan province. Their safe passage was negotiated with the help of Salvadoran Archbishop Rivera y Damas.

Another group of 26 families returned to the town of San Jose Las Flores in June, 1986. They were accompanied by 15 American religious, who helped to negotiate with soldiers when the soldiers attempted to halt the caravan.

Since May, 1986, nearly 2,000 families have returned to their homes, according to Father Trinidad Nieto, a Salvadoran priest who works with displaced persons, and who recently visited the United States to advocate an end to U.S. military aid to the Salvadoran government.

But the government is stepping up efforts to discourage repopulation, Father Nieto said. In San Jose Las Flores, seven children have died since June because the military has interrupted monthly shipments of food from the International Red Cross.

Last July, an international religious team

was arrested and deported after accompanying 132 families to the town of El Barillo. Although they have urged Americans and religious from other countries to continue participating in repopulation, some Salvadorans have cautioned that groups be better organized and informed.

Despite the risks, more than 100 American religious in 10 delegations have participated in the repopulation effort so far this year.

Currently assistant chaplain at Nazareth College, Sister Kathleen believes the timing of the December Delegation's trip is curiously fitting for her. "I began a process of consciousness raising as a result of the murder of those four women," she recalled.

First she started talking about Central America in her high school classes, showing slides and films. Then, in 1983, she moved to Corpus Christi Parish and became involved in the education process that led to the congregation's declaration of sanctuary.

A member of the Rochester Sanctuary Committee, Sister Kathleen listened to the stories of Salvadoran refugee Alejandro Gomez and his family. "It continued to become more personal with seeing more and more of the faces of suffering people from El Salvador," she said.

During a recent sanctuary workshop at Mundelein College in Illinois, Sister Kathleen met organizers of the December Delegation and decided to sign on.

Although the concerns of others have

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