

WORLD & NATION

Sister Ortiz adds fast to D.C. protest

By Nancy Frazier O'Brien
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — Ursuline Sister Dianna Ortiz said she would "place my life in the hands of the U.S. government" by beginning a bread-and-water fast until she hears the truth about the U.S. role in her 1989 abduction, rape and torture in Guatemala.

Sister Ortiz, a native of New Mexico, announced the fast at an emotional press conference April 22 in Washington as she began the fourth week of a silent vigil outside the White House. Her visitors have included first lady Hillary Rodham Clinton.

The vigil and the fast are aimed at finding out "the truth about my case and the truth about all those Guatemalans who have suffered and died at the hands of the officially sponsored death squads, for years supported with U.S. tax dollars," Sister Ortiz said.

"Because I am still barred from knowing the truth, because I am still in a prison of silence, because U.S. government agencies deny me access to the documents that could allow me to recover my life, I will begin a fast of bread and water, continuing my silent vigil in front of the White House and daring to place my life in the hands of the U.S. government," she added.

Sister Ortiz, who broke down in tears several times during the press conference, said she had already lost 10 pounds since beginning her 21-hours-a-day White House vigil March 31. She now weighs about 98 pounds, a spokeswoman for the nun said.

Asked how long she would continue the fast, she replied, "Let me answer your question with a question: How long will the U.S. government keep the truth from me?"

Among Sister Ortiz's supporters at the press conference were Ethel Kennedy, widow of former Attorney General



Reuters/CNS

Ursuline Sister Dianna Ortiz began a fast April 22 as part of a White House vigil she started March 31 to protest human rights abuses in Guatemala. Tortured by Guatemalan security forces in 1989, she is seeking information from the U.S. government about her case and other abuses.

Robert Kennedy, and their daughter, Kerry Kennedy Cuomo.

Cuomo said she and her mother wanted to show Sister Ortiz "how deeply moved we are by your courage and the hope you have given all of us with your courage."

Sister Ortiz, now 37, was a school teacher in Guatemala in November 1989 when she was abducted at gunpoint from the back yard of a church retreat. During the 24 hours she was detained, she was burned more than 110 times with cigarettes, repeatedly raped and forced to wield a small machete against another woman, she said.

Her torturers took orders from a man called Alejandro who spoke broken Spanish but spoke English with a perfect American accent, the nun said.

"I want the truth, not just documents,"

Sister Ortiz said April 22. "I want to know who Alejandro is. I want to know why our government has protected him. I want to know why a U.S. citizen had the authority to supervise and give orders to my torturers. Until I receive this information, I cannot heal."

Sister Ortiz said that during the White House vigil she has experienced "heavy rains, harsh sun, blustery winds and cold temperatures."

"But what I found most difficult to weather," she continued, "is the tempest of memories that everyday life in the park has unleashed: the sight of a uniformed police officer ... reminds me of the policeman who raped and tortured me ... the smell of cigarettes reminds me of the cigarettes that were used to brand my body ... the stream of questions from journalists, tourists and supporters reminds me of the interrogation."

She quoted Austrian philosopher Jean Amery, who said after being tortured by the Gestapo, "Anyone who has suffered torture will never again be at ease in the world. ... Faith in humanity, already cracked by the first slap in the face, then demolished by torture, is never acquired again."

"It is with great horror that I repeat these words," Sister Ortiz said, noting that Amery committed suicide in 1978. "I want so desperately to live," she said. "I want so desperately to believe in humanity again ... to be free of Alejandro and all my Guatemalan torturers. Thousands of Guatemalans who have been tortured by the security forces also want to live and to believe in humanity again. Only the truth will set us free."

Vatican condemns veto of abortion method ban

VATICAN CITY — President Bill Clinton's veto of the bill banning partial-birth abortions "in practice amounts to an incredibly brutal act of aggression against the unborn, the Vatican said."

"The fact that this presidential decision legalizes this inhuman procedure morally and ethically imperils the future of a society that condones it," said Vatican spokesman Joaquin Navarro-Valls.

In its April 19 edition, the Vatican newspaper printed an Italian translation of the April 16 letter written by eight U.S. cardinals and the president of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops condemning Clinton's veto.

"The Holy See completely supports the position taken by the cardinals of the United States and the National Conference of Catholic Bishops," Navarro-Valls said April 19.

Pope marks anniversary of 1986 nuclear accident

VATICAN CITY — Pope John Paul II commemorated the 10th anniversary of the world's worst nuclear accident at Chernobyl, Ukraine, and urged experts to make sure it never happens again.

"May God, in his power and his mercy, console those who are suffering and inspire responsibility in decision-makers so that such tragedies will never be repeated," he said.

The pope's comments at a Sunday blessing April 21 came as Western and Ukrainian officials debated closing the Chernobyl nuclear power plant, which is still considered dangerous.

Holy Father lauds efforts to limit land mine usage

VATICAN CITY — Pope John Paul II urged government representatives at a U.N. meeting on land mines to "renounce such instruments of death."

"It is a question of weapons which are sown by the tens of millions in many parts of the world, particularly in Cambodia, Angola, Afghanistan and Bosnia-Herzegovina," the pope said April 21 during his midday address to pilgrims in St. Peter's Square.



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