

A Nun Confronts Her Torture

BY SISTER DIANNA ORTIZ

Today, on Palm Sunday, I begin a silent vigil for truth in front of the White House—the truth about my own case, and the truth about those Guatemalans who have suffered and died at the hands of the officially sponsored death squads. For those of us who know and love Guatemala, it is painfully clear that our own United States government has been closely linked to these death squads, and has a great amount of detailed information about those of us who have survived, as well as those of us who have perished. We need and demand this information so that we can heal our wounds, bury our dead, and carry on with our lives. We need and demand this information so that we can insist on change, insist that these terrible realities never be repeated.

People ask how long I will be in front of the White House. I can only respond with a question: How long will the U.S. government let me be taken from me? Who is America to the US citizen presenting my tortures? Is it a small piece of my past and a small part of the very real and daily fact of continuing torture—the torture of silence and secrecy.

On behalf of all of us, I demand that President Clinton declassify the U.S.

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government information related to human-rights abuses in Guatemala, from 1954 to the present, and that the Intelligence Oversight Board release the full text of its report, not just a summary. I want the full truth about Guatemala.

I will now maintain my silence, not a silence of complicity or cover-up, but a silence of commemoration for the thousands of known and unknown victims and survivors who have been abducted, tortured, assassinated, and disappeared in Guatemala in the past three decades.

I will not be alone on this vigil, for I know that those who have lost their lives and their beloved family members and the thousands who have been tortured will be with me in spirit. A candle will burn day and night as a reminder to President Clinton and his Administration that there is a presence in the park—a presence that represents those victims and survivors whose flame will never die. As President Clinton and his Administration sleep peacefully, many of us fight to stay awake—to protect ourselves from the recurring visits from our torturers.

My experience is a daily occurrence in Guatemala.

More than six people a week, on average, are killed for political reasons. More than two people a week are tortured. The total death toll will never be known.

The counter-insurgency campaign has an estimated 150,000 dead and another 150,000 disappeared, victims of the dreaded official death squads. This staggering death toll is far higher than that



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of the dirty wars in Argentina, Chile, and El Salvador.

Most of these violations were visited upon the Mayan population. Some 440 Mayan villages were wiped off the map. Hundreds of people vanished. Their mutilated, charred remains are only now beginning to emerge from secret mass graves.

The truth, in Guatemala, is beginning to be unearthed. What about in the United States? When will the truth be exhumed?

I was teaching young children in Guatemala to read and write and to understand the Bible in respect to their culture. For a long time I received death threats, then was abducted from the backyard of a church retreat by members of the Guatemalan security forces. They took me to a clandestine prison where other Guatemalans were being horribly tortured. I was tortured and raped repeatedly. My back and my chest were burned more than 111 times with cigarettes. I was lowered into an open pit packed with human bodies—bodies of children, women and men, some decapitated, some lying face up and caked with blood, some dead, some alive—and all swarming with rats.

After hours of torture, I was returned to the room where the interrogation initially occurred. It was in this room that I met *Alejandro*, a tall man with a light complexion. As my torturers began to rape me again, my torturers said to him in Spanish, "Hey, *Alejandro*, come and have some fun." *Alejandro* cursed in unmistakable American English and ordered them to stop the torture, since I was a North American nun and my disappearance had become public. In an earlier torture session, the men had said that if I didn't cooperate, they would have to turn over a videotape and photographs they had made of me to *Alejandro*, their boss.

Like a knight in shining armor, *Alejandro* seemingly came to my rescue. He helped me on with my clothes. As he did, I asked him if he was a North American. He refused to answer, but asked why I wanted to know. He then escorted me into a gray Suzuki jeep, and in poor, heavily accented Spanish, he told me that he was going to take me to a safe haven, the U.S. embassy, to talk to a friend who would help me leave the country. For the duration of the trip, I spoke to him in English, which he understood perfectly. *Alejandro* professed that he was concerned about the people of Guatemala and consequently was working to liberate them from communism. He kept telling me in his broken Spanish that he was sorry about what had happened to me. He claimed it was an honest mistake.

Alejandro told me to forgive my torturers because they had confused me with Verónica Ortiz Hernández, the woman in the photos I was shown during my interrogation. He claimed it was a case of mistaken identity. I asked him how they could

have mistaken me for a woman who did not resemble me in any way. Why were the threatening letters I had received addressed to Madre Dianna and not to Verónica Ortiz Hernández? He avoided my questions. He kept telling me to forgive my torturers, insinuating that I was to blame for my torture because I had not paid heed to the threats that were sent to me.

After *Alejandro* spoke to me of forgiving my torturers, I asked him what would happen to the other people I heard screaming and saw tortured before my eyes. At this point, he switched to English, which he spoke with a distinct, completely American accent. He told me not to concern myself with them and to forget what had happened. He made it very clear that he had been given a videotape and photographs that would incriminate me of crimes that I was forced to participate in. He also made it a point to tell me that he could release the footage to the public and to the press. I believe this was an obvious threat.

I cannot forget those who suffered with me and died in that clandestine prison. The memories of what I witnessed and experienced that November day haunt me day and night. Even to this day, I can smell the decomposing bodies, disposed of in an open pit. I can hear the piercing screams of other people being tortured. I can see the blood gushing out of the woman's body as I thrust a small machete into her.

For you see, I was handed a machete. Thinking it would be used against me, and at that point in my torture, wanting to die, I did not resist. But my torturers put their hands onto the handle, on top of mine. And I had no choice. I was forced to use it against another human being. What I remember is blood gushing—spurting like a water fountain, droplets of blood splattering everywhere—and my screams lost in the cries of the woman.

Like the people of Guatemala, I want to be free of these memories. I want out of this nightmare, out of this past, out of this room with *Alejandro* and my torturers. The key is the truth. I want to know who *Alejandro* was. Was he a CIA agent? Why is the U.S. government protecting him? How many other *Alejandro*s are there out there, supervising the torture of innocent people?

I have struggled with so many others, for so very long, to bring the truth to light, but this blanket of lies remains, thick and heavy, nailed down by the U.S. government, stamped CLASSIFIED.

Like so many Guatemalan victims, I have lived through the agony of not being believed, of being branded a crazy person or even a liar.

Guatemalan army officials accused me of staging my own abduction, said that my torture was a hoax and that I burned my own back during a lesbian love affair. Former Defense Minister General Hector

Gramajo said that these remarks originated in the U.S. embassy. Gramajo told *La Republica* on April 17 that the U.S. ambassador himself had "assured" him that Ortiz was "well" and that she had not been abducted and tortured but simply "had problems with her nerves." Likewise, Lew Anselem, the human-rights officer at the embassy, told a Congressional aide at a cocktail party at the American embassy in December 1990 that my abduction and torture were the result of a lesbian love affair gone bad.

Some steps have been taken. A judgment for damages was entered against General Gramajo in the U.S. courts. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights of the OAS has my case and many others under its consideration. A year ago, President Clinton issued a government-wide investigation of cases of U.S. citizens abused, killed, or disappeared in Guatemala since 1984.

The scope of this investigation included my case and that of other Coalition "Missing" members. A short time later I learned the U.S. District Attorney's Office (Department of Justice) had also launched an investigation, six years too late. I appreciate the efforts of some government officials who are spending long hours making sure this investigation is thorough. I understand that this type of investigation cannot be concluded overnight, but what I do not understand is this attitude of secrecy. A year has gone by, and I'm not any closer to learning the truth behind the nightmare of November 2, 1989. How much longer must I wait?

Last April, I filed a Freedom of Information Act request, and as of today, I have not received one shred of paper pertaining to my case, nor have I been given anything that I consider of any value. On February 7, I wrote to President Clinton, outlining how the experience of torture continues to affect me, even now. I pleaded with him for declassification. I received an answer almost two months later, and it was the same as all the other "answers" have been in the past six years: We sympathize with your suffering. We're investigating. And so the torture of silence continues.

The torture continues on a more active level, as well. Two days ago, a white envelope was left at my home. The content of the envelope—which had no return address, an old address for me glued to the front, and a green stamp that said CARE-MAIL—was something unexpected: either dog or human waste.

In spite of the memories of humiliation, of the pit, that this form of psychological torture recalled, I stand with the Guatemalan people.

I demand the right to heal. I demand the right to know. I demand the right to a resurrection, a future built on truth and justice. ■