News



The tomb of U.S. Maryknoll Sr. Ita Ford is seen Jan. 11, 2020, in a cemetery in Chalatenango, El Salvador. Ford, buried next to Maryknoll Sister Maura Clarke, who also served in Chalatenango, was murdered by Salvadoran military forces along with Ursuline Sr. Dorothy Kazel and lay missionary Jean Donovan in 1980. (CNS/Rhina Guidos)



by Sarah Mac Donald

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On Dec. 2, 1980, American missionaries Sr. Ita Ford and Sr. Maura Clarke returned to El Salvador from their Maryknoll regional assembly in Nicaragua. They were collected from the airport in San Salvador by Ursuline Sr. Dorothy Kazel and lay missionary Jean Donovan. What followed shocked the world. All four missionaries were brutally raped and murdered by members of El Salvador's National Guard because of their commitment to and solidarity with the poor. They were martyrs for justice.

According to the Maryknoll Sisters, what Ford learned from the poor in Chile, where she was missioned in the 1970s, challenged her to respond to Archbishop Oscar Romero's call for help in El Salvador.

Ford arrived in Chile in 1973 just before Gen. Augusto Pinochet's coup. "Chile had a profound impact on her. It was here that her commitment to the poor grew, and that she learned what this demands," explains the Maryknoll webpage on their martyred sister.



Fr. Alo Connaughton is seen in Dalgan Park, home of the Missionary Society of St Columban in Ireland. (Sarah Mac Donald)

One of those who knew Ford in Chile was Fr. Alo Connaughton, an Irish Columban missionary, who first went to Chile in 1973 as part of his role as editor of the Columban mission magazine, The Far East magazine. He spent almost three months in Chile as the coup was just beginning to brew. In fact, the first attempted coup took place while he was there in June 1973. He returned to Ireland for a year and then was missioned to Chile at the beginning of 1975 and stayed until the end of 1993.

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In the video below, Connaughton provides a personal insight into the Ita Ford he knew. He recalls meeting her at the Columban House in Santiago, Chile, and later studying with her during a course in New York in 1978. He treasures the one photo he still has in which he is pictured with Ford, taken just two years before her untimely and brutal murder.