

Heartbeats

The Company of St. Angela in the 21st Century

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Risking for Life

St. Angela Merici was a courageous woman, willing to respond fully to the call of God's Spirit who spoke to her in her heart. Her risk-taking flowed not from desires to be adventurous and carefree, but from conscious commitment to the enterprise God put before her. With audacity and faith, she sought creative new ways for women to consecrate their lives to God while living in a struggling society. The Ursuline story of risk-taking that began with Angela continues through the centuries. This month, we remember some of the "greats"—persons who gave up their very lives for the love of God and God's people.



This year, 2019, we celebrate the 225th anniversary of the Ursuline martyrs of Valenciennes, who were beatified by Pope Benedict XV in 1920.

In the convent of Valenciennes in France, there were about thirty Ursuline sisters when the Revolution broke out. On September 10, 1792, a decree ordered that all convents had to close, and the Ursulines moved to their convent in Belgium, but less than a year later, were able to return to their convent that had been plundered and put on fire. They began again to lead their religious life and to teach. By 1794, the dangers increased, and the Ursuline superior prepared the Sisters to consider being martyred in the approaching reign of terror. Many were arrested, even in their own school and convent. The Sisters were ordered to renounce their faith. They were accused of wearing the religious habit, and even of being immigrants, though this was not true. Their hands were bound, their hair cut, and the procession to the guillotine began while the Sisters sang. The crowd, very moved, was silent. When the Sisters were called by name, calm and determined, they climbed one after another on the scaffold.



Happy Feast of St. Ursula, October 21!

She, too, risked her life, and was greatly admired by St. Angela for her courage and holiness.

On the evening of December 2, 1980, Ursuline Sister Dorothy Kazel, two Maryknoll Sisters, Maura Clarke and Ita Ford, and a young lay woman, Jean Donovan were killed in El Salvador. 2020 will be the 40th anniversary of their deaths-these women who were the compassionate face of God for the Salvadoran people. Sr. Mary Sullivan, OSU, shares this story:

Twenty-five years ago I was at the Commemoration of their deaths at Maryknoll. A rising banner bearing the faces of Ita, Maura, Dorothy, and Jean was carried in to the strains of "Maranatha, Maranatha." How these familiar faces still challenged and changed us. As we called "Come" it was as if their swaying faces echoed back "Come."

In 1980 a few days after the death of the Churchwomen on the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe, many women religious and others gathered in New York City to demonstrate across from the Salvadoran Embassy. An hour before I left Lincoln Hospital that day, a young Hispanic man whose name was Jesus, died in my arms. As I cradled his head and prayed the Our Father with him, he reached out to someone or someplace well beyond the realm of my seeing, and gently settled into the arms of our God. The connection between what happened with Jesus, who had been a victim of drugs and poverty, with what I was setting out to do, confirmed and strengthened me. Shortly after I arrived at the demonstration the leader of the group invited us to cross the street, thereby breaking the law as we did not have a permit to walk directly in front of the Embassy. Most of us crossed and soon saw the glistening glasses of the embassy staff as they toasted each other and laughed at the ragtag crowd below. The NYC police did not disappoint us.

They arrived in vans, police cars, and mounted on horses. Repeatedly with loud megaphones they warned us that we would be arrested if we did not leave. At the advice of the leader we eventually withdrew. Those minutes of wondering what might happen came with a strange heartfelt freedom and certainty. This wouldn't be the last crossing and my life would never be quite the same as I grew to understand what the women had done and their invitation to "come."



left to right: Sr. Dorothy Kazel, OSU; Sr. Maura Clarke, MM; Sr. Ita Ford, MM; and Jean Donovan

Many years have led up to this near 40th anniversary of these women who risked their lives daily. The world of the Churchwomen is still our world with countless injustices confronting us. A recent conversation with an employee from El Salvador attests to the corruption and oppression still so rampant there. To be present to the poor and all who suffer injustice, we call on the strength of the Churchwomen whose "...witness still pervades our community with reassurance and deep hope" and on Angela who reminds us "to take courage" and that "she is more alive now.." as indeed are Ita, Maura, Dorothy, and Jean.

In her poem, *I will not die an unlived life*, (<http://www.awakin.org/read/view.php?tid=552>), Dawna Markova says, "I choose to risk my significance . . ."

For what are you willing to risk your significance, your energy, your life?

Who are today's martyrs? What do you see in them that you admire?

Angela and Ursula, the Ursuline martyrs of France, and the four US Churchwomen lived with courage, even to risking their lives. What is the courage you are being called to live?