

Vessel of Clay: The Inspirational Journey of Sister Carla

“The Lord is calling me to be poor with His poor.”

Maryknoll Sister Carla Piette served in Chile from 1964 to 1979. For the last seven years she lived, with Ita Ford, MM and others, in *poblacion* La Bandera, a poverty-stricken settlement outside Santiago, during the 1973 military coup and subsequent years of the Pinochet dictatorship.

“There is great poverty...but I believe more that real poverty consists in the lack of hope that can push a man to despair.”
1964- Chile

“My heart is so full of searchings. I look for the road God points out but it’s so foggy sometimes and, being so weak, I know my glasses aren’t even well-cleaned.”
1966-Chile

“To the extent that we walk with the people, reflect with them, and dialogue with the Master, we will see that the communion of redeemed sinners, or of those on the road to liberation, is as strong as the communion of saints.”
1979-Chile

In January 1980 Carla headed to Central America to work either in Nicaragua or, as she hoped, to join Monseñor Romero in El Salvador.

“Every day of my pilgrimage since I left Chile has been one of learning and receiving...in the university of listening to the little people. I won’t come out with a title or degree, but a more valuable education could not be achieved anywhere.”
1980-in transit

Carla arrived in El Salvador the evening of March 24, 1980 only to learn of the assassination of Moñsenor Romero. She was present at his vigil, his funeral, and the escalation of violence that followed. She and Ita then worked amidst constant danger to rescue women and children refugees in Chalatenango. The women had experienced violence and terror in Chile, but El Salvador was far worse – complete lawlessness, madness, and hostility to the church. “Be a patriot – kill a priest!” was a commonly posted handbill.

“The sadness that slowly settles over a people with the death of a father, pastor, guide and prophet is the sadness that Salvador is now wrapped in. I am tired from mourning – not tired of it but tired from it – so I ask the Lord of the Beatitudes to open me to the comfort He always sends.”
3-28-1980

“Pray for us...especially that the sense of humor may not turn into a sense of horror.”
April 1980

“Life continues to dolly on and the beautiful greeting of the Salvadoran people, ‘Primero Dios,’ kind of expresses where their hope lies. I’ve discovered a lot about my own faith in seeing and listening to them express their faith. I believe that the yes that I continue to say will contain the strength necessary for the surprises each day holds.”
May 1980

“Ole beat-up Salvador is not absorbing all of my energies, but it’s doing a good job of trying to! I’ve never been in a situation so hostile to the Church and so full of mistrust. The word of God that I always read and chewed on has suddenly become a very real promise as I dolly along with the Word as the only security in this insane atmosphere.” July 1980

“The walk continues and the Lord of the Way leads each day with no map and no clear weather but rather fog and total trust.” July 1980

“If I had to choose another name, I’d choose Rahab, who also did her best to defend life. I leave the future in the Circus Master’s hands.” August 1980

“We dolly along in this crazy circus of life where so often the Divine Circus Master doesn’t clue us into the act for tomorrow yet always gives us the strength to perform.” August 22, 1980

Carla died in the rushing waters of a flash flood on August 23, 1980. In El Salvador, the people quickly named her *Martyr of Charity*. Each year the people hold a pilgrimage at the river where she died. Today a sculpture of her, the only North American so honored, stands in the park in San Antonio Los Ranchos.

**All quotes from Carla’s writings, courtesy, Maryknoll Mission Archives.*

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