

Baltimore Province SSND Ministry in El Salvador Marie Kevin Mueller, SSND

Brief History of the Foundation

After a long period of discernment Cathy Arata moved from working with the materially poor in Western Maryland to El Salvador as a volunteer with the SHARE (Salvadoran Humanitarian Aid, Research, Education) Foundation in January of 1988. From 1988 until 1993 when the war ended, Cathy served as a field worker in a documentation project. She left SHARE in 1991 and continued the work for the diocese of Chalatenango. Her primary task was to locate legal documents of Salvadoran campesinos which would allow them to move beyond the numerous checkpoints set by the Salvadoran army. Chalatenango was an area controlled by the FMLN (Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front) rebels and the scene of much violence during the war. Chalatenango is on the border of Honduras and most of the people in the communities Cathy served were either internal or returned refugees. She also coordinated religious education and women's programs in the village of Arcatao and surrounding villages.

In 1993 after the Peace Accords were signed and the need for documentation work lessened, Cathy moved into pastoral ministry at the parish of Nombre de Jesus in Chalatenango. Nombre de Jesus parish embraced a number of towns within several hours walking distance from the church itself. Her primary focus was the education and empowerment of women. When Cathy arrived at Nombre de Jesus, it had not been served by a priest for several years and fundamentalist evangelicals had gained a foothold with the people. One of her challenges had been to gain the trust of the people and imbue them a more human understanding of Jesus and his mission.

Cathy was the only member of the Baltimore province to be missioned in El Salvador. Mary Kennedy from the St. Louis province was missioned there for a while...

One of the fruits of Cathy's ministry had been the establishment of a sister school relationship between the elementary school in Ignacio Ellacuria in Chalatenango and the province – owned Notre Dame Preparatory School in Baltimore. Students and faculty from NDP visited the Salvadoran community several times. Another fruit of her ministry was the marketing of crafts created by a women's cooperative in El Salvador. Cathy's ministry in El Salvador was a mutually enhancing ministry for the people she served and the province at large.

Editor's Note. Between 1979 -1981 about 30,000 people were killed in El Salvador by right wing death squads backed by the military. Among them were Archbishop Oscar Romero and five church women from the United States. Napoleon Duarte, a moderate civilian who was president from 1984 – 1989 offered alternatives to the political extremes of left and right, but Duarte was unable to end the civil war. In 1989 Alfredo Cristiani of the Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA) was elected. In November, 1989, 6 Jesuits, from the University of San Salvador, their housekeeper and her daughter were murdered. On January 16, 1992, the government signed a peace treaty with guerilla forces, formally ending the 12 year civil war that had killed 75,000 people.