

Guide to
the Microfilm Edition
of the

FBI File on the
American Churchwomen
Killed in El Salvador,
December 1980

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Introduction

Jean Donovan, Maura Clarke, Ita Ford, and Dorothy Kazel were U.S. citizens working in El Salvador. Clarke, Ford, and Kazel were nuns in the Maryknoll religious order; Donovan was a lay missionary worker. On December 4, 1980, their bodies were discovered in a shallow grave alongside the road leading from the San Salvador airport into the city after they were beaten, sexually abused, and shot to death by members of the El Salvador National Guard on the night of December 2. Five technical experts from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) went to El Salvador at the request of that government to analyze the van driven by the women and the debris from the crime scene. Rifles were sent by the government of El Salvador for analysis, and polygraph examinations were given to suspects. The FBI also conducted investigations within the United States in order to track down possible eyewitnesses. The murders sparked outrage in Washington, and the Carter administration put all military aid to El Salvador on hold until it was convinced that the Salvador government was investigating the murders. As the investigation and trial wore on, however, the issue was used by groups and members of Congress to oppose further military aid to Central America.

The FBI was involved only in providing technical assistance to the government of El Salvador. However, this became a problem for many reasons. Because the request for FBI assistance came through the Department of State, interdepartmental conflicts soon surfaced; also, the working conditions within El Salvador were so chaotic that it took months for routine legal procedures, such as setting a trial date. Furthermore, the families of the victims became increasingly angry about the speed of the trial and the lack of information about it, and they eventually filed a request for all information about the case under the Freedom of Information Act. The Department of State, the Department of Justice, and the government of El Salvador each had different opinions about the release of information, because most of it was not compiled under U.S. jurisdiction.

The documents in this file include memorandums, letters, teletypes, airtels, specimen analysis sheets, photographs of the

alleged murder weapons, field reports, newspaper clippings, witness statements, requests for information by the victims' families, and polygraph examination reports on the suspects.

The documents reproduced here were drawn from the Washington files of the FBI and have been released under the Freedom of Information Act; certain documents or portions of documents have been deleted by the FBI pursuant to provisions of that legislation. The material has been filmed in the exact order and condition in which it was released, and every effort has been made to publish the most legible copies available.

The file is in approximate chronological order, and the FBI did not index documents. The Roll Notes is not a complete inventory of the file; however, it gives an indication of the types of material or specific documents that may be particularly worthwhile for research.

ROLL NOTES

FBI File on the American Churchwomen Killed in El Salvador, December 1980

Bureau File Number 163-49105

Section 1:

December 1980 - February 1981

Roll 1, 0001-0172

Report on laboratory identification team sent to El Salvador,
12/11/80

Request for Bureau assistance and dispatch of legal attaché to
Panama

Report on conditions in El Salvador

Review of known facts, 1/16/81

Orders for legal attaché

Report on threatening signs found near Maryknoll mission in El
Salvador

Memo from Bureau Director William Webster to President Jimmy
Carter, 1/5/81

Evidence analysis charts and lists of evidence

Report of the Latent Fingerprint Section

Teletype regarding the legal attaché's meeting with the Salvadoran
commission and government officials

Section 2:

December 1980 - June 1981

Roll 1, 0173-0533

Fingerprint analyses

Specimen analyses

Rifle examinations

Letter from William P. Ford, brother of victim, requesting govern-
ment information

Newspaper clippings

Copy of House Resolution 112, calling for the completion of the
murder investigation

Section 3:

July 1981 - January 1982

Roll 1, 0534-0615

Letters to William P. Ford

Reports on the search for César Cortez, possible eyewitness and former member of the El Salvador National Guard (ESNG)

Preliminary lists of suspects based on polygraph exams

Section 4:

November 1981 - January 1982

Roll 1, 0616-0738

Reports on the search for César Cortez, possible eyewitness

Written confession of J. C. Palacios, ESNG

Report on the investigation into owner of blue pickup truck

Report on the search for Dagoberto Martinez, ESNG

Summary of investigation

Section 5:

January - February 1982

Roll 1, 0739-0809

Report on the trial delays

Polygraph examinations of suspects

Statement by Dagoberto Martinez to special agents

Reports on the preparation for press conference on status of the investigation

Memos regarding continuation of technical assistance in the investigation

Section 6:

February - July 1982

Roll 1, 0810-0977

Bureau memos and teletypes

Letters from the Senate Foreign Relations Committee

Bombings at the San Salvador Supreme Court House

Memos regarding conditions in El Salvador

Memos regarding requests of victims' families for information

Letter from Mary Rose Oakar, U.S. representative from Ohio, on behalf of victims' families

Section 7:

July 1982 - March 1983

Roll 1, 0978-1200

Letter from Joseph G. Minish, U.S. representative from New Jersey, on behalf of William P. Ford

Letter from William P. Ford and his requests for information
Letter from Director Webster to Representative Minish
Letter from the Maryknoll community, including additional
information:
•Questioning of Sister Maria Richman's experiences of
12/2-3/80
•Statements by witnesses at the airport on the night of 12/2/80
Letters for release of information; denials by Director Webster
Reports on the examination of latent fingerprints
Newspaper clippings
Memo dated 3/30/83 updating the investigation
Letter from Director Webster to Clarence E. Miller, chairman of the
House Appropriations Subcommittee

Section 8:

June - July 1983

Roll 1, 1201-END Roll 1

Roll 2, 0001-0244

Memos regarding President Ronald Reagan's interest in the
investigation
Summary of the investigation to 6/15/83
Copies of the *Congressional Record* highlighting comments perti-
nent to the investigation
Polygraph examination reports

Section 9:

August - October 1983

Roll 2, 0255-0377

Investigation into allegations that the wrong men are being tried
Reports on attempts to set a timetable for the trial

Section 10:

September - December 1983

Roll 2, 0378-END

Memo regarding CIA review of FBI documents
Analysis of evidence
Update, 10/13/83
"Report on the Investigation into the Killing of Four American
Churchwomen in El Salvador," by the Lawyers' Committee
for International Human Rights, including a chronology of
events
Copy of foreign assistance legislation for fiscal year 1982

**Copy of the transcripts of the hearings before the Committee on
Foreign Affairs, 3/18/81**

Chronology of events relating to the death of Jean Donovan

Newspaper clippings

**"Justice in El Salvador: A Case Study," by the Lawyers' Commit-
tee for International Human Rights, 7/20/82, including update
of 2/1/83**

**Report to the secretary of state, 12/2/83, including periodic updates
to 7/5/84**

Memos from the legal attaché, Panama, from 12/15/80 - 1/16/81

**Statements by Francis Mullen of the Bureau to the Senate Foreign
Relations Committee, 3/19/81**