

Circle of Mercy Member Prepares for Jail

News Analysis

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Linda Mashburn, a member of Circle of Mercy Congregation in Asheville, N.C., will spend Holy Week and Easter in a West Virginia prison for a November moment of prayer near Columbus, Ga. Her three-month sentence (and \$500 fine) won't be enjoyable, for her or husband Bill. But some consequences are chosen in light of deeper convictions.

Linda, a retired nurse and community health educator, was among the estimated 19,000 people taking part in last November's "School of the Americas" action at Ft. Benning. Part of her family and two other members of Circle of Mercy accompanied her. But only a few traveled the final steps, "crossing the line" onto the base and, with 31 others, were convicted in late January of misdemeanor trespass.

Interestingly enough, the majority of those convicted are Christians, from a wide age span (19-81 years) and diverse careers. The group includes a farmer, military veterans, a painting contractor, writers, several priests and nuns, an accountant, a tennis club manager, a landscaper, and health care workers.

Often referred to as the "School of Assassins," the counter-insurgency training is for troops from Latin America. Hundreds of its graduates have been implicated in human rights abuse cases, especially in Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala and, more recently, Colombia. Former Panamanian President Jorge Illueca has referred to the training facility as the "biggest base for destabilization in Latin America."

The school's activities first prompted significant Congressional attention in 1996 after public disclosure that textbooks provided instruction in torture, extortion and execution. In 1999 an amendment to close the school was approved by the House of Representatives but failed to make it out of a conference committee with the Senate. The following year, a similar vote narrowly failed. A new Congressional initiative (HR 1217) to close the school has currently garnered 123 Democratic and Republican co-sponsors.

Reacting to public pressure, the Pentagon briefly closed the school and then reopened it under a new name, Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation. Fr. Roy Bourgeois, a Maryknoll priest who has worked in Latin America, doesn't think the change was substantive. Bourgeois is the founder of School of the Americas Watch, which has been sponsoring the annual protests since 1990. Since that time 183 people have been convicted of "crossing the line" and collectively served more than 81 years in prison.

Linda's personal opposition to the school's function began with a trip to Nicaragua in 1985. Since then she's made at least a dozen trips to Central America, with various organizations and on her own, most recently as the volunteer staff for Sister Parish, which fosters partnerships between Central American and U.S. congregations.

"I witnessed first-hand the terrorist tactics" used by SOA graduates in Nicaragua, Linda said in a trial court statement prior to her sentencing. And in Guatemalan refugee camps in southern Mexico she "heard similar stories about massacres carried out by soldiers in the Guatemalan highlands."

In her trial testimony, Linda rooted her convictions in two authoritative traditions. One is the conclusion of the Nuremberg International Military Tribunal, which set internationally-recognized legal precedents following World War II, saying that individuals "have the duty to violate domestic laws to prevent crimes against peace and humanity from occurring."

Her other taproot of conviction is as a follower of Jesus.

"I believe Jesus preached nonviolent resistance to evil and was crucified by the Romans because of it. Many down through the ages have followed his example and have sometimes met a similar fate." Being

aware of these witnesses, and having seen the “horrors visited on Central Americans by SOA graduates, prison is not such a terrible ordeal.”

Her goal, she said to the judge who decided her penalty, is to call attention to the fact that the U.S. is “running the largest training school for terrorism in the world.” Since its inception in 1946, the school has trained more than 60,000 Latin American soldiers.

I confess that this account is biased with personal connections. I have known Linda for 20 years—the past four as her pastor. Over the last decade she has made the annual trek to Ft. Benning for the SOA action—not to mention authoring many articles, countless letters to the editor and visits with elected officials.

Her vision, courage and compassion have been consistent over the life of our friendship. And her prior involvements testify to the same Spirit that animates her present course. It was, I think, this same Spirit which prompted the ancient prophet to declare: “What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God” (Micah 6:8); this same Spirit which prompted Jesus to insist that love of enemies is the touchstone of both spiritual and social transformation (Matthew 5:43-44).

Spending Holy Week in jail will add an extra dimension to the season. And Easter’s resurrection promise will become all the more audacious.

No turning back, no turning back.

Ken Sehested is co-pastor of Circle of Mercy Congregation in Asheville, N.C., a congregation affiliated nationally with the Alliance of Baptists and the United Church of Christ.

PHOTO CAPTION: Linda Mashburn speaking at a news conference prior to her trial in Columbus, Georgia. Her three-month prison sentence will probably begin in late March. *PHOTO CREDIT:* SOA Watch