



The FURROW

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Voices That Challenge

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In a number of online newspaper articles this year many journalists reported how politics in Brazil is now the latest threat to the rainforests of the Amazon region.¹ It appears that those who serve the interests of large landowners and agribusiness in the National Council of Brazil were attempting to push through laws which would rescind protection laws for the region. Some of their attempts were bearing fruit and going uncontested in the unstable political world of Brazil. In September 2017 Jonathan Watts reported 'campaigners welcome U-turn on Renca reserve but threat still exists as Brazil president has close ties to mining industry'.²

There has been a ten year period of semi-stability for the environmental activists in Brazil but things are changing fast. In the past three years enforcement of the environmental laws has been very lax. Despite this the indigenous peoples continue to work in and protect their regions in the face of political opposition. They understand that without the safeguards of the law, they, and the forests, will not survive. They were taught this fact through the work of Sr. Dorothy Stang, a Notre Dame Namur Sister. She lived and worked among them for forty years until her assassination in the State of Pará in February 2005.

Dorothy Stang (1931-2005) was born in Dayton, Ohio USA. She was the middle child of a large family. When she was seventeen, she made a decision to enter the order of Notre Dame Namur, the Sisters who had educated her. Her parents supported her decision despite her young age and believed she would work out her true vocation in her first year in the convent. It had been Dorothy's wish to travel to a mission country, perhaps China, with the Notre Dame Namur Sisters. Upon profession she worked as a teacher in Illinois and Arizona from 1951-66. In Arizona she encountered migrant Mexican farm workers. It was, she said, her first real encounter

1 www.theguardian.com/environment; www.reuters.com
www.nytimes.com www.edie.net accessed October 2017

2 Jonathan Watts www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/sept/26/brazil-backtracks-on-the-plan-to-open-up-amazon-forest-to-mining accessed October 2017

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with poverty. While working with these Mexican workers she came to the knowledge that the Gospel involved action as well as words.

In 1962 Cesar Chavez, a civil rights and labourer leader co-founded the National Farm Workers Association. This was a Union for the migrant and low paid farm workers in the rural areas of America. During the Depression years (1929-39) his father lost the farm they had in Yuma Arizona and the whole family moved to California to work on the grape farms. Despite having good employment at the end of 1950's and early 1960's he left his job to return to the fields to work. Here his goal was to gain the support/trust of the workers to form a Union which would highlight their civil rights and working conditions. Dorothy identified with Chavez and his work. She took his influence with her when working in Brazil.

Prior to the opening of the Second Vatican Council Pope John XXIII asked North American religious communities to send ten percent of their people to serve in Latin America. Dorothy was among the first Notre Dame Namur Sisters to put her name forward for consideration in 1963. It was not until August 1966 that she, and four other Sisters, arrived in Petrópolis, Brazil for a five month induction course into the language and culture of the country. Jon Sobrino and Gustavo Gutiérrez were part of the induction team. These men were not renowned Liberation Theologians at the time but their influence on Dorothy's work in Brazil was very evident.

The first home Dorothy knew in Brazil was in Coroata in the State of Maranhão. The mission team she worked with consisted of four sisters and two priests and their congregation was twelve thousand people in the town and ninety-six thousand people in the outlying areas. Along with religious instructions they taught the workers about their human rights. Here the preferential option for the poor was paramount in all the missionary team did.

The Notre Dame Namur Sisters early years in Brazil coincided with a critical, transitional era not alone for the Church but also in South American politics. There had been a military coup in 1964. The Second Vatican Council (1962-65) had opened the Church to new possibilities in the World. The Conference of the Latin American Church at Medellín (1968) was a great support to those religious working in South America. With these changes Dorothy believed, perhaps naïvely, that working together with the Church the workers could attain their full human rights. The workers were totally dependent on the will of the landowners because they had no land rights for the areas they worked. Dorothy was convinced that the workers needed to be organised in the manner of Cesar Chavez's farmers union.

Seeing the need to educate herself in the land laws of Brazil Dorothy took on the study of Land Statutes in Brazilian law. Some of the workers joined her as part of the study group. Later, to enhance what she had learnt she went to Rio de Janeiro to study the Brazilian Agrarian Reform Movement. Through this study she began to acutely understand the challenges of farming in the Amazon region. She believed that the Law was the answer to the workers problems. Her understanding of vocation was to minister to the poor and assist them to work together, especially in rural regions. With permission from her local Bishop Dorothy moved further into the forests of the Amazon. In the early 1970s she felt the need to travel with, and accompany in faith, those migrant workers who went in search of work on the Transamazon Highway. Offers by the Government of free land brought many in search of prosperity and a route out of their bondage to landowners.

In 1974 Dorothy and another Sister, Becky, moved to the State of Pará in the diocese of Marabá. This was to become her second home in Brazil. The workers here were as badly treated as in Coroata. When they cleared the forest floor, believing the land to be theirs, the landowners forced them off the land under duress. Some workers were killed for resisting. In her first weeks in her new home Dorothy witnessed the police working on behalf of the landowners against defenceless migrants. She and the pastoral team she worked with felt helpless and infuriated. They formed a plan to go to Brasília and seek Federal assistance for the workers. They brought with them federal maps of the region and reports of the oppression suffered by the workers. Representatives of the Community went with Dorothy to Brasília. They were received by the Federal Authorities but nothing changed.

The Bishops of Brazil formed a Pastoral Land Commission in response to the violence. This encouraged the people to seek justice, understanding that it was the Church, not the Authorities, who would support them. Resulting from their actions the numbers of workers, priests and religious being arrested rose as they were seen as obstacles in the way of landowner's plans for the Transamazon Highway. In the years 1977-82 the workers continued to come together to agitate for their rights and 1979 some major American steel and mining companies moved into the State of Pará to build a major dam and mine for iron. It became evident that the workers were becoming organised. They wanted better lives for their families and the generations to come. In local elections in 1982 their representative was elected. Dorothy's many years of information meetings and encouragement of the workers started to bear fruit. This was a major victory for the workers, though minor in the greater scheme of things.

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It came to Dorothy's attention that there were communities living deeper within the forest in the Eastern most region of Pará. She knew that they had no-one ministering to them and asked permission to go. She travelled into the forest on foot taking lifts when local trucks passed by. She encouraged the workers there to come together and help each other. INCRA – the government department for land reform – committed itself to building roads into the forest, making it more accessible, after representation from the workers with Dorothy's assistance. Small schools were constructed in the forest with salaries for teachers provided because Dorothy went, on behalf of the people, to the Government Headquarters in Altamara and, quietly, demanded their legal rights. The community built a small home for her and it was here she lived for two years with them. Dorothy constantly carried a plastic shoulder bag which contained area maps, a copy of the Brazilian Constitution and her Bible. She was known as a different type of religious because she helped the people think for themselves through her witness to her faith and to them.

It was through the INCRA in the 1980's and 90's that many petitions were made on behalf of the workers. Legal documents were sought to establish the workers' rights of ownership to the land when being threatened with eviction. In 1991 a Creation Spirituality Course in California saw Dorothy on sabbatical from Brazil. She returned to Brazil more energised believing that Creation Spirituality was the perfect companion to Liberation Theology and the struggle for justice in Latin America. She now wanted to reclaim the forests and undertook a replanting programme with the workers in 1993.

She moved to Anapu in 1995 and remained for twenty years. The re-uniting of the county of Anapu was facilitated by the workers coming together and petitioning for the areas to be united. This would never have occurred had Dorothy not encouraged the people to do so and informed them as to how it could be achieved. Despite this great advancement the landowners ensured the workers would never get further in their hopes for justice.

From 2002 onwards the struggle for power between workers and landowners continued. In the midst of this many leaders of the workers, Dorothy and other religious were arrested and released. Dorothy knew all she had done was legal. She knew the law and which government agencies and lawyers to contact when needed. She knew the workers were powerless but she refused to stop trying on their behalf. The landowners now saw her as a viable threat.

In early 2005 a particular invasion by the landowners brought Dorothy to the INCRA offices in Belém. The Federal Police committed to look into the situation. They also informed her that

she was in need of protection herself. On 11 February she travelled to Boa Esperance for a meeting with workers. She informed the police of her plans but they maintained they were unable to provide protection at that time. She knew the situation was dangerous as a bounty had been offered for her life. She also knew the workers were waiting for her at the meeting. She met with them and the following morning was on her way to another workers meeting when she was shot dead by two men working for the landowners of the region.

When her body was taken to Belém the area outside the hospital, where her autopsy was taking place, was thronged with workers, lawyers, human rights workers and her Notre Dame Namur sisters. She was now to be planted not buried in her beloved Brazil.³ Today on the site where Dorothy was murdered – known as Lot 55 – a small school and community centre has been erected.

When news of her death reached President Lula, originally a forest worker himself, he signed a decree placing eight and a half million acres of the Amazon Rainforest under Federal protection. In her name two National Parks were created. It is these areas that are now under threat due to the instability of Brazilian politics.

Despite her death the killings have continued. So also has the peoples determination for their rights, justice and peace. The base ecclesial communities continue wherein the Good News is shared and lived. Her life demonstrated what one person with faith, courage and determination can accomplish in the struggle to change some part of the world desperately in need of justice. Her voice challenged the status quo during her time in Brazil and it resounds still today. She took the influences of her era and put them to good use where she ministered. She would not be silenced when speaking out in support of the communities she loved and it was this that, ultimately, which led to her death.

3 *Rosemary Murphy Martyr of the Amazon- the Life of Sister Dorothy Stang* (2007) Orbis Books Maryknoll N.Y. USA pg 181