12-7-2005

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Recommended Citation
'As Anniversary of Sister Dorothy Stang's Murder Approaches, University of Dayton to Confer Posthumous Honorary Degree' (2005). News Releases. 9574.
https://ecommons.udayton.edu/news_rls/9574
AS ANNIVERSARY OF SISTER DOROTHY STANG'S MURDER APPROACHES, UNIVERSITY OF DAYTON TO CONFER POSTHUMOUS HONORARY DEGREE

DAYTON, Ohio -- Sister Dorothy Stang, a Dayton native murdered by hired assassins in Brazil where she had spent most of her life serving the poor and protecting the Amazon rainforest, will be honored posthumously on Thursday, Feb. 2, at the University of Dayton. For what's believed to be the first time in its history, the University of Dayton will confer an honorary degree after someone's death.

The honor comes nearly one year after the courageous missionary -- called "the angel of the Amazon" by Brazilians -- was shot in the chest and head by two gunmen on a rural road on Feb. 12, 2005, as part of a land dispute over the displacement of peasants. Witnesses say the 73-year-old nun, who had previously received death threats, pulled out her Bible and began reading before the men shot her. The gunmen's trial is slated to begin Dec. 9 in Belem, Brazil.

"She was a tireless defender of human rights and the environment," said Daniel J. Curran, president of the University of Dayton, who suggested her name to UD's honorary degree committee. "She worked unflaggingly on behalf of the poor and the powerless. As a Catholic, Marianist university, we are called to carry on her mission. She is an extraordinary role model."

Plans are still shaping up for the ceremony, which is expected to include a 4 p.m. Mass in the Immaculate Conception Chapel before the conferral of the honorary degree of humane letters. Cincinnati Archbishop Daniel Pilarczyk and Stang's family are expected to take part. The ceremony is part of activities during UD's "Human Rights Week 2006: Building Democracy, Justice and Peace" that runs Jan. 29-Feb. 3.

Stang, a naturalized Brazilian, spent nearly four decades as a missionary in that country. For more than two decades, she lived in primitive conditions in the rainforest, where

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she taught peasants sustainable farming techniques and fought illegal logging and ranching. She was a member of the Catholic church's Pastoral Land Commission, a human rights organization that fights for the rights of rural workers and peasants, and worked with the Association of Ecological Solidarity in the Amazon.

Stang's ministry put her life at risk. Pastoral Land Commission records show that nearly 1,400 people died in land conflicts in the last 20 years, according to newspaper reports.

Just two months before Stang's death, the Bar Association of Brazil awarded her its "Human Rights Award." In 2004, she also was named an honorary citizen of the state by officials in Para, Brazil. Following her murder, Brazil's president ordered the creation of a huge Amazon rainforest protection area.

"Sister Dorothy's ultimate sacrifice has resulted in the preservation of the land that she loved and fought so hard to protect," said Kerrie Cross, chair of UD's honorary degree committee and archivist. "The government is no longer ignoring the lawlessness of the region and has sent troops to the area to protect the farmers. The international community has been made aware of the plight of the legitimate farmers and the need to protect their efforts toward sustainable farming techniques and the plight of one of the world's most important natural resources — the rainforest."

Known as "Dot" by her family, Stang grew up in Harrison Twp. in Ohio with nine brothers and sisters. She attended Julienne High School, leaving after her junior year to join the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur in 1948. As part of the order's mission, the sisters "take our stand with poor people, especially women and children, in the most abandoned places."

Stang took that philosophy to heart, according to Sister Elizabeth Bowyer, SND, a friend. "Her heart was so touched by the material poverty of the people of Brazil and of their potential greatness. She moved into the interior (of the rainforest) with the peasants to help them reach their God-given potential because she realized that by working the soil, they could make a life for themselves and their families. When she saw the illegal logging and farming, her sense of justice was ignited. She had to cry out against this kind of injustice, and that's what caused her death."

Besides responding to the world’s poor, the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur "proclaim the goodness of God as part of our charism," said Bowyer, coordinator of sponsorship for the order in Cincinnati. "That's important for our world today, to give a sense of hope and trust. Dorothy, in her belief that all creation is filled with the presence of God, had such respect for the dignity of people and the dignity of creation."

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For media interviews, contact Kerrie Cross at (937) 229-4267 and Sister Elizabeth Bowyer at (513) 761-7636. For interviews with Daniel J. Curran or members of Sister Dorothy Stang's family, contact Teri Rizvi at (937) 229-3241.