

# Celebrating Women Witnesses

## A Project to Rediscover Women Leaders in the Catholic Church

Author Tara K. Dix is Assistant Editor of U.S. Catholic magazine and a freelance writer living in Chicago, Illinois.

### Introduction

*I feel like I'm walking down a new path. It's not physical fear or fear of death, because the courageous poor of Latin America have taught me a theology of life that, through solidarity and our common struggle, transcends death. Rather, it is a sense of helplessness—that I who always wanted to be the champion of the poor am just as helpless—that I, too, must hold out my begging bowl; that I must learn—am learning—the ultimate powerlessness of Christ. It is a cleansing experience. So many things seem less important, or not at all, especially the ambitions.*

Penny Lernoux wrote these words in a letter to *National Catholic Reporter* editor Tom Fox shortly before her death from cancer in 1989. When Penny died, letters flooded the offices of the newspaper, people who had never met Penny, lamenting her death and the loss of a beacon of light and justice in the dark underworld of Latin America.

At her funeral Mass, mourners sang:

*And if our voices were broken, still the stones themselves would cry. For our life will not be silent, nor the earth remain unmoved.*

Surely this is what Penny hoped, her own voice broken, that someone would carry on the work of speaking truth to power.

### Award Winning Journalist

Penny was born in 1940, graduated Phi Beta Kappa from the University of Southern California, and took a job as a reporter for the U.S. Information Agency in Bogota, Colombia and Rio de Janeiro. After that she was bureau chief of the Copley News Service in Caracas, Venezuela, then Buenos Aires, and then became South America Correspondent for Copley in Bogota. From 1976 until 1989, she freelanced mainly for U.S. periodicals, like *Newsweek*, *NCR*, and the *New York Times*. She married Denis Nahum, and together they had a daughter, Angela.

## PENNY LERNOUX

### Speaking Truth to Power



Penny earned great praise for her work, winning numerous honors including the coveted Maria Moors Cabot Award from Columbia University, the Sidney Hillman Foundation Book Award for *Cry of the People*, and an Alicia Patterson Foundation Grant for her research.

She was prophetic in her dead-on perception of Latin American politics, as *The Nation's* editors point out in their obituary of Penny:

*The second article she wrote for us was about Panama.*

*It warned of the explosion that might one day result from the lethal brew of U.S. arrogance, Latin American nationalism and Panama's growing importance as a drug-trafficking center. That was in 1972.*

### Converted by The Poor

Penny Lernoux did not set out to right wrongs. She was simply a journalist, doing her job to record the times accurately, honestly. As it turned out, the "times" converted her, called out to her, and she could not ignore what she saw and heard.

She witnessed the great suffering of the poor of Latin America under brutal dictators and despots, military regimes and drug lords. She witnessed the elite reaping benefits from the oppression they wreaked, and she knew that few people in the United States, or in Latin America for that matter, were getting the real story. She realized that the United States, in many of its policies and actions, stood complicit in the crimes against human dignity and she sought to expose the roots of corruption. American banks were funding terror, the CIA was spying on religious groups and human rights workers, the U.S. Army was training assassins, the U.S. government was turning political tides with its support of certain regimes, and U.S. corporations were bribing government officials to maintain profitable business relationships.

She noticed also that the Catholic Church was doing little as an institution to assuage the pain of the poor. She described the Church as “wedded to the upper classes,” and grew further and further from the faith in which she had been raised—until she went beyond the halls of government, beyond spokesmen and bureaucrats, and journeyed deep into the slums, deep into the poverty. There she met Catholic laypeople, sisters, brothers, and priests who lived an entirely different style of Catholicism than she had seen before. They showed a new way of being church, of living the gospel.

The Maryknoll Missioners in Chile particularly had an effect on her. In her last years, she began to write a book about the history of the Maryknoll sisters, to tell their stories of service and courage. When she proposed the book to the sisters, she wrote to tell them that they were the catalyst of her re-conversion to Catholicism:

*I began to drift away after I arrived in Colombia in the early 1960s, before Vatican II. The institutional church seemed so wedded to the upper classes, particularly the Conservative Party. My experience of this near-feudal institution was so painful that for years afterward I was estranged from the church. But in the early 1970s I came in contact with Maryknoll Missioners in Chile, who showed me a different church—the church of the poor. It was through them that I became aware of and entered into another world—not that of the U.S. embassy or the upper classes, which comprise the confines of most American journalists but the suffering and hopeful world of the slums and peasant villages. The experience changed my life, giving me new faith and a commitment as a writer to tell the truth of the poor to the best of my ability.*

### **Risking Her Life to Tell Their Stories**

For 27 years, Penny lived this commitment, reporting on political and economic conditions in Colombia, Brazil, Chile, Argentina, Venezuela, and throughout Central America. She sent her stories back to the United States, writing of corruption and violence, torture and oppression. It was not a pretty world. Those she visited were filthy from poverty and gaunt from hunger. Yet she found beauty in the faces of the poor, saw how they imaged Christ perhaps more than anyone she had met. And she knew their stories must be told, particularly to the wealthy and powerful of North America. A change must come, and she did her best to bring it about.

At that time, workers for human rights, any who spoke for the poor, were losing their lives. They were kidnapped, tortured, murdered. Penny herself received many death threats. She was amazed by these Christian people who risked their lives to help others. They lived in solidarity with the people, and her commitment to them and the people they served did not falter. Several journalists’ comments on Penny’s work noted that she was indeed partial, but always factual, always accurate. Her partiality did not mean compromising her journalistic integrity. And neither would she compromise her Christian integrity. She told the truth without fear of reprisal.

She wrote their stories in numerous magazine and newspaper articles as well as her book, *Cry of the People*. In a chapter titled “Be a Patriot (in El Salvador) Kill a Priest,” she tells of the systematic persecution of priests in San Salvador, as in Father Jose Inocencio Alas, the archdiocesan delegate to El Salvador’s first agrarian reform congress in 1970. He was kidnapped on the way to the congress and “found the next day on a lonely road, his head shaved, and still suffering the effects of the drugs and liquor his kidnappers had forced him to take.” In 1972, “Father Nicolas Rodriguez, the parish priest of Chaleatenango, was arrested by agents of the National Guard...his brutally dismembered body was found a few days later.”

A priest who ran a Catholic radio station received death threats for he told of intimidation during the 1972 presidential elections. Because his bishop, Pedro Arnaldo Aparicio, refused to silence the priest, the first floor of the building was set afire. In 1975, Aparicio demanded an answer from the government as to why they had kidnapped and tortured a parish priest. Later that year, the Salvadoran army opened fire on students protesting the government’s \$3.5 million funding of the Miss Universe beauty pageant. Twelve were killed, 80 were wounded, 24 “disappeared.” This is just a small sampling from her book. Her factual and

statistical accounting of human loss and suffering in the 500-page book is simply overwhelming.

Later in her career, Penny exposed the corruption of U.S. financial institutions in her book *In Banks We Trust*, (1986) and examined the struggle of the Catholic Church in Latin America and the world in *People of God: The Struggle for World Catholicism* (1989). Her book *Hearts on Fire: the Story of the Maryknoll Sisters* was completed by Arthur Jones and Robert Ellsberg and published in 1995 after Penny's untimely death.

**She sent her stories back to the United States, writing of corruption and violence, torture and oppression. It was not a pretty world... Yet she found beauty in the faces of the poor, saw how they imaged Christ perhaps more than anyone she had met. And she knew their stories must be told, particularly to the wealthy and powerful of North America.**

### Conversion of the Church

Just as Penny was converted by her witness of the poor, so the institutional Church experienced conversion as well. Recognizing its gospel mission to stand in solidarity with the excluded, in 1968 the Bishops Conference of Latin America (CELAM) declared its "preferential option for the poor" at a historic meeting in Medellin. Penny describes it like this:

*Medellin produced the Magna Carta of today's persecuted, socially committed church... The Bishops placed the blame for social and economic injustice squarely on those with the 'greater share of wealth, culture, and power' who 'jealously retain their privileges,' thus 'provoking explosive revolutions of despair.'*

The new focus of the Church was on liberation and participation of the poor.

With the birth of liberation theology, a new affirmation was given to the struggle that empowered Christians

to act on duty, this preference for the poor. It spread throughout the world. Much of the hierarchy, even in Latin America, resisted it, for it meant a radical repositioning of the church, to stand with the impoverished, to suffer with them, to release itself from the comfort of wealth, protection, and security. Despite the resistance, it was a revolution in Catholic social thought. Two concrete outcomes of Medellin were improvement of education systems and the establishment and support of grassroots communities. While some progress has been made, the economic situation in Central and South America remains dire, political unrest continues and the poor suffer.

### Trusting God's Will

In a tribute to Penny Lernoux, Tom Fox recalled her words during her struggles with the reform of the church:

*I believe that those who seek a new path, whether in the church or secular society, should not expect roses but must be prepared to endure the prophet's life in the desert. Yet, as the Archbishop [Helder Camara] notes, 'The desert also blooms'—as we have seen in Latin America... Meanwhile, those of us committed to the church of Medellin and Vatican II must continue the struggle. Sometimes it is hard, as I know from my reporting on the church in Latin America, but I also believe it is the only way to remain steadfast to Christ's vision.*

Penny held a firm belief that God's hand worked in the deeds of humankind and committed herself to a trust in God's will. At the conclusion of a phone call when she told Fox she'd been diagnosed with cancer, she said, "All we can do is trust in God." Despite the risks she took in a dangerous environment, literally placing her life on the line, in the end, it was cancer that took her life.

Arthur Jones, another chief editor of *NCR*, wrote of her death: "Penny wrote as she lived, at a breathless pace. Courageous, her books are jam-packed with details, horror stories and hope... She was a deluge. Now, only now, we know why. She had to get it all done."

*And if our voices were broken, still the stones themselves would cry. For our life will not be silent, nor the earth remain unmoved.*

Perhaps the mourners at Penny's funeral sang this lament for a voice of truth extinguished. Or perhaps they sang in hope and thanksgiving, knowing that when Scripture speaks of the stones that cry out, it speaks of people like Penny, of prophets. Even when one beloved voice is broken and battered, still new prophets will always cry out. They cannot be silenced.



### References:

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Lernoux, Penny with Arthur Jones and Robert Ellsberg. *Hearts on Fire: The Story of the Maryknoll Sisters*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, May, 1995.

The feast day for Penny Lernoux is celebrated on Jan 6 or Oct 12. Please use the enclosed prayer service in your parish or small faith community on that date or at another appropriate time.

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## **Prayer Service in Honor of Penny Lernoux**

*May be celebrated Jan. 6 (date of birth) or October 8 (date of death) or at another time.*

### **Opening Song:** Come to the Water

(in Gather #502)

*by John Foley, copyright J. Foley and New Dawn Music, 1978*

### **Prayer:**

We gather here today to celebrate the memory and witness of Penny Lernoux, a journalist of the 20<sup>th</sup> century who sought to tell the truth of poverty and oppression in Latin America during the 1960s through the 80s. We pray she lights within our hearts a fire for justice.

### **Reading I** Luke 19:36-42

### **Reading II** From writings by Penny Lernoux

Reader 1: “Nothing in modern day [name of your first world city] can compare with the squalid shanty towns of Sao Paulo...or the parched wastelands of the Northeast Brazil, where millions of people die of hunger every year.

I think of the horror stories of leprosy in the Bible and how many leper colonies I have visited in Latin America—every country there has them. And I share the Brazilians’ frustration because so many Christians in the First World cannot understand that we [in Latin America] live in a different world which, because of its suffering, is far closer to the biblical reality of Jesus. That early church was like the church I have come to admire in Brazil—poor, prophetic, and communitarian.

*from “In common suffering and hope,” by Penny Lernoux. Sojourners, Dec. 1987.*

### Reader 2:

“I had gradually faced up to the reality of ‘insitutionalized violence’ against the poor majorities by governments of and for the rich...I wouldn’t have understood the implications of the situation had it not been for some U.S. missionaries working in Santiago’s shantytowns. They introduced me to the underworld of the poor—its sounds, smells, hopes and sufferings. You can look at a slum or peasant village, and I had seen enough in my reporting, but it is only by entering into that world—by living in it—that you begin to understand what it is like to be powerless, to be like Christ. ...

“The blood of the martyrs also had a positive effect, by helping to awaken the church to the urgent need for social justice...Whereas Catholicism had previously encouraged fatalism, the Medellín church taught the poor that they were equal in the sight of God and that they should take history into their own hands by seeking political and economic changes.”

*from “Incidents and accidents along the road from Medellín to Puebla,” a speech by Penny Lernoux at the University of Notre Dame, March 15, 1989*

### **Song:** Digo Sí Señor

(in Gather # 597) *by Donna Peña, copyright GLA Publications, Inc., 1989*

### **Shared Reflection:** “Be a light for justice”

*In the front of the room, or center of the circle, sits a wide, shallow bowl (or terracotta pot) filled with sand. A large cross is placed in the sand. Any other desired symbols, decorations, etc. are placed next to the bowl on the table. Each participant has a candle and when s/he finishes her/his reflection, s/he places the candle with the others in the sand. At the end, all the candles burn together in the sand*

Give a brief reflection on how learning about the life of Penny Lernoux has inspired you and think of one concrete thing you will do in the next week/month to aid a cause of justice. Place your candle in the sand as a symbol of your commitment to be a light for the world.

### **Closing: Letter from Penny just before her death**

“I feel like I’m walking down a new path. It’s not physical fear or fear of death, because the courageous poor of Latin America have taught me a theology of life that, through solidarity and our common struggle, transcends death. Rather, it is a sense of helplessness—that I who always wanted to be the champion of the poor am just as helpless—that I, too, must hold out my begging bowl; that I must learn—am learning—the ultimate powerlessness of Christ. It is a cleansing experience.”

### **Blessing of Compassion**

*The blessing is done in pairs with the two people facing each other. They both touch the other’s forehead, ears, etc. while the leader reads the words of blessing. For the last section, the group is invited to repeat the words after the leader. It is essential to ask the one being blessed if he or she is comfortable with someone touching his or her eyes, ears, etc. If he or she is not, then the one offering the blessing can simply hold a hand near that particular part of the body as the blessing is being prayed.*

#### Touching the forehead:

May you approach all other beings with Christ-like compassion, observing them with kindness. May you let go of all harsh judgments.

#### Touching the ears:

May you be aware of the suffering of those around you, and of all those in the cosmos. May your ears be open to hear their cries of distress.

#### Touching the mouth:

May you have the courage and wisdom to speak up for those who are wronged, to be a voice for those who suffer from injustice of any form.

#### Touching the hands:

May you be open to receive from others when you are in need. May you be ready to give when someone needs to receive your gifts.

#### Touching the heart:

May you be willing to meet your own suffering. May you do so with deep compassion for yourself.

#### Touching the feet:

May your faith give you strength when you stand beneath the cross of another.

#### Embracing the other person:

May you always know the shelter of God when you are hurting and in pain. May you trust this Compassionate Being to protect you and to comfort you. May you be at peace.

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Name\_\_\_\_\_

*Penny Lernoux: Speaking Truth to Power*

1. Create a resume for Penny Lernoux by filling in the following information.

Education

Honors, Awards and Grants

- 
- 
- 
- 

Job Experience (beginning with most recent)

- 
- 
- 
- 

Publications

Books

- 
- 
- 
- 

Magazines

- 
- 
- 
- 

Personal

Born:

Languages spoken:

Family information:

2. Name the countries where Penny lived between 1976 and 1989.

- 
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- 

3. What were some of the issues that Penny wrote about during her time in Latin America?

4. What did she think of the United States' involvement in Latin America?

5. What did she think of the Catholic Church's role in Latin America during her early years there?

6. Who was influential in her conversion by the poor? What did she learn from their example?

7. Why did Penny receive death threats?

8. The institutional Church in Latin America also experienced conversion. What new focus came out of the meeting with the Bishops Conference of Latin America in Medellin, Colombia?

9. Penny Lernoux is a woman who spoke "truth to power". What message does her life's work—to speak the truth—convey to Catholics today?

10. Write a personal mission statement that Penny Lernoux might have written about her own life. Write in the first person, beginning with the sentence starter below:

The mission of my life is to....