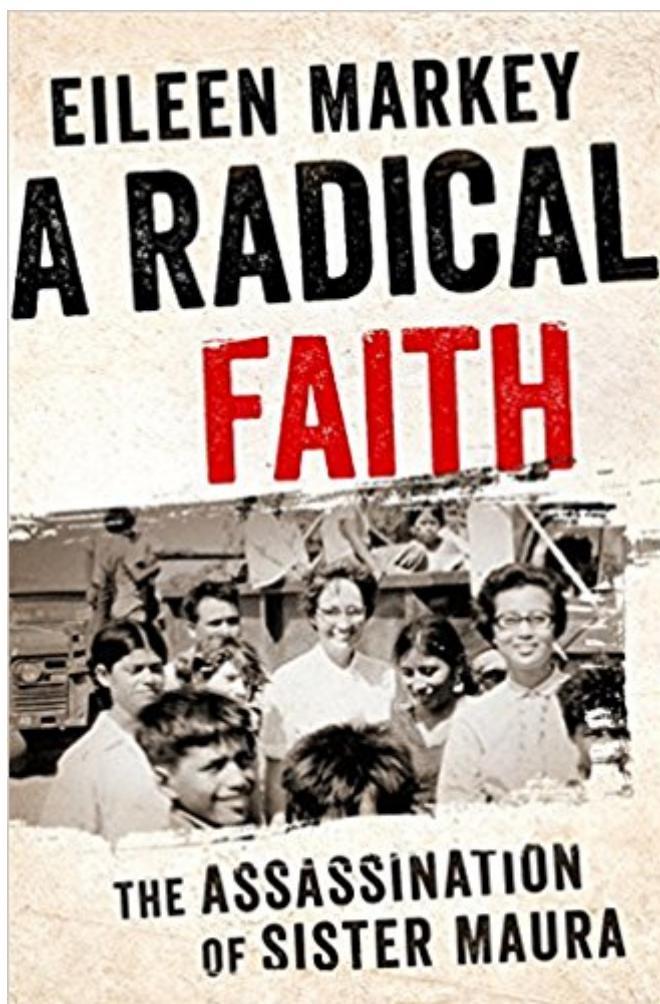


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# A Radical Faith: The Assassination Of Sister Maura



## Synopsis

On a hot and dusty December day in 1980, the bodies of four American women-three of them Catholic nuns-were pulled from a hastily dug grave in a field outside San Salvador. They had been murdered two nights before by the US-trained El Salvadoran military. News of the killing shocked the American public and set off a decade of debate over Cold War policy in Latin America. The women themselves became symbols and martyrs, shorn of context and background. In *A Radical Faith*, journalist Eileen Markey breathes life back into one of these women, Sister Maura Clarke. Who was this woman in the dirt? What led her to this vicious death so far from home? Maura was raised in a tight-knit Irish immigrant community in Queens, New York, during World War II. She became a missionary as a means to a life outside her small, orderly world and by the 1970s was organizing and marching for liberation alongside the poor of Nicaragua and El Salvador. Maura's story offers a window into the evolution of postwar Catholicism: from an inward-looking, protective institution in the 1950s to a community of people grappling with what it meant to live with purpose in a shockingly violent world. At its heart, *A Radical Faith* is an intimate portrait of one woman's spiritual and political transformation and her courageous devotion to justice.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

In death, Maryknoll Sister Maura Clarke became known as a symbol of the brutality of El Salvador's pitiless conflict in the 1980s. In this rare and beautiful book, Eileen Markey brings Maura to life. From her childhood in a tightly knit Irish Catholic neighborhood to her departure for Nicaragua in 1959 and subsequent murder in El Salvador, Maura's life became interwoven

with the tumultuous history of Cold War Central America. Drawing on personal correspondence and extensive interviews, Markey skillfully evokes the transformation of the Catholic Church during those turbulent decades, crafting a searing testament to the meaning of faith amidst the hard choices imposed by desperate circumstances. —Cynthia Arnson, Director, Latin American Program, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars

A Radical Faith brings excitement, tension, and compassion to an overlooked story; Rich details and solid storytelling convey one nun's story of her dedication to God and her fellow humans." Kirkus Reviews

Eileen Markey is an investigative journalist whose work has appeared in the New York Times, New York Magazine, Wall Street Journal, National Catholic Reporter, America, Commonweal, and Killing the Buddha. She has worked as a producer for WNYC's Brian Lehrer Show and is a contributing editor for Housing and Homelessness at City Limits. Markey is a graduate of Fordham University's urban studies program and Columbia's Graduate School of Journalism.

I was invited to an event at which the author was speaking about this book. I feel blessed that I was given the opportunity to read a book I might otherwise never have known about. This is a story about the power of a faith that overcomes all fear, all doubt. The author has done a magnificent job of bringing Sister Maura to life through her meticulous research, her own faith, and her obvious admiration for her subject. This book gave me, a non-Catholic, insight into the development of the young Maura Clarke into the deeply devoted Sister Maura.

A Radical Faith captures the spirit of Sister Maura Clarke as a woman with a strong desire to make the world a better place by being present to people the world seemed to ignore. Eileen Markey's detailed writing places us side-by-side with Maura on her journey from New York to Nicaragua and finally to El Salvador. After a bit of a slow start, the book quickly picks up steam as it describes the missionary work of Sister Maura and even though we know the tragic end to her well-lived life, A Radical Faith has us hoping against hope that events will somehow turn out differently. The book also frames Maura's life and work within the larger shifts in American foreign policy and the US Catholic church, opening our eyes to all the factors that led to the murder of the churchwomen and so many others in El Salvador.

I am very impressed with the research done by Eileen Markey on this and the sensitivity by which she narrated the events mentioned. I am also humbled to see my picture with Sister Maura Clarke

on the cover which was taken in Managua, Nicaragua surrounded by the victims of the earthquake there in 1971.

This book is excellent. It's a must read from a variety of perspectives. In addition to telling a compelling story of Maura Clarke's life, it offers a history of the evolution of life in the Catholic Church between 1950 and 1980. It does this from a very personal perspective. The book is based on in-depth research by the author. Maura was a prolific letter writer and those letters were available to her. Many of Maura's relatives and Maryknoll sisters are still alive so Eileen Markey was able to interview many of them. In addition, she traveled to El Salvador and other places where Maura ministered. The result is you end up feeling as if you are right there at Maura's side witnessing her tremendous courage and faith.

This is an excellent book which weaves together the life of an extraordinary person, her upbringing in an Irish New York family, and the geopolitics of the 1960s and 1970s in Central America. In less capable hands the book might over-rotate on one of these dimensions - but Eileen Markey finds the balance between these narrative threads and the result is a compelling and highly readable book. Many people have heard of Sr. Maura Clarke - but most of them have heard about how she died - and the impact that her death had on US policy in Central America. This book tells the far more interesting story of Maura's life - which is a story that most people have not heard. Sr. Maura was clearly a very spiritual and driven person - committed to social justice - and able to bridge cultural divides to find the things that people have in common. She did important work, mainly in Nicaragua, and then took on a far more dangerous assignment in El Salvador in the midst of that country's Civil War. Markey has done extremely thorough research based on access to primary sources - but the research serves the story well. It lends credibility to the whole journey that Sr. Maura Clarke went on a nun and as a person.

One difficult task that Markey tried to explore by writing Maura's life story was for the reader to discern if Maura's assassination was out of a political struggle, a story of martyrdom or a combination of both. For her reader to make a well-thought judgement, it was important for Markey to trace the background of Maura beginning from her upbringing in the family, her entrance into the novitiate and its formation and her long years of foreign mission. Was Maura a Christian martyr? Or was she a subversive nun who took side with leftist guerrillas? As Markey struggled to answer these questions for 3 years (262), our answer will depend on our

understanding of Maura's life and from the perspective of where we come from as a reader. The story of Maura must be comprehensive enough to make such judgement. Markey set the tone of Maura's story by starting in the place where the 4 bodies of women were exhumed from the ground (1). As the dead bodies were retrieved from the ground, 3 nuns kneeled and prayed over this horrifying scene. This picture caught the attention of the world which led the people to question the increasing death toll in El Salvador's current regime and the American foreign policies to this country (9). In order understand Maura, it is an imperative for one to know her formative years from childhood, family upbringing and religious formation. In these, Markey did an excellent job as a writer. In the book, Markey described

Maura's growing up years at Rockaway (16), describing the type of family which she grew up to, detailing the kind of parents and siblings she had and the community that she lived with (13). Some significant experiences that has left a mark in Maura's consciousness must be her experiences of poverty in the family, the instability of family's finances as they transferred from one house to another (25), the influx of poor migrants in their neighborhood especially during summer and perhaps the stories of martyrdom of Maryknoll nuns in foreign missions (43). These experiences became ingredients of Maura's character as a potential martyr, a nun for others especially for the oppressed and suffering people. What strengthened her consciousness as a person for others was the Maryknoll spirituality which believes that everyone is important and deserves equal attention (48). Hence, Maura's stance in taking sides with the least fortunate and the oppressed must have shaped by those foundational years of her life. As someone who was faithful by how she was formed as human person and as a nun, I would say that Sr. Maura deserves to be called a martyr. Questions: In what way is an expression of one's faith become radical? What are the operative norms in defining a radical faith? How can we strike the balance in our engagement in such a way that we not labeled as extremist in expressing out our Christian mission?

Having just read the latest biography of Dorothy Day and now the life of Maura Clark, saints are on my mind and in my heart. The life of Sister Maura as portrayed is both ordinary and extraordinary. Her personal mission in Nicaragua and El Salvador becomes a quest to find Christ and his passion in the oppressed. Maura lived liberation theology, not as an ideology as much as an act of love, for the other.

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