

## Stop the Torture

By Sister Dianna Ortiz | January 27, 2005

On Thursday, January 20, I listened to George W. Bush take the oath of office as President. He made many promises. One promise he did not make is to end the torture his administration has not only tolerated but facilitated. It left me wondering what his promises to uphold the law and fight for freedom and liberty really mean.

I am a survivor of torture. On November 2, 1989, I was abducted by members of the Guatemalan security forces. I am still talking today about the torture that followed because it is with me at every moment. I carry it with me physically—I wear in my skin the marks of 111 cigarette burns. But the scars go as deep as my very being. I was tortured for twenty-four hours, and in that time who I was, who I had been for 31 years, died. I was a nun, a missionary, a teacher of children. But now there was no God. People could not be trusted. And I could not trust myself.

Those were the lessons I learned. But in that clandestine prison there was one person who reached out to me, a woman who had also been tortured. She asked me my name and took my hand. I made a silent promise to her that, if I managed to survive, I would tell the world what had been done in that secret prison, to her and to others. I would not let her simply vanish, as tens of thousands had at the hands of the Guatemalan army.

I honored my promise. I spoke out about my torture and filed criminal charges in a futile effort to obtain justice in Guatemala. I called on the U.S. government to reveal information about the American who entered the secret prison, ordered my torturers to let me go, and escorted me out. Who was he? How did he know the location of a secret torture center? Why did the Guatemalan torturers obey him, as if he were their boss? Why did he leave all the others there, under torture?

Fifteen years have passed since I was abducted. I pray for the day I will no longer be shackled to that

promise I made in the clandestine prison. But I'm still talking about torture, not only because it is with me at every moment but because it is with us, as a nation, and with us, as a world.

Bush has nominated Alberto Gonzales to be Attorney General, the highest law enforcement officer in our land. We are told he will almost certainly be confirmed. Gonzales set forth his opinions on the permissibility of torture as White House Counsel in a memo to Bush, knowing that his opinions had a likelihood of being translated into policy and that torture could well be the result. And torture was the result.

We have seen the photos from Abu Ghraib. We have heard the accounts from Guantanamo. We have heard Gonzales' evasive testimony before the Senate Judiciary Committee. Unfortunately, those who suffered the torture encouraged by Gonzales did not have the opportunity to testify before that Committee.

The damage Gonzales and his colleagues in the administration have done is irreparable. The damage that Bush has done is incalculable. That the President has nominated Mr. Gonzales for one of the highest offices in our land, an office specifically devoted to the rule of law, is a scandal of epic proportions.

At what point will we say no? At what point will we distinguish ourselves from the American in the prison where I was tortured who had the power to save dozens of Guatemalans but shut the door on their screams? At what point will we demand that the President of the United States live up to the oath he swore to God and to the American people? I hope I



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don't have to wait another 15 years for answers to these questions.

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