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MOVIE REVIEWED BY **ELIZABETH PILGRAM**

# The Greatest Gift

The courageous life and martyrdom of Sister Dorothy Stang

WRITTEN BY Brinka Le Breton

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This book will be of interest to Catholics and also to those who are interested in the environment, but perhaps are not Catholic; however, for all readers outside of Brazil and South America, the most valuable things about Ms. LeBreton's book is the human intelligence she provides about the early life of Dorothy Stang and the culture and land struggles in Brazil. It is within this context that the drama of the gospel stories of Jesus was played out in Sr. Dorothy's life and culminated in her inevitable martyrdom for the world not only to see, but to understand the importance of the Amazon to the survival of the planet.

This retelling of Sister Dorothy Stang's life was of interest to me, because I was educated in a Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur (SND) parochial school in the 1960s. I soon recognized in this new book the distinctive SND charism with which I am so familiar. The SND are women with hearts as wide as the world, and they teach that life's highest vocation is service to the poor: "Nourished in that love by her parents, her teachers, and her siblings, she grew into a woman of conviction, dedication, and sacrifice. The Sister of Notre Dame taught that life's highest vocation was service to the poor..."

Ms. LeBreton is the co-founder and director of the Iracambi Research Center in the Atlantic Rainforest of Brazil, which works on biodiversity, conservation, sustainability, and human rights. She is a lecturer and broadcaster, and she has written two other books about the Amazon, including *Trapped: Modern-day Slavery in the Brazilian Amazon*, which won a Judges' Award from World Hunger Year, New York. In her introduction, Ms. LeBreton, tells the reader about her motivation for writing this book: "Like Dorothy, I came from another country to Brazil. Like Dorothy, I found myself working on new ways of caring for forests and forest people, and like Dorothy, I believe that God is good. This book makes no pretense of being a definitive biography. It is an investigation into Dorothy's life in the context of the violent land struggles in the Amazon."

Ms. LeBreton tells us about Dorothy's early life, her formation as an SND, which led to her first mission in parish schools in Phoenix, Arizona, and during the years of Vatican

II, subsequent move beyond the parish boundaries to work with the children of Mexican immigrant labourers and Navajos. The author writes, "Second Vatican Council was called by Pope John XXIII from 1962 to 1965 to enable the Roman Catholic Church to redefine its priorities...The Church was slowly relinquishing its absolute hold on power and was placing itself on the side of the poor and powerless."

In 1966, after the preparation of those years in the migrant camps, Sr. Dorothy was sent to Brazil. She would spend the next forty years of her life with the poor and landless of the rainforest. As she moved more deeply into her Brazilian experience, she increasingly sought to work with the poor. "She had also noticed, with growing concern, that between them, the settlers, large and small, had succeeded in destroying the forest and destroying their own livelihoods. There had to be a better way. So in 1982 ... she traveled the Transamazon Highway to the river town of Altamira, presented herself to the bishop, Dom Erwin, and told him she wanted to work with the poorest of the poor."

In this small town on the Amazon, Sr. Dorothy worked with an organization to protect poor farmers and their land from loggers and land developers who stop at nothing in pursuit of profits. She began to receive death threats after she testified at a government investigation into illegal incursions into protected areas of the Amazon.

Sr. Dorothy told her followers that "The death of the forest is the end of our lives." She believed that although the poor settlers were themselves damaging the forest, they could learn sustainability as a means of self-preservation. You could not separate the issue of human rights from that of conserving the environment. They were so related that it was a struggle for the ultimate survival of the planet.

Undeterred, she continued her work. Ms. LeBreton ends the book describing the house and community where Dorothy lived, the atmosphere, and the motivations of the two gunmen who ended the life of this 73-year-old nun with six shots. So a life of service ended the tragedy.

**Elizabeth Pilgrim has an Honours BA in English and Film Studies and lives in Brampton, Ontario.**

