

Here's an excerpt from a letter written twenty years ago by Maura Clarke, an American Maryknoll sister working in El Salvador:

"There are so many deaths everywhere that it is incredible.

"The 'death squadron' strikes in so many poor homes. A family of seven, including three small children, was machine-gunned to death in a nearby town just last week. It is a daily thing -- death and bodies found everywhere, many decomposing or attacked by animals because no one can touch them until they are seen by a coroner. It is an atmosphere of death. . . .

"I am beginning to see death in a new way, dearest Katie. For all these precious men, women, children struggling in just laying down their lives as victims, it is surely a passageway to *life* or, better, a change of life. . . .

I don't know what tomorrow will bring. I am at peace here and searching -- trying to learn what the Lord is asking. Ita is a beautiful, faith-filled young woman. I am learning much from her. . . .

"Keep us in your heart and prayers, especially the poor forsaken people."

Twenty years ago today, Ita Ford and Maura Clarke were brutally murdered for their missionary activity in defense of the poor in El Salvador. Our sister community there named themselves after these martyrs. The danger of death gave Maura Clarke a stronger commitment to charity. She didn't leave Salvador. She stayed out of love.

All of us live in danger of death, but some people have stronger reminders of it. They live in countries of civil unrest, like the Middle East, where the city of Bethlehem has canceled public Christmas activities this year. Some live with illnesses that steal away their life. Others have reached an old age when they know their days are numbered. Foolishly, many of us think our lives will never end; we take risks and sometimes pay the price.

The Church of Thessalonika also believed the end was near. Not because of persecution, not because of illness, not because of age. They believed Jesus was coming back soon to bring the world to its end. They were wrong about the timing, but they were right about the message. Paul asked them to live like there would be no tomorrow. If he said that to Americans, most of us would max out our credit cards. When Paul says live like there's no tomorrow, he means not in excess, not in selfishness, but in charity. "May you increase and abound in love for one another and for all," Paul writes. Why should they love? He continues, "to strengthen your hearts, to be blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his holy ones." In Paul's view, Jesus was coming back, and he'd be looking for someone to blame. You can be blame-free if you increase in love.

We celebrate Advent not just to prepare for Christmas, not just to set up a tree, purchase the cards, and draw up the gift list, not just to remember the coming of Christ at Bethlehem, but to prepare for that other coming of Christ, that second coming. Advent invites us, as St. Paul does, to conduct ourselves to please God, as we are conducting ourselves, but to do so even more.

If conditions in your life tell you that you will meet Christ soon, conduct yourselves accordingly. If you are privileged to think you have lots of time, think again. And live in love.