

Brazilian Convicted of Killing American Nun Set Free

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Staff Writer

(May 9, 2008) The man convicted of ordering the murder of an American-born nun in Brazil in 2005 has been acquitted of all charges and set free.

BBC News reports that the Brazilian rancher, Vitalmiro Vastos de Moura, who was convicted of ordering the death of Notre Dame de Namur sister Dorothy Stang in 2005 was acquitted during a May 6 retrial in Para Brazil. Mr. Moura was previously convicted of the crime and sentenced to 30 years for ordering the shooting. However, Brazilian law requires retrials for first offenders who are sentenced to more than 20 years. In the retrial, the jury voted five to two to free him.

The conviction of the man who confessed to the actual shooting of Sister Dorothy, Rayfran das Neves, was upheld at the same proceeding. His sentence was increased by one year to 28 years in prison with no possibility of appeal.

Two other men have already been convicted in the murder and are currently serving sentences. A fifth man, Rancher Regivaldo Pereira Galvão, has been accused as the principal architect and co-financer of Sister Dorothy's murder and awaits trial.

According to a press release by the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, Sister Dorothy is among more than 800 people who have been murdered over the past 30 years for land-related reasons in the Brazilian state of Pará, the location of much of the Amazon rainforest. During the same three decades, only three others were convicted of land-related murders in Pará, but none were given jail terms.

A citizen of Brazil and the United States, Sister Dorothy moved to Brazil 40 years ago to help the poor build independent futures for their families. She worked with the Pastoral Land Commission, an organization of the Catholic Church that fights for the rights of rural workers and peasants, and defends land reforms in Brazil.

Her death came less than a week after meeting with the country's human rights officials about threats to local farmers from loggers and landowners. She was also the recipient of death threats and commented shortly before her death: "I don't want to flee, nor do I want to abandon the battle of these farmers who live without any protection in the forest. They have the sacrosanct right to aspire to a better life on land where they can live and work with dignity while respecting the environment."

The 73 year old nun was shot to death on February 12, 2005 while walking along a dirt road in Anapu, Para. The man who shot her claimed he did so in self-defense because she reached into her bag while saying, "This is my only weapon." It turned out to be a Bible. While she began reading it, he shot her six times.

"My sister Dorothy Stang was murdered because she wanted the poor to enter into the economic

life of Brazil,” wrote David Stang, Sister Dorothy’s brother, in June, 2007.

“She built over twenty six schools, filled them with children, found teachers and hoped that these children would be a progressive part of Brazil. She developed a fruit cooperative so that women could bring in their Amazonian Fruit and be paid money as the cooperative found outlets for their products. Selling the fruit to the schools was one possibility but the mayor of Anapu stopped the idea. She also then helped over 25 years to develop two huge sustainable development projects, developing leaders and people who could live together and sell their products in the open market.”

Her efforts to help the poor brought her many enemies, however. “My sister was directly murdered by two pistoleiros who are paid by the ranchers,” Stang wrote. “These pistoleiros swagger all over the forests. They are hit men who control peoples' lives and terrorize the poor into slavery.”

Stang, who was present at the May 5 trial when Moura was acquitted, said his family is stunned and saddened by the verdict.

“The prosecution was excellent. They presented their case very well, so we’re very surprised,” he told the *BBC*.

Sister Camilla Burns, congregational leader of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur said her community is grieving the fact that justice has been thwarted in the case. “Dorothy is our sister, so our grief is personal,” she said in a press release. “We also grieve for the many unknown murder victims of Anapu. In this season of resurrection, we hope and we fervently pray that one day all people, especially the people of Dorothy’s beloved Brazil, will be treated with the reverence they are due as human beings.”

The sisters are vowing to continue Sister Dorothy’s work. “We the Sisters of Notre Dame in Brazil accept and are respectful of the justice process,” said Community Spokeswoman Sister Kathryn Webster from Brazil. “We are immensely disappointed with the exoneration of Vitlamiro Bastos de Moura. We are committed to continue to walk with our people in Anapu. They have a right to live and be safe. We will work with the people and proper authorities to make that happen.”

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