The Blindfold's Eyes, by Dianna Ortiz, with Patricia Davis

reviewed by Victoria Lee Erickson in the January 25, 2003 issue

Sister Dianna Ortiz, an American Ursuline nun and missionary to Guatemala, tells the story of her abduction, rape and torture by security forces and of her subsequent decade of work to document and publicly protest the involvement of local police in--and the suspected support of the U.S. embassy for--torture activities. Now, the director of the Torture Abolition and Survivors Support Coalition International (TASSC) in Washington, D.C., Ortiz presents a chilling reminder of how easy it is, without wide public discussion and monitoring efforts, for governmental agents to become partners with the agents of terror. Not only does her book contribute to our spiritual and psychological understanding of torture, it helps us to understand its sociological aspects as well.

In their efforts to assist the victims whose souls and bodies are hurting, compassionate caregivers often ignore the sociology of terror. Ortiz's story, however, would not have become public if she and a host of friends, colleagues and supporters had not struggled to make the world right in the sociopolitical arena. Chief among their efforts was to clearly document the fact that the command governmental agencies have over fiscal and policing resources often allows them to act without individual or public awareness of what they are doing.

Ortiz was eventually rescued by an American embassy agent who claimed that she had been "mistaken" for someone else. But she had the courage to protest this interpretation. It was her name that was called by her captors, and letters addressed to her clearly announced her as a target. She worked with the poor and she prayed for victims of torture--activities that displeased the security forces. She was tortured when she refused to leave Guatemala.

Ortiz believes that her effective struggle to survive torture is linked by a fragile lifeline to a force stronger than violence and fear. Even as she names many Christian victims of torture and terror who have committed suicide, she identifies the life line:

Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus' story is a story of torture and death, a story that every Christian is called to claim as her or his own. For Ortiz the story of Jesus is the ultimate story of betrayal and the ultimate source of hope. Jesus, crucified by humans, is the one with us, resurrected by a defiant divine yes to the human no.

Ortiz discovers that resilience comes from our participation in the divine resurrection. As she seeks to thank her known and named helpers, Ortiz's most radical sense of gratitude is reserved for the many unknown and unnamed people whose love and generosity taught her how to understand her life's pain and darkness through often silent and small acts of compassion that brought joy and light. Most surprisingly, Ortiz discovers that the abused victim can be a deep well of compassion. Her journey toward healing through compassion was initiated by the barely alive torture victim who shared her cell and refused to let the torturers remake her. When she discovered this woman who smiled at her, reached for her hand and asked for her name, Ortiz knew why she herself had been kept alive. Oritz knew that she was taking her place in an endless line of those who help and encourage other victims. The woman told her, "Dianna, be strong. They will try to break you."

During 24 hours of torture Ortiz suffered the most egregious personal violations, including being raped, having men urinate down her throat and having 111 cigarette burns inflicted on her back and legs. But by far the most profound pain and torment came when her torturer grabbed her hands and forced her to aid him in stabbing the compassionate woman to death. The videotaping of this action was meant to blackmail her into silence.

In describing her short but life-changing ordeal, Ortiz outlines the brutal structure of torture which is able to undo the sociopsychological well-being of its victims in a mere 24 hours. The first disorienting reality was a social one, her awareness of the breech of trust and security, especially painful because she was an American, hailing from a country known for its commitment to freedom and democracy. The second betrayal came through her awareness of the American support for the torturers and the death squads. This deadly partnership was aimed at disrupting the activities of people believed to be dangerous to the security forces.

Most of the victims were women. After her release, co-workers showed Ortiz how much she was like other torture victims: she was a faithful member of the church

who was educating the poor and empowering them by acting on Christian values. The values of the church stand in direct opposition to the values of the torturers. The torturer informed her that "no one gives a damn about you." The church and human rights groups responded by caring for her. "Torture is calculated to destroy trust and the ability to communicate; in an atmosphere of mistrust and silence, organizing becomes impossible," Ortiz states.

The disruptive panic that restricts normal functioning began when Ortiz's captor announced that he had been instructed to keep her in the dark. Blindfolded, she was pushed into a world in which rational thought processes were impaired by a disabling of the normal functioning of the senses and of the basic assumptions human beings make about one another. Because she could not see, her hearing had to help her imagine what was happening. Even when she could see, it was hard to believe what she saw. No solidarity was possible inside or outside of the torture chamber.

Ortiz decided that her survival depended on "staying awake" and "praising God." This made her realize that though her "real" self might be dying, her spirit continued to live. The sense of being "a ghost" during her decade of healing allowed her to connect with the large company of faithful souls gone before her--witnesses against terror and abuse. She stayed alive in order to keep the names of the dead and dying alive, and in order to stop the traffic into the torture rooms. Ortiz wants us to know that we can stop torture if we act together. Yet finding people who will act is difficult.

Staying alive meant discovering who her friends were. Those caught helping her risked their own lives. Many people turned away from her. But it was face-to-face encounters that helped her interpret what had happened to her. It was not until years after her torture that Ortiz, her lawyers and some citizens' groups were able to collect the data that presented her with a reasonably whole story. Human beings steal the bread of life from each other by not telling the truth.

For Ortiz, multiple stories gradually unfolded: her story of torture, the official story of denial, the story of monitoring agencies, and her new story of surviving the truth-telling itself. Through it all, the unfolding realization that her torture was both personal and political made her struggle to reestablish a sense of connection to a spiritual reality in order to strengthen and renew her soul. Ortiz found comfort in beauty, especially the beauty of nature. The autumn leaves became a treasure for her. Beauty joined Jesus in the treasure box that restored her soul.

New treasures kept presenting themselves. Memories of the blindfold produced a search for new ways to see. Ortiz discovered that she just wanted to listen. New listening practices produce both an analytical capacity to predict and prepare for the next move of the devil's charges, and a listening/watching for the growth of conditions that would lead others into terrorist practices. When listening raises red flags she seeks to have people teach her about their lives. She provides a context for talking someone into accountable acting.

"Seeing" also changed for Ortiz. In order to survive she had to learn to trust and hope again. This came from "daring to see in the eyes of the enemy the humanity that would link us." We can redirect violence only by calling humanity out of the torturer. One way to do this is by speaking through one's eyes: I see that you are a human being too--would you like to be treated in the way you are treating me? The victim's personal rebuke and the public rebuke of the degrader are necessary acts that reestablish trust and hope in future right action.

The good news that grows out of Ortiz's struggle is that people really do want to tell the truth about their actions and that there are those who really do want to be there to help us through our suffering and our resurrection.

The man in charge of Ortiz's torture asked her to forgive him because he had no choice--he was earning bread for his children's table. He told her that he went to church and read the Bible, but he had tortured people and he knew he needed forgiveness. She realized that he would set her free if she absolved him of his terrifying sins. He could buy his forgiveness and she could buy her freedom. But as a nun, she realized that she had to think through the consequences of such forgiveness. Did she have the right to forgive him? On whose behalf? Why was he not asking God for forgiveness? She took too long to answer him. As he left the room he said, "I could have saved you."

One wonders how many people of faith he has tortured. Could it be that only those acquainted with the faith know how to torture the faithful so effectively? Calling on the name of God is the way this man can move toward forgiveness. Ortiz was saved and resurrected by God and the people of God who decided to be with her in her suffering. Like Jesus, she bears the scars of her baptism into this suffering. And she bears witness that the world of torture, violence and terror will be changed when believers join in solidarity to work for its transformation.