

*Prayer for the 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of  
Sister Irene McCormack  
& Companions  
Noe Palaciosblancas, Agustin Vento Morales,  
Pedro Pando Llanos and Alfredo*



*Welcome and Gathering*

**Leader** Let us relax and settle into the loving presence of our good God. (pause)  
(As the leader reads, others can light the remembrance candles.)

We remember our sister, Irene, and the four men who died with her twenty years ago. They gave their lives providing leadership to improve the lives of the people they lived among - just doing what they knew was right.

We remember their loss.

We remember their sacrifice.

We remember them with awe and gratitude.

We remember especially our sister, Irene, living 'on mission to her last breath'.

*Hymn* (may use another appropriate hymn)

**Standing on the Shoulders**

*I am standing on the shoulders of the ones who came before me  
I am stronger for their courage, I am wiser for their words  
I am lifted by their longing for a fair and brighter future  
I am grateful for their vision, for their toiling on this earth.*

*We are standing on the shoulders of the ones who came before us  
They are saints and they are humans, they are angels, they are friends.  
We can see beyond the struggles and the troubles and the challenge  
When we know that by our efforts things will be better in the end.*

*They lift me higher than I could ever fly  
Carrying my burdens away  
I imagine a world if they hadn't tried we wouldn't be here celebrating today.*

*I am standing on the shoulders of the ones who came before me  
I am honoured by their passion for our liberty.  
I will stand a little taller, I will work a little longer  
And my shoulders will be there to hold the ones who follow me.*

*They lift me higher than I could ever fly,  
Carrying my burdens away.  
I imagine a world if they hadn't tried, we wouldn't be so very blest today.*

*I am standing on the shoulders of the ones who came before me,  
I am honoured by their passion for our liberty.  
I will stand a little taller, I will work a little longer,  
And my shoulders will be there to hold the ones who follow me.  
And my shoulders will be there to hold the ones who follow me.*

*Joyce Johnson Rouse © 1995 Rouse House Music (ASCAP)  
recorded by Earth Mama® on 'Love Large' available at [www.earthmama.org](http://www.earthmama.org)*

### *Psalm 56: 1-6; 8-13*

**Antiphon We will walk before God in the light of life.**

Be gracious to me, O God, for people trample on me;  
All day long foes oppress me;  
My enemies trample on me all day long,  
for many fight against me.

O Most High, when I am afraid  
I put my trust in you.  
In God, whose word I praise,  
in God I trust; I am not afraid;  
what can flesh do against me?

All day long they seek to injure my cause;  
all their thoughts are against me for evil.  
They stir up strife, they lurk,  
they watch my steps.  
They hoped to have my life.

You have kept count of my tossings;  
put my tears in your bottle. Are they not in your record?  
Then my enemies will retreat in the day when I call.  
This I know, that God is for me.  
In God, whose word I praise,  
in the Lord, whose word I praise,  
in God I trust; I am not afraid.  
What can a mere mortal do to me?

My vows to you I must perform, O God;  
I will render thank offerings to you.  
For you have delivered my soul from death,  
and my feet from falling,  
so that I may walk before God  
in the light of life.

Glory to you Source of Life, Way of Truth and Heart of Mission,  
Glory and praise to you forever.

**Antiphon We will walk before God in the light of life.**

## *A Reading of Irene's Life*

Irene McCormack was born in Western Australia on 21 August 1938 and grew up on a farm near Trayning. After her profession as a Josephite and teaching for many years in Western Australia, Irene was missioned to Peru. The young people of Catholic College, Perth, tell her story in these words:

*“In the mid-1980's Irene experienced a real dilemma with her vocation. She felt she had to volunteer to work with the most needy in order to be true to herself. She continually proclaimed about mission in the Church - to be an active part of the Global church. For that to have any value for her she felt she had to put her feet where her mouth was!*

Irene arrived in Peru in 1987 and was appointed to Huasahuasi in 1989. She took up the challenge of ministering to the impoverished, “I have come to understand that effective action is a way of loving.”

For political reasons Communist rebels, the Shining Path, did not welcome missionaries and despite recognising the danger Irene and her fellow sisters continued to work with and for the village people, “I really believe and have experienced that the more committed you are the freer you are.”

On the 21st of May 1991 Irene's fears were realised when she and four others were dragged to the village square, told to lie face down and executed by a shot to the back of the head.

Irene's 'crime' in the eyes of her murderers was caring for, working with and handing out Caritas food parcels to the impoverished villagers.

Irene McCormack. <http://www.irenemccormack.wa.edu.au/irene.html>

## *A Reading from Scripture: John 12: 23 – 28*

Jesus said, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honour.

Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say – ‘Father save me from this hour’? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father glorify your name.”

Take time for **reflection and then share** with each other your thoughts and insights from Irene's life and the reading.

## *Prayers of Response*

**Leader** In a world where our God desires peace and not conflict and yet so many live in the shadow of conflict and with the consequences of war and other kinds of unrest, we ask our God to hear our prayers.

We pray for the people who are victims of unrest, especially those exploited such as child soldiers and women violated: we pray for their liberation, justice and deep healing.

**Response** *Make us people of peace*

We pray for those who exercise power and authority in our world: may their working together bring about constructive conflict resolution and result in peace-building. **Response**

We pray for all peoples: may we all value our freedom, our participation in government, the beauty of the land and our way of life. **Response**

We pray for all missionaries who knowingly work for justice in lands torn apart by unrest and internal chaos: may they be strengthened by our constant prayer. **Response**

We pray that Irene's example of care for the people will continue to influence our Josephite hearts for mission. **Response**

We pray for the people of El Pacifica, Lima and Tarma /Huasa Huasi who are having a week dedicated to Peace for Peru and for the world. **Response**

We pray for peace in our own hearts, in our families and in our communities: may we learn to resolve conflicts and be peacemakers in our daily lives. **Response**

We pray for our Sisters who celebrate birthdays today. **May they enjoy peace and joy.**

We pray for our Sisters whose anniversaries are also on this day (*from Obituary List*). **May they enjoy eternal peace and joy.**

### **Invitation to include other prayers**

**Leader**      **Loving God hear our prayer as we strive to be people of peace. Heal our world and our hearts so that we can love wholly and come into right relationship. We ask this in the name of Jesus, the Way the Truth and the Life, and of the Spirit of Peace. Amen**

### *Sing*

#### **Dream Lady**

The Spirit of God has been given to me  
And the giving has not been in vain.  
The Spirit of God has been given anew  
So that anyone seeking the truth, the life and the way  
Will know Jesus Christ is God's name.

Make sure your prisoners go free  
Make sure your blind people see  
Otherwise I've wasted my time  
Walking around Galilee.

Make sure the poor hear the word  
Make sure your children are heard  
Otherwise I've wasted my pain  
Hanging there in my agony.

Make sure the hungry are fed  
That the homeless ones all have a bed  
Otherwise I've wasted my life  
Coming on back from the dead.

Be sure when breaking my bread  
That courage and joy have their head  
Otherwise I've wasted my love  
Pouring my spirit, my blood.



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**OR**

## **Magnificat**

**Refrain** *All that I am sings of the God who brings new life to birth in me.  
My spirit soars on the wings of my Lord.*

1. *My soul gives glory to the Lord, rejoicing in my saving God,  
who looks upon me in my state, and all the world will call me blest;  
For God works marvels in my sight, and holy, holy is God's name.*
2. *God's mercy is from age to age, on those who follow in fear;  
Whose arm is power and strength, and scatters all the proud of heart;  
Who casts the mighty from their thrones and raises up the lowly ones!*
3. *God fills the starving with good things, the rich are left with empty hands;  
Protecting all the faithful ones, remembering Israel with mercy,  
the promise known to those before and to their children for ever!*

*David Haas. CD Blest are They. Track 8.  
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## *Concluding Prayer*

God of the Poor, boundless provider, source of peace,  
On this anniversary of Irene's death give us an appreciation of life well lived.  
Support our Josephite longing to work for your reign of love, peace and justice throughout our world.  
We make this prayer through Christ Jesus, and the Spirit of Mission. Amen.

## *Blessing*

May the Peace of God find a home in us  
the Compassion of God shine through us  
the Justice of God inspire us  
the Love of God enfold us  
the Healing of God touch us  
the Joy of God delight us  
the Creativity of God absorb us  
the Mission of God concern us  
and may the Providence of God be our trust now and always. Amen.

## *Suggestions for the prayer focus*

As the gospel reading uses the image of a grain of wheat having to die in order to begin a new plant, as an image of Jesus, (and we trust, Irene's), effective death, - golden/wheat coloured cloth, wheat stalks, four and bread, could make a meaningful focus for prayer. You might also have 5 candles, one for Irene and the four men killed at the same time, grouped around a cross.



About 6 pm on Tuesday, 21 May 1991 an armed band of members of Sendero Luminoso entered the town of Huasahuasi. They threatened residents and entered a number of homes. Four men were taken from their homes and brought to the central plaza of the town. Members of the guerrilla band also went to the convent, where Sister Irene McCormack was alone (as Sister Dorothea Stevenson was receiving medical treatment in Lima). The Sendero Luminoso members did not enter the convent, but ordered Irene to come out, which eventually she did. She was also marched to the plaza and made to sit on the benches there with the four men.

For about an hour the five victims were harangued, interrogated and shouted at. Several local people interceded for the lives of the five, saying they were good people and not wrongdoers. Sendero Luminoso members retorted that they had not come for a “dialogue”, but to “carry out a sentence”.

Irene was accused of dispensing "American food" (Caritas provisions) and spreading “American ideas” (by providing school books). When local people insisted that Irene was Australian, not American, the guerrillas dismissed this as irrelevant.

Meanwhile some people in the crowd which had been summoned to see the proceedings gathered around Irene in the darkness and threw a manto over her head to hide her white hair and managed to move her back into the crowd. But the guerrillas soon noticed her absence and returned her to the bench.

Eventually the five prisoners were ordered to lie face down on the terrazzo-tiled surface of the plaza. Each was shot once in the back of the head. Irene was the first to be killed – about six metres from the door of the church.

The guerillas forbade the removal of the bodies.

*(Note: there were no authorities in Huasahuasi; The only ones who did not flee the town much earlier, were the JP and councillor Alfredo - - on their faces with Irene)*

Later, when all was quiet, Columban Leo Donnelly, went into the plaza with the two Catechists who had seen all, and made a shelter for the dead with church seats and canvas. Leo anointed each one he could see. The three remained with the dead till morning.

Then a group of women laid Irene out in the sacristy and did for her what their families did for the men killed with her. On 23 May 1991 a funeral Mass was held and Irene was buried in the Huasahuasi cemetery, first in a niche donated by a parishioner and later transferred to her own grave.

*Irene McCormack [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Irene\\_McCormack](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Irene_McCormack) with amendments by Dorothea Stevenson and Margaret Malady.*

It was an awful, frightening death. She'd been pottering in her garden in the hill-top Peruvian village of Huasahuasi when two armed women broke into the. Sister Irene McCormack was alone, trapped upstairs with no escape route. It was a situation for which she would have been usually prepared, and her course of action would have been to "head out along the river and keep going". But, as Anne Henderson relays in crystalline prose, it didn't happen like that. She describes in gripping and terrible detail the last hours of Sister McCormack's life in May 1991. \*

From the convent, she was taken to the town square where 300 people had been summoned. Earlier, the

Shining Path terrorists had stormed the village, looted homes and terrorised the townspeople, looking for the people they meant to eliminate. Now, in the glare of spotlights Sister McCormack and four men were tried in a "kangaroo court" and sentenced to death.

*(Frances Atkinson, "The surprising life of Sister Irene", The Age, 24 March 2002.)*

In many respects we see in the life, ministry and death of Sister Irene McCormack a clear reflection of the life, ministry and death of the one to whom she espoused her life and whom she loved and served to an heroic degree, the Saviour of the world, our Lord Jesus Christ. He came into the world to uplift a fallen race ...

The name "Irene" is Greek and it means "peace" and it was Sister Irene's stated desire and vocation to bring peace and joy into the lives of the poor people of Peru. Like her divine Master she went about doing good amongst those people and helping them in so many ways. Her good deeds were misjudged and resented and in a mock trial she too was sentenced to death and then brutally executed, but we can be sure that before she died she also prayed "Father forgive them for they do not know what they are doing" ... The preferential option for the poor was certainly Irene's option. She lived it out and in so doing she bore powerful witness to the Gospel message of Jesus Christ and sealed that witness with her death ... She leaves us a legacy of the example of total dedication to the service of the poor in the spirit of the foundress of her congregation ... and we pray that she whose name means peace, with the four persons who died with her, may rest forever in the peace of Christ.

*Bishop William Murray's Homily at Irene's memorial Mass, Wollongong Diocese.*

### A legacy

Around the time of Irene's anniversary the people of both El Pacifico and Tarma /Huasi Huasi have a week dedicated to Peace for Peru and for the world.

*Margaret Malady rsj, Peru.*



