



Mother of the Disappeared

By Br. Robert Lentz OFM

For Catholic peoples of Latin America, the Sorrowful Mother - Madre Dolorosa - is a central image in their life. Her statue stands in most churches, clothed in black. Mary's bitter experience on Good Friday has made her a sympathetic sister to those whose lives are marked by similar sorrow. She has shared the lot of the downtrodden and can stand in solidarity with them through all ages.

Tens of thousands of Latin American mothers have had family members abducted -- "disappeared" -- by death squads in recent years. What can these women do in their despair when their governments ignore their requests for help? In 1976 a number of Argentinean mothers began a silent protest every week in front of the government offices as a way to release their despair. Wearing black dresses and white kerchiefs; they carried photographs of their missing loved ones and marched around the plaza. They wore a white rose bud if they hoped their loved one was still alive, and a red rose bud for the dead. From Argentina, the

march of the mothers spread to El Salvador and other countries.

This icon presents a new Madre Dolorosa, who stands in solidarity with the Mothers of the Disappeared. She wears their white kerchief, and her wine-colored Byzantine garment is almost black. She has no photograph to carry of her son, who was also abducted by a death squad and tortured to death, but she carries his crown of thorns. She wears both red and white rose buds, since she has become mother of all the disappeared.

The white handprint smeared across the side of the icon is the signature of the El Salvador death squads. It is unusual to add such a detail to a Byzantine icon, and the result is shocking: the icon is violated! The hand, however, expresses a deep truth. The death squads violate icons of God every time they abduct and torture a human being. If the truth is not pretty, let it challenge us to action.