

Reagan's Gun-Toting Nuns

Podcast with **Theresa Keeley** (26 October 2021).

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Allison Isidore 00:04

Hello, everybody, and welcome to [New Books in Catholic Studies](#), a podcast channel on the [New Book Network](#). This channel and episode were created in collaboration with the [American Catholic Historical Association](#), a conference of scholars, archivists, and teachers of Catholic studies. My name is Allison Isidore, and I'm a host of the channel. Today, we'll be talking to [Theresa Keeley](#), author of [Reagan's Gun-Toting Nuns the Catholic Conflict Over Cold War Human Rights Policy in Central America](#). The book was published by Cornell University Press in September 2020. Theresa Keeley is currently an Assistant Professor of U.S. and the World in the History department at [University of Louisville](#). Theresa, welcome to New Books and Catholic Studies.

Theresa Keeley 01:01

Thanks so much for having me. Allison. It's nice to meet you.

Allison Isidore 01:04

Yeah, can you tell us a bit about yourself, your academic formation, and your background?

Theresa Keeley 01:09

Sure. So, I'm actually an Associate Professor of U.S. in the World at the University of Louisville, recently tenured. I don't think the website's been updated. Recently, I focused on human rights, religion, transnational movements, gender, and the law. And all these things for me kind of come together based on my own background. Before I went to grad school for history, I worked as a human rights attorney and activist. So, I use a lot of that in how I teach how I design syllabi. So just

to give you a sense of the kinds of things I did, I push for housing as a human right, I worked in an organization that push for equal treatment for members of the LGBTQ community, I did a lot with educational opportunities for women and girls. And I also helped coordinate civil disobedience campaign that highlighted the humanitarian impact of the [UN Security Council sanctions on Iraq](#) after the first [Gulf War](#). I kind of have a different take, I think then, if I had just come straight from college, and quite honestly, I didn't know what I was doing when I came to college. I know other people do, but I was not one of those people. So that's a little bit about me.

02:40

So, before we dive into *Reagan's Gun-Toting Nuns*, can you tell us about how you came to this particular project? How did you become interested in the Maryknoll's and their involvement in Latin America?

Theresa Keeley 02:54

Sure. Honestly, I could tie some things from my past into this project and make it sound like this is a foregone conclusion, and it all neatly fits and packaged with a bow. But that would not be true. In many ways. This project was a complete accident during my research for my first year of grad school, I was searching for a research topic. And as many people often do, during researching, I got lost in a rabbit hole. And somehow, I started reading articles about the [Civil War in El Salvador](#), and I came across the story of the [rape and murder of the four US missionaries](#), the three nuns and the lay missionary in El Salvador in December 1980. And it caught my attention because I had been familiar with the [murder of Archbishop Romero](#), but I had never heard of those women. And as I kept reading, I wanted to know what happened. And then another article caught my attention. It was a newspaper article that featured [Secretary of State Alexander Haig](#). And he said that the women died after they ran through a checkpoint and they died in a shootout, which wasn't true. And when I read it, I thought, this is crazy. I know that Haig, is a Catholic — was a Catholic — I know that his brother was a [Jesuit priest](#). What is going on here? Why would he make comments like that if he knew how upsetting they would be to Catholics? So that's really what inspired me to learn more about [Central America](#), US policy, the people in [Reagan's cabinet](#) and how many of them were Catholic? And then it's also what led me to [Maryknoll](#), I honestly had never heard of Maryknoll before. I feel like I need to turn in my Catholic card here (laughs), but I went to 13 years of Catholic school and Maryknoll was just not a part of that. So, it was not — all of this was completely new to me, I didn't go to graduate school thinking I would do Central America, I didn't go thinking I was going to focus on a story about nuns. None of this was what I had in mind other than I did want to do something with human rights. And I wanted to do something that looked at the intersection between people's religious and political identity that really fascinated me. So, all of this was a learning experience for me.

Allison Isidore 05:25

It's just such a fascinating story it — I couldn't put the book down. So, in your introduction, you define and distinguish four types of Catholics that are going to appear in your book; traditionalist, conservative, neoconservative and liberal Catholic. Can you talk about why you made those distinctions and how you came up with the definitions that you listed under each of those?

Theresa Keeley 05:52

So, I borrowed from some other historians who had looked at it within the US community ways to think about Catholics. So, the traditionalist I saw as people who really thought [Vatican II](#) was just a terrible idea. And they also tended to read a magazine called [The Wanderer](#) which kind of gave voice to their viewpoint. Whereas other groups of Catholics that were more on the conservative and neoconservative side weren't as black and white in terms of the way they thought about Vatican II, maybe they thought some things hadn't gone far enough, or some things needed to be changed, but they split in terms of from the traditionalist in terms how of how they thought about Vatican II. But they also had some serious critiques about the direction of the Catholic Church, particularly in the 70s and the 1980s, when I was looking at it, whereas the liberal Catholics were generally more welcoming of the changes of Vatican II wanted to go even farther than it had gone. And were much more likely to be active in things like the Civil Rights Campaign, or [Civil Rights Movement](#), I should say, or the even the [Anti-Vietnam War Movement](#). So, there were some political lines and some lines in terms of where they felt about the Catholic Church. So, I tended to group them, as I went along in the book more with conservative versus liberal, not necessarily to say that the neoconservatives thought everything the traditionalist did, but more often than not, they were aligned when it came to Reagan's policy towards Central America. Those were the people that were surrounding Reagan, those were the people that supported him, whereas the people who oppose us policy towards Central America were more often than not, would categorize themselves as more liberal or progressive Catholics.

Allison Isidore 07:52

That kind of leads us into our next question. You're talking about, Vatican II and how that changes, a lot of things for both conservatives and liberals and the embrace of that. And through chapters one and two, you show this clear evolution of Catholic practice and belief as a result of Vatican II. Can you tell our listeners about some of those significant changes and why you want to include them in the book?

Theresa Keeley 08:20

Sure. So, for those people who aren't as familiar, I should have said this earlier or need a quick refresher, Vatican II was a worldwide conference of Catholic Bishops that took place from 1962 to 1965. And it dealt with a wide range of issues everything from the liturgy to bishops' relationship to the Pope, to laity's role, to what clothing nuns should wear, to Bible translation, to Catholic stances toward non-Catholics. But from an everyday Catholic, practicing his or her faith, one of the biggest changes they would have seen was how Mass was celebrated. So, the vernacular replaced Latin [and] priests turn to face the congregate congregants. So, these are big changes for people practicing every day. One of the other things that Vatican II did was that it emphasized the church's responsibility to care for people's needs on earth, not just looking at how to prepare them for the afterlife spiritually. So, it prompted this reexamination of what the role of the church was in society and what it meant to be Catholic. It really was a big shift.

Theresa Keeley 09:25

So why do I talk about it so much? Part of the reason is because I couldn't believe how often the conservative Catholics I was looking at, talked about Vatican II. When they referenced their problems when they described what their critiques were of the Catholic Church in the late 1970s. And particularly in the 1980s they often said, "Well, this is all this all goes back to Vatican two. This was the source of the problem. We have a problem with how we think the hierarchy of the church is being too political, how the bishops are acting. This really stems back to Vatican II." So, this was also not something that was unique to us Catholics. I also noticed this type of language among the Nicaraguan and Salvadoran conservative Catholics, I looked up they blamed Vatican II. But their language was slightly different in the sense that they said, "Well, that's what ushered in this new embrace, or even just welcoming of communism and communist ideas." So, the two groups of conservatives, the Nicaraguans, the Salvadorans in the US, Conservative Catholics, I looked at all shared the same idea that Vatican II is really where we need to look to think about where all these problems started, they just define them slightly differently.

Theresa Keeley 10:59

And truthfully, though, there were divisions among Catholics before Vatican II, so it's not entirely fair for them to make this argument. I just mentioned it because that's the way they characterize the problems as they saw them. Vatican II just accentuated those divisions. So, if we just take the case of US Catholics, there were other major changes happening in the 1960s that caused divisions among Catholics besides Vatican II. The Civil Rights Movement, the Vietnam War, especially priests and nuns' involvement in those activities, many Catholics were divided over whether

priests and nuns should be involved at all, if Catholics should be involved in these movements. And so, then kind of what happens after Vatican II is you see these views of liturgical reform, civil rights, and [anti-communism](#) kind of going hand in hand together. And some of these things these are not, I'm not the first one to make those arguments about the significance of Vatican II. Just to give you an example, in terms of civil rights, in terms of thinking about the divisions among Catholics, Matthew Cressler, has talked about that. But from what I saw in the 70s, in the 80s, it was really this continual focus by conservatives to go back to Vatican II and say, well, that's where all this started. It's not about what's happening right now. It's about this earlier problem.

Allison Isidore 12:28

After Vatican II, we see this shift to a [liberation theology](#) approach, especially among liberal Catholics, and especially in your book with the Maryknoll's. And so, liberation theology plays such a significant role in your book and the history of the sisters, for our listeners who might not know what liberation theology is, can you explain it? And you've kind of hit touch on it a little bit in our last question, you know why it's so important for your book.

Theresa Keeley 13:00

So, we were just talking about the 60s that liberation theology developed in the 1960s. It's unusual, because it is something that develops in Latin America. So, for some of its critics of liberation theology, they even make the argument that well, Latin Americans couldn't possibly have come up with this themselves. There's definitely a race element for some with this. But what's important to understand about liberation theology is that it's not just it's called liberation theology. But it's not just ideas. It's not just something that you would read in a book. It evolved simultaneously. From theologians and grassroots activists. This was something that both Catholic and Protestant theologians were developing. The reason why it's controversial is because it borrows from Marxist analysis. So, it's a little different for us to think about this right now. But this is during the Cold War. So, anything that is remotely tinged with [Marxism](#) is automatically branded [communism](#). So that's where the part of the controversy comes from. This idea with liberation theology is that you start with action when you're trying to reflect theologically and liberationists. Think of sin as not just something that is personal, but as societal so that you have societal structures that create inequalities and people need to be liberated from that. It's often associated with one of its founders, the Peruvian theologian [Gustavo Gutierrez](#), who published his [book](#) in 1971. So, the basic gist of it is, people, human beings create inequalities in society, not God. This is a big deal, especially in places like Central America, where you have widespread inequality, because liberation theology is essentially a security threat.

Theresa Keeley 15:09

So, to explain what I mean, if we think about [El Salvador](#), by the late 1970s, half of Salvadorans were illiterate, about 60% of families had no access to water, and about less than 1% of the population owns 40% of the arable land. If you are a poor person, and you believe that things are unequal now, but after you die, you will have a wonderful afterlife. Now you hear these liberation theology ideas, and you start to believe everyone is equal in God's eyes. And this inequality that I see in my life isn't because God wished it for me but because human beings created it, then you start to have a different understanding of yourself, and a different understanding of what your life should be like. And so that's how it becomes revolutionary priests and nuns who follow liberation theology weren't trying to start revolutions. They weren't trying to create class warfare. It just came from this self-awareness and self confidence in many ways that liberation theology inspired among the poor. The elites in Central America recognize this, which is why they saw it as so dangerous, and why they saw the priests and nuns affiliated with it, as so dangerous, because they saw them as taking sides. They said, well, you're siding with the poor and you're fighting against us. What was missing from their analysis is that these priests and nuns weren't moving from a neutral position to siding with the poor. These elites were failing to recognize that the church had traditionally sided with elites, and now it was moving to the side of the poor. So, it was political in that sense, but they were missing that initial piece. It mattered to the US government liberation theology did because these conservatives had the critique of it as being associated with communism. So as soon as you say communism, and Cold War, then the red flags go up. And it becomes a concern of the US government.

Allison Isidore 17:29

You explain or give a couple examples in your book of, you know, liberation theologians. Prior to the killings of the churchwomen, where they're facing backlash from both, you know, the US, but also the governments there. And one event, or incident that you demonstrate in the book is the Melville incident. And I was wondering if you struggled deciding what events to include, or were you just picking the most prominent ones?

Theresa Keeley 18:18

Honestly, I chose the Melville incident, because so many of my historical actors talked about it. I knew about it, studying Latin American history, from a completely different point of view. I didn't realize Maryknoll's were involved in it. And then I noticed in the 1980s, that conservatives in the US and in El Salvador and Guatemala, all talked about the Melville incident, even though it had happened in the 1960s. So, for those who aren't familiar with it, the Melville incident, just brief overview in 1967, Maryknoll expelled two priests, they were brothers [Thomas](#) and Arthur Melville

and sister [Marjorie Bradford](#). They had been serving in Guatemala and melt and Maryknoll expelled them for involving themselves in what they called in plans for starting an armed revolution. So, these three were essentially the public focus, but there were two other Maryknoll nuns and another priest who took part of it. This becomes important for a couple reasons why I included it. First, was because I think it shows how some mariners living in Latin America changed through their missionary experience. They started to reexamine us cold war policy, they started to reexamine what it meant to be Catholic. Now, the Melville's are atypical. You don't have Mary molars running around everywhere doing the same thing that the Melville's did, but they're also not entirely novel. The year before former priests, [Camilo Torres](#) had died while he was fighting with the Colombian guerrillas. So, this was a current that existed in Latin America at the time, this idea of kind of being pushed to the point of we've tried everything else. What else can we do?

Theresa Keeley 20:17

Another reason I talked about it, as I mentioned before, is because so many people in the 80s, when they critiqued the women who were murdered, they basically said, "Well, what else would we expect from an order that in 1967, tried to cause an uprising in Guatemala." They made it sound like this was just everyday behavior of Maryknoller's. And the other reason I included it is because I think it's important to show the connection that Maryknoller's and other missionaries were making about Catholic Church positions and about US foreign policy more broadly. So, after Tom and Arthur are expelled from Guatemala, and sister Marjorie Bradford, Tom and Marjorie marry, and less than six months later, they're involved in the [Catonsville Nine](#) protest, which people familiar with the Vietnam War protests would know. They made homemade napalm outside of a draft board and they burn files. Why I think it's interesting and how it connects to Latin American liberation theology, is that the Melville's were two or three former missionaries who served in Guatemala who took part in this protest, and it was their experience in Central America, not US involvement in Vietnam, that inspired them to join this protest. They were making connections between what they saw as US imperialism in Guatemala and Vietnam. And they were also making connections between those policies and what they saw as an institutional Catholic Church that wasn't saying anything to condemn how US policy was harming the poor. So, for that incident, for me, I knew that definitely would be in it. But you're right. In other cases, sometimes it was difficult to choose what goes in and what does not make it.

Allison Isidore 22:18

Yeah, I'm sure there's a bunch of things you would have wished to have included. But due to time and writing ability, you can't fit it on one book, maybe a sequel in the future. But so, we've talked a little bit about this or mentioned them briefly, but in chapter four, which is, aptly called *US Guns*

Kills US Nuns. You focus on the four church women who were raped and killed in El Salvador. Can you tell our listeners about them, and what made you want to share their story?

Theresa Keeley 22:50

Sure, as I mentioned and before, I didn't know anything about them when I started this project, so for the listeners who don't know the four women were Maryknoll sisters [Ita Ford](#), and [Maura Clarke](#), [Ursuline Sister Dorothy Kazel](#), and lay missionary [Jean Donovan](#). And as I read more about them, what I found most fascinating and remarkable was, first how living among the poor of Central America really changed their outlook on what it meant to be Catholic, what it meant to be a missionary and what it meant to be an American in light of a US Cold War policy that affected foreigners. The other thing that really struck me about them was their awareness of how in danger they possibly were, they were very aware of the risks they face living in El Salvador, but they stayed anyway. And I don't know that most people would have done that. So those two things really struck me just to highlight one of the women Maura Clark, you can really see in reading about her life, how she underwent this change. She started in [Nicaragua](#) in 1960, teaching second grade, then as she continues to progress in her role. Maryknollers expand from not just educating these girls but to seeing how they can empower them as leaders. And then she's exposed to new ideas, Christian based communities that are forming in Nicaragua. And so, she can see how the idea of what it means to be a church and what it means to be a Catholic is changing. That old model of being a missionary who goes and tries to convert people is not what these Maryknoll sisters are doing and are focused on in the 1960s. She's living among the poor and seeing how they're treated. She then goes back home for a year Maryknoll Sisters are required every so often to go back to the mother house for a year. She participates in Vietnam protests while she there, she's there. She also reads a lot about the [Medellin Conference](#), which is the Latin American Bishops Conference that took place in 1968, where they also stressed this idea that sin is societal. So, she's kind of seeing this on the ground change, and then reading about this broader theology, which then leads her to go back to Nicaragua, and get even more involved in human rights work. And what struck me about her is that she doesn't go in and say, "I'm leading the charge," she consciously makes an effort to think about how she can be supportive how she can accompany the poor, rather than tell them what to do. So, when they push for things like more equitable water prices, she is there standing by them, but not telling them, this is the way you need to do it. So that that was something that struck me in terms of the dangers the women faced.

Theresa Keeley 26:03

In 1980 all for the women are involved in working in [Chalatenango](#) in El Salvador, which is a dangerous place to be in 1980. 1980 at this time, there's a war situation, but it's undeclared, which means that international agencies can't be giving the aid that they would be able to give during a

war. And these women are involved in distributing food and medicine and aid, helping refugees. They're collecting information for the church. And so, they're really on the front lines. But this is extremely dangerous work, because this is an area that the military has classified as an emergency zone, where it's trying to weed out guerrilla fighters. So, despite all of that seeing people die, seeing what's happening, they continue to stay. And I just thought that that was remarkable. At one point Maura Clarke writes to her parents, this is about two months before she's murdered. And just to read some of her words, to give you a sense of how she appreciated the danger. But her letter doesn't say, and I want to come home. She says "Anyone suspected of being in an organization or attached to the church is in serious danger. People are fleeing from their houses looking for some kind of safety, as the so-called Death squadron strikes anywhere in everywhere. The cutting up of bodies by Machete is one of their tactics to terrorize the organized groups from continuing their efforts. The effort of the oligarchy is to wipe out the farmers and workers who have organized for change. And they do this in the name of fighting communism." So, she's under no illusions about what is happening. But she still stays as do the three other women.

Allison Isidore 27:55

Yeah, I mean, it's just such a fascinating story, because I had never heard about them before reading your book, either. So, it was really enlightening to hear about them. And you demonstrate this knowledge that they had of how much danger they were in. Your book also is just really, I think important because you talk about the disinformation that the [Reagan administration](#) is doing during the 1980s to try and dismiss the sisters. And I think it's very much relevant to what we're seeing in 2021, with disinformation, can you talk a bit about this disinformation that you saw from the Reagan administration?

Theresa Keeley 28:38

Sure. So, it's funny that you use the word information because it is so prevalent now. When I was researching it, the word came up a fair amount. And I remember thinking, what does this mean? Where's this word coming from? Because both sides actually accused the other promoting disinformation. Reagan and his supporters accuse opponents of [US Central America policy](#) of the disinformation, and it goes the other way. So, I'll mention the Reagan efforts in a second. But what they first they accuse opponents of US foreign policy of being victims of communist disinformation. Their argument is essentially, you're just objecting to US foreign policy because you don't understand you've been duped by Soviet or Sandinista or Salvadoran disinformation, you just don't get it. The opponents of Central America policy, as you said, accused the administration of engaging in disinformation and they do use that word. One of the most disturbing examples for me was one that concern the Maryknoll Sisters and oftentimes that

Reagan officials did not directly speak of the Maryknoll Sisters most of the time, it's their allies, or in this case I'm going to talk about is almost their surrogates.

Theresa Keeley 30:05

So, in 1983, there's a congressional hearing called Marxism and Christianity in revolutionary Central America. And all of the witnesses talk about how dangerous liberation theology is, and they connect Maryknoll to it. Now, to the outside observers, this might just seem like a bunch of ordinary people who are airing their views. But in fact, all of the witnesses had connections to the White House and several of them were actually on the administration's payroll. Two of them, one a husband-and-wife team, Edgard Macias was Nicaraguan, and he was married to Geraldine, who happened to be a former Maryknoll Sister and left to marry him. At this hearing, Edgard criticizes the Maryknoll Sisters, which in and of itself is upsetting to the Maryknoll Sisters, he says things that are not true. But then what happens is his story, his words at the hearing, then somehow found their way to an official with the [US information service abroad](#). This official then repackages his testimony as an article, which the US Embassy in Venezuela then sends to a local newspaper, and it's printed. So, we have this story, which is not true about the Maryknoll Sisters at a congressional hearing that then is published in a Venezuelan newspaper. And this matters not just because he's saying things that aren't true. But by linking Maryknoll to communism, particularly in Latin America, this is dangerous. What is rhetoric and words and just insults in the United States is really a matter of life and death in Latin America, places — not everywhere in Latin America — but in places where there are death squads, or people places where you essentially would have a target on your back. If someone accused, you of being associated with communism. The strangest part of the story is that there actually weren't any Maryknoll Sisters in Venezuela at the time, there were married all fathers and brothers but no, Maryknoll Sisters. So essentially, what it seen that was happening was that the Reagan administration was trying to undermine the credibility of Maryknoller and potentially threaten their safety in Venezuela so that they would stop sharing their stories about what they had seen in Central America.

Allison Isidore 32:40

I mean, it was just interesting reading that and just because I remember seeing that the testimony and then seeing the response from the Maryknoller to the US department saying, you can't be publishing these things, because it's very much dangerous to those who are still in Central America. And you hit on rhetoric there the rhetoric in the US is very much different than the rhetoric in Central America. And rhetoric, obviously plays a major role in your book from questions of what it means to be a "real" or "true" or "loyal" or even a "good" Catholic, to the gendered rhetoric of what a good nun or a bad nun looks like. Can you tell our listeners a bit about the rhetoric you write about and why you want to include it?

Theresa Keeley 33:33

In general, I'm interested in language. And this might come from my legal background of having to kind of parse legal opinions. But early in my grad school career, when I read historians like Emily Rosenberg talking about discourse and power and gender, it really resonated with me. And it wasn't something I sought out, intending to do. I just kind of noticed things. And so, one of the examples I explore in the book is how Reagan and his allies challenge Speaker of the House [Tip O'Neill](#) by questioning his authenticity as a Catholic and his masculinity. So, O'Neill, a little refresher in the 1980s was a Democrat, and he opposed Reagan's Nicaragua policy, which was not a big deal because so did other people. The problem for Reagan and his supporters though, was that O'Neill was Speaker of the House which meant he had a lot of power. And more significantly, the problem for Reagan was why O'Neill opposed his policy. O'Neill said he opposes policy because of advice from the Maryknoll Sisters. At one point O'Neill even said to a reporter, "Am I wrong in listening to women who live in Nicaragua and follow the sermon on the mount or my supposed to just sit here and believe the generals?" So even in his mind, it was clear to him that the Maryknoll Sisters were more credible in terms of foreign policy, sources of information, than what he was getting from the Reagan administration. This basically ignites a full court press from Reagan and his allies against O'Neill. They have a problem with him because they're already upset about Maryknoll to them. Maryknoll, the oldest us missionary community that's based in the United States is supposed to be reflective of the United States in their mind. In the 50s Maryknoll had been very much closely aligned with US Cold War aims, that shifts in the 60s in the 70s. And they're upset about that. Reagan and his supporters in their mind as they are you real men support Contra policy. So, the [Contras](#) were the counter revolutionaries, that the US government helped in training and fun to try to overthrow the Nicaraguan government.

Theresa Keeley 35:57

By contrast to O'Neill, who they say is emotional, and they call him a "San Francisco Democrat," which is their way of accusing him of being gay. It's more than that, it's a homophobic slur. They're setting him up as this weak feminine character. Meanwhile, they're saying Reagan is this tough, manly Rambo type of guy. You know, forgetting the fact that Reagan was 73 the second time that he was inaugurated, which probably doesn't sound that old now compared to Biden. But their basic issue is okay, Reagan is this [Rambo](#) guy and O'Neill is basically a woman. He's listening to these women and they're naive. They don't know what they're talking about. Never mind the fact that these women actually lived in Nicaragua, saw with their own eyes, what was happening saw

the impact of US foreign policy in the Contra war. So, the long-term effects of what decades of US support for a dictator in Nicaragua had done that was completely irrelevant. Many of these people who were criticizing them had never stepped foot in Nicaragua.

Theresa Keeley 37:04

The other way that they criticize O'Neill, as they say, well, real Catholic support US policy, because the Pope does. Now, there was no evidence that the Pope supported US policy in Central America. But what Reagan is trying to do, and his allies is argued that Maryknoll's out of step with what it means to be Catholic. So, if O'Neal's following them, he's also out of step. Real Catholics listen to real nuns Maryknollers orders are not real nuns, real known as Mother Teresa, which is She's a very different kind of nun than Maryknollers. [Mother Teresa](#) was more about directly giving food and care to the poor, whereas Maryknoll's were more likely to think about structural problems, why are you poor to begin with? And so, what I found out about this was two things. First, it's essentially turning an old stereotype on its head. The previous stereotype had been this idea that Catholics can't be Americans because they listened to the Pope, their loyalty is somewhere else. They're not capable of living in a democracy. But now in the 80s, Reagan and his allies are essentially saying you're a real American if you listen to the Pope. And the other thing I found so strange about this is that essentially, you have this debate over counter funding, where Reagan's on one side and O'Neill's on the other. And it's essentially the two men representing two different Catholic camps. Even though Reagan isn't Catholic. He's standing for the conservative side, the side that supports US foreign policy, the side that condemns liberation theology, the side that thinks Maryknoll has lost its way. Whereas O'Neill is the standard for the more liberal side that critiqued US foreign policy in Central America that sees liberation theology as a positive development that says, wait a minute, communism isn't the reason all of these things are happening. It's because people have realized they live in unequal societies, and they're pushing for change. So, rhetoric is something I think tells us a lot about what's happening at the time. And that's just one way that I tried to talk about it in the book,

Allison Isidore 39:19

As we wrap things up here, I was wondering if you could tell us about what current projects you're working on? And are there any lingering questions that remain from your work on Reagan's gun toting nuns that you're pursuing? Or has your work taken a new direction?

Theresa Keeley 39:36

Right now, I'd say I'm exploring some of the same themes, the relationship between people in religious and political identities and how Americans might see themselves as responsible for their government's foreign policy, what the role of the US should be in the world and who gets to be

involved in foreign policy debates, but right now, I wouldn't say it's an explicit connection, I'm looking at how US citizens, often together with people outside the United States, challenged US foreign policy by emphasizing how it negatively impacted the health of children abroad. And so some of the bigger questions that project raises for me is what makes a campaign or an effort religious versus secular or what counts as humanitarian and who can be involved in that. So, it's right now we'll see where it goes. But that's what I'm looking at right now. And it's tentatively called Suffer Little Children, Health Harm and US Foreign Policy.

Allison Isidore 40:40

Yeah, that sounds very interesting. I can't wait to hear more about it and hopefully read your next book. Thank you, Theresa, for joining us on New Books in Catholic Studies.

Theresa Keeley 40:52

Thank you so much for having me. It's been so nice talking to you.

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