

Tortured suffer lasting effects in body & soul, experts say

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ATLANTA (ABP)—Nearly two decades ago, Dianna Ortiz says, Guatemalan security forces abducted her and took her to a clandestine prison where she was gang-raped; burned more than 100 times with cigarettes; forced to cut another woman with a machete; and suspended by her wrists over a pit full of dead and dying men, women and children.

“This past has awakened again, both here and now,” Ortiz said of the experience, in remarks prepared for a summit of religious leaders in Atlanta.

“The smells of burning flesh and decomposing corpses, the mutilated bodies of children, the policeman’s cratered face and button-like eyes devoid of feeling are returning. I have no wish whatsoever to return to that prison in Guatemala; nor do I wish to hearken back to how I felt as I cried to a silent and deaf God. Yet, it all does come back.”

The American Catholic nun went to the Guatemalan highlands in 1987 as a missionary to indigenous Mayan people. What she experienced at the hands of right-wing government officials—and a fair-skinned accomplice, identified only as “Alejandro,” who she said was obviously an American—in 1989 nearly destroyed her faith.

Ortiz experienced what she called “the radiant face of God” in the first two years of her missionary work, teaching Mayan children in their own language.

“We are nearly blinded by the glorious colors, shining from heaven’s door,” she wrote. “But now, try to imagine a dark shadow falling across that face

of God—eclipsing it, obliterating every sign of it. Hope is gone. Belief is gone.”

Ortiz had been scheduled to be one of the speakers at the summit on torture and U.S. policy. Although she was unable to attend because she was testifying in a torture trial, Ortiz provided her prepared remarks to summit participants.

Crises of faith are among the many long-term consequences victims of torture suffer, said Doug Johnson, executive director of the Center for Victims of Torture.

“Whatever we do learn about the impact of torture must be placed in the context of what we know about the impact of intense traumas, and particularly human-induced traumas,” Johnson said. “We’re getting a clear idea that there is a biological effect that is induced by intense traumas—not merely a psychological one.”

For example, even mild forms of torture—forcing victims into stress positions for long periods of time or sleep deprivation—can have subtle physical side-effects that only manifest themselves years later, Johnson said. And the psychological effects not only can be profound, but also long-lasting.

“We know, for example, that survivors of the Holocaust ... still have high rates of clinical depression and suicide 50 years after the fact,” Johnson said. He noted the sin of torture visits itself on subsequent generations, as well—children and even grandchildren of Holocaust survivors also have higher rates of suicide and depression than the general population.

Johnson’s organization provides psychological treatment to survivors of torture at clinics in Minnesota; Washington, D.C.; Guinea and Sierra Leone. He said some effects of torture are so profound they can fundamentally change the personalities of the victims.

And the often-stated purpose of torture—to gain information—is almost never achieved by physical or psychological coercion, both Johnson and Ortiz said.

Ortiz, who founded an organization of torture survivors, said simply destroying the victim and their community is torture's true goal.

"Torture is an attempt to obliterate a person's personality, to turn him or her into a quivering mass of fear, cowering in some corner of the world afraid to look for the dawn," she said.

"It is not something we, the tortured 'get over.' It is something we live with the rest of our days. It is forever strapped to our backs.

"It constitutes a permanent invasion of our minds and our souls. Someone in uniform; a scream; the smell of a cigarette; the sound of someone whistling; the sight a dog; the sound of keys rattling; cutting a piece of meat with a knife—any of these may continually threaten a return to that past which walks so closely behind us."