

How One Woman Challenged Oppression

Maria Sliwa, a controversial ex-cop from New York City, has a new crime beat. She's calling the United States government to get tough on countries that persecute Christians.

It's 9 a.m. on a crisp Monday, and Maria Sliwa has just forwarded another e-mail. This report is just in from United Press International: A pregnant Sudanese Christian has been sentenced to death by stoning for allegedly committing adultery. Human Rights Watch is pleading with the Sudanese president to spare her life.

The e-mail address is familiar to journalists, ministers and human rights groups worldwide. Sliwa—known to some simply as MS4Freedom@—is a one-woman lobbying organization dedicated to championing the cause of the persecuted church, particularly in Sudan. She usually does her “shouting and yelling” from the computer in her living room, but sometimes she takes her cause to the streets, as she did on May 2, 2001, when she got arrested in front of the Sudanese Mission to the United Nations during a demonstration she helped organize.

The protest could have won her a three- or four-day stay in the “Tombs,” a notorious jail located in the Centre Street courthouse in Lower Manhattan. The facility is filthy and crammed with muggers, drug dealers, prostitutes and petty thieves. Germs permeate the ancient holding cells, which resemble animal cages, and Sliwa admits, “I was scared to death.”

She ended up spending several hours at the 17th Precinct jail. But for this ex-cop-turned-crusader, what's worse than waking

up in a dirty jail cell is hearing the cries of Sudanese believers who have been tortured, raped and enslaved as penalty for their beliefs.

For more than 20 years, the fundamentalist Islamic government of Sudan has persecuted black Christians and animists in a bloody civil war. The New York Times reported in October 1999 that the war in Sudan “is in many ways a religious conflict, pitting the Muslim north against the Christian south.”

More than 2 million people have died since 1983, and an estimated 100,000 people are in bondage in the north. National Islamic Front soldiers have torched villages and food supplies, pastors have been crucified, and starvation runs rampant as Christians are pressured to convert to Islam.

Former slave Mary Akuc was gang-raped by Arabs. “They cut the throats of two slaves,” she says. “They forced me at gunpoint to eat their inner organs. I am a Christian, but they forced me to say Muslim prayers.”

The hope of seeing an end to such brutality is what landed Sliwa in jail. “I felt a tremendous burden for people suffering,” she says. “I felt heartbroken that their voice wasn’t being heard. Even though my flesh was fighting the arrest, I knew that the word had to get out. You had to do something desperate for people to take notice.”

What Price Freedom?

At 5 feet 1 inch tall, Sliwa isn’t exactly the picture of a world crusader. Sitting in her living room, she taps out another e-mail: A Sudanese government plane bombed a U.N.

distribution center, killing one child and injuring six civilians.

This three-room apartment in a working-class section of New Jersey is the 46-year-old's international headquarters of sorts, where she edits the Freedom Now World News (), an 80,000-subscriber Internet news service, and alerts the globe about human rights abuses against Christians worldwide. The free weekly service is disseminated to media professionals, government officials, pastors, laity and advocacy groups.

"When she sees a wrong, she speaks out," says friend John Rocco Carlo, senior pastor of Christian Pentecostal Church in Staten Island, New York. "She's willing to pay the price to bring a wrong to the open."

Though single, Sliwa is not alone in her efforts. At the May protest, she was arrested along with Charles Jacobs, president of the American Anti-Slavery Group (AASG); Roy Vogel, a Christian psychologist; and her brother, Curtis, founder of the community watchdog group Guardian Angels and co-host of the popular morning talk show Curtis & Kuby on WABC radio.

"[Maria] has a strong religious drive," Curtis says. "Her faith must be translated into action."

A scrappy conservative, Curtis has championed Maria's activities many times on his show. During the 55th anniversary celebration of the United Nations in 2000, he and another Guardian Angel attempted a citizen's arrest of Sudan President Lt. Gen. Omer Hassan Ahmed Al Bashir, who they say is responsible for atrocities against Christians.

"We were prepared to physically detain him," Curtis says.

The general never appeared for a scheduled press conference and evaded the plot aimed at pressuring the U.S. government to aid Christians in Sudan.

Curtis was on hand at the May 2, 2001, protest even before his sister. Maria met her brother, Jacobs and Vogel in front of the Sudanese Mission on Third Avenue between 41st and 42nd streets, a busy midtown thoroughfare flanked by tall office buildings. Curtis wore his trademark Guardian Angels' uniform—a red beret and red jacket.

A vocal group of 40 supporters from various denominations greeted them. The protesters also included local politicians and Sudanese Christians waving placards and enlarged photos of mutilated slaves.

The police set up barriers along the sidewalk, alert for trouble. Sliwa worked the press bull pen jammed with TV crews, and radio and newspaper reporters. She handed out press releases and plugged interviews for the demonstration speakers. Despite the hubbub, no one from the Sudanese Mission appeared.

After the speeches, the Sliwas, Vogel and Jacobs linked arms and sat down on the crowded sidewalk. While passers-by stepped over the foursome, a nervous-looking officer approached carrying a bullhorn.

"What you are doing is in violation of the law," he read from a prepared statement. "You are blocking pedestrian traffic. If you don't move you will be arrested."

When the group refused to leave, four officers appeared and handcuffed them. They were escorted to a blue-and-white New York Police Department wagon and driven to the 17th Precinct, an old station house that has seen better days.

Maria was frisked with her colleagues, who were shoved into the men's holding cell. Sliwa was handcuffed to a chair in a shabby, windowless room. The four endured the confinement for about eight hours. They opted for a summons to appear in court and were released. Charges were dropped late last year.

Despite their discomfort, the protesters accomplished their objective of focusing attention on Sudan. The event hit evening TV and radio news programs and was covered in the New York Post and New York Daily News. "I was grateful for the press coverage," Maria says. "It was worth it."

Breaking the Silence

Observers sometimes wonder what makes Maria Sliwa go to such lengths for strangers halfway around the world. Raised in Canarsie, a blue-collar section of Brooklyn, Sliwa grew up with a strong work ethic and an awareness of her civic responsibility. When injustice reared its ugly head, Sliwa's parents taught her: "Don't just squawk. Do something about it."

Though they had been percolating since childhood, Sliwa's activist genes first erupted in 1985. While attending the New York City Police Academy, she witnessed flagrant sexual and racial abuses against female recruits and officers. She was harassed, too, because of her brother's high visibility in the

Guardian Angels. His safety patrols in crime-ridden neighborhoods irked police officials.

Instead of playing it safe, Sliwa called the Internal Affairs Division (IAD) anonymously. Aware of similar allegations, the IAD persuaded her to name the offenders, promising confidentiality. A formal investigation followed, but her involvement was leaked to the press. She was devastated. Joining a "blue wall of silence," male officers tried to stymie her revelations.

Rank-and-file cops cursed her. Professors and students at the academy shunned her like the plague. When you "drop the dime," or tell on fellow officers, "you're considered a rat," she says.

The only people who stuck up for her were black officers and born-again Christians. "I thought the Christians were weird," she recalls.

She was transferred from the academy into a special investigations unit at the IAD. She landed an undercover assignment, a coveted fast-track promotion slot. Yet the harassment intensified and became violent. The powerful police union pressured headquarters to return her to street patrol. "I knew that meant death," she says.

Believing she had no other option, Sliwa resigned. After waitressing at Pizza Hut, she landed a job as a peace officer for the New York City Taxi & Limousine Commission. For several years life was good. She won a promotion to the Tactical Narcotics Task Force and worked alongside federal and state law-enforcement officers. She raced unmarked squad cars up and

down New York City streets and alleys, investigating drug rings and arresting dealers.

Then a failed marriage, an abusive boyfriend and boredom on her job soured the excitement. "I started feeling empty inside," she says.

God intervened in 1991. Sliwa dusted off a Bible a Christian friend had given her as a wedding present and for the first time dug into the Scriptures with an open mind. She discussed spiritual concerns with her friend, who invited her to a Pentecostal church on Long Island, where she surrendered her life to Christ. "I got radically saved," she says.

Several weeks later she was baptized in the Holy Spirit at Christian Pentecostal Church. "It gave me a new boldness I never had," she says. "I knew then my whole life would be devoted to the Lord."

Urged to get a college degree, she took a leave of absence from the taxi commission and enrolled at St. John's University at age 35. While studying criminal justice and sociology, she worked part time for a private detective agency run by Bo Dietl, a tough-as-nails ex-street cop known for his crime-busting feats. She honed her researching skills chasing down cheating spouses in divorce cases and running the agency's white-collar crime unit after she graduated in 1994.

Active in various ministries, Sliwa also did street evangelism and joined short-term mission trips to Croatia, Cuba, Russia, Colombia and Peru. Along the way she earned a master's degree. But her real turning point came in 1998.

En route to Madras, India, to handle press relations for P.P. Job, a well-known Indian evangelist, Sliwa stopped in Los Angeles. At the request of a friend, she visited the late Richard Wurmbrand, founder of Voice of the Martyrs. Terminally ill in bed at home, Wurmbrand unburdened his concerns about persecution in Sudan.

"Can you imagine little boys and girls raped in the most heinous ways?" he told her. "My house is a house of horrors. Every day I get faxes from around the world of Christians that are suffering unimaginably because of their faith."

Weak and being fed intravenously, with feeding tubes protruding, Wurmbrand entreated Sliwa to aid suffering Christians. "He begged me to do something about the children of Sudan," she says.

She says the Holy Spirit filled the room, overwhelming her. "I surrendered it all to the Lord," she says. "I didn't know how to help. It was too big for me."

But within minutes of her leaving the bedroom, Wurmbrand and his wife, Sabina, each independently encouraged Sliwa with Joshua 1:9—"Be strong and of good courage." Wondering how one person could make a difference, she prayed: "Please help the children of Sudan. Lord, I'm helpless. I don't know what to do."

Doors opened soon after. She joined an 11-day hunger strike to pressure the city of New York to divest its pension-fund investment in Talisman Energy, a Canadian oil and-gas firm with financial ties to Sudan. The Islamic government uses oil revenue to finance military action against

Christians.

Publicity surrounding the hunger strike forced the New York City Council to hold hearings on the issue. She won the ear of city comptroller Alan Hevesi, who pressured the pension fund to sell 180,000 shares of Talisman. This would be the first of many small victories.

A Saint and a Warrior

Sliwa cut the cord from Dietl Investigations in 2000 to devote her full energy to defending suffering Christians. She gives lectures at churches, colleges, community groups and public hearings, and offers research and media assistance to advocacy groups such as Christian Solidarity International and the Institute on Religion and Democracy.

She also accompanies emancipated Sudanese Christians on speaking tours and reports their remarks in her news service. Francis Bok Bol, an escaped slave from Sudan's Dinka tribe, describes Sliwa as someone who "is working hard for my people."

A representative for the AASG in the greater New York City area, Sliwa works closely with AASG President Charles Jacobs, an Orthodox Jew who empathizes with enslaved Christians. "We more than anybody else know what happens when the world is silent," he says, referring to the Holocaust. "The Christians in Sudan are the Jews of our time."

Jacobs says he admires Sliwa's fervor. "She suffers the pain of people in the worst of circumstances. She's a saint, and she's a warrior," he says.

Not connected to a particular denomination or political ideology, Sliwa eschews labels but considers herself a servant of the persecuted church. "Morning, noon and night I see the persecuted church," she says. "Their cries are always with me."

Sliwa urges Pentecostals and charismatics to join the struggle. She says secular media and government contacts badger her, asking where the church stands on these issues. Sliwa says Christians should lobby their elected officials by writing letters and calling congressional offices urging the U.S. government to intervene on behalf of their persecuted brothers and sisters in Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Indonesia and China.

The church also needs to break out of its shell and communicate intelligently with the secular media, she adds. That means tabling religious lingo and pressing the "human rights" hot button. "You must approach the press in a way they understand," she says.

If believers don't get more proactive on this issue, Sliwa believes they could lose a valuable opportunity to speak out for Jesus. She has observed that non-Christian groups are becoming more vocal about atrocities against Christians. "The secular world sees this as a heavy-duty human rights issue," she says. "Therefore they want to jump in."

Familiar with the brutality of Muslim fundamentalists, Sliwa sees September 11 as a wake-up call to the church at large. "I was not shocked about the disaster at the World Trade Center," she says. "The mind-set of radical Muslims is clear. They hate Christians and Jews. We are infidels."

She believes the attack is a forerunner to a movement bent on world domination. She openly criticizes the Bush administration for “schmoozing” with Arab nations and allowing the United Nations to lift sanctions against Sudan. “We sold Sudanese Christians down the river,” she says.

Sliwa plans many media events and protests in 2002, but more than ever she is determined to goad the church into action. “Christians should be yelling and screaming about the 31 countries where brothers and sisters are being brutalized because of their faith,” she says.

That’s what Sliwa will be doing until someone finally listens.

Peter K. Johnson is a New York City-based writer and frequent contributor to Charisma.