

ZÁRATE, ROSA MARTA (1942–)

"I say no, no one can take my happiness away from me, no one in this country will put their foot on me. I am Rosa Martha, and no one will take away what I am." Rosa Marta Zárate in Independent Television Service website.

Born in Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico, Rosa Marta Zárate came to the United States in 1966 as a nun with her fellow Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament. The journey of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament was to establish a convent and school in San Ysidro, California. In 1971 a meeting with Las Hermanas, an organization of Latina religious, exposed Zárate to the challenges of social change, and while at first she thought the group was too radical, in time Zárate began to appreciate their perspectives. In 1973 Zárate became the first Mexican woman in Latino ministry for the Diocese of San Diego. This took place at a time when the U.S. Roman Catholic Church had just started to recognize the distinct culture of Mexican American Catholics. In spite of opposition from Zárate's order, she shared her work with other sisters, organized youth choirs, ministries for the laity, and grassroots or small church communities. She believed in the Latin American Theology of Liberation which espoused a bottom up approach to social change. By 1978 her reputation as a community organizer led to the position of coordinator of the Department of Evangelization and Catechesis for Hispanics (DECH) in the San Bernardino Diocese. But some among her superiors and peers thought she was too radical, branded her a Communist and ultimately forced her to leave her position as coordinator. Receiving no support from her religious community, Zárate filed a \$1.5-million lawsuit against the diocese alleging sexual discrimination, fraud, and breach of contract, which she lost. Working with impoverished Chicano/Mexicano communities she continues to organize small base communities through calpulli, a network of cooperatives in San Bernardino County emphasizing economic self-empowerment and cultural knowledge. They are inspired not only by liberation theology but also by knowledge about the economic systems of their Mesoamerican ancestors. In addition to her strong leadership abilities, Zárate is an internationally recognized composer and singer of la nueva canción music echoing themes of justice and self-determination of oppressed peoples. Zárate travels frequently to Chiapas, Mexico, to assist textile cooperatives operated by indigenous women and to participate in the Zapatista struggle as a civil rights observer. Her revolutionary vision of the role of the church in society has not faded.