Dorothy Kazel, O.S.U.: “An Alleluia from Head to Foot”

*Cynthia Glavac, O.S.U.*

The second and youngest child of Joseph and Malvina Kazel, “Dorothea Lu” was born on June 30, 1939, in Cleveland, Ohio. She and her older brother Jim enjoyed a close-knit family life in the predominantly Lithuanian neighborhood in which they grew up. For her elementary and secondary schooling, Dorothy attended neighborhood parochial schools where she formed lasting friendships and participated in extra-curricular and athletic activities.

After graduating from high school in 1957, she completed an intensive two-year elementary teacher certification program at St. John College in Cleveland. During this time Dorothy met Donald Kollenborn, a native of Bakersfield, California, who was stationed at a military base in Cleveland. He and Dorothy were engaged in the spring of 1959. Dorothy then taught the third grade for one year, 1959-60, at St. Robert Bellarmine School in Euclid, Ohio.

Early in 1960, Dorothy began to consider that she might have a religious vocation. Her attraction to religious life, and ultimately, to the Cleveland Ursuline Sisters, was fueled by her association with the Ursuline Sisters at both St. John College and St. Robert School, where a number of the sisters taught. After much prayer and discernment, Dorothy formally broke her engagement to Donald in July 1960, and in September of that year, joined the congregation of the Ursuline Sisters of Cleveland. A year later, Dorothy was formally accepted into the novitiate and received the Ursuline religious habit with a white veil. She was also given the religious name of “Sister Mary Laurentine.” Dorothy later learned that her namesake had been an Ursuline sister of Valenciennes, France, who was martyred during the French Revolution.

After her first profession of vows in 1963, Dorothy attended Ursuline College, Cleveland, and in 1965 earned a bachelor of arts degree and a high school teaching certificate in the areas of stenography-typing and social studies. She was then assigned to teach business courses at Sacred Heart Academy, East Cleveland, one of the three high schools then owned and operated by the Cleveland Ursuline congregation. Here, Dorothy ministered for seven years. Former students of Dorothy’s remember her as an excellent, well-prepared teacher whose good sense of humor and attentive manner managed to make them feel comfortable and confident.

In 1964, the Diocese of Cleveland established a parish in San Miguel, El Salvador. Two years later, responding to a request from Cleveland’s Archbishop Edward F. Hoban for religious to help staff the parish in San Miguel, the Cleveland Ursuline congregation decided to send two sisters every five years to El Salvador. The following year, the Ursuline administration asked sisters interested in volunteering for the El Salvador mission to write a letter in which they explained their desire and suitability for missionary ministry. Dorothy was one of the first sisters to volunteer, and it was in her letter, dated November 4, 1967, that she first publicly expressed her desire to minister to Spanish people and Native Americans, a desire that had its roots in her childhood:

I have always been of the nature of a person eager to be on the move—to go to new places, to meet new people, to learn to understand these people, and to help them. Before I entered, I traveled to the West Coast four times. It was then that I was first impressed with the Spanish and Indian people. I wanted to stay, get to know them, and help them. I had even “day dreamed” that my parents would disown me and leave me there. Then I entered. As a junior sister [temporarily professed] I attended Ursuline College. While at the College, I took a course about Latin America, and since then, I have even more earnestly had the desire to go there. The countries and people hold a very special appeal for me. . . .

Because Dorothy had not professed final vows by the time she had written her letter of application to the El Salvador mission, her request was denied. She found other ways, however, to serve the poor and the marginalized by working at a multi-service agency for Cleveland’s inner-city poor and by teaching Catholic doctrine to hearing-impaired children at a neighboring parish. Dorothy got her first taste of missionary work in the summer of 1969 when she traveled to Topawa, Arizona, to teach Catholic doctrine to Native Americans of the Papago Tribe.

In the year before she went to Arizona, Dorothy made a comment which very aptly described her spiritualty and joyous, fun-loving personality and positive attitude. During an ecumenical retreat weekend in East Cleveland that Dorothy attended, the group leader asked her what she would like engraved on her tombstone. Dorothy replied, “I want to be remembered as an Alleluia because a Christian should be an Alleluia from head to foot [St. Augustine].” Also during this year, 1968, Dorothy professed final vows as an Ursuline Sister of Cleveland.

Due to financial difficulties, Sacred Heart Academy closed in 1972, and Dorothy was assigned to Beaumont School, Cleveland Heights, where she served as a guidance counselor for two years. Because Dorothy was an effective counselor, many students relied on her for directions and advice. Giving her time freely, she was often involved with some of the more troubled girls all hours of the night. In addition to counseling, Dorothy also volunteered her services at a hospital for the chronically ill and at a women’s correctional facility.

In 1974, when it was time for the Cleveland Ursulines to send another pair of sisters to the mission in El Salvador, Dorothy was selected to go with Martha Owen, O.S.U., for a term of five years. In July the two traveled to El Salvador and later to Costa Rica to study Spanish. In December, they joined the Cleveland Latin American Mission (CLAM) Team in the parish of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Chirilagua, San Miguel, where they participated in pastoral works of the parish and Caritas (“Love”), a food-assistance program for pregnant women and nursing mothers and their children.

Less than a year later, in April of 1975, Dorothy and Martha moved to another parish, Saint Charles Borromeo in La Union where they assumed the same type of ministry until the CLAM Team transferred the parish back to the Salvadoran diocesan clergy in December 1977. Dorothy and Martha then moved and became a part of the pastoral team in the parish of the Immaculate Conception in the port city of La Libertad. There, also, their ministry included Caritas and planning and organizing liturgical celebrations and leadership formation programs to develop Basic Christian Communities.

In October of 1978, a young woman named Jean Donovan visited El Salvador to explore the possibility of joining the CLAM Team. She left Dorothy with a positive first impression: “Jean’s really cute—a typical twenty-five-year old kid. She’s very pleasant and friendly and seems really settled in her mind to come here and work and is willing to. . . .”

In these years, the social tension and repression against the popular organizations were increasing on the part of the military and paramilitary forces of the government. In a taped letter Dorothy recorded for her family in February 1979, Dorothy expressed how the military perceived the work of the parish:

There have been things going on, and we have not been directly involved. They [the military] haven’t been against us except that I have just been called a Communist, and Pablo [Paul Schindler] has just been called a Communist. . . .

The Guardia are like the National Guard. . . . They’re the group that does all the killing all the time. They’re right outside the church—right across the street from us. So, anytime anything’s going on in the church, they certainly can hear and listen to what we’re saying, and we’re not saying anything “bad” or communistic as they claim we are.

The summer of 1979 marked the end of Dorothy’s and Martha’s assignment in El Salvador. By this time, however, the Ursuline congregation had decided that one of the sisters of a pair assigned to El Salvador would always remain in the country for an additional year to help train and also offer community support to the new Ursuline assigned to the CLAM Team. The decision was left to Dorothy and Martha to determine which of them would stay in El Salvador for the extra year. A staffing situation enabled them to quickly arrive at a decision. Since only Dorothy had been working with Paul, whereas, Martha and Christine Rody, SC, had been working with Fr. Ken Myers, if Dorothy left, obviously, Paul would be alone. Dorothy and Martha then mutually decided that Martha should go and Dorothy should stay. Martha recalls that Dorothy was so excited about staying, for she really wanted to continue doing missionary work.

On August 10, 1979, Jean Donovan arrived in El Salvador and began to work closely with Dorothy, Christine, Paul, and Ken at Immaculate Conception Parish in La Libertad because the team was considering that Jean would replace Dorothy the following year when Dorothy would return to the United States. So, for the next few months, under Dorothy’s guidance, Jean learned the workings of the parish and got to know the parishioners in its outlying areas. At this time, the parish was ministering to five additional parishes, which brought the total number of their parishioners to 140,000.

With the increase of repressive violence throughout the country, Father Alfred Winters, director of the Cleveland Diocesan Mission Office, requested that each member of the team write a letter, explaining why he or she desired to stay in the country. On October 13, 1979, to Martha Owen, Dorothy wrote the following concerning her return to the United States:

Today we were talking extensively about what could happen if something begins. Most of us feel the desire to stay here. We don’t want to abandon the people. I thought I should say this to you because I don’t want to say it to anyone else because I don’t think they would be able to understand. Anyway, my dear friend, I wish you to know what I am feeling and guard it in your heart. If the day comes when others need to understand, please explain it to them for me.

A bloodless coup occurred on October 15, 1979, in which a group of young military officers overthrew the government and formed the first junta. This coup initiated a new period of political instability, and the repression became much more brutal. Hundreds of dead bodies appeared in the street and the fields each month. On March 24, 1980, the archbishop of San Salvador, Monseñor Oscar Arnulfo Romero, fell victim to the forces of the government and the right, who wished to silence his prophetic voice. After his death, and at the request of the bishop of Cleveland, James Hickey, the Ursuline congregation gave Dorothy permission to extend her stay in El Salvador.

In the months before his death, Monseñor Romero had requested the U.S. Catholic Church to send missionaries with experience in Latin America to work in his archdiocese. Three Maryknoll Sisters decided to respond to Monsigñor Romero’s invitation. Carla Piette, who had much experience working with poor communities in Chile, came to El Salvador the same day on which Monsigñor Romero was assassinated. Two days later, Teresa Alexander arrived from Panama to work with Maryknoll Sister Joan Petrik, who was collaborating with the Cleveland team in La Libertad. Finally, Ita Ford, who had worked with Carla in Chile, arrived on April 13, 1980. After spending a month becoming acquainted with El Salvador, Carla and Ita decided to work in the department of Chalatenango, helping the growing population of refugees, who were displaced by the repression.

During these months, the Cleveland team had expanded its ministry to include the transportation of refugees and supplies to the refugee centers that the Church had opened to respond to the violence. Dorothy and Jean then began transporting people in Chalatenango and other northern parts of the country, where the army was bombing villages and destroying crops. They helped Carla and Ita move refugees, food, and supplies to refugee centers in the Chalatenango area.

A fourth Maryknoll Sister, Maura Clarke, arrived on August 5, to live and work with Maryknoll Sister Madeline Dorsey in Santa Ana. Maura’s stay there was short, however. On the evening of August 23, Carla and Ita were asked to return a prisoner, released from the army base in Chalatenango, to his village beyond the El Chapote River. When they reached the river, rain began falling heavily. They proceeded nonetheless, and while recrossing a riverbed, a wall of water struck the jeep and turned it over on the driver’s side. Carla, the driver, pushed Ita out through the half-opened window, but Carla could not escape and was drowned. Undeterred by this tragedy, Ita decided to remain in Chalatenango. The other Maryknoll Sisters then determined that Maura would join Ita in Chalatenago.

On September 23, 1980, enraged by the part that her own country was playing in the repression, violence, and murder of so many innocent Salvadorans, Dorothy wrote a letter to President. Jimmy Carter:

My name is Sister Dorothy Kazel, and I am a North American missionary working in the Central American country of El Salvador. . . . My reason for writing this letter comes from an experience I had yesterday afternoon. . . . And it makes a North American even sicker because of the help our country has given the government here—as it was stated—for “vehicles and communication.”

Early Monday morning [September 22, 1980], the army soldiers of El Salvador made house searches in San Jose Villa Nueva. . . . It seems that this group (of soldiers) kept going further up the isolated road to the villages above in their *high-powered trucks* with their *communication* equipment.

About 6:00 or 6:30 in the morning, they killed ten or more people in one village and then went further up (the road) and killed another ten or more people. One old man was coming down the road with three cows—he got killed. One young man was going to wash down by the well—he got killed. One young girl about twelve years old had in her hands the words of a song that had been written in honor of one of the priests who had been martyred. They (the soldiers) claimed she was a subversive and killed her. . . .

And the most appalling thing to me is that I am a North American, and *my*  government gave them money for the “durable equipment” they have, so that it’s relatively easy to get into the worst villages without much trouble and kill innocent people because of the wrong information they have received.

I really would like to know what you think of this situation, Mr. President, and whether you really realize how many innocent people we are helping to kill. How do you reconcile all of this?

In spite of unrelenting violence all around them, Dorothy and Jean continued their parish work, as well as assisting Maura and Ita in Chalatenango. With their white Toyota van, Dorothy and Jean, who had been dubbed “The Rescue Squad” by Maura and Ita, traveled through the hills, transporting refugees and supplies. They were well aware of the dangers and were fearful, especially when driving alone in isolated areas. But because they looked so American with their blonde hair and blue eyes, Dorothy and Jean believed they were safe. Dorothy would say, “Being a gringa [North American] is an asset. They wouldn’t do anything to you.”

On December 2, 1980, Dorothy and Jean drove to the Comalapa International Airport to pick up Sisters Teresa Alexander and Madeline Dorsey, who had returned together from a regional meeting of Maryknoll Sisters in Nicaragua. A tense atmosphere prevailed in the country because on the following day, December 3, the burial of six prominent leaders of the executive committee of the Frente Democratico Revolucionario (Revolutionary Democratic Front) was scheduled. These leaders, desirous of forming a democratic government committed to social justice, had been kidnapped, tortured, and executed by security forces on November 27, 1980. Despite any fear they may have felt, Dorothy and Jean returned to the airport that evening to pick up Ita and Maura. From there, the four women were abducted by five members of the Salvadoran National Guard and later raped and shot, execution style, by the same guardsmen in a deserted cow pasture, one hour from the airport.

Even though Dorothy was a witness to so much death, violence, and pain, she radiated a profound faith in the active presence of God among the poor, hope-filled people. In late November 1980, she wrote the monthly CLAM Team letter to the diocese of Cleveland. She began the letter in this manner: “December is almost upon us. Time surely is moving by quickly—and at times one wonders just *where* it is going!” What then follows is Dorothy’s description of the pastoral work in which she and the other team members would engage during December. She afterwards claimed:

All of this goes on as normally as possible. And yet if we look at this little country of El Salvador as a whole, we find that it is all going on in a country that is writhing in pain—a country that daily faces the loss of so many of its people—and yet a country that is waiting, hoping, and yearning for peace. The steadfast faith and courage our leaders have to continue preaching the Word of the Lord even though it may mean “laying down your life” for your fellowman in the very *real* sense is always a point of admiration and a most vivid realization that Jesus is *here* with us. Yes, we have a sense of waiting, hoping, and yearning for a complete realization of the Kingdom, and yet, we know it will come because we can celebrate Him right now!

Dorothy’s Cleveland Ursuline congregation, family, and friends received this letter on Monday, December 1, 1980.