

SISTER DOROTHY KAZEL AND HER SERVICE

Who was Dorothy Kazel?

She was an Ursuline Sister who served on the Cleveland Diocesan Latin American Mission Team in El Salvador. On the night of December 2, 1980, Sister Dorothy Kazel, lay missionary Jean Donovan, and Maryknoll Sisters Maura Clarke and Ita Ford were abducted from the La Libertad airport, interrogated, physically and sexually abused, and shot by five National Guardsmen. While the greater population learned of Sister Dorothy as a result of her martyrdom, those who knew her remember her as a compassionate and energetic woman with a deep concern for humanity. One of Dorothy's life themes was reaching out to those marginalized within our schools, our city, our nation, and those at risk of violence and war in El Salvador.

Why is the anniversary of Dorothy's death pertinent to the public?

The murder of the Churchwomen represents a major event in international history, felt deeply in the United States and most intimately in the Greater Cleveland community and El Salvador.

The anniversary gives us an opportunity to touch others with the story of a contemporary martyr, and call upon Sister Dorothy's spirit to inspire all of us to actively seek peace and justice for our brothers and sisters who are near and far.

How has Sister Dorothy's death impacted society?

Her death has been a catalyst for many groups of diverse people to join together and advocate for social justice at local, national, and international levels. The Interreligious Task Force on Central America, headquartered in Cleveland, was established after the deaths of the Churchwomen to carry on the legacy of the martyrs. (IRTF educates, advocates, and organizes for peace and human rights, economic justice, and aid to Central Americans and Colombians. IRTF works to change U.S. policies, corporate actions, and consumer behaviors that undermine these aspirations, both here and abroad.)

The Religious Task Force on Central America and Mexico (RTFCAM) was founded on March 7, 1980, in response to the call for solidarity from Archbishop Oscar Romero. Less than three weeks later, he was martyred on March 24, and 10 months later, the churchwomen were martyred. These martyrdoms dramatically called attention to RTFCAM's mission and the plight of the poor in Central America and Mexico. (RTFCAM promotes the work of faith-based solidarity in the United States by promoting a "Spirituality of Solidarity;" informing concerned people about the reality of Central America and Mexico, the impact of U.S. policy on the people of Central America and Mexico and the opportunities to take action to promote justice; and through special attention to the United States-Mexico border, where the impact of economic globalization and fears of terrorism have undermined the rights of migrants and immigrants, low-wage workers and border populations.)

The deaths of the Churchwomen prompted critical awareness of the United States' role in Central America, its changing policy concerning the protection of human rights, and its participation in the training of the military arm of oppressive regimes. The fate of these women mirrored that of more than 70,000 Salvadorans, and thousands of Hondurans and Guatemalan people.

The circumstances of Sister Dorothy's death weighed heavily in The Ursuline Sisters' decision to adopt a corporate stance to support efforts to close the School of the Americas, of which a number of graduates are responsible for the torture and murders of religious men and women—including Sister Dorothy and her missionary companions, Archbishop Oscar Romero and six Jesuit priests, human rights workers and indigenous people within Central America.

The murder of Sister Dorothy and later, the 1995 murder of Sister Joanne Marie Mascha, who was also a Cleveland Ursuline, strongly influenced the Cleveland Ursulines' decision to take a corporate stance to oppose the death penalty. In addition to studying and discussing a number of critical religious, social and political implications of the death penalty, the Cleveland Ursulines were further committed by the witness of Sisters Dorothy and Joanne Marie, who worked so hard to preserve the lives of others.

What made El Salvador so dangerous?

Political tension rose in 1976 due to proposed reforms designed to help El Salvador's agro-export economy support the growing number of poor citizens, while protecting the financial interests of the country's wealthy minority. During the first half of 1977, a fraudulent election prompted strikes that took place throughout the capital city of San Salvador; 90 demonstrators were killed by the military at a rally organized by the opposition that filled the city's plaza with 40,000 to 60,000 people. In the following months, the government began to arrest, torture and expel priests; two priests were murdered; two top government officials were kidnapped and killed by guerillas; Oscar Romero became archbishop of the country; troops launched a military attack on the poor town of Aguilares; and a terrorist organization threatened to kill all Jesuits in El Salvador. All of the political tension and violence simmered to the boiling point and an undeclared civil war was soon under way. In March of 1980, Bishop Oscar Romero was assassinated.

Why were the Churchwomen targeted for murder?

Representatives of the Catholic Church who helped liberate the poor were considered a threat to the power structure of the wealthy ruling class and the government. The El Salvadoran people, most of whom were "campesenos" or landworkers, were very spiritual, however many were illiterate and were unaware they were entitled to basic human rights. Among Sister Dorothy's work was that of teaching the poor leadership skills and how to read and write. Sister Dorothy gave the poor dignity, hence her love cast out their fear. Prophetically, Archbishop Romero said, "Those who work on the side of the poor suffer the same fate of the poor."

Why was Dorothy serving in such a dangerous place?

It was Dorothy's desire to serve on the diocesan mission team and she maintained her desire to stay amid the political tension that continued to escalate with each passing year she was there. She was deeply inspired by the extraordinary faith exhibited by the poor of El Salvador. She and they embraced a mutuality of spirituality that was continually reinforced through their interactions.

Sister Dorothy remained committed to the people of El Salvador, many of whom had become refugees and victims of violence. She did not want to "run out" on the El Salvadoran people when they would need the members of the mission team most. Her desire to stay was reinforced by the assassination of Archbishop Romero. Members of the Cleveland Latin American Mission Team had won the trust of the El Salvadorans because of its longstanding presence and members who risked their lives to serve them throughout this dangerous period.

To whom did Sister Dorothy minister in El Salvador?

As a member of the Cleveland diocesan mission team from 1974 to 1980, Dorothy served in the parishes of Chirilagua, La Union, La Libertad, and outlying villages and cantones, such as Zaragoza. She prepared for liturgical celebrations, was a vital communication link between the parishioners and the parish, and worked to develop lay leaders, with the hope that they would teach others and prepare them for the sacraments in their villages.

In the CARITAS program, Dorothy distributed food to communities in need and taught women how to properly care for and nourish their children. She also helped teach the indigenous men and women to read and write.

When the civil war began, under the direction of Archbishop Oscar Romero, the Cleveland Diocesan Mission Team focused on working with victims and refugees of the war, widows and mothers who had lost their sons.

What was Sister Dorothy's relationship with the Maryknolls?

The significant number of North American religious mission teams serving in El Salvador forged friendships and networking relationships, as they all had much in common in terms of the challenges they faced in their efforts to help the poor and their dedication to the Gospel. Sister Dorothy became friends and socialized with the Maryknoll Sisters and held much admiration for their spirituality. At times, Sister Dorothy and some of the Maryknolls lived together while in El Salvador. After the death of Archbishop Romero, Sister Dorothy and the Maryknolls worked together to transport war refugees to safety.

Where did Sister Dorothy minister before she went to El Salvador?

After her religious and professional formation, Dorothy taught business courses and the Sophomore Service religion courses at Ursuline Sacred Heart Academy in East Cleveland. Between 1965 and 1972, she expanded her educational ministry to include teaching catechism to deaf children at St. Philomena's parish and volunteer work at the St. Martin de Porres Center in the central city. In 1969, she served the Papago Tribe in Topowa, Arizona, exploring her missionary calling during the summer, by teaching Papago children. She served at Beaumont School for Girls in Cleveland Heights from 1972 to 1974, the same year she completed a master's degree in counseling and was called to serve on the Cleveland Latin American Mission Team.

Background

Dorothy L. Kazel, baptized Dorthea Lu Kazel, was born to Lithuanian American parents, Joseph and Malvina Kazel, in Cleveland, Ohio, on June 30, 1939. Shortly after entering the Ursuline Sisters of Cleveland in 1960, she was given the religious name of Sister Laurentine, in remembrance of an Ursuline nun martyred in the French Revolution.

Her evolution from Dorothy to Sister Laurentine to Madre Dorotea, member of the Cleveland Catholic Diocese's Mission Team in El Salvador, reflects historic trends in contemporary religious women's experience of institutional change for women religious in the Catholic Church; and the shift in their ministry from institutionally based service of the poor to more diverse venues of ministry.