

Sister M. Dolorita Butkus

“This is a woman who loves her vocation and the God whom she serves. She is part zealot, part hermit, always active and at the same time, contemplative.” This is a fitting description of Sister Dolorita Butkus on the occasion of her 65th Jubilee celebration written by Sister Janet.

Sister Dolorita came to us from Elizabeth, New Jersey, where she was educated under the guidance of our sisters at Sts. Peter and Paul Elementary School. Born Albina Amelia Marie on September 11, 1922, she was one of three children of Lithuanian immigrants, Joseph and Lenora. In writing her vocation story Sister Dolorita described her family as “very close-knit where there was much love, gentleness, kindness and consideration. Fran, my dearest sister and I always were very close; shared our bedroom and clothes. My brother Joe, six years my junior was 12 years old when I left home for the convent. I loved to dance, to sing, to travel and enjoyed good times.”

Sister often recounted how she was only six years old when, in her words, she “wished upon a star, wanting to be a ‘Sister,’ to belong to God.” In her reflection on the occasion of Sister Dolorita’s 75th Jubilee, Sister Joanne recalled that: “In the back of the sisters convent in Elizabeth NJ, there is a small shrine to the Blessed Mother and even before Albina Amelia Marie Butkus embraced religious life, she would go there to pray. My dad was a few years younger than Sister Dolorita and he lived in the area and would often see her going to the back of the convent. One day when he asked what she was doing back there, she invited him to join her – and she made him stay for the whole rosary.”

Albina entered our congregation in January, 1941 and made her Perpetual Profession in 1945. She once described how she “had never been to Pittsburgh, never even saw the building.” She received the name Dolorita after Our Lady of Sorrows but she was anything but a sorrowful woman. She always spoke with that sweet smile and a twinkle in her eye. When she wanted something of you, usually for one of her dear projects, she approached ever so humbly and in a soft voice suggested what you might do for her. But you shouldn’t let that demeanor fool you. She was like the persistent widow in the scriptures. She knew what she wanted and usually accomplished her objective.

Sister Dolorita began, as most of us did, as a teacher; she taught kindergarten through grade 4 for only three years. Her ministry soon changed as the community began to enter into the field of health care. She pursued registered nurse training and further studies in anesthesia. Good Samaritan Hospital in Mt. Vernon, IL welcomed her as a registered nurse, anesthesiologist and Director of Respiratory Therapy for the next 24 years.

It was in 1975, that Sister Dolorita began another ministerial direction. She was a lover of people and got involved quickly in their lives, especially when someone was in need. So she trained for and was licensed in Pastoral Care and served as Director of this department in our two hospitals and four others in several states for another 15 years. Sister once remarked about

this particular ministry, “I hope to bring Christ to the people of God . . . to make the love of God real through me, through my ministry.”

The next year, in lieu of a trip for her 50th Jubilee, Sister asked to be a hermit at Mount St. Francis in upper New York State. This was a pretty rugged existence. Imagine this stately and gentle woman tramping through the snow, collecting her own firewood and fetching water. But she loved the experience and often got starry-eyed when she spoke of it. She continued to plead for extended times, short though they may be for quiet and contemplation.

In 1992, Sister’s life took another unexpected turn when, after the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe, she volunteered, at the tender age of 70, to pioneer our newly established mission in Lithuania. Arriving in Lithuania on October 7, 1992, the feast of Our Lady of the Rosary, she first assisted Sr. Michele Garas teaching English at the newly reopened Saule Grade School in Utena, then served in Kretinga at the re-opened College of the Franciscan Friars and finally again in Utena, engaging in pastoral ministry.

Perhaps Sister’s greatest legacy is her role as co-founder of St. Clare Hospice in Utena in 1996, where the staff continues to provide terminally ill patients with professional and loving care in their final days. Housed in a building that had been vacant for three years, Sister Dolorita began the hospice with practically nothing, obtaining donations of beds, mattresses, sheets and linens. Her own hospital background along with financial assistance from Aid to Lithuania, the Knights of Lithuania, as well as other organizations provided many of the needs, but Sister Dolorita’s voluminous correspondence to her many friends back in the United States brought much needed funds.

Sister Dolorita was aware of those on the margins of society and when she began to make home visits, she witnessed so many people that were not only sick, but also hungry. Once again, she responded to this need by establishing a food pantry in 2005. Supported by a grant from Lithuanian Catholic Religious Aid, she and Sister Michele regularly distributed over 300 bags of groceries to elderly poor and their families as well as those persons struggling in their day-to-day living. A quote from St. Augustine spoke strongly to her: “*Ask in my name. And he (Jesus) didn’t say what for, but in his words we can understand what we ought to ask for. Ask and you will receive that your joy may be full.*” Sister Dolorita certainly did follow Augustine’s recommendation.

Returning to her persistence when facing a reluctant response: There was an incident in which she was asking for space in a parish rectory for her food bank to which the pastor did not respond in the affirmative. She gently and ever so humbly chided the priest: “I’m not asking you for your teeth, just a little space each month to help these people.” Needless to say, she got her space.

In 2014, Sister Dolorita moved to Westminster Place at Presbyterian SeniorCare in Oakmont PA for health care assistance. She then began her final ministry: contemplative and evangelizer par excellence! Her listening ear was always ready to hear both residents’ and staff’ concerns

and requests for prayers. She made friends easily because her interest was genuine. She wrote birthday greetings and cards of encouragement, and gifted many with little angel statues. She had recommendations for her doctors, Pastor Susan (the chaplain), and all the staff for better care and suggestions for more efficient ways to do things. Sister Dolorita never lost her skills at being the Director of Respiratory Therapy from Good Samaritan days and guiding the administrator and staff at St. Clare Hospice in Lithuania! Since Sister Dolorita was also a licensed Director of Pastoral Care, she continued using those gifts at Westminster Place and then in these last few weeks, though bedridden, in the Willows. She had a wonderful listening ear and heart. She will be missed.

The Jubilee Questionnaire for her 65th Jubilee celebration had the final question “Is there anything else you would like readers to know about you?” Sister Mary Dolorita responded: “I want to spend my eternity thanking God the Father, Son and Spirit for the gift of Vocation! It has been a great privilege and joy to serve God and His People, in His Name, for His Loves’ Sake. I would again and again gladly make the same choice of life.”

Sr. Dolorita had, throughout her life, spent many hours in prayer and adoration before the Blessed Sacrament. So, she is surely ready to spend eternity with the God to whom she had given her life.

During her entire time as a Sister of St. Francis of the Providence of God, Sister Dolorita advocated for the least of her brothers and sisters following in the footsteps of St. Francis and St. Clare. Her love of the Blessed Mother was clear to everyone. Recently, she felt she even had a vision of Mary calling to her prior to her death. On December 21st, God called her home. May she now know the joy of God’s eternal embrace.

-Compiled by Sr. Margaret Markey from Sister M. Dolorita’s vocation story and Jubilee reflections
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