Sister Mary K. Duwelius, OP
1920-2019

My views on missionary life have certainly changed over the years, since at the beginning I thought I was ministering to the poor in Pamplona, but as time went on I realized that I was being ministered to by my Pamplona friends. Several theologians and writers are asking the same question: What do we learn from the poor of the world?

These words are found in the life story of Sister Mary K. Duwelius, who spent more than three decades ministering in the Dominican Republic and Peru in addition to serving migrant populations during her many years in south Florida.

Dorothy Catherine Duwelius was born on June 26, 1920, in Elkhart, Indiana, to John and Mabel (Ness) Duwelius. She was one of four children, along with her brother Kenneth and two younger sisters who were identical twins, Eileen and Arlene. “Both our parents were happy, holy, and hard-working,” she said. “Mother kept everything under control and we children knew how to settle down when advised to do so.”

Sister Mary K.’s lifelong commitment to social justice and the poor may well have come from her Depression-era upbringing, instilled by her parents. A railroad track ran directly behind their home, and those riding the trains often knocked on the back door asking for something to eat – and could always find a meal there.

Life in the Duwelius home revolved around activities in the family parish, St. Vincent’s in Elkhart. John was an usher and active in many church groups, while Mabel “was a great organizer of ice cream socials, dinners and card parties” in the parish. All the children attended the parish school. “Each day we would devoutly pray before class and then break forth loudly singing ‘Cheer, cheer for Old Notre Dame,’” Sister Mary K. said. “I didn’t find this strange and for years thought that this was done in all Catholic schools in the world.”

The school was staffed by Holy Cross Sisters, and in third grade Mary K. made up her mind that she wanted to become a nun. But the family’s life was altered forever when Mabel was diagnosed with inoperable cancer during Mary K’s high school years at Elkhart High. Mary K. quit school to take care of her mother and the rest of the family, until Mabel’s death five months after her diagnosis at the age of just forty-four.

The school’s principal arranged for Mary K. to finish school by attending classes in the morning and being home to study and take care of household duties in the afternoon. Not long after she earned her diploma, her father asked if she still wanted to enter the convent, and although she thought she should wait, he told her she should go.

A friend who had been in the novitiate in Adrian but who had left for health reasons spoke so highly of the Adrian Dominican Sisters that Mary K. decided to become a Dominican rather than a Holy Cross Sister. When Mother Gerald came to Elkhart to witness this friend become a Third Order Dominican, she decided that Mary K. should enter in the summer, rather than in December as Mary K. had originally planned. “We sort of went back and forth with this and I entered in June 1941. I thought that Mother was quite bossy and had no idea most people didn’t argue with Mother Gerald,” Mary K. said.
Immediately, and for the rest of her life in fact, she knew that religious life was for her. “I loved every minute of my postulancy and novitiate,” she said, even on the day she was cleaning Mother Gerald’s place in the chapel and accidentally dropped Mother’s office book into her bucket of wax. “When I showed Sister Mary Philip [Ryan, the novice mistress] the dripping mess, she simply said ‘Take it to Mother immediately.’ By this time word had got around and novices promised their prayers as I went on my way,” she said. “Mother just looked at her office book and said, ‘Unstick the pages.’ No more, no less.”

Sister Mary Kenneth, as she was known after reception, spent two years at Siena Heights College (University) after her canonical novitiate year was completed and then, in December 1944, was sent to St. Mary of Mount Carmel School on Chicago’s South Side. She finished her bachelor’s degree work at Siena Heights, majoring in Spanish, in the summer of 1945 and was then sent to study at Catholic University in Washington, D.C. She had only been there two days, however, when she was changed to Havana, Cuba, along with Sister Mariana Carrigan. The pair were to attend the University of Havana, learn Spanish, and teach one class a day to grade school students, all for one year.

When that year – during which time her father died of cancer – was up, she and Sister Mariana were missioned to the Dominican Republic to teach at the new Colegio Santo Domingo. She spent seven years teaching high school there and then for the next five years divided her time between the Colegio and teaching at the University of Santo Domingo, where she taught technical English to those studying to be doctors, dentists, and veterinarians.

While she had hoped her next mission would be among the poor, she was appointed in 1958 to teach at Barry College (University), and she enjoyed this assignment. She also found herself in the middle of an unexpected ministry: the Cuban Revolution that began in 1959 brought more than one million refugees to Miami, most of them educated professionals who needed to learn English in order to continue their careers in the United States, and she knew she wanted to repay the kindness she had been shown during her year in Cuba by assisting these immigrants as well as people who arrived from other Latin American countries.

She spent the next several years holding classes for them and, as thousands of Cuban parents sent their children to the U.S. out of fear for them (what became known as Operation Peter Pan), she often went to the airport to help these unaccompanied youngsters. Twelve such young women were given scholarships to Barry and “they soon proved to be real leaders and excellent students,” she said. Her volunteer work teaching English led to three months in the Callao area of Lima, Peru, to teach medical English at the Hospital Central del Empleado. A few months later, in the summer of 1968, she returned to Peru, where she would spend the next twenty-three years, joined over time by Sisters Teddy McKennan, Mariana Carrigan, and Pam Millenbach.

Originally, she went back to carry out the same ministry as she had previously, and she planned to return to Barry after the three months were up because she wanted to work directly with the poor. But when the hospital director heard of her plan to leave, he took her to visit the slum area of Pamplona Alta, where she learned of the dire need there for medical care.

With the hospital’s help and a $6,000 donation that had already come in from Peruvian friends living in Miami, she started a clinic to serve the area’s residents. This clinic closed after three years, having helped many thousands of patients in that time, because the Peruvian government had begun opening clinics in the area, but the building received a new life as a library.
Sister Mariana arrived in the country around this time and established a school for children with special needs. When Sister Mariana became ill with cancer in 1980, Sister Pam came to work with her and eventually succeed her in that ministry, and Sisters Pam and Mary K. continued their work in Peru for many more years.

Throughout their time there, Peru was wracked by unrest and terrorism, and the Sisters’ safety was often in serious question. But they remained, until Sister Mary K. needed an operation and had to return to the States, and she and Sister Pam said goodbye to the people they had walked alongside and come to love.

After Sister Mary K. recovered, the pair went to Immokalee, Florida, where Sister Mary K. put her Spanish skills to use by assisting lawyers working with migrants at the Guadalupe Center. She later volunteered with an agency that served widows living alone in North Miami.

She returned to Adrian in 2002 to take up residence at the Dominican Life Center, where “she maintained her zest for life, her lifelong concern for the most vulnerable, her sense of humor despite experiencing multiple health issues and, yes, her strong sense of prayer and presence,” Sister Pam said in her remembrance at Sister Mary K.’s wake service.

Sister Mary K. died on March 26, 2019, at the age of ninety-eight. Fittingly, she had asked for a green burial, and on March 27 her earthly body, draped in a cuadros made by some of the women in Peru with whom she had ministered, became one with the Adrian soil. At the wake, Sister Pam recalled her longtime friend’s “strong lifelong preferential option for the poor” and the way she herself had been mentored by Sister Mary K. “A lifelong relationship of trust and support quickly became a reality,” she said. “I found that when I left the house and later returned, she would immediately stop everything she was doing and ask about my day. This became a mutual interchange that continued throughout the next thirty-nine years.”

Sister Patricia Harvat’s homily at the memorial Mass on March 29 reflected upon the words of Jesus that “in my Father’s house there are many dwelling places.”

In other translations, it reads, “In my Father’s house there are many mansions.” Perhaps in our reflection of Mary K. that might be more appropriate to say as she found mansions of love, hope and goodness in the lives of the suffering. … The work of Mary K. built mansions of love, care and support to dwelling places of desperation.

St. Paul in our first reading writes, “Live faithfully the vocation to which you have been called.” … Life is so sad if we don’t live with a dream. How many dreams Mary K. helped to come true for young doctors and surgeons as she taught them English, and young women for whom she found doctors to train them to be promoters de salud – health promoters – and those of us who ministered with Mary K. to realize our dreams of living our vocation in a cross-cultural context.

… And so we say to you, Mary K., adios.
Left: Sister Mary K. Duwelius, faculty member of the University of Miami School of Medicine, drills Spanish-speaking physicians on medical terms in English. She is shown in the classroom with Dr. Felix S. Arias of Peru, general practitioner; Dr. Ines Olaya of Columbia, internist; Dr. Segismundo Obregon of Cuba, pathologist; and Dr. Mauricio Schitter of Argentina, surgeon.

Left: Sister Mary K. strolls through the campus of Barry College (now University), Miami Shores, Florida. Right: Sister Mary K., left, with Sister Barbara Cervenka.
From left: From left, Sisters Mary Aquiline Pety, Thomas Maynard, Agnes Cecile Prendergast, Mary Kenneth (Mary K.) Duwelius, and Mariana Carrigan. Sister Mary K. Duwelius visits a market in Pamplona Alta, Peru, 1985.

From left: From left, Gizella, sister-in-law, Mary K.; Bud, brother; and Anwar, nephew. Sister Mary K. Duwelius makes a visit in Pamplona Alta, Peru.
Right: Sister Mary K. Duwelius poses with her family, from left: Haleema, grandniece; Debra, niece; Anwar, grandnephew; Bud, brother; Sister Mary K.; and Sister Pam Millenbach.

From left: Members of the 2016 75-Year Jubilee Crowd are: back row, from left, Sisters Marie Joannes O'Donnell and Julia Rudolph, and front row, from left, Sisters Anne Marie Snyder, Mary K. Duwelius, Jean Charles Birney, and Irene Marie Kerich. Sisters Pam Millenbach, left, and Mary K. Duwelius in Lima, Peru, 1998