

Sister Dolores Lew

Answering the call to love

When people ask Sister Dolores Lew where she was born, she likes to tell them, “I was born in Ireland, off the shores of Skibbereen.” This might surprise some people, because Sister Dolores doesn’t actually appear to be very Irish. Someone who really knows Sister Dolores, however, would recognize the joke immediately, a perfect example of Sister Dolores’s irrepressible humor that goes hand in hand with a deep faith and commitment to serving her sisters and brothers.

Dolores Lew was actually born in Bayonne, New Jersey (a birthplace she shares with Blessed Miriam Teresa). Her parents were both 100% Chinese and were matched in a traditional arranged marriage, a marriage that later ended in divorce. Dolores and her family spent eighteen months in China when Dolores was a young girl. She recalls that when she returned to the US from China, “I only spoke Chinese. When I went to school, I had to catch up.”

When Dolores was ten years old and living with her father, she became a Roman Catholic. She had been going to a Catholic church with her friends and was attracted to the place that was “peaceful and quiet.” She laughs when recalling that when the priest asked her why she wanted to be a Catholic, she answered, “So I can wear nice medals.”

Dolores attended St. Michael’s High School in Jersey City and her faith grew and matured. She attended Caldwell College and wrestled with the question of whether she had a vocation. She was attracted to the Sisters of Charity, but the Sisters of Charity at that time did not accept candidates whose parents were divorced. Dolores instead entered the Sisters of Saint Dominic, which was primarily a teaching community. She was assigned to teach first grade, but found that “teaching was not my forte.” She laughs, “I taught everything I was supposed to teach in the first three days, and I then I said, ‘Now what?’ They had pity on me and moved me up to teach the fifth grade.”

Sister Dolores continued with the Dominicans for nine years, during which period she earned a Masters Degree in biology from Villanova University and left teaching to work as a medical technologist. When it was time to take her final vows as a Sister of Saint Dominic, she realized, “I just couldn’t.” Sister Dolores had come to know the Sisters of Charity who worked with her at St. Joseph Hospital. With the encouragement of these sisters, Sister Dolores transferred into the Sisters of Charity, but still, “I didn’t know if I truly had a vocation.” She left the Sisters of Charity for four years before reentering, this time for good. She says, “Finally after this long journey, I knew I had a vocation.”

As a Sister of Charity, Sister Dolores worked as a medical technologist at St. Elizabeth Hospital in Elizabeth, NJ before studying to become a Physician’s Assistant in 1995. For almost 20 years, she has served in the Emergency Room of St. Joseph Hospital in Paterson. She works long hours, often staying past the end of her scheduled shift, and she gives all that she has to minister to her patients with competence and compassion.

To Sister Dolores, the heart of her vocation is loving people and meeting their needs, whether those needs are physical or spiritual. She treats each patient with dignity and sensitivity to their individual needs. “Sometimes



they need a little encouragement, a little counseling. Sometimes I pray over them, I hug them.” She offers comfort and understanding to women who have suffered miscarriages. “I talk to the woman, tell her what is happening, hold her, not let her be alone. I encourage her to hold the child in her heart, to name him or name her.”

She explains, “Working for the poor and the underserved is what we are called to do. The message we always carry is one of God, to love you, you are our sisters and brothers. We’re supposed to preach the good news.” To Sister Dolores, the good news is truly reason for joy. She says, “Life is a gift. Optimism is the key word. It keeps you going, right? I tell people, ‘Whistle, dance down the hall.’ I do! Be happy, even though you feel rotten.”

Sister Dolores says that prayer is what sustains her through her long days ministering to the needs of others. “Sometimes I come home dog tired, and I say, God, are you with me? But I know that God gives me everything I need.”

In her hours away from the Emergency Room, Sister Dolores enjoys reading, gardening, and collecting coins and stamps. She says that her personal needs are very simple, and that when she gives things to others, God often surprises her by giving back to her tenfold.

In all things, Sister Dolores tries to follow St. Vincent de Paul’s call to simplicity and humility. “Simplicity, as St. Vincent would always say, is to speak the truth. I want to be honest. I want to be fair. I want to be just and highly principled. Morality and ethics play a big part in my life. And it goes to everyone.”

Sister Dolores says that her philosophy in a nutshell is, “Give of yourself and your resources. Love everyone.” She reminds us that the true value of a life is not found in wealth, titles, or educational degrees, but is found in answer to the question, “How much have you loved?”