



Martyr of the Amazon

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The Life of Sister Dorothy Stang, SNDdeN by Sister Roseanne Murphy, SNDdeN

Just two months after her seventeenth birthday, **Dorothy Mae Stang**, a Junior at Julianne High School in Dayton, OH, entered the Sisters of Notre Dame. Her best friend, Joan Krimm, was a Senior and had told Dorothy that she was entering the convent. Her response was, "Not without me."



Sister Dorothy Stang, 2005

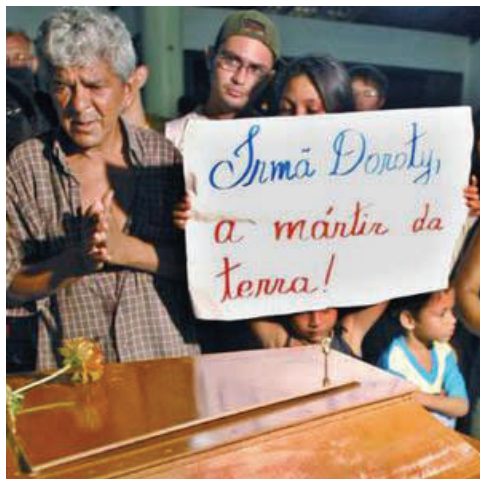
One of nine children, Dorothy was a leader. She was generous, athletic, and popular. Her dream was to be a missionary where she could teach poor children and bring the message of Christ to those who did not know Him. She had heard of missionaries all through her Catholic school education and had seen the compassion and generosity of her parents towards the poor. She wrote on her application, "I want to be a missionary in China." Her dream of going to a foreign land was nurtured during one of her early teaching assignments in Arizona. There on the weekends, she and some of the other Sisters worked in the migrant labor camps where the dire poverty of the people moved her to want to change the unjust systems that allowed people to live without safe water or without enough food to feed their families.

Finally, in 1966, her dream of becoming a missionary came true. She, along with Joan Krimm and two other Sisters of Notre Dame, were sent to Brazil. After six months of studying the language and culture, four Sisters were sent to Coroatá, a town in the north eastern part of the country where there were 12,000 in the town and 96,000 in the parish. Together with two Italian priests, the Sisters went out into the forest and began several Base Ecclesial Communities, groups of poor farmers gathered together to study the Bible and the teachings of the Catholic Church. But it soon became evident, that the farmers did not even know their rights given to them by the law. Dorothy began to study the laws of Brazil and tried to show the farmers that they had certain rights guaranteed by the government. The wealthy land owners often exploited the farmers and denied them any freedom even so far as to allow them to build a school for their children even when they had the twenty-five children required by law. Dorothy protests brought about a change. The ranchers began to suspect that the Sisters were Communists working to "overthrow the system." Anyone, at that time, who worked for the poor and taught them their rights were labeled as Communists, and many were hunted down and arrested, even killed.

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After ten years of working in Coroatá, Dorothy and another Sister asked permission to follow the farmers deeper into the Amazon forest. During the 1970's the military government had opened up thousands of acres of the Amazon forest for poor people to homestead on a small plot of land. Many of the wealthy were given enormous amounts of land to begin cattle raising and logging. Hundreds of thousands of people went into the forest wanting to gain their freedom and have their own land to provide for their families. The Sisters followed them and when they were "run off their land" by ranchers who produced forged documents claiming that the land belonged to their families, the farmers moved on further into the jungle. Everywhere Dorothy went, she developed Base Communities to teach the farmers, encourage them to build schools for their children, and to begin to organize themselves into unions. She was their greatest resource for getting justice. Finally, in 2005, two wealthy ranchers offered a \$25,000 reward for gunmen willing to kill her. On her way to a meeting of poor farmers whose homes had been destroyed, she was stopped by two gunmen who spoke to her for about fifteen minutes. She showed them the map she carried which proved the right of the farmers to their land given to them by the government. One of them asked if she had a weapon; she pulled her Bible out of her bag saying "This is the only weapon I have." She read three Beatitudes to them ending with "Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called children of God."



They murdered Dorothy on February 12, 2005. The news of her death spread throughout the world in the news media. Dorothy gave her life that the poor in Brazil would realize their dignity and know that they had a right to a decent life. Her spirit lives on in the lives of the people. The Sisters of Notre Dame keep her memory alive through their publications. Her biography was

released in September, 2007, telling the story of the "Martyr of the Amazon."