

The Vintage Voice

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My Kind of Saint

The Rev. Canon Laurence Larson

We clergy have our saints, and I don't mean just saints from the past, but also saints from our parishes. Dorothy was one of many for me. The day that we moved to our new parish in Rock Island, Illinois, Dorothy and her husband were waiting at the door of the empty rectory as we pulled in right behind the moving van. She somehow had anticipated that our three young children, who were in fact rather unhappy about this move to a new city, would be more in the way than any help; and so she had persuaded her husband to help her take them off our hands while the furniture was being unloaded.

She took them on a tour of each of the three schools that they would be attending, plus a local museum. They were also treated to lunch at a local pizza and ice cream parlor. By the time they returned later that afternoon, our youngsters had been charmed and were quite a bit happier. My wife and I were happier, too. Not only was our furniture in place, but — thanks to Dorothy — so were our wits as well!

Since my parents and my wife's parents were deceased, Dorothy and her husband became surrogate grandparents for our three, remembering them on their birthdays, at Christmas, and at graduations. They would take our entire family out to dinner at the country club to mark such special occasions. When an English priest friend and his wife came for a two-week visit, they entertained them as well. Dorothy even subscribed to the *Chicago Tribune* for the period of their visit so that our guests could get a better picture of life in the USA.

Our children weren't the only recipients of Dorothy's caring. She was just as kind to the neighborhood kids and to all of the other children in our Sunday school program. At Trinity we designated the occasional fifth Sunday in any month as "Youth Sunday." The teens would read lessons, lead the psalm and prayers, usher, and greet, while the primary grades formed a choir that provided the anthem for the service. Dorothy would unfailingly compliment every child for their efforts.

This same children's choir would go out caroling before Christmas, hitting a couple of nursing homes and then three or four homes of some elderly members of the parish. Dorothy's house was always the last stop. She would invite us all inside for caroling. When our singing was

concluded, she would announce that it was time for refreshments. Taking my arm, she would lead me toward the dining room where her table was arrayed with fresh baked cookies. But along the way she always stopped under an archway where she had hung some mistletoe. Yes, you guessed it; she would stretch up and give the rector a big kiss on the lips. And even though the children had seen it before and knew it was coming, they always howled with laughter. There is no doubt in my mind that this annual “tradition,” with the delicious cookies and the big surprise smooch that wasn’t really a surprise, will be a fond part of their memories of Trinity.

My favorite Dorothy story, which I heard only after her death, concerned something of a “crisis” in the rather affluent neighborhood where she lived. One day a very agitated friend and neighbor rang Dorothy’s doorbell, and so Dorothy invited her in for a cup of coffee. The woman was barely through the door before she blurted out that she had some terrible news: a Jewish family had purchased the house right next door! She cried out excitedly; “Whatever are we going to do about this?” Without any hesitation, Dorothy calmly informed her that she knew exactly what she was going to do about it and that she expected her friend to do likewise. Relieved, the lady asked Dorothy what she intended to do. Dorothy answered that she was going to bake a cake for the new neighbors and that she wanted her to make her favorite soup for them. The woman was speechless with surprise, and yet she and Dorothy eventually did exactly that. Together, they delivered their lovingly made gifts of welcome to the new family on their very first day in the neighborhood.

In a very small way I was able to repay some of Dorothy’s caring and kindnesses. When she reached ninety, she had been a widow for a couple of years and had no family living locally, so I agreed to become her health care agent. She was still in her home four years later and doing reasonably well until the day she fell down a flight of stairs. She was injured so badly that she ended up in a nursing home for the last months of her life. It was my privilege to arrange for and oversee her care for her last days, and then to preside at her requiem.

I was burying a parishioner and a dear friend but also something more. A saint? Possibly. A hero? Definitely!



The Rev. Canon Laurence Larson is Rector Emeritus of Trinity Episcopal Church in Rock Island, Illinois, Diocese of Quincy, where he served from 1977 to 2001. He has served as the Chaplain to the Retired Clergy and Surviving Spouses for the diocese since 2001 and, since February 2009, as co-pastor for All Saints “Community of Faith” in Moline. He and his wife Betty have been married for forty-nine years and have three children and eight grandchildren.