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Beginnings in Brazil

by

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The first four Sisters of the Holy Cross to go to South America expected to found a school of nursing; the Holy Spirit had a better idea.

It was the summer of 1947. World War II had been over for two years. The membership of the Sisters of the Holy Cross, Notre Dame, Indiana, had risen to 1400 Sisters, of whom about 150, or slightly more than ten percent, were retired, 79 (5.5%) were novices, and only nine (one-half of one percent) were serving outside the United States.¹

Mother M. Rose Elizabeth (Havican), then superior general, had decided with her council that it was time to exert some of the community energy in a new field. In September 1945 she informed the council that the congregation had been "offered hospitals" in Cuzco and Arequipa, Peru, and a possible colegio in Lima. Mother began to speculate on how she could include Peru in her next trip to Bengal. But it was not Peru, but Brazil, which would receive the first South American missionary efforts of the Sisters of the Holy Cross.

On or about September 20, 1947, Mother Rose Elizabeth received a telegram from Bishop Edwin V. O'Hara of Kansas City, Missouri, saying that His Eminence, Dom Carlos de Vasconcelles Motta, Cardinal Archbishop of Sao Paulo, Brazil, would be attending the coming Eucharistic Congress in Buffalo, and that Bishop O'Hara could arrange for Mother to meet with the Cardinal in New York City. Mother agreed to the meeting, rearranged her schedule, and flew to New York September 27 accompanied by Sister M. Olivette (Whalen). After two meetings, one the evening of the 27th and one the morning of the 28th, agreement was reached that the Sisters of the Holy Cross would open a mission in Brazil, and that almost immediately. The general idea was that it would be a school of nursing or nursing education; but although a detailed report² of the founding says that "final arrangements were made" on September 28, these arrangements seem to have consisted of an invitation to the Cardinal to visit Saint Mary's and his acceptance for October 7, and a letter of introduction

given to Mother by the Cardinal, which she could present to Monsignor Paulo Rolim Louiero, chancellor of the Sao Paulo archdiocese, upon her arrival.

Faithful to his invitation, Cardinal Motta came to Saint Mary's October 7 and spoke to all the Sisters assembled in the Church of Loretto, the conventual church of the general house. He was the guest of honor at a luncheon at which the servers were Sisters Olivette, Charlita (Enright), Caecilius (Roth) and Armella (Guerrero), the four who had been chosen to make the first foundation in Brazil.

These Sisters came from various backgrounds and had among them a remarkable number of talents. Sister Armella was the youngest, having made her final profession in Holy Cross three years before. She had taught both elementary school and high-school Spanish during the six years before she was named to the Brazilian mission. The new assignment came as a great surprise, as Sister Armella had never placed her name on the list of those who hoped to go to the foreign missions. But there were no Sisters of the Holy Cross who spoke Portuguese at that time, and it was hoped that Sister Armella's command of Spanish would readily transfer. Sister Armella, who is still living at this writing (spring, 1998) reports that her hasty study of the language did give her a reading ability in the language, but that she was completely helpless when she encountered the spoken language.

Sister M. Charlita was the only one with previous experience of the Holy Cross foreign missions. She had started her missionary career immediately after her first profession in 1926 by reporting to the Holy Cross Foreign Mission Convent in Washington, D.C. The convent itself was part of the Holy Cross Foreign Mission Seminary of the priests and Brothers of Holy Cross. The Sisters had their own convent and community life, but their chief work in Sister Charlita's day was to get out the Bengalese, a magazine devoted to the Holy Cross missions in Bengal. The Sisters also studied the history, culture and language of Bengal. The problem with these studies was that the priest teachers seemed to be constantly transferring between Bengal and Washington.

Sister Charlita went to Bengal in 1930. She taught elementary school in Toomiliah for one year, then in Nagari for fifteen years. She had come to Bengal, however, with a minor medical condition that was made progressively worse by the climate and food of Bengal. She returned to the United States in 1946, wondering if she could ever return to the "foreign mission," for at that time "missions" and "Bengal" were synonymous.

The opening of a new mission field was a godsend to Sister Charlita. She could still be of service to the Church and the congregation, without the dangers to her health. She gladly agreed when Mother Rose Elizabeth asked her to go to Brazil.

By the time they were chosen for the Brazilian mission, the names of Sisters Olivette and Caecilius were already paired in the minds of the community. They had entered the congregation a year apart, Sister Olivette in 1933 and Sister Caecilius in 1934. Sister Olivette was only a few credits short of a degree (major and minor in art) from the University of Missouri; Sister Caecilius had just finished high school. Because they hoped to be sent to Bengal, and nurses were needed there, both were enrolled by their superiors in the Mount Carmel School of Nursing in Columbus, Ohio.³

Both Sisters finished their nursing studies in 1940, and continued working at Mount Carmel until they were called to Saint Mary's to prepare for their departure for Bengal. There were nineteen Holy Cross priests, Brothers and Sisters in the mission band which left San Francisco November 9, 1941, and arrived in Manila December 5. Two days later they heard of the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Passengers from the ship were informed that they could sail no farther. Their baggage was off-loaded and the ship sailed away, even leaving behind half its crew.

With nowhere to go, the Sisters decided to see if their services would be accepted by the Maryknoll Sisters at St. Paul's Hospital. They were warmly welcomed, as Americans, as Sisters, and as nurses. Their first night there they had their baptism of fire when bombs fell on the airfield outside the city. The city itself was not bombed, but there were some civilian

casualties, which came to the hospital.

Manila was declared an open city on Christmas Day, and two days later the Japanese army entered. For two years Sisters Olivette and Caecilius remained virtual prisoners, living with the Maryknoll Sisters and the French Sisters of the Assumption, and serving as nurses to the American medical unit in the Santo Tomas prison camp.

Eventually they were transferred to the Los Banos prison with a large number of other American missionaries. With even a Bishop on hand, they called their chapel the "cathedral" and their part of the camp "Vatican City." All the Sacraments were administered except Holy Orders. In the waning days of the war, they had exposition of the Blessed Sacrament and a continuous recitation of the rosary, with each religious taking a half-hour turn. On February 23, 1945, American paratroopers appeared and their war was over.

The Sisters spent two years of rest and rehabilitation in the United States. When the call to the missions came again, each was ready to respond.

To return to 1947, Cardinal Motta offered Mass at Saint Mary's at 7:30 a.m., at which the South American missionaries received Communion. (They must have slept late, because the regular hour for the community Mass in those days was six a.m.) After breakfast there was a picture-taking session, at which the Cardinal insisted on having his robes properly draped. That afternoon a departure ceremony was held in the church, and the Sisters left the South Bend train station at five p.m., accompanied by Mother Rose Elizabeth, Mother M. Loretella (Hoffman) and "a statue of Our Lady of Fatima which Mother Rose Elizabeth intended to enthrone in the new convent in Brazil."⁴

In New York next morning it appeared that the sailing of the S.S. Rangild, on which they had booked passage, would be indefinitely delayed while needed repairs were made. Mother purchased airline tickets and sent a cable to Monsignor Loureiro, "Arriving Rio 7:45 Tuesday morning Pan American Flight 201." She signed only her own name, assuming that Monsignor Loureiro would know that the cablegram meant six people.⁵

The Sisters spent the few intervening days visiting whatever friends and family members could get to New York for a farewell, seeing whatever sights they had time and energy to see, and attending impromptu reunions of Saint Mary's alumnae. They left New York at 11:35 p.m. on October 12, reached San Juan, Porto Rico, at 9:30 the next morning, reached Port of Spain, Trinidad, at 2:30 in the afternoon, crossed the Equator at 8:30 p.m., and finally stood on Brazilian soil in Belem at 9:30 that night. At each stop they were able to get off for at least a brief walk. From Belem they had another night on the plane to endure. They reached Rio de Janiero at eight a.m. Tuesday October 14, only fifteen minutes later than the time given in their cable. Here they rested for two days, staying at a Cenacle convent that happened to have an American superior. During the night of the fifteenth, the second night of their stay, one of the Cenacle Sisters died very suddenly. The Sisters of the Holy Cross attended the Requiem Mass next morning, did a last fast round of sight-seeing, and were on the plane to Sao Paulo at ten o'clock, touching down neatly at noon, October 13, 1947.

They deplaned. Mother Rose Elizabeth looked around hopefully for Monsignor Loureiro or his delegate. There was no sign of any escort, clerical or otherwise. Charles St. Martin, an American resident of Sao Paulo whom the Sisters had met on the plane, asked if he could help, and offered to take the Sisters to a group of American priests, Oblates of Mary Immaculate from St. Louis. The superior there, Father Walter Mooney, explained to them that "very often in Brazil cables and telegrams did not arrive on time."⁶ He called Monsignor Loureiro, who said he had not received the message but would come right over. Meanwhile Sisters Caecilius and Armella helped the cook find enough food for six extra people. The Introductory Report goes on:

In the middle of the "informal" meal Monsignor arrived, and no one present will ever forget the look of utter consternation on his face when Mother Rose Elizabeth presented him with the Cardinal's letter telling Monsignor to look after the Sisters and arrange a place for them to stay until he, the Cardinal, would return to Sao Paulo. Monsignor called the Colegio Sao Augustino, conducted by the Canonesses of St. Augustine, and asked if they had room for six Sisters. Since the answer was in the affirmative, the Sisters bade farewell to the Oblate Fathers and went with Monsignor in taxis to the convent.

They were to remain with the Canonesses until November 8.

By October 17, word of the Sisters' arrival in Sao Paulo had reached the only other Holy Cross religious in the city, a group of five Holy Cross priests and one Brother, all of the French-speaking Canadian province, who were staffing a parish in Jaguare, a western suburb of Sao Paulo. Father Lionel Corbeil, the superior, called on them at their residence. "The smile of genuine delight at seeing the Holy Cross Sisters' habit again and friendly interest manifested endeared Father Corbeil to the missionaries."⁷

He took them to see the American consul, who told them it had been a mistake to come with only temporary visas. Under Father's guidance, the Sisters set about the bureaucratic process of exchanging the temporary visas for permanent ones.

The next day Father Corbeil took them to see the parish in Jaguare. Father Dupuis was serving as pastor there. Father Parent was the pastor of the parish of Sao Vito. Fathers Corbeil, Melancon, and Jaubert were doing social and apostolic works in the city, with Father Jaubert also serving as assistant to Father Dupuis. It was plain that they would be welcome there, and they were shown "a tiny, (very public) house which could be converted into a convent."⁸

Many false solutions presented themselves first. The Report states, under October 21, "After viewing over fifty houses the Sisters decided to rent a large house in Rua da Nobraga." This arrangement never went through. After Cardinal Motta had returned from the United States, the Sisters went to a clinic in Iparanga run by a Dona Carmelita. The Sisters were impressed with the cleanliness and good order of the place, but "Mother Rose Elizabeth told Dona Carmelita that the Sisters could not take charge of her clinic as it was not the policy of the congregation for members to manage an institution for other organizations."⁹ The management of another hospital in Sao Paulo was declined for the same reason.

The chief subject of discussion between the Cardinal and Mother Rose Elizabeth in their New York meetings had been the establishing of a School of

Nursing in connection with the Catholic University of Campinas. Encouragement for this idea had come from Monsignor Salim, rector of the Catholic University, who ventured the opinion that the Bishop of Campinas, a city about an hour's drive north of Sao Paulo, would probably be glad to let the Sisters have his house, which he had always found too large. But what they were shown was a large undeveloped site upon which the University hoped, at some undetermined future, to construct a School of Nursing. Meanwhile the spot was serving as a trash disposal site. As for the house, the Bishop regretfully explained that he had nowhere else to live, and could not at present make his house available.

At a meeting on All Saints Day, November 1, Cardinal Motta offered the Sisters Vila Betania, a summer home in the suburb of Santo Amaro, which he seldom used. In fact Canadian Dominican priests had recently used it as a men's retreat house for about two years. Mother Rose Elizabeth, Mother Loretella and Sister Olivette were driven out to see it.

There are five buildings on the grounds -- a modern house with seven rooms and a bath downstairs, and five rooms and three baths upstairs. The chapel is a separate building, an artistic gem . . . built by the late archbishop Dom Jose¹⁰ . . . Another building used by the Dominican Fathers for a retreat house could easily be converted into a school. A swimming pool, tennis courts and spacious grounds would be the ideal setting for the Sisters to open their school. There is also a four-room house for the caretaker and his family.¹¹

The next day Mother Rose Elizabeth took Sisters Charlita and Armella out to see their new home, then "sat down to write her first letters from Vila Betania."¹² That evening after supper all the Sisters went to the Roosevelt railroad station to see Mother Rose Elizabeth and Mother Loretella off on the first part of their journey home. "After Mother had said goodbye to all the Sisters she shook hands and bade farewell to a group of strangers, thinking they were part of the party."¹³

Sisters Olivette and Charlita went out next day to walk to the Cenacle convent, and were stopped in the street by a young woman who asked if they were the Irmãs da Santa Cruz. She introduced herself as Evalda Martins, president of a Catholic action group in Sao Paulo, and said the Cardinal had told her they were coming to live at Vila Betania. In fact, she carried a

letter of introduction from the Cardinal to Sister Olivette, and offered to take them anywhere in her car, as the Cardinal had appointed her their chauffeur.

On Thursday and Friday, November 6 and 7, the four Sisters, with Evalda, Sister Martha Maria (an extern Sister of the Canonesses) and Maria Clara (an assistant housekeeper at Sao Augustino) descended on Vila Betania with brooms, brushes, buckets, and mops. On Saturday Mother Praxedes of the Canonesses assembled everything useful in a household "from scrubbing brushes to shoe polish" including everything necessary for Mass on the Sunday morning.

As the Sisters tried to thank the Reverend Mother Superior, her assistant, and Mother Praxedes for all the kindnesses they had showered on them, they thought that words could not convey their thoughts. The Canonesses of St. Augustine will always be remembered as the perfect bond of Christian Charity uniting all religions in one huge family of Christ. If the statue of Christus on the top of Corcovado seemed to have embraced the Sisters and held them in the outstretched arms, personally welcoming them to Brazil, then they found in the Canonesses of St. Augustine the outward expression of Christlike love. May God reward and bless them for all their kindness.¹⁴

The Cardinal had appointed his secretary, the Reverend Enzo Gusso, to serve as chaplain at Vila Betania. These services began at 7 a.m. on Sunday November 9. Mass was offered and the Blessed Sacrament permanently installed at Vila Betania. An entirely new Holy Cross mission had begun.

Endnotes

1. All of these were in the Dacca district of what was then Bengal, a part of India; it is now Bangladesh and is served by 51 Sisters of the Holy Cross, of whom only seven are Americans. There are also two Sisters of Holy Cross from Canada.

2. This report, which is probably by Sister Charlita, consists of ten single-spaced pages or approximately six thousand words.

3. There was a policy at the time that all Sisters serving abroad were to be nurses.

4. Special Introduction, 2. Hereafter Intro.

5. She may have given him the Rio instead of the Sao Paulo arrival time because Rio was the end of the international flight, but it is not clear how he should have known their Sao Paulo arrival time, especially as the Sisters stayed two days in Rio.

6. Intro., 4.

7. Vila Betania archives narrative, 4.

8. Intro., 5.

9. Intro., 5.

10. Jose Gaspar de Alfonseca e Silva, Archbishop 1939-43.

11. Intro., 9.

12. Intro., 9.

13. Intro., 9.

14. Intro., 10.