

CHILE LINDO

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The Northeastern Province of the School Sisters of Notre Dame 1962-1973

The Church's Call to Latin America

When Sister Marie de Montfort (Mary) Meehan deplaned in Santiago on December 22, 1964, she was carrying a guitar in a brown felt case, while a sister following her carried a "long slender package that could have been anything from a rifle to an oboe, but turned out to be a fantastic white Christmas tree!"ⁱ The first six SSNDs in Chile obviously planned to celebrate their initial summertime Christmas together in fine style. Following Marie de Montfort off the Panagra plane were Sisters M. Ruth Strothmann and M. Georgita Lindner, who were also laden with boxes and bags.ⁱⁱ "Waving their arms off"ⁱⁱⁱ to greet them were the three pioneers who had preceded them on October 15 to Wilton's new mission territory? Sisters Maria José Tresch,^{iv} M. Alejandro (Maria Eugenia) Ortiz and M. Simplicia (Mary Anne) O'Connor.

All were fluent in Spanish and seasoned missionaries to the Latin culture, having been stationed for various lengths of time in Puerto Rico.^v Alejandro was a native Puerto Rican and Ruth, originally a Westphalian, had been in Puerta de Tierra since 1935. When the first three had arrived in South America, on an October day that was unusually cloudy and rainy for Santiago, they began a new venture for the young Wilton Province, one that initially had been doubted. The March 16, 1964, minutes of the Wilton Province Board of Directors state

Discussion RE: Foreign Missions for the Wilton Province

Mother General requests four sisters from the Province to staff a Jesuit School for boys, Grades 1 thru 6, in Santiago, Chile! Discussion centered around preliminary planning, effects on schools, especially those in Puerto Rico, where these missionaries would be drawn from because of facility in Spanish, financial aspects, etc., etc. **We are less than enthusiastic about this since we would prefer to build up the schools in Puerto Rico.**^{vi} However in view of the mandate to send 10% of personnel to South America, we are in no position to refuse to send Sisters.

The next entry, for April 4, reads

We have been informed that there has been a request for an unusual mission in San Felipe in Chile—the formation of an already existing community. Two Sisters, a Superior and a Novice Mistress, must be assigned. We have been asked to do this

since the mission is in Chile and not too distant from Santiago where we have already committed our Sisters to do teaching in San Ignacio School there.

Authorization for all the expenses, travel, clothing, materials needed was given for this new and challenging assignment.

Both entries give the exact hours of the meetings, solemnly attest to the presence of a quorum,^{vii} and are “Respectfully submitted” by Sister M. Theodora, Secretary. Thus, as Vatican Council II was between its second and third sessions, Wilton stepped into what would prove to be a tumultuous time in the history of Chile, of South America, and of the Church.

Mother M. Ambrosia Roecklein was moved to concrete action regarding Latin America by what is usually referred to as Pope John XXIII’s call to all North American religious communities—the famous 10% noted in the Wilton Board of Directors minutes. An exact description of that request was provided in 2003 by Luis Escobar of the Society of St. James of the Archdiocese of Boston:

1961 August 17. The Second Religious Congress of the United States, meeting at Notre Dame. Msgr. Agostino Casaroli, substituting for Archbishop Samore, was the principal speaker. He presented, on Samore’s behalf, in the name of Pontifical Commission for Latin America (CAI) of which Samore was the vice-president, the outline of a Ten-Year Plan of Aid to Latin America, calling for both personnel and financial help. **‘This ideal is the following, namely, that each religious province aim to contribute to Latin America in the next ten years a tithe^{3/4} ten percent^{3/4} of its present membership as of this current year.’** It should be noted that this call had been addressed to religious communities and not to diocesan priests.^{viii}

Mother Ambrosia would have been present at this meeting. In a February 6, 1962 circular, she names it correctly the “Congress for Major Superiors in Notre Dame, Indiana, August 16-19, 1961.” The following February, she wrote to the North American provinces to describe two urgent requests- one from Guatemala and the other from Valdivia, Chile, where “Acceptance on our part would mean a significant service to the Church of Chile in the face of anti-Catholic influence of subversive elements that are now rapidly gaining ascendancy.”^{ix}

In the letter noted above, she invited sisters (teachers, housekeepers, *et al*) chiefly of the Western, Eastern and Northeastern Provinces to send a 4” x 6” card to their provincials volunteering “to dedicate themselves generously to the service of the Church in Latin America.”^x Mother Ambrosia gave as rationale that “poverty, disease, ignorance in many forms [are] a veritable spawning ground for Communism among a receptive people with little or no hope for improved conditions if left to themselves. . . .”

In the fall of 1963, she made a lengthy visitation trip to the Argentinian Province, and the two provinces in Brazil: São Paulo and Porto Alegre.^{xi} From Criciuma, Sta. Catarina, Brazil, Mother wrote to the entire congregation on the First Sunday of Advent, 1963:

This letter comes to you from Hospital Sao José, Criciúma, that is being conducted efficiently by our Sisters and that is holding me captive because of a stubborn chest cold. . . .^{xii}

Political corruption, rising monetary inflation, inefficient leaders, retarded industrial development, poverty, illiteracy, communism, sectarianism, social problems paint a rather gloomy picture of Brazil for the immediate future. **No wonder the Church calls for the mobilization of forces for South America.**^{xiii} If all of the country were serviced as well as the areas where our Sisters—and, for that matter, other religious—are operating, the problems of Church and country would be greatly reduced.^{xiv}

She was drawn to a unique need in Chile when, during the Council, José Luis Castro, Bishop of the Diocese of San Felipe, visited the generalate and spoke with her about the initial formation of the community mentioned above.^{xv} Mother Ambrosia herself visited Chile in January 1964, and spoke with the foundress Mother Teresa Ortuzar Ovalle through an interpreter.^{xvi} Then, on the 13th of April, 1964, on generalate stationery, she committed the congregation, not to Valdivia but to Santiago, by signing a contract with José Aldunate, S.J., Chilean provincial. It promised “to provide four Sisters the first year and gradually within the next three years at least four additional sisters” for the Jesuit school Colegio San Ignacio.

On the following October 4, the Wilton province’s “very first” departure ceremony^{xvii} was held in the motherhouse chapel for the six sisters who had been chosen for Colegio San Ignacio in Santiago: Maria José Tresch, superior and principal, and Marie de Montfort Meehan, M. Georgita Lindner, and Maria Alejandro Ortiz as teachers; with Sisters M. Ruth Strothmann as superior, and M. Simplicia O’Connor as novice mistress of the pious union in San Felipe. Mother Ambrosia was present, having come from Rome to meet the pioneers for whom she had signed generalate “obediencies” the previous August 6.

The six pioneers received mission crosses from Msgr. F.X. McGuire, vicar for religious of the Bridgeport Diocese. Rev. Arthur Donnelly, CSsR, himself a longtime missionary to Puerto Rico and brother of Sisters M. Gertrudis and M. Aquiline (Alice Marie) Donnelly, closed the ceremony with benediction. October 15 had been chosen as the date of departure to honor Mother Theresa Gerhardinger, who had taken Teresa of Avila’s name and feast day as her own.

Mother Ambrosia, in a meeting with the group, had been adamant that the volunteers would stay in Chile for ten years before returning for home visits. Mother Paschal, knowing how long they all felt this to be, appealed this decision at a meeting of all the provincials in Canada. When she returned, Mother Paschal met three of the sisters in the refectory at Wilton where they were awaiting their departure, and said quietly, “It’s five years.” Marie de Montfort remembers vividly how gratefully they all hugged and kissed her.

San Ignacio School for Boys

One of the first things the second wave of pioneers learned when they arrived in Santiago was that they did not need to bring a Christmas tree. The gardener at Colegio San Ignacio

had already cut down several trees for their celebration. One was a seven-foot long-needled pine for their combination refectory-community room. One of the sisters wrote

Don Virginio, the gardener, who must call each tree by name, looked more and more lugubrious each time we asked for a tree. At last, he balked. No more trees! And so we decided that one in chapel really was better than two.^{xviii}

The new sisters also saw to their delight that the extensive grounds of the school were planted with gorgeous beds of roses, calla lilies, geraniums, and numerous other flowers, while cactus, plants and trees grew in such profusion that they rivaled the beauty of the majestic Andes which surround the valley in which Santiago lies. December, they learned, is indeed high summer in the southern hemisphere!^{xix}

They also learned a few days later that Christmas midnight Mass was a simple *Missa Recitata*, with a live stable—people and animals—and that usually the feast was celebrated for one day only, like Thanksgiving in the States. Chagrined, Georgita confessed that the lack of music was a big “sacrifice.” However, after Mass they enjoyed a *cena*, a big dinner in the cafeteria (including *pisco* sours) with the priests, faculty, and workers at the school. “Gifts and good wishes were exchanged, and a real sense of belonging was achieved.”^{xx}

On Christmas day they were invited to supper and carol singing (in Spanish and English) with the American Precious Blood sisters, with whom the first three pioneers had lived until just a few days before. On December 26, they took a two-hour drive over the mountains to Las Cruces, the vacation home of the Chilean sisters of *Amor Misericordioso*, who had just amicably withdrawn from San Ignacio. Here they had the thrill of riding the high waves of the Pacific.^{xxi} Many years later, they remembered that both of these communities, the American and the Chilean, “provided us with many opportunities to meet the Chilean people, other religious both local and foreign, men and women. They were blessings for us and will never be forgotten.”^{xxii}

First Description to the Province

Sister Emmanuel, who with Sister Theodora had made the long journey with the first three sisters to Chile the previous October, wrote a vivid account of the new mission to which SSND had been invited by the Jesuits of the Chilean Province. She tells of their welcome by Fathers Aldunate and José Francisco Arrau, S.J., Director of San Ignacio, several mothers from the PTA, and schoolboys bearing roses. Also there was Precious Blood Sister Mary John, from Dayton, Ohio,^{xxiii} at whose newly-built motherhouse the pioneers made their first home in Chile. Then Emmanuel launched into the following description; it contains already elements that would lead to much soul-searching by the sisters before the decade was over.

Santiago, our home for the next two weeks, was founded in 1541 by the Spanish Conquistador, Pedro de Valdivia. It is a large sprawling city of over two million people . . . fairly modern with tall buildings and hectic traffic which is made up predominantly of buses and motor scooters. They do have traffic lights but it is survival of the ‘quickest’ and one moves with heart in mouth and eyes rolling in all directions. The

homes of the wealthy and the middle class people are of Spanish architecture with high walls facing the street and hiding the most beautiful of gardens. They did not seem to want to share their lovely flowers with the prying eyes of the passer-by.

San Ignacio where our sisters will teach is a new school and modern in every detail. . . . The plant includes a spacious and unusual chapel, an auditorium, a gym, an outdoor swimming pool and huge athletic fields. . . . The top floor of the old school is being transformed into a convent for our Sisters. The area lends itself nicely to this reconversion and the finished product will be an up-to-date apartment with necessary conveniences. Besides teaching at San Ignacio, our Sisters will go out to teach catechetics to poor children.

The section where the poor live is called a *poblacion*. The one we visited accommodated about 400 families and consisted of long lines of one-room adobe huts with no windows and as many as three beds crowded into this space. The average family numbers seven, and many have ten children living under these intolerable conditions. The huts face each other forming a large rectangle. At one end is a line of toilets and in the center of the yard is a large stone basin with running water. Some little children were standing in this scrubbing their legs. Hot water is an unheard of luxury. Each little hut had an outdoor kitchen about the size of a closet with a wood stove and a wooden tub for washing clothes. Chickens and dogs are underfoot everywhere and the squalor of this housing project is heart-rending.

The men and women work in a nearby canning factory and they earn fifty cents a day and free rent in the shacks the employers have built for them. Being illiterate they accept their fate as inevitable and as something about which they can do little or nothing. Meanwhile the mortality rate among the children is mounting. The American and Dutch sisters besides teaching catechetics have set up polyclinics in the *poblacions* where they care for the babies and treat the children for all types of ills. With the aid of a charitable organization called CARITAS they distribute milk, rice, flour, beans, etc., and they instruct the mothers in childcare and the importance of being clean.^{xxiv}

Emmanuel ends her three-page description with this:

Chile is, indeed, one of the most varied countries on earth and it runs along the Pacific coast like a fringe of fine lace. Nowhere is the visitor out of sight of the snowcapped Andes and she witnesses a country of unforgettable contrasts and contradictions. Cactus, pines and tropical vegetation grow side by side and the squalor and poverty of its inhabitants are in stark contrast to the luxury and freshness of its natural beauty. We hope that one day the wealth and beauty of its natural resources will be carried over into the hearts and homes of these wonderful people.

After reading the above account I know you will agree, dear Sisters, that much is to be done and it will take a century to do it. Our share in this great work is very small but nonetheless great . . .^{xxv}

Colegio San Ignacio

The sisters had deliberately arrived in good time to prepare for the new school year of March 1965, the school's 109th year. San Ignacio, founded in 1856, by that time enrolled 1200 boys. About 700 of them in grades one through six,^{xxvi} called "The Preparatories," were the responsibility of the new faculty. The high school, called the "Humanities," was in a three-story building on the campus with a separate faculty.^{xxvii} Each young Chilean scholar presented himself, on the first day of school, March 18, in a dark blue coat, gray trousers and white shirt with a gray-and-red striped tie, and the insignia of the Loyola family. One of the first sisters, probably Maria José, remarked in typical American fashion, "They're really cute," and then continued with this:

Little boys look immaculate and very handsome as they enter the classrooms. But then they get into dusty tan coveralls which they wear until it is time to go home in the evening.

The "Prep" school year was divided into trimesters that ran from March to December; the day lasted from 8:15 to 4:15 with Wednesday afternoon free as was the European custom. This time was made up with Saturday classes from 8:15 to 11:30. The sisters taught the grades in a series of nine, newly built single rooms, each one separated from the next by a small patio planted with grapevines. Maria José wrote to the province that "700 little wiggly boys" were "undisciplined but not uncontrollable," and unused to keeping silence. "Forming a line quietly, walking down stairs without half-sliding on banisters became real feats."^{xxviii}

In their contract, the newcomers had also accepted the responsibility of supervising a corps of lay teachers. In letters to Mother Paschal, Maria José spoke of "poor results" the teachers had been getting from "antiquated methods," and of their gratitude for help in pedagogy.^{xxix}

Our poor lay teachers don't know what "*las Madres norteamericanas*" will do next. They are not used to little things like plan books, daily plans, discipline either, but they are doing beautifully. They are amazed at how we do things, the wonderful school things which we have and for which we are deeply grateful. Our sisters were so good to us before we left and the school supplies given to us are among our dearest treasures. School material is as scarce as can be besides being terribly expensive. A roll of masking tape here costs \$6.^{xxx}

On May 16, 1965, Maria José wrote to Mother Paschal:

For the past two weeks we have been having Class meetings with the parents. It was a good opportunity to meet them. Father Rector interested us in revising the school regulations in regard to exams, grade repetition, marking, etc. He approved what we did, but since it was much more stringent than the previous regulations, the parents were somewhat excited and frightened. On seeing them, we explained our purposes and they seemed grateful. The children are responding well, but there is still very much to be done in regard to improving the quality of the instruction.

By February 1967, after her second visit to Chile, Emmanuel wrote to the province:

The sisters not only prepare their own work but they instruct the lay teachers every day after school so that the material will be presented the SSND way. The teachers are very receptive and even though it has meant long hours and exhausting work it has been very rewarding. The rapport between Sisters and lay faculty is excellent and the parents are especially pleased at the progress their young hopefuls are making.

Father Arrau had anticipated the above assessment in this December 2, 1965, letter to Mother Paschal:

Last week we had a little party at our school in Santiago to celebrate the first anniversary of the arrival of our dear sisters.-

In the name of the Company of Jesus, of Father Rector, and in my own name, I want to send you these few lines to express to you our gratitude for the wonderful group of sisters you sent us.-

They couldn't have been better. They are very well acquainted with every body here and they are highly appreciated by both staff and students and the parents of the children.-

They have adapted themselves perfectly and they are the best ambassadors of your congregation and your country.-

Once again I'd like to thank you for sending us these excellent sisters to cooperate with us.-

I hope to have you soon with us here in Santiago.-

Yours truly, brother in Christ,
José Francisco Arrau, S.J., Principal

ⁱ "News and Views from Chile," an unsigned description of the Chilean sextet's first few months.

ⁱⁱ At JFK airport, Sister Theodora had paid \$200 for their extra baggage.

ⁱⁱⁱ "News and Views from Chile," see footnote 1.

^{iv} Twenty-five years later Maria José remembered that she had arrived with black eyes and a swollen face from a car accident the week before October 15; it had not been serious enough to delay her departure. "The Year of Chile," reminiscences written on October 15-16, 1989.

^v Maria José was coming from Fajardo; Alejandro and Marie de Montfort from Caguas; Ruth from the Costura in Puerta de Tierra; Georgita from Miramar; Simplicia from Annapolis, Maryland, but she had spent 16 years at San Agustín in Puerta de Tierra. Maria José stated in the above text that "300 had volunteered" for Chile, "including almost all of our missionaries in Puerto Rico."

^{vi} Emphasis added.

^{vii} The three members of the council constituted the entire board of directors.

^{viii} Emphasis added.

^{ix} Circular letter 25/62. Why the Valdivia mission did not materialize was not investigated for this work.

^x The Northwestern Province had listed its volunteers the previous fall. The Southern Province was “already spearheading SSND missionary work in Honduras, and the Canadian Province, in Bolivia. The South Central province, now in its infancy, will undoubtedly contribute upon reaching maturity.” Letter 25/62.

^{xi} Mother wrote vivid, detailed reports of these provinces, which were published in the *Interprovincial News Letter*, February and June, 1964 issues. Argentina and São Paulo had been formally declared provinces in 1950 and Porto Alegre in 1957, although sisters from Bavaria had been on the continent since the 1930s.

^{xii} She was hospitalized for three weeks with pneumonia.

^{xiii} Emphasis added.

^{xiv} Circular letter 38/63.

^{xv} In the minutes of the Wilton Province Board of Directors meeting.

^{xvi} An August 22, 1964, letter to Mother Paschal, signed Madre Teresa Ortuzas Ovalle, Sup. Grl.

^{xvii} Four sisters from the Baltimore Province were sent to Bolivia from a Call-to-Mission ceremony at the Cathedral of Mary our Queen around the same time. Sister M. Simplicia took part in both the BA and WI ceremonies and was photographed with the “Bolivians”; all were in gray modified habits.

^{xviii} “News and Views from Chile,” see footnote 1.

^{xix} Sister Georgita wrote this first impression to Mother Paschal on December 28, 1964: “The front of San Ignacio looks like a million dollars, the back looks so poor. . . . They don’t seem to finish off the backs of their buildings.” During a February 1966 visit, Sister Theodora, who was much accustomed to supervising buildings, wrote that San Ignacio School was beautiful but seemed to lack maintenance. “A few repairs and a coat of paint would work wonders. We asked Sister why the back of the big school building was unfinished – and it was exactly that – rough cement with the reinforcing pieces of steel sticking out here and there – an ugly appearance. Reason – on an unfinished building you have to pay less tax and this is an unfinished building – and it will probably remain that way, too.”

On this visit, Theodora was reunited with an 8th grade student of hers from Blessed Sacrament in Baltimore. Charles Jeffries Burton was a Jesuit seminarian who came from Valparaiso to see her. He was preparing for the Jesuit Mission in Orsorno in Southern Chile.

^{xx} “News and Views from Chile,” see footnotes 1 and 12.

^{xxi} Wilton’s *From the Pentagon*, Feb. 22, 1965, p. 1. Mother Ambrosia mentioned the detail about swimming in a December 22, 1964, letter to Simplicia, “I haven’t heard from Sister Maria José (she is probably in the Pacific).” Swimming was still forbidden in her mind.

^{xxii} Reminiscences of Sister Maria José, October 15-16, 1989.

^{xxiii} On July 14, Mary John (her surname is never given) had written the following to Mother Paschal: “When the Sisters arrive, we will welcome them with open arms into our convent until they can get settled at San Ignacio. We are so happy to have a few more American Sisters in our midst. You know we Northamericans are very clannish, we are like one big family. I know they will just love the school in which they will teach; it is the most modern school in Santiago and the Jesuit Fathers have everything well organized.”

^{xxiv} Circular letter of November 4, 1964, signed by Mother Paschal who calls Emmanuel and Theodora her “scouts,” pp. 1, 2.

^{xxv} *Ibid.*, p. 3.

^{xxvi} Grades seven and then eight were added later to the “Prep” by the government, so the sisters had 900 boys, and a longer time to prepare them for high school. In March 1966, the school itself added kindergarten.

^{xxvii} The sisters lived in this building after they left the new motherhouse of the Precious Blood Sisters around December 13.

^{xxviii} Letter of March 29, 1965.

^{xxix} In her 1989 reminiscences, Maria José wrote that the *Amor Misericordioso* sisters “wanted to leave San Ignacio because most of them were not formally prepared for teaching. The educational system used by them was really a 19th century French system: write lessons on board; children copy and go home and study; recite them in school the next day and then begin to copy next day’s work.”

^{xxx} *Ibid.*