

Arzobispado De Asuncions  
School Sisters of Notre Dame  
San Pedro y Pablo  
Casilla Correo 654  
Asuncion, Paraguay, South America

March 11, 1967

Dear Sisters,

Praised be Jesus Christ! Greetings from your Sisters thousands of miles "down under" in a most interesting and different country, where at present the days are shortening, the weather is about to become cooler (let's not say cold!), autumn will set in on the 21 of March, and winter on the 21st of June, the constellations look upside down to us, Orion standing on his head, and his faithful dog trails after him serenely gliding on his back!

Some of you have heard the tape describing in detail our trip here from Ponce, but just to mention the journey in general: we came to Paraguay by way of Lima, where we stayed with our Canadian Sisters in a *barriada* in Comos, having seen our community at Bogota during a half-hour stop there. Thence to LaPaz stopping at Arequipa with the Josephites, Puno and Juli (Peru) with the Maryknollers, and crossing Lake Titicaca, high in the Andes, a most thrilling experience. We were glad to have been obliged to stay in La Paz over Christmas - we couldn't get from there to Asuncion before the 27<sup>th</sup>. While there we made ourselves gray habits, like the Sisters in Peru and Bolivia, because of the eternally dusty or muddy conditions of the *barrio* in which we work. Mother had suggested this after she had seen Paraguay in December.

Our welcome in Asuncion on the 28<sup>th</sup> was a tremendous surprise. As we approached the airport we wondered what VIP was on our plane. It was the SSND's from whom the people were waiting, with banners and welcome signs, and flowers and a bus-load of friends from Barrio Republicano. Fathers Seramur and Rodriguez and Papal Volunteer Ray Otto from Theinsville, by the way, helped us fly through customs (it hasn't happened since to us!) and we were driven out to the *barrio* church of San Pedro y San Pablo where there was a more formal welcome and prayers of thanksgiving.

It has taken us a while to get settled; seems we have been in the attitude of "waiting" for weeks – first to get here, then to get into a more permanent (for a year or so) house, then for our drums, which left New York before we left Ponce, always waiting for mail, waiting for a *frigidaire* (imagine keeping food in temperatures over 95) waiting for Paul Dase, the other

P.V. and most of all waiting to get started in our work. This has finally gotten off the ground. As of now, Sisters Juliette Marie and Macrina are teaching English two evenings a week, and catechism daily at the barrio, and two days a week in a sort of “vicario” of San Pedro y San Pablo, the sectors called Canada, Yuquty, and San Miguel. Teaching is so interesting and so many of the things to which we are accustomed – using a pillow of sorts for a blackboard eraser, kerosene lamps, “classrooms” equipped with benches and no desks (for the English class) four in a bench at some of the catechism classes, ringing the church bell to summon the kiddies – a series of single rings for the first class, double for the second, etc.

We began taking a census of the parish, accompanied by members of the Legion of Mary, the only active organization out there. Most of the census-taking after this will probably fall on Sister Miriam Sheila, since so many hours of the day are used to teaching religion. Sister will work in an existing clinic at present, with the public health nurse and doctor. The doctor comes 4 days a week at 4 p.m., so the burden of the nurse’s work comes about 2:30 to 4, getting the patients and their records lined up. Sister Miriam Sheila will help with this, and after the doctor’s examination, explaining his directions to the patients. In the morning she will be able to go to the homes, as many as possible, and especially to those where there is need for any kind of nursing care. The public health nurse tells us that follow-up visits of this kind are so badly needed. Many of the women go to the hospital to have their babies, thanks be, but are very much lacking in knowledge of even the elements of hygiene, much less of the particular care of themselves and their new-born babies. Another thing we’ll have to take care on is the training of a choir. The people love to sing, and Sister Macrina has had no trouble gathering a group around her before and after Mass in the evening, to sing, and accompany their singing with her guitar. Father Saramur has done much to put some order into the church singing but there is still a long way to go. Poor old Paraguay hasn’t even got melodies for the Prefaces and Our Father, and the official texts are still not settled – guess this is true everywhere so Father has been using the “Latin” melodies thus far. You should hear the Pater Noster sung by the crowd, some of the tykes being just about high enough to see over the “pews.”

We simply couldn’t lay our hands on a Missa Cantata. Sister Miriam Sheila finally conferred with the Sisters at the Redemptorist church and will be able to put together a simple thing for Easter. May have to use psalm tones for the Gloria and Credo.

You have already heard how very poor the people are, and some pictures in Mother’s recent appeal give an idea of their living conditions. Pictures are one thing, but the reality! We went into one shack, where there was room for two beds, one lengthwise and the other horizontal at the head of

the other, the only other space being alongside the one bed. They had no need of a place to put their clothes; it seemed as though they had most of them on in bed, and the rest lay across the foot. The shack was occupied by an old sick man, and his 60 year old cousin who looked after him. They do their cooking outdoors and of course there is the inevitable outhouse (can you imagine what they are like when the living quarters are so poor?) Most of them have a fair amount of land around their homes, and many of them have different kinds of fruit trees. For breakfast they usually have dry bread (a kind of hard roll they make) and water, or mate´ a tea, one of Paraguay’s few exports. Anyone in the barrio can have a cup of milk daily by going to the centro vecinal (literally “community center”, but only a two room brick building) at 6:30 a.m. The milk is prepared there from powdered milk given by Caritas, by a young woman of the barrio who gets up every day at 4 to do this. The other meal of the day is a stew, mostly vegetables, which is cooked over a charcoal fire in the yard.

We have visited other barrios but have seen only one that is as poor as Barrio Republicano. The name only signifies a section of the city and environs. The one in which we live is General Diaz, a middle class section. Others have very Catholic names: Encarnation, San Roque, San Vicente, Santa Rosa, San Blas, etc. Catholicism is the state religion, and is very evident in externals, (the daily press even published the fast and abstinence laws, and the moral rating of movies, #6 being listed as “immoral” – no words minced here!) but as we have heard and read so much recently, many sacramentalized, but not evangelized Catholics.

We should refrain from saying too much as yet about the climate. We arrived in the hottest season, temperatures up to 105 degrees F. and have experienced some torrential rains. This morning the three of us went downtown, to different places. It was drizzling when we left home, so we took raincoats, but forgot boots. We should have heeded Father Seramur who told us “If it’s raining, just stay home.” Torrential is not the word for the condition of the streets by the time we got there. So we were soaked to the knees when we got home – by bus, since we couldn’t get a taxi, and there were no boats. Sister Macrina came home last, after a manifold frustration, another round with the customs office over a package of film her sister had sent her. They had to know for what she would use the film, and where the pictures were going, so she finally fired at them: “Is there a law against sending a picture of yourself home to your 83 year old father thousands of miles away? These are the things we want pictures for, and to show our Sisters at home where we live and work. Is there a law against that?” They began to back down, and she finally got the package without paying the 3000 (about \$25). We spent a week hounding them about our drums and trunks. If you think that the U.S. has red tape, you should see this! We had many a laugh over the involved processes (that we could simplify so easily), but of course it’s the time element that is so

frustrating for us. We're not entirely used to the manana life yet. Back to the climate (you see where we got off above) we understand that it can get very cold, and there are no warm places to go. Homes, restaurants, stores, none are heated. So you wear sweaters or coats indoors or build a fire in the fireplace, or use some kind of gas stove that you can carry from room to room as needed. This we will write about later when we have gone through it.

We had the pleasure recently of meeting a very fine Paraguayan priest who works very hard in the poorest section of Asuncion, down near the river, a place called the "Chacarito", possibly because it is across the river from the Gran Chaco, the semi-jungle which covers about half of Paraguay. This priest is unusual because it seems that most native priests try to get placed in the better parts of the city, but he has chosen to work among the poorest. He has a grammar school, a carpenter shop, shoe shop, and a huge bakery where the Indians come almost every day to learn and practice baking bread. The places where he has these enterprises are very primitive and poor looking, but at least he is giving the people something to do.

Another hard-working person we met last week is Bishop Pechillo, a Franciscan from Pennsylvania. He's way out in the styx with five priests and some brothers for a territory of some 80,000 souls. He has gotten the people to build a church and school, and has Spanish sisters teaching there. The people are very happy with their church, which they and the fathers constructed, sans architect. It's the cathedral, of course, and very well built, Spanish style, but without the usual gingerbread all over the place. The Bishop invited us and the two fathers out there for lunch to show us around his mission, so we are returning the invitation – for St. Patrick's Day, his mother being from County Cork. We love the simplicity of the bishops we have met here. Of course we can understand how it's possible to feel closer to them than to those in the huge diocese of the U.S. where the formalities are almost unavoidable. There can be more of a family atmosphere here. And maybe we warmed up to Bishop Pechillo so easily too, because he is North American, a strong bond.

I think all of us have met for the first time a Papal Nuncio. He dropped in on us one evening and invited us to luncheon at the Nunciature – a very formal affair. He stopped by another time, after we had moved into our new home, just to see how we were getting along! That time we had to "run to the corner store" to get some cokes to offer him and his secretary! We had no "fridge" then.

There are so many details we could write, many of which you can read in books; the cigar-smoking women (usually older ones) who carry great loads of vegetables and fruits, even brooms, on their heads, going from

door to door to sell, clapping for attention (almost no doorbells here) – other ladies riding side-saddle on little burros with their wares hanging on either side, the bus conductors who whistle to the driver to start or stop, the open markets that rival Maxwell Street for variety of sight and smell, including meat hanging out in the open. But we had better stop for now! More anon.

We close with the attempt to express our deep gratitude to all of you who have helped us get this far, and whose help in prayer and material things we continue to bank on. As in all Notre Dame ventures, we could not manage without each other's support and assistance. It's wonderful to be part of such a big family that always rallies around in need – a cause for great appreciation and thanks to God and to the family.

HAPPY EASTER FROM THE THREE OF US TO ALL OF YOU!

Sister Miriam Sheila

Sister Juliette Marie

Sister Mary Macrina