

La Isla del Encanto

Puerto Rico: First SSND Mission outside the Continental United States

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When eleven School Sisters of Notre Dame from three provinces in the United States, disembarked from the steamer Brazos in San Juan, Puerto Rico, at 6:30 p.m. on September 1, 1915, "a heartier welcome than [they] received could scarcely be imagined."¹ They were greeted at the pier by four Redemptorist priests and a brother. Also waiting for them were two American sisters, Mission Helpers of the Sacred Heart, and Madame Louise Lucchetti and her daughter, Madeleine, benefactors of San Agustin, the parish to which they were going. Of the voyage, which began from Pier 35 in Brooklyn, New York, at noon on August 28, the sisters later recorded only that it "was quiet and uneventful, except that each one of the sisters was seasick for some time."²

The voyagers were about to found the first house of their congregation outside Europe and continental United States, in "a new field of labor in the far distant Island of Puerto Rico. The religious who had invited them to "La Isla del Encanto" belonged to the Baltimore Province of the congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer. These priests and brothers had been invited to replace their Spanish confreres after 1898, when Puerto Rico had been ceded to the United States by Spain after its defeat in the Spanish American War. During the next few years most of the Spanish missionary priests, who had been laboring on the Island since 1883, had returned to Spain and American Redemptorists had established their first mission in Mayaguez in 1902.³

Only one of the sisters, a native of Guatemala and member of the Milwaukee Province, spoke fluent Spanish; the others had picked up a little instruction here and there since they had been chosen for the new venture.⁴ The missionary band was led by the only volunteer from the Mankato, Minnesota, Province, Sister M. Timona Diedrich; at 51 she was the oldest of the group. Three of the sisters were in their 20s, six in their 30s, and one was just 40. Three had taken their first vows only that summer. Four were from the Milwaukee Province and six from Baltimore. They had gathered at the Baltimore motherhouse on Aisquith Street on August 21, some meeting each other for the first time. The annual *SSND Chronological Sketches*, 1915 later recorded the formalities of their departure:

"On the 26th, Holy Mass was offered in our chapel for the courageous missionaries, during which they received Holy Communion. The Reverend Celebrant encouraged them in a short, hearty homily and gave Benediction. The parting hour was 11 a.m. Venerable Mother Provincial M. Agnes Feldhaus went with the sisters to the harbor at New York. They

made a short side trip to visit the grave of Blessed Bishop Neumann [in Philadelphia] to implore God's blessing on the new foundation. On the feast of St. Augustine in our convent chapel of the Most Holy Redeemer, New York, another Holy Mass was celebrated for our dear travelers and Benediction offered for them. A telegram brought the blessing of our revered Mother Commissary General."

At about 11 a.m. the Sisters boarded the steamer "Brazos." Venerable Mother M. Agnes, several Sisters and Priests had accompanied them and waved farewell until the ship disappeared from their sight. A strange feeling of loneliness came over the Sisters when Venerable Mother was no longer with them.⁵

After four days on the Atlantic, a tumultuous welcome awaited them less than a mile from the pier, on the Military Road in Puerta de Tierra. ((later, Avenida Ponce de Leon) This was their destination - San Agustin, the parish of the wharves with their surrounding slums. In front of the almost finished church, rectory, convent and school, a large crowd had been summoned by the ringing of the church bells. In several "autos" borrowed by the Redemptorists from friends, the sisters arrived after a ten-minute drive. The generally low-keyed convent chronicler later wrote of them in the third person, but still conveyed their excitement. An immense throng of curious natives had gathered, and expressed their joy by heartily clapping their hands while the Sisters were ushered to the temporary church to receive Solemn Benediction with the Blessed Sacrament, and to thank God for the safe journey. It is impossible to express their feelings on that memorable night, kneeling before the Blessed Sacrament, offering themselves anew to serve Him in His poorest subjects and begging His aid and blessing upon their work. ⁶

1 House Chronicle, St. Teresa Convent, Puerta de Tierra, September 1, 1915

2 *ibid*

3 In 1900 the Foraker Act replaced the military government in Puerto Rico with a civilian one under U.S. control. By 1915 Arthur Yager, an American, was governor. With the Jones Act in 1917, "Puerto Ricans became U.S. citizens with universal male suffrage and a locally elected bicameral legislature. In 1922, the U. S. Supreme Court declared Puerto Rico a "territory", in 1952 commonwealth status was proclaimed. With this, Puerto Ricans have all the rights of U. S. citizens except voting for the president and paying federal income taxes. Advocates of continued commonwealth status, U. S. statehood, and total independence from the U.S. continue to debate the future of the Island in 2002. Voters chose commonwealth status by a narrow margin in a 1993 referendum.

4 "As Bp. Currier is at the Motherhouse so frequently he has been engaged to give Spanish lessons to some sisters." Remark made by E.M. Weigel, CSSR, from Sacred Heart Rectory. Highlandtown, Md to his Provincial, in a handwritten letter dated July 12, 1915.

5 Chronological Sketches, SSND Heritage Research, Vol 1: 1858 - 1916. 255-6

6 Puerta de Tierra Chronicle, Sept. 1, 1915