

First Step to the South American Mission?

During the past summer the Archdiocese of New York asked for two Sisters from each Congregation to carry on an apostolate in Puerto Rico during several months of the holidays. Two of our Holy Child nuns were privileged to share in this Mission work.

This is a portent of our work to come, for we hope in the not too distant future to begin the first Holy Child mission in South America.

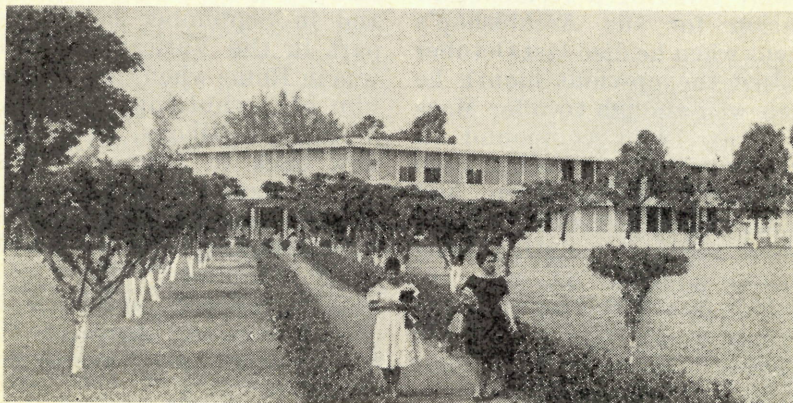
The following are letters from the two pioneers in the new venture, Mother M. Beata and Mother John Fisher. Both of them teach in Our Lady of Lourdes School in New York, on the edge of Harlem, which is attended by many Puerto Rican children.

"...Thank you for the opportunity of sharing our Puerto Rican summer with you. M. M. Beata and I thought we would each tell you about a different aspect of this great experience. As you know, the Archdiocese of New York had a group of ninety Priests, Sisters and lay persons studying Spanish language and customs at the Catholic University in Ponce

for the apostolate to the Spanish-speaking. I will try to give you a brief account of our six weeks of intensive training in Ponce and of some of the trips we took while there. M. M. Beata will write about the field work that followed which probably was the most deeply moving experience of all.

"Our day at the Catholic University began with a community Mass at 6:15 A. M. During the breakfast hour we had an opportunity to meet with the students in the university and talk to them about their life and studies. Classes began at 8 A.M. and only three or four were in each class with a native Puerto Rican teacher so

The Spellman Building which houses the School of Law and the College of Education in the Catholic University, Puerto Ricans have a deep sense of gratitude to Cardinal Spellman for all he has done for them.





The new Church of Santa Maria Reina, on the grounds of the Catholic University in Ponce, where we often attended Holy Mass.

we had had individual attention in learning the Spanish language! This was followed by an hour-long conference given by experts in the fields of sociology, history, apostolic methods, liturgy and Puerto Rican family life. For instance, we had Monsignor Ivan Illich among the lecturers; he is the Director of the institute in Cuernavaca, Mexico. Fr. Joseph Fitzpatrick S. J., chairman of the sociology department in Fordham University, and Fr. Theodore McCarrick, at present the director of development for the Catholic University of America, also gave us outstanding talks. Then we had native Puerto Rican speakers such as Teodoro Moscoso, the first Director of 'Operation Bootstrap,' the program which made Puerto Rico the model of industrial progress for many small nations... It was a full day with classes resuming in the afternoon and seminars in the evening. Meals consisted of typical Puerto Rican food which was delicious.

"One weekend we took a trip to Yauco to visit the Sisters of Fatima. This was of special interest to Mother and me because

one of the Sisters there used to work at O.L.L. before she entered religion five years ago. She was so thrilled to see us, and we had a good opportunity to practice our Spanish since she has forgotten nearly all of her English!

"A big bus took us one Sunday to the Remy Air Force Base in Aquadilla up in the northwest corner of the Island overlooking the ocean. Our purpose in going there was really to "start off" the new Liturgy — singing hymns at Mass and answering aloud, etc. We sang for three Masses, then talked with the American airmen and their families and saw some of the planes.

"Towards the end of our stay in Ponce, we went on a pilgrimage to visit the oldest Church in the Western Hemisphere, *Porta Coeli* in San German. It is no longer used as a church but serves as a museum and is very much like the Cloisters here in New York only much smaller. From there we went to Horminguerous and saw the Church of Our Lady of Monserrat where many children, who are now here in our O.L.L. parish, were baptized. There were



We left a little bit of ourselves with this first family we visited in Las Vayas. Jenny de Jesus the oldest child, (holding the baby) became our guide and co-worker. (M.M. Beata at left).

numerous steps leading up to that church and we began saying the rosary — a *Hail Mary* on each step — as we went up. But half way up, the rain began coming down in torrents so we had to finish the rosary inside. There is a famous statue here of Our Lady with real hair, and votive offerings to her often take the form of precious locks from the suppliant's own head!

"Some of the scenery we came upon during these trips was breathtakingly beautiful. Now I know why half the children in my class last year used to look at me with those big brown eyes and say, "*Just wait until you have seen Puerto Rico!*"

Mother John Fisher

"...For weeks before leaving New York for Puerto Rico I used to wonder how we would ever be able to do "field work" because I felt quite certain that my Spanish would limp painfully when I tried to speak to the people — even after six weeks in Ponce. As it turned out, this "field work" was really the most fascinating part of our stay in this wonder-land. My fears of not being understood soon vanished, for all people —

especially these warm, friendly Puerto Ricans — understand the universal language of L*O*V*E*.

"Our official assignment was to assist in a parish on the outskirts of Ponce. Four zealous Spanish priests and five enthusiastic American Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary do an amazing amount of work in this parish of Cristo Rey. Three of the priests are responsible for the two thousand or more souls in each of three nearby *barrios* and the fourth priest cares for the many sick who are in the District Hospital. Of course, the immediate parish population requires four Masses at the Church each Sunday, then each priest goes off to his *barrio* to hear confessions and say Mass in the open field or in a small wooden chapel.

"Early that first Sunday morning, Father Redin, a Vincentian priest who is one of the curates, took us to a small house in Las Vayas where we began our census of this *barrio*. My companion was a Sister of Mercy, Sister Mary Alfred, and both of us left a little bit of ourselves with this first family we visited in Las Vayas. Jenny de Jesus, the oldest child, seventeen, became our guide for our two weeks of work and as she

spoke both English and Spanish we felt armed for the task ahead. But Jenny became more than an interpreter.

"By our second day we had reached the houses at the top of the mountain and had called upon twenty-five families so that now these were 'our people.' When we arrived each morning we waved to all our friends — the wonderful *madres* who were sweeping their small porches; the children too young for school following after

was a day of receiving for Sister Mary Alfred and me. We received loving invitations to enter these people's homes, intimate family secrets of heartache or pride, smiles and embraces which spoke of a longing and yearning love of *Mi Papa* (our Heavenly Father). We began to realize how great was the faith that these people had clung to through years and years without spiritual help. More than anything else we came to see, as Christ must have seen,



Barrio in Ponce . . . We climbed to the top!

us; the families belonging to the Pentecostal sect, who discovered we were not so ferocious after all; and to our special friend, Susanna, with her baby Israel whose two tiny legs were wrapped up in casts.

"Our work was to ask the questions and get the answers that would help Father and the Sisters in the parish to plan their C.C.D. work for the year. We had little to give, but every day

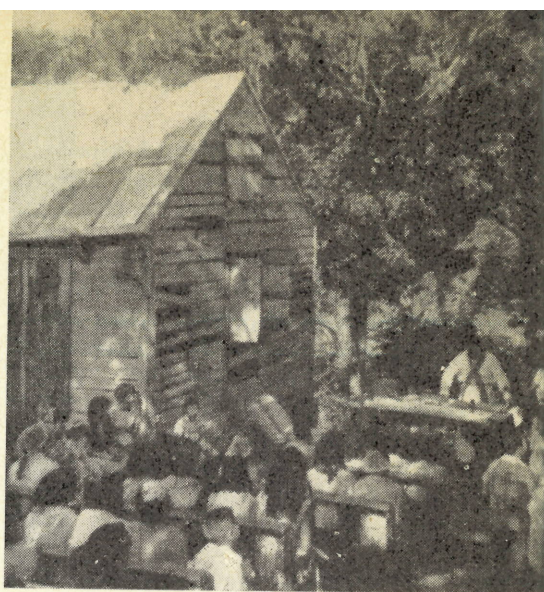
how the 'Poor' accept the Gospel that is preached to them.

"At the end of the two weeks it was surprisingly difficult to leave this work and it was with sad hearts that we noted in long lists the work yet to be done: Baptisms, Communions, and lessons in the love of Christ which the Sisters of the parish hoped to begin soon . . . But ahead of us lay six more days of special graces.

"Caguas, deep in the mountains

of Puerto Rico, was the scene of our Retreat. The *Buen Pastor Hermanas* have a Retreat house there and they themselves were as inspiring as a Retreat. Ours was preached by Monsignor Robert Fox of New York. The Sisters, who are native Puerto Ricans, work among the people of Caguas, supplying many of their needs from running a dispensary to teaching Catechism. Each evening they have a Mass for the people in their Chapel. On the last evening of our stay we were to witness a product of the devotion of these Sisters that will remain for a very long time in our hearts and memories. They have directed the citizens of Caguas in putting on a play, "The Miracles of Christ," that is magnificent in its tense reality and simplicity.

"But — the play must have an outdoor setting. On Saturday, the date of the performance for the Retreatants, the heavens opened and the rains came in floods. In this section, the rain is merciless and the sun brutal and how the



Catechetical Center. The priest offers Mass outside the termite-ridden cabin for the one thousand families in this small area.

people in their small mountain houses ever manage to survive is a miracle in itself. On Sunday the skies were overcast but the deluge was withheld. About six in the evening the 'cast' began to arrive at Buen Pastor; it consisted of nearly all the villagers.



Children appeared like magic wherever we went. Hundreds of them live in the *barrio* in Las Vayas.

Back at O.L.L. in New York, our small Puerto Ricans were afraid we had forgotten our English!



The *Christus* was enacted by the father of seven little ones some of whom appeared in the scene of Christ with the children. Costumes were elegant. Several of the Sisters themselves took part, accompanying Christ to the wedding feast. Nature supplied the scenery: a vast field with high mountains as a 'back-drop.' Lighting effects, music, sound — Broadway has nothing to compare with what we witnessed that evening, and emotion? . . . As Puerto Ricans say, *carino, mucho!*

"This production climaxed for us the tremendous experience of those nine weeks. We can never be grateful enough to Cardinal Spellman and to those who initiated this Spanish Institute, and to the staff directors who planned such a varied program for us.

"Since our return to New York, a letter has come from Jenny de Jesus, our friend and co-worker. She is in the third year of high

school in Ponce and an active member of the Legion of Mary . . . and more than interested in seeing that her new friends among the people we visited either return to the Sacraments or prepare to receive them.

"By the time we began classes here at O.L.L., almost all of our Puerto Rican children knew that we had visited their country (news travels fast in crowded quarters!) Their delighted smiles when we spoke to them in Spanish were more than rewarding for those hours of concentrated study. One of them asked me timidly (if only she had known how limited our Spanish still is!), 'Aren't you afraid you'll forget your English, Mother?'

"To 'our people' in Puerto Rico and to our good Puerto Ricans here in New York we can only say with heartfelt meaning, 'Dios los bendiga, siempre.'"