



75th Anniversary of the Arrival of MMBs to Micronesia

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“Feed my lambs. Feed my sheep” is Jesus’ mandate to Peter and to all those who wish to take up his ministry. We are here to thank God for a group of women who have been doing just that in these islands for the past 75 years. We celebrate with gratitude the gift that the Mercedarian Missionaries of Berriz have been to us for all these years, and for the gift that they continue to be today.

My personal introduction to the MMBs was in 1964 when I was a Jesuit scholastic teaching at Xavier high School in Chuuk. Since I was the choir director in those early years, it fell to me to see the Mercedarian Sisters at St. Cecilia School about a Christmas concert that the Xavier choir planned to give for the school girls. As soon as I met Sr. Dolores Larranaga-tall and of military bearing, red-faced with a no-nonsense demeanor-I knew that these sisters were no pushover. On Christmas Day, 20 Xavier boys showed up to sing and socialize (as best they could) while the sisters patrolled the hall, Xavier boys on one side and Cecilia girls on the other. The boys may have enjoyed the sight of all those lovely girls, but I don’t think there was a single word exchanged between boys and girls that morning. None of our boys was foolhardy enough to cross no-man’s land and try to approach the girls. As we sat there munching our cookies and sipping our punch, I learned what people all over Micronesia already knew-that the MMBs were a real force to be reckoned with.

Those of you who were educated by the Mercedarians may have your own stories to tell about how you came to the same conclusion. Sr. Felicia Plaza, for many years principal of Mt. Carmel School, was not going to smile kindly and look away while you played games in class. I don’t think Sr. Bertha Salazar or Sr. Ana Maria Puyo, other principals of that generation, were either. These Mercedarians were unselfish, prayerful and dedicated, but they were also strong-willed-a group of women not to be denied as they went about their business of educating generations of Saipanese leaders-leaders in government, business and the church.

The arrival of the first Mercedarians on Saipan in 1927 was actually a new beginning for the congregation. Shortly before this, Mother Margarita Maturana had revolutionized the Mercedarians. The congregation had been founded hundreds of years earlier to ransom and care for prisoners taken by Muslims. Then, as the Muslim threat to Europe declined, it became a cloistered community with a vow of stability, so that when women entered to become sisters, they promised never to leave the house.

Mother Margarita heard the Lord calling her and her community to missionary work. Instead of living their entire lives in a single house, the sisters would be moving to the ends of the earth. They would work to ransom not captives of Muslim armies, but those enslaved by ignorance and sin. They would come to distant parts as liberators, working to break the manacles confining people and to bring them to Christ, through their patron Our Lady of Mercy. As they did, their whole life would remain a prayer, just as it had before.

The handcuffs on the wall that I would always tease the sisters about whenever I entered a Mercedarian convent, along with the inevitable picture of Mother Margarita, are a reminder of their unusual history.

True to their ideals, the Mercedarians became an important force in Micronesia. When Mother Margarita brought her sisters to the ends of the world, she was initiating something beautiful for the Lord that would touch thousands and thousands of lives in a deep way. Not just on Saipan, but throughout the whole region. In 1927, the first MMBs arrived here on Saipan, and a year later another band was sent to Pohnpei. In 1936 they took up work in Chuuk, afterwards in Palau and Guam, and finally even in Yap and the Marshalls.

“Do you love me? Feed my lambs, feed my sheep.” And the MMBs did just that, beginning with their work in schools, with the boarding girls especially. They served at Mt. Carmel School, at Our Lady of Mercy in Pohnpei, at Margarita School and then St. Cecilia School in Chuuk, and at Maris Stella in Palau. A long procession of Sisters-with names like Angelica, Mercedes, Genoveva, Ursula, Consuelo, Concepcion, Maria Paz, Fermina, Remedios, Asuncion and Perpetua-feeding the lambs entrusted them by the Lord over the years. A litany of names, perhaps feared but also revered by those they had nourished long ago.

When war came to the islands, the sisters stayed to continue nourishing their flock. They stayed and suffered alongside the people they served, hiding out with them in caves during the bombardment, bringing them comfort in Camp Susupe when the hostilities ended, and resuming their educational work as soon as the war was over.

As the years went on there were new names, many of them with an island ring to them, and new ministries. The sisters may have shed their distinctive religious habit in later years, but not their unselfish dedication to the work the Lord had given them. They were providing religious instruction to children, they were engaged in youth ministry, they were involved in spiritual direction and retreat work, and they were doing social work among women.

All of us have been fed at the hands of these women. I know that during my 25 years in Chuuk, I turned to them frequently for friendship, support and inspiration, not to mention a good meal and a laugh from time to time. Many of you have been educated by these women; you may have even learned your prayers from them. We have all been enriched by their presence and their work, by the example of total commitment that they have offered us, and we thank God today for their ministry among us over three-quarters of a century.

It's good of you to honor the Mercedarian Sisters for the tremendous contribution they have made to our islands, but don't think you're going to get off as easy as attending a mass and sponsoring a weekend of festivities. Haven't I reminded you several times already that the MMBs are a force to be reckoned with? The litany of sisters who have lived among you for all those years, and taught you and your parents and your grandparents expect something much bigger and better from you. They ask that you do for each other, and for the truly needy, what they have done so abundantly for you. They expect you to feed one another-the lambs and sheep, and even the goats and pigs and stray dogs-all out of a love of Christ. I warn you that they will be satisfied with nothing less.

May the Lord they serve bless their work and reward them for all they do. May the Lord grant these sisters the strength to continue their work of liberation-liberation from self-love and vanity, liberation from prejudices and all that isolates us from one another, liberation from ignorance and darkness of all kinds. May he see to it that they always remain a force to be reckoned with-a powerful testimony to the Lord's loving care for us.

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