

“The Spanish Missions”
by Sister Christopher Marie Burleson



How does one begin to discuss the ministries familiarly known as “The Spanish Missions”? Perhaps it begins with the taming of the Okeechobee with its fertile lands: thousands of acres and so few to do the backbreaking work to find its yield. Farmworkers of other cultures had been employed before, offshore – would it be possible to draw on this source?

And so they came, with their foremen (*jefes* – pronounced “*heffas*”) bringing in single men as well as family groups under contract to work these fields. They came with their most prized possessions (their faith and their families) and little else, from Puerto Rico and from Mexico.

And their Florida bishops took note (most of Florida was but yet one diocese). As Archbishop Hurley traversed the state he saw the need to help persons brought to Florida to, first of all, retain their faith, while working to ameliorate their living and working conditions.

These central areas were designated for the Spanish-speaking priests (mainly from Spain) and the Sisters of St. Joseph to serve in these centers and their surrounding areas. The three Sisters assigned by the congregation for each central area included one Sister with a medical background (one in the original group held a Masters in Social Work from Catholic University). Others were nurses and teachers, drawing upon their catechetical studies background, all with some knowledge of the Spanish language (admittedly Castilian) – meager for “the camps” but with hearts filled with love for a powerless people and their children. What did they see as they entered the areas? They witnessed people living in the buses and cars in which they had been transported, with little housing, running water, sanitary conditions in general – and in some instances, no food.

Illness abounded; no prenatal care at first existed. Seeking aid from clinics and hospitals from urban communities was a priority. Legislation had not yet reacted to their plight. This was occurring a decade before the influx of our Cuban neighbor exiles.

Raising awareness became a priority. As this awareness grew, both in government and in private organizations, conditions gradually improved. Housing, with government oversee of sanitary conditions, came into being, but at a price. Rent-gouging occurred with housing cost deducted from earnings. Food, too, was available from the company store, at a similar price.

This, then, was “The Spanish Missions,” into which it was hoped would come hope, that based on religion.

3. St. Theresa Convent, Coral Gables

4. Perrine – see p. 23

Serving Spanish-speaking migrant farmworkers and their families from Mexico and from Puerto Rico. Catechetical and social work by SSJs for those working the fertile grounds south of Miami, beyond Homestead to Florida City. Classes held in camps on makeshift bases with few inside facilities available initially, later usage of churches, classrooms after school in Perrine (Holy Rosary) and in Homestead (Sacred Heart).

Church was constructed approximately 1961 in Naranja (St. Ann's) with its first Sunday Mass on Easter Day, with first communicants as well as a wedding taking place and wall-to-wall people! Volunteers through Dominican Sisters subsequently served from Naranja.

Sisters at Homestead Center

1. Sister Mary Claire Dwyer
 2. Sister Jane Frances Horan
 3. Sister Rosarii Gentile
 4. Sister Imelda Michels
 5. Sister Ann Loretta Fraas, RN
 6. Sister Conrad Sikorski, RN
 7. Sister Andre O'Keeffe
 8. Sister Christopher Marie Burleson
- Others?

'54 – St. Joseph Mission

'62 or '63 – Ft. Myers

Sisters' Residence

1. Ft. Myers

Serving Spanish-speaking migrant farm workers and the families in the areas of Immokalee, Devil's Garden, and the surrounding area in catechetical and social work.

Our Lady of Guadalupe Mission Church was built by Archbishop Hurley at Immokalee to serve as center for activities (contained priests' living quarters).

'54 St. Joseph Mission

Palm Beach

'69 St. Juliana Convent, West Palm Beach

Originally served area from Indiantown to Pompano Beach; subsequently, from Okeechobee Road to Pompano Beach labor camp. Catechetical and social work at campsites, with more centralized catechism classes held at St. Vincent Ferrer Catholic School, Delray and Sacred Heart School, Lake Worth in rooms made available.

The school buses of Catholic schools were utilized on Sunday mornings (with shuttles from the campsites to the bus-navigable road) to bring the children to class and to Mass.

One area was provided a Greyhound bus one day a week. It enabled instruction to be provided to students who had half-day sessions only at their school. Students not in class in the mornings were picked up at designated stops by the Sister team and Greyhound bus driver, taken to a Catholic school where rooms were provided for catechism and an early lunch, then taken to their regular school. Students completing their morning session then boarded the bus to another Catholic school where they received hot lunches and catechism classes and subsequently returned to their campsites.

The Sisters' approximate ten-hour jaunt with these students was a highlight for them, to be able to provide safe transportation, a hot lunch (probably the students' best lunch of the week), while sharing the joy of this unique class arrangement.

Other times, county roads required good timing; otherwise a child-filled station wagon might have quite a wait for the cattle of a nearby dairy farm to cross from one side of the road to the other. Kicked-up dust was the result as we proceeded, all the while cautioning the students to "leave the windows closed, please" and their gleeful laughter through it all. Life in the wagon, in the school bus, in the Greyhound, was a trip, a worthwhile trip.

Transportation

Each Sister team was provided a station wagon for reaching the various campsites by traversing rural Florida. And the children of the camps (with their parents' permission) willingly accompanied them to central locations for classes.

Singing made the trip shorter. A favorite song began with "Al cielo, al cielo, al cielo, al cielo quiero ir . . ." followed by each verse of the Ten Commandments," summarized by "Amar a Dios, sobre todas las cosas."

Classes also were held at Our Lady Queen of Peace Mission Church, Delray Road, just off State

Sisters at St. Joseph Missions, Palm Beach:

1. Sister Imelda Michels
2. Sister Mary Isabel Carpenter
3. Sister Florence MacDonald
4. Sister Mary Esther Flanagan
5. Sister Aquinas O'Shaughnessy
6. Sister Rose Catherine Hughes
7. Sister Christopher Marie Burleson
8. Sister Jeanette Friedham

Others? Sister RNs?

Please see map for 30 campsites visited each week.

The Certificates

The nature of the migrant farmworkers' livelihood included traveling lightly and oftentimes, quickly, to meet the seasonal crop demands.

Infants born may or may not have been registered and birth certificates obtained, before their families made these moves. But perhaps a baptism had occurred.

Meeting church registry needs for the furthering of their sacramental lives, was a must – as was a birth certificate for entrance into school.

And so the Sisters' role also included that of certificate-seeker: obtaining as much information as possible from the parents, letter writing and phoning for baptismal certificates and even recourse to libraries for health department addresses in the various states. When the baptismal certificates were available, this document could be helpful in obtaining the birth certificate.

And not infrequently, a second recall by the parents was needed for data, to resume the trail that would provide proof, documentation for the tomorrows, for the child's adult world. Meeting a current need and preparing for future needs were the focus.

The degree of success achieved in obtaining the certificate provided one more window of service to God's people.

How does one gather the students for a class when a freeze has occurred, with the resulting lack of work for their family members and scant food to eat or wearing apparel to keep warm?

The focus is on the feeding of the hungry, the clothing of the naked. The wagon is packed, scarcely leaving room for the team as it is readied for steps to disburse food, sweaters, and, yes, shoes! A fit is obtained for the latter by picking up the younger child, seating him/her on the wagon's tailgate and trying on the shoes. The older children made their own selections. It was a blessed day, when all could be fitted.

Government food supplies programs initiated a procedure to make its foodstuffs available to the migrant farmworker during freezes if it could be attested by the farmer or by the jefe contracting with the farmer that the workers were in the area during/following the freeze. If the worker left the area in search of a job, leaving the family behind, they were ineligible. Friends provided either food or wherewithal for purchases to the team for distribution of food.

Quick distribution was essential and direct, given the circumstances. More subtle methods were employed to recognize more fully the dignity of the individual whenever possible, but either way, the people knew it was given in love, to meet needs.

Help abounded as awareness grew in the public sector for our brothers and sisters in Christ who performed backbreaking tasks for the fresh vegetables easily available at the local food markets. There was no freezing of hearts.

The Christmas Parties and the White Bow

A joyous part of the year for the migrant farmworker families and all who lovingly assisted was the Feast of the Epiphany (their traditional gifting day), later Christmas Day itself.

For weeks prior, the surrounding schools, parishes and, yes, merchants too, helped in the great collection. All manner of articles were given to enhance their holiday; sweets and toys were, quite naturally, the most popular.

Packages were sorted by gender and age to help distribute to approximately 500 children. Games, sing-alongs and foodstuffs all added to the cheer.

But then one of the Sisters would realize that some of the children were not there. These were later arrivals to the area.

Christmas and the Sisters made these out for the next at least days in the country.

Within a short time (about a week), however, a phone call from the rectory, where the Spanish priest resided, told us that one of these happy boys had just died of pneumonia. Our last gift to him was his burial clothes, given to us after pleading his cause with a merchant in a nearby city.

Jose was laid out in one of the shacks of the camp (open coffin with paper streamers from its lid to the open-raftered ceiling). His picture with the Sister who had assisted in preparing him to receive his Eucharistic Lord, was resting on a table beside him.

His family, his school classmates, the Sisters and Father raised our prayerful farewell. . . "ruega por nosotros pecadores ahora y en la hora de nuestro muerto, Amen. . ."

But why the white bow? It had been tied to a tall tree beside the Military Trail so that all could find and follow into the campsite. May we follow him into eternity. His cousin asked of his mother, "Why did he die?" His mother's gentle response was, "to be with Jesus." Merry Christmas, Jose!

The Challenge

What is a physically-challenged child? It could be the daughter of a migrant laborer, a young girl who was the victim of polio, wearing an ill-fitting brace while trying to move herself in meeting the day's demands.

And what if there is a Morning Star School in the area where she could attend elementary classes while receiving the physical therapy available there? Could they come together?

A Sister team member effects a "yes" from the Morning Star School principal, a "yes" from her parents, a "yes" from the Ladies' Guild of the Churches of Boca Raton to provide transportation to/from the campsite to school, along with financial support for refitting of growth braces.

A postscript could be that of a decade later, a young woman's attendance through scholarship to the nearby Marymount College and her subsequently coming with the students of that school to assist at the Sunday morning classes of Our Lady Queen of Peace Mission. A physically-challenged child had become a young woman with a barely discernable limp to her step – educated, self-confident, serving her Church, meeting the challenges of life.

Se Fueran

The period of highest activity for the migrant farmworker of the Homestead area was from early October to late April. But sometimes circumstances deemed otherwise and "carne diem" was the

gathered round seated on the ground and their Sister teacher with rudimentary instruction tools sitting on an upside-down packing box!

The day approached for reception of the Sacraments – until one day the camp was almost empty. The night before, the family workers had come and told their families what they had just heard: “The jefe says we leave tomorrow.” All entreaties notwithstanding, on arriving the Sisters were told by the few remaining “Se fueron”. The Sisters’ “Vaya Con Dios” prayer followed their youthful charges with also a “‘til we meet again,” that hopefully their journeying will keep them beautiful in God’s eyes.

Missions in Puerto with Spanish names:

1. Holy Family School, Corazal
Colegio Sagrada Familia
2. Our Lady of Mt. Carmel, Santurce
Senora Nuestra de Carmel

Not Noted on List

1964 St. Cloud Hospital
St. Cloud, Florida

1972 Novitiate returned to St. Augustine

Sisters living in Cuba were assigned to the Mission by Bishop Carroll; Sisters of St. Philip Neri may now be serving this area.

cf: Sister Regina Carleton’s autobiography “In Jesus”

Sisters at Ft. Myers

1. Sister Regina Carleton
2. Sister Aquinas O’Shaughnessy
3. Sister Jane Frances Horan
4. Sister Virginia Tebo