

The Foundation of León in Nicaragua: MME's last foundation

The foundations of León in Nicaragua and Santa Ana in Salvador were the last foundations before the death of Marie Eugénie. There are many documents related to the foundation in the Archives, in particular (Doc J) a copy of the account of the foundation written by Mother Maria Caridad and recopied in 1939 by a sister of the Salvador community. We give the story here – as it is in the original notebook with its illuminated cover. We have added a few other documents from the file (chosen from amongst many).

Account of the Foundation of León (Nicaragua) by Mother Maria Caridad (Doc A)

At the end of 1891 or beginning of 1892, Dr Roberto Sacasa, President of the Republic of Nicaragua, asked Mr Medina, Ambassador for Nicaragua in Paris, his representative, to find an educational congregation willing to send some of its members to León to found a school for the girls of the aristocracy... Mr Medina (Doc L)) knew our sisters in Lubeck, so he wasted no time choosing which congregation but went straight to Auteuil to tell our venerable foundress his government's desire.

MME saw the Ambassador's request as a sign of God's will: it seemed to confirm a secret desire of her heart to open up the possibility of the missions again for those of her daughters who felt called. She had no hesitation in giving her approval to Mr Medina who, after referring the matter to his government, made a contract with our venerable Mother Foundress. Both sides stipulated their conditions clearly. (Doc K)

On 24 August 1892, the sisters who had the joy of being chosen by MME herself to be the foundation stones of our first house in Central America boarded the *Labrador*, a steamship of the Transatlantic Company (Doc B) at Pauillac. They were nine. Mother Maria Rosario, Sr Rose Adelaide, Sr Catherine Marie, Sr M. Denyse, Sr M. Rosa, Sr Myriam; with three coadjutrix sisters: Sr M. del Salvador, Sr M. Raymunda, Sr M. Placidia... In the group there was, besides, a holy priest making up the little colony because one of the clauses in the contract signed with the Nicaraguan government was that a priest, chosen by the sisters, would accompany them to be their chaplain and assure their spiritual welfare. Our chaplain at Mira Cruz, Abbé Domingo Maria de Goñi, of holy memory, as soon as he knew, spontaneously offered himself to MME who accepted with gratitude his generous offer and never regretted it, because the holy priest did an immense amount of good, not only in the boarding school, but also to outsiders and especially the clergy. We will come back to him again later.

The crossing was good, but when they came in sight of Colón (the port of Panama), the authorities made it known to the captain of the *Labrador* that they would not be allowed to anchor in the port and both passengers and crew would be quarantined because they had heard in Colón that there had been a case of cholera in Le Havre at the time the *Labrador* was leaving. The captain was very upset by this and decided to turn round and go back to France.

However M.M.Rosario and her daughters, as also the Abbé de Goñi, were heartbroken at the thought of abandoning the mission, so when they reached La Guaira (Venezuela) M. Rosario decided to leave the ship with her eight daughters and await orders from MME. M. Rosario did not regret her decision because not only was the Parish Priest of one of the local parishes in La Guaira, Padre Monteverde, a real father for the little community the whole time they spent in Venezuela, but also the authorities and upper classes of La Guaira, even the working classes, were very welcoming to them. It would be too long to recount all their kindnesses; I shall just say that in the two months they spent at Maiquetia, a suburb of La Guaira, they were not allowed to spend one *centavo*. The families disputed for the honour of paying their rent; they were given furniture, eating utensils, and even their meal every day and everyone wanted them to settle in Venezuela... but this was not the mission field that the Father of the family had in mind for them at that time, so as soon as M. M. Rosario knew that they could now land in Colón, the little community accompanied by its chaplain set sail again. Finally on 6 November 1892, the sisters and priest arrived in León and were warmly received by civil and church authorities and the upper classes alike (Docs E and F). The first Mass was said on 15th November, the feast of St Gertrude, and on January 15, 1893, they opened the boarding school. Soon we had so many girls that the two houses that had been prepared were not enough to receive such a large number (Doc D) and President Sacasa gave us the National Institute where we remained until the great earthquake of 29 April 1898 destroyed part of the building.

In 1893 MME sent reinforcements, another six sisters: Sr M. Michaël of the Presentation, Sr Marie Caridad of the Sacred Heart, Sr Marie Notburge of the Child Jesus and 3 coadjutrix sisters, Sr M. Virtudes, Sr M. Rudesinda, Sr M. Brigida.

We left Le Havre on the 15th June that same year. M. Agnès Eugénie came with us as far as the port as well as M. Cecile Emmanuel, who we had picked up in Rouen where we spent the night... When the moment to say goodbye arrived we were all in tears, so to console us M. Agnès Eugénie said, *Don't cry my children, soon I will come and join you...* We never imagined that her prediction would one day come true...

On 14th July we reached San Juan del Sur (Nicaragua) and there they told us that we would not be able to continue as far as Corinto as there was a Revolution on, and the rebels were in the port. We had to leave the ship at San Juan del Sur. Luckily a very kind gentleman called Dⁿ Salvador Chamorro guided us through the town which at that time had three streets and a few cabins where the fisher families lived... We had to spend 5 days there, it seemed more like a century!... we slept on the ground as there were no beds, and, worst thing of all, it was impossible to communicate with Mother Marie Rosario!... and our resources were almost finished, since that was supposed to be the end of the journey.

By good luck, Mr Chamorro had the idea of advising Sr M. Michaël, who was in charge, to send a telegram to the new president (who had overthrown Mr Sacasa) to tell him that the Government had called us, and that we were asking him to be good enough to send transport to take us to Rivas... The President kindly replied that he would send two carts. And indeed, two days later, the carts arrived, one with six oxen and the other with two. The first was for

us, and the second for the luggage... We were thrilled with the thought of travelling just like Saint Theresa!...

We left San Juan del Sur at 4 o'clock in the morning. The journey was very picturesque. After crossing a natural forest of great beauty, we arrived in Rivas at 5 o'clock in the evening ... (now the journey takes less than an hour !

The Government paid the hotel bill during our whole stay in this little town, as we could only wait and see how events would develop.

Toward the end of July the revolution came to an end. Mr Santos Zelaya, who had in turn overthrown Mr Zelaya, Mr Sacasa's rival, was recognised as President of the Republic and communication was re-established. Thus, in the first days of August, we left Rivas on the way to the little port of San Jorge, on Lake Nicaragua, and after a few hours on this beautiful lake we came ashore at Granada. Once there, we were at last able to get in contact with M. M. Rosario who was very happy and sent us someone we could trust to meet us and take us to León.

On the 11th August we reached our destination and fell into the arms of Mother M. Rosario who welcomed us - a real Mother.

Here I must put in a parenthesis and talk about the dear priest who had followed Mother Marie Rosario and her daughters to León as chaplain.

As Mother M. Rosario had our date of departure from Le Havre but was unable to communicate with us because of the Revolution, she supposed that we would land at Amapala (Honduras) or that we would continue as far as Salvador... learning that a schooner was due to sail to Amapala, Abbé de Goñi offered to go and wait for us there and to accompany us back to León when the schooner returned. On his arrival in Amapala he cabled to the Commandant of the port in San Juan del Sur to ask him whether, by chance, the Religious of the Assumption were there. The answer was Yes, and so Abbé de Goñi immediately cabled Sr Marie Michaël to tell her to wait for him because he would come and meet us : Abbé de Goñi was thinking of getting to San Juan del Sur on the same schooner that had brought him to Amapala, but God had other plans for him...

He had hardly arrived in Amapala when someone came begging him to minister to a man dying of yellow fever. Several people tried to dissuade him, but his reply was '*I am a priest, and my duty is to souls.*' So he went to administer the sacraments to the sick man who died a few hours later... The next day, as he was coming back from the church where he had said the funeral Mass, Abbé de Goñi felt the fever beginning, and on the 27 July 1893 he gave his beautiful soul back to God, without any priest to assist him...

What a sad surprise it was after getting the cable to say that Father was arriving to receive another telling us of his death... We had the details I have just given through a friend of the Abbé who arrived on the same schooner he had been going to travel on, and it was us who had the painful mission of giving the news to Mother M. Rosario when we arrived in León.

In September that year, Mother M. Rosario opened the free School with 200 children only a few months after the Sunday School. Since then ... how many generations have succeeded them!

In spite of the great welcome given us by the aristocracy, the beginnings were very difficult, without counting deprivations of every sort. Having been requested by a conservative government we had to struggle with the demands and restrictions of a liberal government. Soon religious persecution began. In 1894 the government expelled a women's congregation. President Zelaya's ministers wanted to force him to send us away too, but as he admired us a lot, when he was presented with the decree for his signature, he said '*Gentlemen, you want me to expel the Religious of the Assumption ? Fine, but I warn you that these Religious won't leave meekly like lambs, and you can be sure that they will have recourse to their respective Consuls : and furthermore there is a contract with their Superior General and we have to respect it – if not...*' The decree of expulsion was not signed. (All of this was reported to us by an eye witness).

But in Auteuil they heard about the decree of expulsion of the Religious of Granada and MME as well as her Vicar (Mother M. Celestine) became alarmed about us and decided to send Mother Agnès Eugénie in the role of Visitor with orders to bring us back to Europe if need be.

Mother arrived in torrential rain on 12 October. We were not expecting her as the cable she had sent from Panama to Mother Marie Rosario was incomprehensible. All that could be understood was that someone had landed in Panama on their way to Corinto : it could have been a sister, or it could have been a teacher who was coming to the Padilla family who lived in Amapala...

It was impossible to talk on the phone because of the storm, so Mother M. Rosario decided to send two sisters to Corinto to meet this unknown person who perhaps might have letters from our Foundress or her Vicar... What a joy it was to see our dear Mother Agnès Eugénie arriving! ... Alas, our joy was short-lived for, the day after she arrived, our Mother Visitor told us that she had come to close the house... Nonetheless our dear Mother was not in a hurry, she discussed everything with Mother M. Rosario and with us all, and then wrote to Auteuil to reassure our Mothers. In the midst of all this, she received a letter from MME which told her, amongst other things, *to put her whole heart into keeping the Mission*, and added : *because what will happen to these poor children abandoned like this ?*

Here we must include a very nice story: A group of women, parents of our families, having learnt that Mother Agnès Eugénie had come to close the house, came to see her, to beg her not to do this. (Doc G). As it was only a few days after her arrival, Mother Agnès' reply was in the negative, but these ladies were not about to give up ; they waited a short while then, one day, they returned to the convent and asked to speak with the Mother Visitor in the parlour. Mother Agnès went, but to her surprise did not see anyone, only a small statue of Our Lady of Mercy on the parlour table. After a moment of surprise, Mother Agnès

understood and was very moved, then the door from a second connecting parlour opened, and there stood the ladies who had been hiding.. After greeting Mother Agnès they said : *Mother, you did not wish to agree to our request, but will you refuse your agreement to our Queen and Patron ?...* This time, Mother Agnès, very moved, was able to give them a little bit of hope. They left, but the statue remained with the Assumption several months : those who had brought it came and fetched it and took it to the church of Our Lady of Mercy (Doc I) only once they had received the good news that the authorisation to continue in León had arrived from Auteuil. For us, we were overcome with joy and gratitude to God and to Mother Foundress and her Vicar for keeping our dear Mission of Nicaragua.

While all this was going on, the President of Salvador, Mr Gutierrez, hearing that we were thinking of leaving Nicaragua, asked one of his friends in León to go and visit Mother M. Rosario and suggest a foundation in Santa Ana. Thus Providence uses difficult situations and turns them to his glory.

On 15th January 1895, Mother Agnès Eugénie and Mother M. Rosario, accompanied by Sr M. del Salvador, left for Salvador to explore the situation. The foundation was decided on, and, instead of closing a house, we opened another ...

On 15th October that year, another 10 sisters arrived for the foundation of Santa Ana, with Mother M. Carolina at their head. Before going on to Salvador, they spent a few days in León, to our great satisfaction.

As for our dear house in León, it continued to develop year after year. Mother Marie Rosario was called back to Auteuil by Mother Marie Celestine about August 1895 in order to replace her at Santa Isabel, and Mother Agnès Eugénie remained as superior in León. The boarding school flourished under her , as did all the works begun by Mother M. Rosario.

Mother Agnès remained in León as superior until March 1909. This was when Mother M. Celestine named me Superior of this dear house. I left on 26 November 1927 to go to Santa Ana. Mother General (Mother M. Joanna) named Mother Francisca de Paula superior in my place.