

Sisters of Mercy at Chacachacare, Trinidad, gave hope to victims of leprosy

Ta generation brought up with the image of the saintly "Man of Molokai," Father Damian (born Joseph de Veuster) before them, the heroics of religious sisters assisting medical teams at leper colonies were probably easy to understand. Damian, now blessed and moving painfully toward canonization, was the Belgium-born priest who devoted his life to the care of lepers living on the island of Molokai, finally becoming a leper himself. In a day when segregating those who had Hansen's Disease was still the recommended method of dealing with the disfiguring and potentially deadly affliction, Sisters of Mercy who succeeded Dominican nuns at Chacachacare Leprosarium, off the coast of Trinidad, were truly putting their lives on the line.

The organism known as *Mycobacterium leprae*, first isolated and identified by G. H. Armauer Hansen in 1873, has caused feelings of repulsion and dread from time immemorial. Problematic to medical men like Dr. J. Lawrence, who wrote about leprosy in a 1905 issue of *The Journal of Scientific and Medical Surgery*, was the marriage of lepers which often produced offspring who, though born free of the disease, exhibited it later. "So far," Dr. Lawrence explained, "the only preventative measure is that of segregation or colonization, which we think should be carried out strictly, even to individual isolation of patients."

In the primitive tropical state

One such place of isolation was Chacachacare Leprosarium. In 1945, following a period when the U.S. had built up defenses and stationed personnel in the area, four Sisters of Mercy from Saint Joseph's Hospital, Savannah, began their mission as volunteers in the leper colony north of Trinidad. Sister M. Xavier Devane, RSM, RN; Sister M. Graziana Sumner, RSM, RN; Sister M. Leo Lang, RSM, and Sister M. Luke Dent, RSM, were members of this group headed for Trinidad, an island owned by Great Britain and described in a contemporary story in *The Bulletin of the Catholic Laymen's Association*, as "still in the primitive tropical state."

Earlier, the sisters had taken a ten-day orientation course at the National Leprosarium at Carrville, Louisiana. A farewell dinner the night before they left for Trinidad allowed them time to say goodbye to family and friends they probably would not see for at least three years. Awaiting the sisters' arrival at Chacachacare were two other Sisters of Mercy already at the island: Sister M. Veronica Daly, RSM, RN, and Sister M. Rosarii Rood, RSM, RN.

In 1950, *The Bulletin* recorded the departure of Sister M. Cornile Duloher, RSM, superintendent of Saint Joseph's Infirmary in Atlanta, for

Chacachacare. The purpose of Sister Cornile's visit, scheduled to last two months, was to deliver kits prepared by Atlanta's Junior Red Cross for the more than fifty children at the leper colony. Also traveling to the Chacachacare colony, now numbering 500 patients, were Sisters M. Vianney McGuire, M. Marie Grady, M. Damaris Twigg and M. Jacqueline Shaw. The sisters were to join Sister M. Leo Lang, Sister M. Xavier Devane and Sister M. Graziana Sumner and others still working at the leprosarium.



Rita H. DeLorme

Following this 1950 visit, Sister M. Cornile Duloher returned to Chacachacare in 1952 as matron of the leprosarium's hospital. She subsequently wrote a letter to her sister, Margaret Duloher Johnson of Savannah, describing Christmas at the leprosarium.

In the letter, reproduced in *The Bulletin* of February 28, 1953, Sister Cornile explained the presence of the sisters at Chacachacare. She noted that the facility had come under the care of the Sisters of Mercy of the Union of Baltimore Province after World War II when the Dominican Sisters of France could no longer staff the facility.

Christmas in the leprosarium

Christmas festivities at Chacachacare as described in Sister Cornile's letter, began with the sound of Christmas carols transmitted by radio to the island. "On Thursday, December 11," Sister Cornile wrote, "Chaplain Embry—a good Methodist—and Commander Provin from the U.S. Naval Base at Chaguaramus came down to tell us that the Base had decided to adopt the leprosarium for Christmas." Sister Cornile added, "The next big event was on Tuesday, the 23rd, when the Americans came bearing gifts. 'Santa' was standing on the front of a beautiful boat with the Stars and Stripes flying on the back. There were several officers and about fifty sailor boys in uniform. Chaplain Embry had a box full of envelopes with him, a dollar bill for each one, marked for each patient."

Later, patients were visited by Doctor Van Crosson, medical superintendent, dressed as Father Christmas. Sister Cornile wrote: "The Marines at the Base (There are only a small number of them!) asked permission to sponsor the four youngest children, Those four got so many packages they were nearly buried beneath them," Nor were the Sisters overlooked. Each received a box of Whitman's Candy "brought in by the fly-boys at the Base".

Sister wrote that Father Barry celebrated Midnight Mass on Christmas. The next morning, the sisters cooked and served Christmas dinner



Photo courtesy of tricityherald.com

The abandoned leprosarium at Chacachacare, Trinidad.

to their patients. "It's called breakfast here," Sister Cornile explained. Patients ate chicken, which they preferred to turkey, and the usual seasonal fare: stuffing, cranberry sauce, green peas, coffee, nuts and dates. Every cottage in Sunday Bay was cleaned and decorated. The donkey cart was loaded with gifts and these were taken to the male patients at Cocas Island.

Afterwards, a launch picked the sisters up and took them to the Marine Base for dinner. Arriving back home, the sisters found their chapel and community room decorated with a real fir tree and gift packages. After the gifts were opened, the sisters gave themselves a special treat—a swim, their first in a month. Sister Cornile observed: "We found that we had all been envying 'Dopey', the dog, when he was daily seen in the water. We ate supper on the gallery, then we went to the peace and quiet of the chapel to say our prayers, and from there we went to bed." Ending her letter, Sister Cornile wrote: "Now, all of us, Mother Provincial Sister Mary Sheila; Sisters M. Cornile, Jacqueline, Luke, Ruth, Hilary, Marie, and Damaris are grateful for all you did to make this Christmas so happy for our patients and in doing it for them, for us! When we're down here what the folks do at home means so much—we are so glad we are Sisters of Mercy."

Today, the World Health Organization considers diagnosis and treatment of Hansen's Disease "easy," with access to information, diagnosis and treatment with multi drug therapy (MDT) key factors in eliminating the disease. The organization's Web site states that "MDT treatment has been made available by WHO free of charge to all patients worldwide since 1995, and provides a simple yet highly effective cure for all types of leprosy."

The last leper left Chacachacare Leprosarium decades ago. It is slowly returning to "the primitive tropical state" described in *The Bulletin* in 1945, with only the memory of its patients' suffering and the sisters' kindness remaining to haunt its crumbling buildings.

Columnist RITA H. DELORME is a volunteer in the Diocesan Archives. She can be reached at rhdelorme@diosav.org.

TV Mass Schedule

AUGUSTA

Sunday, 10:00 a.m.

WAGT-TV

SAVANNAH

Saturday, 6:00 p.m.

Comcast Cable 7

Sunday, 5:30 a.m.

WTOC-TV