

Bánica, Dominican Republic

La Isla del Encanto

Kay O'Connell, SSND, 2003

Early in December 1981, the regional council, Sisters Rosemarie, Bernardine, and Dorothy Mary, met with all the sisters in Puerto Rico to discern the question of whether God was calling the region to a mission outreach in the Dominican Republic. After much prayer and dialogue, consensus was reached on a positive answer. Along with Japan's going to Nepal, around this time, and Guam to the island of Yap in Micronesia, Puerto Rico's outreach to Bánica was deeply moving to the delegates when it was described at the 1982 general chapter. It seemed to many that the smaller units, the regions, of the congregation were leading the way in the spirit of Mother Theresa, who gave, not out of her abundance, but out of her meager resources. In the summer of 1982, Sisters Rosemarie González, Milagros Esteban, María Antonia Flores, and Marilyn Ortiz went to the small town of Bánica, close to the Haitian border, to become familiar with its culture, needs, and apostolic possibilities.^[51] The following summer, 1983, Milagros returned with Socorro García, Mercedes Rosado, and Lillian Corriveau. These last three were to be the pioneers in Bánica, but this decision was still in discernment in the region that summer. Sisters Rosemarie and María Eugenia Ortiz, the new regional council, announced it in a letter to Bishop Connors, dated November 29, 1983.

The new mission, San Francisco de Asís, was opened by Lily, Socky, and Mercedes on September 3, 1984. After an early liturgy at the Villa in Puerto Rico the previous day, they departed, accompanied by Rosemarie and Kay O'Connell. The first evening, they had supper with Bishop Ronald (Reinaldo) G. Connors, CSsR, in San Juan de la Maguana, a Redemptorist mission, where they also visited with Father Arthur Donnelly, brother of Wiltonians Sisters Alice Marie and Gertrudis. Padre Arturo was a favorite Redemptorist of all the sisters who had known him in Puerto Rico during his many years there. The missionaries' first night was spent with the Carmelitas Teresas de San José, a community of cloistered sisters in San Juan de la Maguana.

The next day, in a truck driven by their new pastor, Father Gary J. Crevier, from Green Bay, Wisconsin, they began the two-hour trip upcountry to Bánica, arriving in the afternoon to be welcomed by the women of the town who were busy preparing dinner at the small convent. Kay remembers how their worn faces lighted up when they saw the sisters, and their heartfelt hugs and kisses. The next day was spent walking around the very poor town and dusty, crumbling plaza, and greeting friends from the previous summer, the children especially. At the time, Bánica was a town of 15,000, six hours from the capital, within walking distance of the Haitian border. Being so far away from the capital, its people felt neglected by their government, and somewhat by the Church, since they did not have a resident pastor.

At the parish house in the town of Elias Piña, a distance away, the sisters had dinner the following day with Father Gary, who was a diocesan priest and pastor of this

large rural area, which also included the town of Pedro Santana. With him was another American, Father Bill Hoffman. Lay women from Spain, Lola, Conchita, and Isabel, fondly called “españolas” and “señoritas,” did pastoral work and ran a clinic in the Elias Piña parish of St. Teresa. The “gals,” as Gary affectionately called them, took Kay back to Santo Domingo for her flight to the States.

The three missionaries, for the first few months, had a housekeeper and cook named Ginita, who lived with them until they became better acquainted with the town and the customs of the people. One of the realities that they quickly became aware of was that St. Francis and Jesus were intermingled in the popular religion of Bánica. For their first experience of the feast of St. Francis, October 4, a month after their arrival, Bishop Connors came to stay with them.

The previous year, on the night before October 4, Father Gary had been forced to empty and to lock the Church at 1 :30 am to prevent further bloodshed from a fight that had broken out inside. People had insisted, against his wishes because of previous abuses, on staying there for the all-night vigil that was their custom. Father Gary described the scene as a “bar room atmosphere,” with eating, smoking, dancing, drinking, half-dressed sleeping people, and eventual fighting. Bishop Connors came to talk with the people on the following December 5, with Father Gary and the Spanish lay missionaries present. Before that meeting, Gary wrote to Sister Rosemarie that “Perhaps some kind of public penance needs to be scheduled before the Church will be blessed again with great solemnity to emphasize the sacredness of God’s temple, which has far greater preference over popular devotion or tradition.”

For the missionaries’ first celebration of St. Francis’s feast, the Mass and fiesta at the Church passed devotionally; and the next day, they climbed a nearby mountain in procession to a cave in which the people believed Francis had been born. Very primitive icons, made by hand, expressed the petitions for which they were praying. For the two years that the three were together in Bánica, very gradually, Lily by her preaching, Mercedes with her guitar, and Socky with her ability to deal with any situation that presented itself—all with prayer—began to catechize; they made a conscious decision to look to the future and concentrate especially on the children and teenagers. Jesus’ command to love and forgive one’s enemies, the sisters found, was impossible for the men and boys of Bánica to accept; when asked, the women and girls rejected “an eye for an eye” verbally, but thought Jesus’ teaching impossible to live.

The sisters also found that the people had to travel to Elias Piña to get the simplest medications, only to find sometimes they were not available there, and so had to seek farther on. The three new missionaries came to consensus that they would go to the capital every month to bring back supplies for a pharmacy that Mercedes took charge of in Bánica. She trained a layman in this ministry.

After two years together, the little team of missionaries was broken up when Socky was elected to the regional council in Puerto Rico. Sister Rosemarie González then came to Bánica, a ministry she had long desired, and Lily went to the nearby town

of Pedro Santana, whose people had requested her presence when they saw the good that was happening in Bánica. Very early on, stones had been thrown at Mercedes and Socky when they went there to see if the townspeople wanted help.

During her two years in Bánica, Rosemarie worked with the youth group of the parish to establish the Biblioteca Madre Teresa de Jesús. There had been a library in the town, but it had closed for lack of books; when the sisters asked the young people what they saw as their greatest need, they mentioned a library. With donations of money and books from Puerto Rico, permission to use part of the municipal building, some furniture from the former library, and a lot of hard work by the youth group, the Mother Theresa Library became a reality.

Using a simplified Dewey Decimal system worked out by Sister Dorothy Kosarko in PR, the students catalogued and labeled the books, some of them multiple copies of textbooks that were lacking in their school. Rosie then invited the teachers to give homework assignments from these texts, and established a special section for teachers so that they could take materials to their classrooms. The library was so well used after school hours that an extension had to be set up in the school for evening study hours; students and adults took naturally to the necessary quiet. Rosemarie taught one of the mothers to manage the library, which she did for many years. An excellent reproduction of a portrait of Madre Teresa de Jesús, and the SSND mission and ministry statements from *You Are Sent*, flanked the outside door of the library. Both murals were the work of a local artist.

Rescue in Pedro Santana

Lillian Corriveau, one of the three original missionaries to Bánica in the Dominican Republic, lived alone for a fourth year in Pedro Santana, a nearby town. Toward the end of her time there, she was suddenly faced with a very serious situation. On the morning of August 14, 1987, a white pickup truck came over the Haitian border and into Pedro Santana; it held the amazing number of 28 Haitian children who had become family to Dan and Kathy Blackburn, Christian missionaries from Indiana. At 3 am that morning, Kathy had fled their mission at Maissade, Haiti, with her son Chuck, her sister Marianne Lortz, and 17 boys and 11 girls of all ages, some infants. The family had, for months, been receiving death threats at a time of strong and hysterical anti-

Her husband Dan, and their other son Scott, had fled in the other direction, to Port-au-Prince, Haiti's capital, planning to fly to the United States to raise the alarm about the plight of the abandoned children the family had gradually acquired over the previous ten years. The children had no exit visas; the Blackburns believed it was impossible to get them, and that they would probably all be killed if they remained in Haiti. The Blackburns also knew that they had no legal right to these Haitian children, no matter how much they loved them.

Lillian was not completely surprised by the arrival of the packed pickup truck. Chuck and Scott Blackburn had reconnoitered her town earlier. After hearing their story,

Lily had told them that, when they came back, she would take the two of them to the American Embassy in the capital to seek help. Instead, the Blackburns decided to flee Haiti before that could happen...

Years later, in the *Readers' Digest*, their harrowing story was told in detail. Henry Hurt, the author of the *Readers' Digest*... asked Sister Lily to go back with him to Pedro Santana in 1995 as he was writing the story. At the end of the article, Hurt wrote, "Of all the people whose lives were touched by the Blackburns, probably no one has fonder memories than Sister Lily. Still amazed at her own daring, she can only say, 'I don't know why God elected to use me like that, but I'm glad he did.'"

In 2006, Lily thinks of this trip, in which she relived the frightening incidents, as "a healing thing for me." She also remembers that the reason she had confidence in the Blackburns at the beginning was that she knew the children must have been with them for a long time since they were all speaking English, not Creole.

In early 1988, the council called together a group of sisters to whom it presented needs in Chile. Lily responded by becoming vocation director there, and later a pioneer on the island of Puluqui off the southern coast of Chile...