

History of the School Sisters of Notre Dame in the Countries of Africa

by Elizabeth Newman, SSND

Algeria

The brief but significant presence of the School Sisters of Notre Dame in Algeria, a predominantly Muslim country in North Africa, spanned merely eighteen months from October, 1972, to April, 1974.

On March 5, 1972, Archbishop Santo Portulupi, the Apostolic Nuncio in Algiers, sent a letter to Mother Georgianne Segner requesting two or three Sisters, preferably from socialist countries, to work on the staff of the nunciature. They would be doing secretarial and house work, and at the same time (probably in a year or so) they would be surveying possibilities of SSND involvement in a new apostolate with Muslim women of the city. The possibility of the latter was emphasized strongly.

Mother Georgianne sent the request to Sister Warin Valoni of the Dallas province because she knew that Sister Lelia Pond, a French professor, was retiring from the University and was interested in foreign mission ministry. Sister Lelia accepted the invitation. Sister Peter Fourier Spitzer, an English and business teacher, was asked to respond to the missionary challenge, and she also accepted. When Archbishop Portalupi received the names and qualifications, he mentioned misgivings - that they seemed almost too highly educated for "the humble work we are offering at the nunciature," that there were only two sisters, and that they were Americans. Considering the latter he wrote to Mother Georgianne:

In order to materialize this good project I have been in touch with local authorities; I do not conceal that I have found a certain reluctance, considering that relationships with the United States, for the present time, are not at their best. I have been told that as far as the Sisters would come as a staff of the Nunciature, there is no problem at all. But if they intend to develop a particular activity in the country, this would be rather difficult for a near future.

Under such circumstances, I wonder if the Sisters would be interested in assuring a work only at the Nunciature till the moment in which they could start their apostolate in a field of their choice, in one year or so. Unless you think it more adequate to postpone the project for a certain time. From my part, I would be delighted in having them working at the nunciature, and it would be a great help for us. Anyhow, I leave the decision to you.

These misgivings were relayed to Sisters Lelia and Peter Fourier, but they each accepted the new situation with the hope and expectation that new avenues would open

in “a year or so.” After a departure ceremony at Notre Dame of Dallas on September 9, 1972, they sailed for Rome on September 19.

Before their departure for Algeria, Sister Peter Fourier became sick in Rome and needed surgery. Therefore, on October 15, 1972, Sister Lelia and Archbishop Portalupi flew to Algiers where they were welcomed by Monsignor Paulo-Fouad Tabet, a Lebanese Arab priest who was Assistant to the Nuncio.

During the six months that Sister Lelia was alone, it became evident to her that the Sisters were wanted to oversee the working personnel, to plan the meals, do the marketing and take over the financial and routine duties of running the 40 -room house, an embassy attached to the Vatican. Sister Peter Fourier arrived on November 19, and the two ex-teachers shared the responsibilities of the house. At times, Sister Lelia’s knowledge of French and Italian served her in helping Monsignor Tabet with preparing work for the weekly Vatican-bound diplomatic pouch. She also coached the Archbishop in his study of English and helped other religious preparing for their degrees. Sister Peter Fourier took over the work of sacristan in their chapel. During the eighteen months of this venture the travel and living expenses were paid by the nunciature.

On July 2, Sister Peter Fourier left Algeria because of poor health and a need for major surgery. Sister Lelia remained in order to complete the one year they had agreed upon or until the Archbishop would be able to find other Sisters to take over the work. Although one Italian Sister arrived in November, Sister Lelia remained to train her and help her until other help should arrive. However, Sister Warin set April 15 for the termination of her ministry in Algeria. The province was disappointed that no ministry outside the nunciature was being seriously considered for the Sisters.

On April 6, Sister Lelia left Algeria with the hope that “slight though it may be, the Catholic community as well as the Arab neighbors are better for the spirit of Notre Dame which they saw and experienced during the 18-months that the School Sisters of Notre Dame labored in this corner of the Lord’s vineyard.”