

The School Sisters of Notre Dame in the Region of Guam

Marjorie Myers, SSND, 2007

Mary Ignatia Sanchez, SSND

Micronesia consists of four great archipelagos in the western Pacific Ocean: the Marshalls (Republic of the Marshall Islands), Gilberts, Carolines (Federated States of Micronesia), and Marianas (Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands). The Island of Guam is in the Marianas. It is the largest of the Mariana Islands, an unincorporated territory of the United States. The island is 209 square miles (541 square kilometers) with a population of 105,800. The capital city is Agana.

Origins: Catholic Background

“The School Sisters of Notre Dame first came to us in the days when Guam was in ruins from the aftermath of World War II, and they have been an integral partner in helping to rebuild and develop our island, both spiritually and intellectually, by guiding our most precious resources, our children.”¹ Thus said the Most Reverend Anthony Sablan Apuron, OFM Cap., D.D., Metropolitan Archbishop of Agana in 1999, on the occasion of the 50th Anniversary of the arrival of the School Sisters of Notre Dame on the Island of Guam.

This history will detail the call to the School Sisters of Notre Dame to come to Guam, their growth, and the eventual development of mission extensions in the Republic of the Marshall Islands and the Federated States of Micronesia.

Except for one memorable period when it was occupied by Japan, Guam had been a possession of the United States since the Spanish American War (1898), after having been held by Spain since the days of Magellan (1521).

Catholicism came to the people in 1666 when Spanish Jesuit Padre Diego Luis San Vitores arrived with fellow missionaries. It was he who named the islands the Marianas in honor of Queen María Ana de Austria, his royal supporter and benefactor. With the passing of time, the islands came under Spanish control and the entire Chamorro population became Catholic. The Jesuits were banned from Spain and her empire in 1768, and the following year were replaced on Guam by other Spanish missionaries from the Augustinian Recollect Order. When Guam came under United States control in 1898, because of strained relations with the U.S. Navy, the Recollects were expelled from the island. The 10,000 Catholics on Guam were left to the care of a lone Chamorro priest, Father José Palomo Torres. Even though it was difficult, within three years Father Palomo was able to get the Spanish Capuchins to come to Guam. These friars provided an era of tremendous growth and solidification of the Catholic faith on the island. They brought the Third Order of St. Francis to Guam and continued working with a group of married women the Recollects had begun. These friars also began a separate organization for young girls called the Daughters of Mary (Hijas de María [predecessor to the Sodality of Our Lady]) who were often volunteer catechists in

the parish catechetical schools (Eskuelan Pale) conducted daily after normal school hours.

Already in 1929 the Spanish Capuchin Friars had set up such a well-organized mission that an official inspector of the missions from the Vatican, Jesuit Father Joaquín Vilallonga, declared Guam the “best Catholic mission” in Oceania. The only thing missing was Catholic sisters. Guam could have had a parochial school system in place at this time had it not been for this absence. It was caused, however, by the U.S. Navy’s policy that no Catholic sister would be allowed on Guam unless she spoke English with not the slightest trace of a “foreign accent.”

In 1934, a new Apostolic Vicar for the Vicariate of Guam, Miguel Angel Olano y Urteaga, was appointed. Also, in 1934, the U.S. Navy began taking steps to transfer the Catholic missions on Guam to American hands by prohibiting new Spanish missionaries from coming to the island. By September 1941 this transfer was completed. The American Mission barely got off its feet when World War II came to Guam on December 8, 1941. Guam would never be the same again.

Only thirty miles long and eight miles wide at its widest point, the island was little known and seemingly unimportant until those tragic days of World War II. The Chamorros (Guamanians), including some of our future sisters, suffered very much during the war, both from bombings and from Japanese occupation.

Bishop Olano held the position of Apostolic Vicar, even through imprisonment in Japan, until 1945 when Cardinal Francis Spellman, Archbishop of New York asked him to resign. With that resignation, an American Capuchin, Father Apollinaris W. Baumgartner, OFM Cap. was appointed Apostolic Vicar of Guam.

During the Japanese occupation (1941-1944), all but two native Chamorro priests, Father Jesús Dueñas and Father Oscar L. Calvo, were taken to prisoner-of-war camps in Japan. Because of this and inadequate communication as well as the lack of religious instruction, the practice of the Catholic faith was weakened. The people did their best to keep up their devotions, religious practices and fiestas. (Less than ten days before the liberation of Guam by the United States on July 21, 1944, Fr. Dueñas, because of his opposition to the Japanese, was beheaded.)

It was in 1949 that Bishop Baumgartner contacted Mother Commissary M. Fidelis Krieter, SSND, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and asked for School Sisters of Notre Dame to minister on the Island of Guam, the largest and most southerly of the Marianas Islands in the North Pacific Ocean.

At that time the island had a great naval base and a half dozen vast airfields. The island was run by the U.S. Navy who invited the local people to work on the base. In 1949 when the School Sisters of Notre Dame arrived, the people could speak English enough to converse. The pastor’s house boy spoke very good English. The airfields were built on Guam’s best farmland. The economy after the devastation of World War II was very slowly improving but, overall, the people were very poor. Politically the people

were loyal to the United States; however, as the U.S. took over more of the land, the native peoples were displaced. Their economic needs were great and it was a time of struggle. On August 1, 1950, the Organic Act of Guam declared that Guam is an unincorporated territory of the United States. This law, signed by U.S. President Harry S. Truman, granted American citizenship to all persons residing in Guam at the time of its enactment and to their children who were born after April 11, 1899. This form of Guam's Constitution and Bill of Rights was written by the United States Congress, not by the people of Guam. Also, it was not ratified by the people of Guam. However, it did end a 50-year appeal by the Chamorros for U.S. citizenship.

School Sisters of Notre Dame on Guam

In 1945, Guam was a Vicariate and later was elevated to the Diocese of Agana. Bishop William Apollinaris W. Baumgartner, OFM Cap. came as the first and last American bishop to direct the church on Guam. Bishop Baumgartner's major goal was to produce indigenous priests and religious and eventually a native-born bishop.

After World War II, the inception of Catholic school education on the island opened opportunities for a greater transformation of the people of Guam. It fostered leadership and developed local potential. The Sisters of Mercy from the Belmont Province (North Carolina) established their congregation on Guam in 1946. Father Duenas Memorial High School, exclusively for boys, opened in 1948. The School Sisters of Notre Dame from the Milwaukee Province came in 1949. The Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration from LaCrosse, Wisconsin, arrived in 1955, and Dominican Sisters of the Taiwan province came to Guam in 1979.

Like Mother Theresa of Jesus Gerhardinger, foundress of the School Sisters of Notre Dame, Mother M. Fidelis Krieter, Commissary General in the Milwaukee (Wisconsin) province, with deep faith and courage dared to risk satisfying needs not being served by others. On February 21, 1949, Bishop wrote to Reverend Mother M. Fidelis, SSND: "I am sure that you will be glad to hear something about our Vicariate. This is not a begging letter, asking for funds. It is an earnest plea, however, to help us with our educational problem if you can possibly do so....There is a need for Catholic Schools and the need is now. We hope to start in September. In this extremity, we turn to you, Reverend Mother, and we beg you to hear our plea to send us at least a few Sisters for one of our schools."²

In March 1949, Mother Fidelis wrote to Bishop Baumgartner responding to his request. She said, "We are interested in the foreign missions, your Excellency, despite the great dearth of our personnel at home....Before we give any further consideration to the idea, will your Excellency kindly give us the following information."³ Then she proceeded to list her questions regarding the association with the Capuchin priests or another religious order to meet the spiritual needs of the sisters, the security of the sisters, provision for schools, and language spoken.

Like any other wise superior, her foremost concern was her sisters' well-being. She sought advice and did a lot of praying before she made any commitment to a foreign mission. She wrote, "If your Excellency can tell us more about the conditions and requirements, perhaps we shall soon be able to give a more definite reply."⁴ More correspondence transpired between the Bishop of Guam and Reverend Mother M. Fidelis.

The Bishop did not leave any question asked by Mother M. Fidelis unanswered. He made known the fact that Guam was controlled by the U.S. Navy and entrance to the island required permission from the Department of the Navy. Bishop Baumgartner painted a verbal picture of the island for Mother M. Fidelis. He even wrote that, "This is definitely mission territory and mission work, even if we do have some conveniences of language and comforts of life which may be denied other missionaries elsewhere."⁵

The irresistible appeal from the Bishop of Guam and Reverend Alvin LeFeir, who would eventually be the pastor of the parish and finish building the school and convent for the sisters in Yona, could not be refused by our generous and apostolic Mother M. Fidelis.

A letter dated May 31, 1949 from a navy chaplain came to Mother Fidelis congratulating her and the community for accepting a mission on the Island of Guam. Reverend Brian Mahedy wrote, "Congratulations to yourself and your community upon your zealous acceptance of a mission on Guam. Our military newspaper informs me that the School Sisters of Notre Dame have undertaken the establishment of a school at Yona on Guam....I am sure that your new project will be blessed by God. The sisters will find the weather a bit inclement, but the spiritual return in preserving the faith and new candidates for your order will more than compensate for the inconvenience."⁶

Therefore, the vision of the world by Mother Theresa in Germany reached the far-flung islands of Micronesia. In her apostolic zeal, Mother M. Fidelis carried out Mother Theresa's challenge:

We go forth with what little we possess into the whole world, into the smallest villages, the poorest dwellings, wherever the Lord calls us to bring the News of the Kingdom to the poor. (1839)⁷

As soon as the decision to accept the mission on Guam was made, a letter was sent by Mother M. Fidelis inviting sisters interested in working on the island of Guam to contact her. Although the School Sisters of Notre Dame vow obedience, allowing the individual sister to decide for herself was a factor when sending her to a mission land. Besides making her own decision, the sisters were told to discuss this prospect with their parents and to get their permission to go to Guam. Each sister had her own motive for volunteering for Guam but most admitted that they had always wanted to go to a foreign mission. Father Alvin LeFeir, OFM Cap. made arrangements for the Diocese of Agana to pay the passage for the sisters. After a period of waiting, seven sisters

departed for Guam on Tuesday, August 2, 1949. They were Sisters M. Eucharita Luxem, Mary Carleen Roberts, Mary Eric Militzer, Mary Ardwin Shaw, M. Jean Francis Stenger, M. Aquina (Naomi) Curtin, and Marie Jose Herbig. All of these sisters were teachers except Sister M. Jean Francis who was an ingenious homemaker with her delicious meals and clever laundry methods in keeping starched wimples stiff. "We were teachers but we couldn't have kept going without her," Sister Mary Aquina claims.

After a train ride across the western part of the United States and an overnight stay in St. Mary Hospital in San Francisco, the sisters boarded a plane to Guam. This included an overnight stop at Honolulu, Hawaii, a stop at Midway Island, and a memorable overnight at Wake Island.

Bishop Baumgartner, many Capuchins, Father Clayton, C.P.P.S., other chaplains, and a good representation of the people of Agana and Yona were at the Guam airport to meet the sisters on August 10. Upon arrival at the village of Yona, the sisters found that the convent was not ready so the pastor of St. Francis Church, Father Cyril Langheim, OFM Cap., had moved out of the rectory so the sisters could move in. Thursday evening, August 12, at the official reception to Yona, after words of welcome, each sister received the Bishop's blessing and was greeted by all the people.

While settling in, the sisters became accustomed to not only the friendly lizards (gecko), but also to the chickens, roosters, and other animals that sometimes joined them while they said their prayers in church or during rule reading. They also began the inculturation process and accepted the culture and the religious activities of the Guamanian people. The sisters received a great variety of food because of the great generosity of the people who, even though poor themselves, were lavish in sharing what little they had. Francis and Isabel Guzman, whom the sisters had met on the plane, often brought cases of coke and cartons of ice cream for the sisters.

At this early period of the mission, while the sisters tried to make do with very meager resources, their community spirit was one, largely due to the leadership of Sister Mary Eucharita, a deeply spiritual woman. The sisters sensed and felt her holiness and were inspired by her. They were also inspired by the deep faith of the people themselves, a faith whose seed was planted by the earlier missionaries. However, lacking a theological background, the people were an easy target for the various proselytizing groups coming to Guam after World War II. That was one reason why Bishop Baumgartner was anxious to have the help of the sisters.

One of the first things some of the sisters needed to learn was how to drive because, once they moved into the new convent, they would have to drive to school. Within the first month, Sisters Mary Ardwin, M. Aquina, and Marie Jose procured their driver's licenses.

On August 16 registration for school began behind the rectory, under a tent, with heavy paper covering muddy ground to protect the sisters' white habits. The first day 149 children registered.

A month later, September 12, 1949, Saint Francis School in the village of Yona opened with an enrollment of 301 pupils. Because the school building was not finished, the sisters taught in the church and in Quonset huts. To accommodate all the students and grades in their makeshift quarters, they taught in shifts: one group from 7:30 to 11:30 a.m. and the other from 11:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. The pre-primer, first and second grades were taught by a village woman, Maria Crisostomo, who spoke Chamorro so that she could help the younger children make the transition to English. During heavy rains, the teachers in the Quonsets that were open on the sides, gathered the children and desks in the middle of the huts to try to keep dry. The desks had been made and painted by the village people.

In addition to school duties, the sisters went to the village of Talofoto several afternoons a week to teach catechism.

At the request of the Bishop, Sister Mary Eric taught Gregorian chant to the seminarians. The Stigmatine priests of Waltham, Massachusetts were teachers at the seminary. Besides teaching Gregorian chant at the seminary, Sister Mary Eric was also asked to transcribe some of the Chamorro hymns. Years later Bishop Felixberto Flores acknowledged her role in helping preserve the Chamorro hymns through musical notations.

Some furniture and other items were moved to the convent during the early days of October. The sisters moved in on October 4, 1949. That day was spent moving chairs, beds, stove and refrigerator from the temporary convent in the rectory. Because the generator went off, the sisters used flashlights that evening. Also, by bedtime, the water supply had been cut off. After the move, the priests and people continued to bring more furniture. The Bishop blessed the convent under the title, Our Lady, Mediatrix of All Graces.

On October 15 a small earthquake caused a little shakeup. November 5 Father Cyril who had been elected by the Capuchins as their island superior moved to Agana, and Father Alvin LeFeir became the new pastor at St. Francis in Yona.

When typhoon Allyn was sighted southeast of Guam on November 15, the people began preparations to withstand the heavy wind and rain. At 1:15 p.m. on November 17, the sisters joined many people in the church and watched as homes were torn apart and clothes and other belongings blown through open roofs. Then the tin roof on the church, piece by piece, was torn off and the rain poured in. Water began to rise on the church floor. Raincoats gave little protection as the sisters' habits soaked up the water on the floor. By 7:00 p.m., Father Alvin led the sisters through piles of debris to the rectory. After a sleepless night, the sisters were greeted with the good news the next morning that the convent and school, with the exception of one Quonset, had sustained minimal damage. People began helping the sisters and each other, repairing buildings and bringing food supplies. There were no lights, no water, and no

refrigeration. Years later Sister Naomi (Aquina) would comment, "The typhoons really pounded the island and people cleaned up for a long time."

On the feast of the Immaculate Conception, December 8, 1949, three native girls entered the candidature. These young women were: Lourdes Isadora Manibusan, Isabela Cruz Mendiola, and Felicita Baza Sudo. As is the custom on Guam, these candidates (later called aspirants) arrived accompanied by many relatives. These three candidates wore dresses made by S. Jean Francis. They joined the sisters in the church or chapel for Mass and daily prayer. During the day, the sisters came from their classrooms to instruct the candidates. January 15, 1950, two more candidates, accompanied to the convent by a large entourage of relatives, joined the three who entered in December. They were Margarita Castro and Trinidad Matanane. Another young woman, Josephina Cepeda joined them on January 29.

Because the pastor, Father Alvin, worked zealously to have every Catholic child in the village school, the enrollment at St. Francis increased daily. Military personnel on the island continued to send their unwanted furniture and supplies for the school and convent.

The first school year came to an end with many memories of Masses, programs, spiritual conferences, fiestas, first Holy Communion, devotions, devoted students, frequent rain showers, learnings and adjustments.

According to several sources, when the Europeans came in contact with the Chamorros, they noted courtesy among them. They were friendly and had a sense of humor not found in other Pacific Islands. Hospitality was another outstanding trait as well as pride. Cohesiveness was the strongest characteristic of its people. This cohesiveness was strongly influenced by the Catholic Church. The seven pioneer School Sisters of Notre Dame found the above to be true. Respect for humanity in general is highly valued although this seems to be losing ground with today's increase of consumeristic and materialistic values.

Deep love and devotion to the Blessed Mother is still predominant among the Chamorros. December 8, Feast of the Immaculate Conception, is proof of this love and devotion although certain groups object to this. The entire island still turns out for the procession in Mary's honor.

Before the outside contact, the ancient Chamorros were their own ethnic group. Present-day Chamorros are a mixture of races: Caucasians, Oriental, and Black. Their language is Chamorro but English is spoken extensively. The younger generation today does not speak its native tongue. Education in the American system and a feeling of being identified with the Americans are contributing factors to this existing condition.

With more girls indicating a desire to enter the School Sisters of Notre Dame, need for a permanent building for a candidature was evident. On April 25, 1950, the foundation was dug for that structure. Father Alvin LeFeir, who was co-partner in

bringing the School Sisters of Notre Dame to Guam, oversaw the construction of a two-story building adjoining the sisters' original small convent.

Five more girls entered the candidature on July 2. A class of 40 students received the sacrament of Confirmation on July 9th. Father Bernard, OFM Cap., conducted the annual retreat for the sisters from July 16-22, 1950.

Missionary endeavors of the sisters expanded during two weeks in August when Sisters Mary Eric and Mary Ardwin taught catechism at Anderson Air Field in the north end of the island. On August 22, 1950, the School Sisters of Notre Dame community increased to ten with the arrival of Sisters M. Martinus (Margaret) Joyce, M. Paul Anthony (Esther Mary) Atkielski, and M. Paulice Holzinger. The Bishop was present on September 4 to dedicate the new candidature building. The next day St. Francis School opened with an enrollment of 450 pupils and the sisters continued CCD classes adding Mount Carmel in Agat and the parish in Santa Rita, both on the western side of the island.

April of 1951 brought two welcome visitors from the Milwaukee motherhouse. Mother Superior M. Annuntiata Ambrosy and Sister Mary Basil stayed a little over two weeks. Other distinguished visitors were Mother Anna Dengel, foundress of the Medical Missionaries and Mother M. Columba of Maryknoll, both of whom were on visitation to their own sisters and looking to expand their missions in the area.

A big faith-building event took place on the island in 1951. Bishop Apollinaris W. Baumgartner celebrated his silver jubilee. The Bishop brought his honored guests, Archbishop Mitty of San Francisco and Bishop Sweeney of Honolulu, to visit the sisters at the convent. The School Sisters of Notre Dame played a major role in this celebration. A pageant "They Passed This Way" written by Father Julius, OFM Cap. gave an historical account of the Guam mission from the time of San Vitores to 1951. Sister Mary Aquina directed the play and Sister Mary Eric directed the music and the combined choirs of Saint Francis School and the Cathedral Grade School. It was the first faith-building event since WWII. It was also the first time some people of Guam saw the School Sisters of Notre Dame. They were quite impressed, enriched, and inspired by the sisters.

Sister M. Paulice took charge of the aspiranture for the next four years. Other sisters helped her by teaching classes to the aspirants: Sister Mary Eucharita, mathematics; Sister Mary Eric, Latin; Sister Mary Carleen, English; Sister M. Paulice herself taught history, religion, and science. She says, "All the sisters had contact with the aspirants in some activity—Sister Jean Francis in the kitchen and laundry, Sisters Marie Jose, Mary Ardwin and Mary Aquina often spent recreation with them."⁸

In July of 1951 nine more girls entered the candidature. Four of the first candidates went to Milwaukee on August 25 to continue their formation. The new school year opened with 469 pupils at St. Francis School.

On December 23, 1951, Island Electric power lines were connected with the convent and the sisters had more dependable electricity. Admiral Ernest W. Litch of the U.S. Navy was instrumental in obtaining the power.

The year 1952 brought many occasions to rejoice. In February, five candidates entered the community and in July another 21 young women did the same. Forty-four children received their first Holy Communion in Yona. On July 9, Sister M. Melvina Hess, assistant to Mother Commissary M. Andrina Aalbers, came with Sister M. Longina Miksch, a new teacher for St. Francis School. Sisters Mary Ardwin, M. Aquina, and M. Martinus taught catechism for two weeks during August at the Naval Air Station. Bishop Baumgartner presided at the final vows ceremony of Sister M. Martinus, Marie Jose, and M. Paul Anthony on August 11. On August 19 Sister M. Melvina returned to Milwaukee with seven candidates. On Guam, on September 11 of 1952, the candidates were re-named aspirants until they completed their high school education.

The school year began with a total enrollment of 514 pupils. During this school year Sisters M. Eucharita and M. Aquina also took charge of the Sodality of Mary at Barrigada. The sodalists, from the time of the Spanish friars, were quite active in the parishes.

In those early years, SSND pioneers made a deep and lasting impression on the island. At the request of the bishop and pastors they extended their apostolate beyond the regular classroom in other villages with CCD classes, sodality, and choir work.

While the School Sisters of Notre Dame tried to manage with very minimal resources, community life was rich and the spirit of oneness was evident. Always a unifier as well as a spiritual leader, Sister Superior Mary Eucharita's letters to Rev. Mother M. Fidelis and Mother M. Andrina are classic in their simplicity, detailed accounts, and candidness. Sister Mary Carleen kept a running diary of daily events that is second to none in detail and particularly in their life-giving humor showing how the sisters coped and took everything in stride.

Sister M. Paulice returned to Milwaukee in June of 1955. She accompanied fifteen aspirants who were to continue their high school education in Wisconsin.

The succeeding years meant more students in the schools, more Eskuelan Pale (CCD) work, and more candidates. God's work on Guam was blessed and progressing.

RESOURCES

1. 50th Anniversary Book: School Sisters of Notre Dame Celebrating 50 Years of Ministry and Presence
2. Letter to Mother M. Fidelis Krieter, SSND Mother Commissary, Milwaukee, WI, from Most Rev. A.W. Baumgartner, OFM Cap., dated February 21, 1949. SSND Archives, Guam
3. Letter to Most Rev. A.W. Baumgartner, OFM Cap., from Mother M. Fidelis Krieter, dated First Sunday in Lent, 1949. SSND Archives, Guam
4. Ibid
5. Letter to Mother M. Fidelis Krieter from Most Rev. A.W. Baumgartner, OFM Cap. dated March 12, 1949. SSND Archives, Guam

6. Letter to Mother M. Fidelis Krieter, from Brian D. Mahedy, Chaplain, USNR, dated May 31, 1949. SSND Archives, Guam
7. Letter of Mother Mary Theresa of Jesus Gerhardinger, 1839
8. Personal experiences of Sister M. Paulice Holzinger on Guam written in 1971. SSND Archives, Guam