

Promises to Keep, Sister Margaret Patrice Slattery, CCVI  
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While the sisters in Texas were facing disastrous fires at the orphanage in San Antonio and at the academy in San Angelo, those in Mexico were struggling with the tragic happenings of the Mexican Revolution, which broke out in 1910. Abuses of political power under the leadership of Porfirio Diaz had created a clamoring for social reform throughout the country. Laborers, poorly paid and unfairly treated, were calling for justice. Strikes were organized among the miners and the workers in the textile mills. Opposition to the established government was accompanied by severe antagonism against the Catholic Church, which was viewed by many as blocking the course of change. Anti-clerical forces were determined to destroy the power of the Church by eliminating the clergy from the pulpits and closing the Catholic schools.<sup>14</sup>

In 1912, Rev. Mother Alphonse wrote, "Everywhere in Mexico the war is terrible, and God alone knows when it will end." The city of Torreon became a center of violence. Here the sisters "had to close their academy and flee," as Rev. Mother Alphonse reported.<sup>15</sup> Just two weeks later, the school was "taken by the revolutionary parties as a hospital for their soldiers."<sup>16</sup> Concerned for the safety of the sisters, the general administration recalled many of them to the motherhouse. Others took refuge in areas of Mexico where there was less danger from the revolutionary troops. Sister Maria Antonia Fernandez has described their escape in 1913 from Lampazos, where they were forced to leave Colegio del Sagrado Corazon, that had operated "peacefully and effectively" since its establishment. When the school was threatened, the sisters fled from the city to Monterrey. Rail transportation was completely cut off, and their journey, usually a three or four-hour trip, took them three days. "Scarcely had they left Lampazos," Sister Maria Antonia reported, "when the rebels took possession of the college, plundered the clothing and the furniture, and having partially burned the building, departed."<sup>17</sup> The Academia del Verbo Encarnado in Tampico suffered similar destruction:

*Upon the entry of the Carrancistas to this town they took possession of the College and throwing the doors open invited the public to take what they wanted. They then used it for a cuartel for the soldiers and have stabled their horses there also. The little chapel is utterly ruined, as they have used it for a kitchen and they have nailed a coffee mill to the altar.*

*. . . The chapel has been utterly desecrated, and before it could be used again, it would] have to be cleaned, refitted, and reconsecrated.<sup>18</sup>*

During this same period, 1910-1914, eight other schools were closed because of government intervention: Colegio Guadalupano, Durango; Colegio Divino Salvador, Linares; Colegio Guadalupano, Victoria; Colegio Guadalupano, Chihuahua; Colegio Guadalupano, Hermosillo, Sonora; Colegio San Jose, Oaxaca; Colegio Corazon de Maria, General Cepeda, Coahuila; and Colegio Jesus Marfa, Torreon.<sup>19</sup>

In Mexico City, the situation was described as "a veritable reign of terror." Churches were "desecrated, private homes invaded, and between 600 and 700 of the old police force were executed as well as every officer of the old federal army."<sup>20</sup>

When the wave of violence spread to Monterrey, Mother Alphonse wrote, "The war in Mexico is becoming terribly frightening." Churches were closed and priests put in prison. "Only our sisters are left," she said.<sup>21</sup>

If they were recognized as religious, the sisters were in danger of imprisonment or some form of persecution. Mother Casimir Quinn asked the general administration to permit them "to dress as secular ladies ... as a safeguard."<sup>22</sup>

Several bishops, priests, and nuns were jailed or exiled. Others fled to the United States for safety. Abandoning their churches and schools meant, of course, leaving the people they had worked hard to serve as well as sacrificing their property and possessions which would be confiscated by the government. Escape, however, offered an alternative to imprisonment or even death.

On their flight to safety, many of the priests and sisters stopped in San Antonio, seeking food and shelter at the motherhouse or at Santa Rosa. Sister Erastus Voestner, who worked in the hospital kitchen, remarked how "tired and worn out" they looked as they arrived. One priest in particular, she remembered, still had "the mark of the rope on his neck where they [the revolutionaries] tried to hang him."<sup>23</sup> After a good night's rest and a hearty breakfast, some of them moved on to other dioceses or congregations, while others stayed at the motherhouse or hospital for months.

Archbishop Shaw reported in 1915 to the Apostolic Delegate that 6 bishops, 50 religious priests, and 30 secular priests had arrived in San Antonio. Shaw himself, who lived at Brackenridge Villa on the Incarnate Word motherhouse property, moved back to Santa Rosa to make room for four members of the hierarchy to stay at the guest house: Rt. Rev. Ignacio Valdespino y Dfaz of Aguascalientes; Rt. Rev. Jesus Maria Echevarria of Saltillo; Rt. Rev. Miguel M. de la Mora of Zacatecas; and Rt. Rev. Msgr. Fernandez of the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Some of the bishops stayed as long as three years.

Rt. Rev. Francisco Uranga y Sainz, Bishop of Sinaloa, was given refuge at Santa Rosa, and twelve priests were taken in at St. Francis Home. In addition to the priests, there was one young man still studying for the priesthood who was ordained during his exile in San Antonio and celebrated his first mass in the motherhouse chapel.<sup>25</sup>

In areas where the sisters were able to stay on in Mexico, they tried desperately to continue their work, but in constant fear of attack. In 1915, Rev. Mother Alphonse reported, "Things in Mexico are incredible, and would you believe that we still have four houses open? ...We rely on the Incarnate Word to guard and protect them."<sup>26</sup>

When Venustiano Carranza proclaimed himself president in 1915, attacks on the Church became even more vicious. In his study of the revolution, Rev. Francis C. Kelley gives a vivid description of the persecution of bishops, priests, and sisters. He tells also of the confiscation of churches and schools, of "tearing down altars, breaking statues, rip- ping up paintings," and "hunting for religious objects in private homes."<sup>27</sup>

The Constitution of 1917, established during Carranza's time in power, denied the Church any legal status.<sup>28</sup> Monastic orders were outlawed.<sup>29</sup> All property held by religious institutions was declared to belong to the national government.<sup>30</sup> Elementary education was to be completely secular, and religious organizations and members of the clergy were forbidden to establish or direct the schools.<sup>31</sup>

"What an abomination!" Rev. Mother Alphonse wrote. "The constitutions are ... all against God and religion." It seemed certain that the schools owned . and operated by the Congregation would all be taken over. "If the laws are applied," she said, "it is finished. We [shall be] obliged to leave because religious people don't have the right to hold any school whatsoever."<sup>32</sup> She advised the sisters to continue to "dress as seculars for the time being," but she refused to yield completely to the overwhelming fear created by the government and forbade the removal of the crucifixes from the walls of the convents.<sup>33</sup>

Religion classes were held in private homes and conducted in great secrecy. Sister Marie Angelique Descombes wrote to tell the sisters, "We have been able to prepare a few children for their first communion, which has been a great consolation for us." Mass was celebrated in secret also, sometimes in the sisters' convents or in the homes of friends. The Blessed Sacrament was reserved in a portable tabernacle that could be easily removed in the event of a visit from a government agent. "We are obliged to be very careful," the sisters reported, "because the least indiscretion could be a reason for imprisonment."<sup>34</sup>

While the revolution continued in Mexico, the United States became involved in its own war against Germany, and the whole nation rallied to the cause of national defense. The battles had hardly come to an end before another severe tragedy occurred that affected the sisters as well as the rest of the nation and other parts of the world-the out- break of Spanish Influenza. The disease spread rapidly in the United States, and according to one report, "during a ten-week period [of 1918] there were 87,759 deaths ...compared to 7,395 for a similar period the previous year."<sup>35</sup> By the end of the year, the death toll in the nation attributed to influenza soared to 500,000.

Hospitals were crowded with patients, and doctors and nurses worked long hours trying to cope with the disease. At Santa Rosa and the other hospitals operated by the Congregation, the sisters were on duty night and day. What made the situation even more critical was a shortage of doctors and nurses. Many had not yet returned from their overseas assignments of World War I.

The sisters moved beds into hallways, parlors, and even the dining room to accommodate the increase in patients at Santa Rosa. Many calls for help came from outside the hospital, from the small towns surrounding San Antonio. The sisters could hardly afford to spare any of their nurses, yet Rev. Mother Alphonse could not turn down those who were in critical need. From the town of Kerrville, fifty miles northwest of San Antonio, came an appeal from Father H. M. Kemper, who was trying desperately to cope with the spread of the disease in the poor and overpopulated Mexican section of the hill country community. Without access to a local hospital, the people had no way to cope with the illness. Rev. Mother Alphonse sent two sisters from Santa Rosa to help set up a temporary facility in Our Lady of Guadalupe School. When the schools in Kerrville, as in other cities, were closed in an effort to control the epidemic, the sister-teachers began working side by side with the nurses.

Another call for help came from Fort Sam Houston, where congested living conditions in the military barracks contributed to the spread of the influenza. Sisters William Cullen and Cleophas Hurst, both well trained nurses, and nine of the sister-teachers went to the Post to care for the soldiers. They agreed to take full charge, night and day, of one of the pneumonia wards and to give more help as soon as other sisters were available. By the end of the year, eighteen sisters were on duty at the base hospital.

Still another emergency plea came from the city hospital in San Antonio, the Robert B. Green. The Incarnate Word sisters themselves

had operated this facility as early as 1887, but now it was in the hands of city employees. So many nurses on the staff had become victims of the influenza, however, that the institution could not cope with the ever-increasing number of patients being admitted. Eleven sisters were sent to help with the overcrowded conditions.

Other calls for nursing care came from DeMazenod Seminary and the Carmelite Convent, where students and teachers were in need of help. The sisters responded as well as they could, stretching their resources to the limit. Meanwhile Rev. Mother Alphonse called for special prayers from those at home for protection of the many sisters exposed to the contagious disease. Soon she reported that "every day after Vespers, the whole community [at the motherhouse] makes the Way of the Cross with arms extended."<sup>36</sup>

Congregational records show that every sister involved in nursing the sick both at Fort Sam and at the city hospital contracted the influenza, but all recovered.<sup>37</sup> Those working in the Congregation's own hospitals, however, were not so fortunate. The long, exhausting hours of nursing duty and the constant exposure to contagion took the lives of five nurses, "all of them young and capable of being of great service," according to Rev. Mother Alphonse. "But we are not complaining," she added. "It is the work of God."<sup>38</sup>

The nurses who gave their lives in saving others were Sister Brendan O'Connor, Sister Georgina Heckl, and Sister Agnes Dominic Foran, all of Santa Rosa; Sister Sixtus Doherty on the staff of St. Anthony's Hospital, Amarillo; and Sister Scholastica Breheny, who died at the Missouri, Kansas, and Texas Railroad Hospital in Sedalia, Missouri. Two sisters from the schools became victims of the disease also, Sister Alacoque of the Sacred Heart Waters, who had gone to help care for the sick in Victoria, and Sister Catherine of Bologna Ryan, who had been teaching at Blessed Sacrament School in St. Louis.<sup>39</sup> The year 1918 would long be remembered in the Congregation as a year of suffering and sacrifice.