

Serving 'where no one else wants to'

On January 7 my niece Grace Early and I left Rochester to visit our Sisters of Mercy in Chile. We arrived home on January 17 after a delightful stay with these generous women, and the people among whom they serve. Some notes on that trip:

1) Among many memorable experiences we had, the highlight for me was the liturgy during which Valeria Vicencio Catalán and Lilian Silva Aparacia renewed their vows as Sisters of Mercy. It was a joyful moment made so by the obvious happiness of Valeria and Lilian at what they were doing.

And the event symbolized several important connections or relationships that undergirded the celebration. I thought of the vision and courage of the Sisters of Mercy in their establishment of the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas. As Sister Sheila Stevenson, president of the Rochester Sisters of Mercy, received her sisters' vows, I was mindful of their bonds with our sisters here, and of the incredible work these women do, day in and day out, for the glory of God and the good of neighbor. And, I thanked God, as do the sisters every day, that the people of our diocese since 1965 have stood in generous support of this mission activity.

2) Three other Chilean women are professed members of our Sisters of Mercy. They are Elvira Soledad Cantillana Calderón, Lía Nora González Sandoval and Maria Inés Olguin Caro. They have all been affiliated with the Mercy Sisters for close to 20 years.

I have known them all those years and regard them as good friends though we seldom meet. They are the same as always — hospitable, generous and devoted to their respective ministries. What has changed is their responsibility. The



Bishop Matthew H. Clark

Along the Way

three now form the leadership team of our Sisters in Chile. You can imagine, I am sure, the pleasure it brought me to remember the years with these women and the wonderful ways of the Lord in the years between candidacy and leadership. In my opinion such a development is a credit not only to these women but also to their sisters and the respect in which they hold the people of Chile.

3) Soledad (Soli) speaks of what fires her up when she says, "It makes me very happy that we can be faithful to what our foundress, Catherine McAuley, says to us: 'The Sisters of Mercy should go where no one else wants to go.'" Soli, Anne Marie Mathis and Lilian live in Portezuelo, a small community that has not enjoyed the presence of religious women for many years.

On the weekend that we spent with them they were beginning a two-week mission — the same program in two locations in the large area they serve. We had Sunday dinner with the team of young people who were working on the mission. Great enthusiasm. A genuine, still-forming spirituality. I am sure that the experience of the mission will deepen that, and do much good for the parish.

For lunch everyone brought a chicken leg and the sisters supplied a grand array of vegetables and desserts. Grace and I didn't have a chicken leg to our name, so the sisters supplied ours.

4) Sisters of Mercy take a fourth vow in addition to vows of poverty,

chastity and obedience. It is a vow of service to the poor. Sister Jane Kenrick walks with and serves people with HIV/AIDS. Of this she says, "The experience has taught me much about life and what is really valuable for us on life's journey. Needless to say, many of these people have been discriminated against for being HIV or because of their sexual orientation. They are the most marginated of our society, yet they are so kind and loving. All I can give them is friendship and kindness and they give it back a thousand times over. I have been so blessed for doing so little."

I have visited the group Jane serves on past visits so I have a personal experience of what she means. On this trip I met some of the people whom Sister Theresa Rutty serves. Let her speak: "My main ministry is ... the care of their feet. I go to several institutions to offer my services: a home for the homeless, a home for the elderly and a home for cancer patients. Most ... are elderly men. They tell me of their lives, the work they did, their families. They share their sadness and their joys; ... when one performs such an intimate task for another there develops a special bond. I have a special affection for my 'grandfathers.'"

Sister Joanne Deck who works in Copiapó with Theresa and Marie Inés also reflected on the impact on her life made by the people she serves. "When I entered what did not attract me was the mission in Chile ... little by little Chile began to call me. In my 17 years here my life has truly been enriched by the Chilean people. They have helped me deepen my life in Mercy through their hospitality — sharing their lives, homes and families. Their almost unqualified acceptance has helped me to grow in an acceptance of others and in my ability to see the hand of God in all that happens."

5) Our search for meaning in life continues through all of our years. But there are certain pivotal times when we choose fundamental directions, and make lasting commit-

ments. Think of marriage, choosing the single life, ordination of religious profession.

Lía reflected on her attraction to the Sisters of Mercy and shared this thought about a very important quality she saw in her sisters: "When I thought about entering the congregation, what attracted me most was the opportunity to be with women who truly wished to hear the voice of the poor, who knew that the poor have something to say. I also was drawn to the way they looked upon the poor as their equals, shared their lives, their pains and their joys."

6) I am grateful for the experience of the church I had on this trip to Chile — our sisters, their co-workers in pastoral ministry and the faithful people of that beautiful land. The experience reminded me that we are all missionaries by virtue of our baptism. Wherever we are, it is our awesome vocation to share in word and work the good news who is Jesus.

I am grateful to Sisters Janet Caulfield and Josephine Twomey for kind friendship, smoothing the way for us on several occasions, thus saving us time and sparing us a few headaches.

I am grateful for the gracious hospitality of our sisters and their generosity in offering me some opportunity to share their life and ministry.

I am grateful to my dear niece Grace for her companionship, friendship and support — not just on this trip but always.

Let me offer the last word from Sister Sheila: "The people of Rochester need to know how grateful the people of Chile are for the presence of the Sisters of Mercy among them. Our diocese has provided the financial support to enable the ministry of our sisters serving in Chile for 37 years. Each time I visit and journey with our sisters in their areas of ministry, I see in the faces of the people the gratitude they feel for our presence. I say thank you to all in our diocese for your support and care."

Peace to all.

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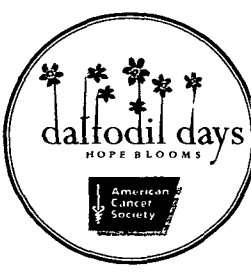
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Catholic Courier (USPS 135-580)
Vol. 114 No. 15, January 23, 2003

Published weekly except the first Thursday in January and the last Thursday in December. Subscription rates: single copy, 75¢; one-year subscription in U.S., \$20.00; Canada and foreign \$20.00 plus postage. Offices: 1136 Buffalo Road, Rochester, NY 14624, 585/529-9530. Periodicals postage paid at Rochester, NY.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Catholic Courier, PO Box 24379, Rochester, NY 14624.



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