

## To Chile and Back

By Sister Mary Susan Dewitt with Sister Therese Carson

In 1961 Pope John XXIII asked all religious communities to send ten percent of their members as missionaries to Latin America. Benedictine Sisters in America have a long history as missionaries: our own founders came in 1852 to teach Bavarian immigrants in Pennsylvania, and succeeding generations moved westward with the pioneers, opening daughter communities to provide education and health care to all, including St. Scholastica Monastery in 1892. Now the call went out to further God's work in South America. The question was, how?

By the working of Divine Providence, a French Canadian priest of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate in Antofagasta, Chile, wrote asking for help. They had built an English school, Colegio San Jose, and needed Sisters to help staff it. After discernment with her Council, Mother Athanasius Braegelman decided in 1963 to send four Sisters to Chile to start the mission: Sisters Richarda Buermann, Mary Paul Ludwig, Sharon O'Neill, and Victoria Jobin.



*Sisters in their modified habits are blessed before leaving for Chile.*

They first went to Mexico for immersion studies in the Spanish language and then traveled to Chile by boat. Chile is a land of diverse climates, from semitropical coastlands on the Pacific to the foothills of the Andes Mountains and south to penguins and seals on the ice flows around Antarctica. Antofagasta is in the north, a semitropical seaport with beaches, lush gardens, warm sun and loving people who welcomed them into their hearts and homes.

Sister Mary Paul became principal of the grade school and the girls' high school, where she struggled to speak and understand the students' language: "To be deprived of one's ability to communicate is true poverty." With Patricia McAllister, an IHM Sister, she traveled throughout Chile to instruct teachers in modern teaching techniques: "What a thrill to see Chilean children learning to think and comprehend instead of learning simply by rote!" She would return to Chile for a visit in 1996, where she found the seeds they had planted so many years ago had blossomed and borne fruit.

Sister Sharon began teaching with only a piece of chalk and a rag to clear the chalkboard. She taught the children English by combining it with aerobics: "We jumped, hopped, and sang while teaching them new words, and they loved it!" The children sang in English in a program for Mother Athanasius when she came for a visit.



*Sister Richarda Buermann teaching children at Colegio San Jose*

In the meantime, three more Sisters arrived to teach at the school: Sisters Nora Quinn, Theresa Spinler, and Paulette Dorff. Sister Theresa, at least, adapted quickly to the slower, simpler life in Chile; indeed, it took much longer to readjust to our faster pace on her return. She taught English, art, and religion, and learned to play a guitar and find her way around Antofagasta: “I rode city buses, which sometimes meant hanging onto the outside with feet on a step, and shopped every day in the open-air market for fruit, vegetables, and bread.”

A poor city parish asked for a nurse to run their clinic and Sisters to help in the parish, so St. Scholastica Monastery sent more Sisters, including Sisters Ingrid Luukkonen, Mary Susan Dewitt, and Mary Faith Gaylord. Sister Ingrid taught many parish women how to bake American dishes, especially apple pie, and they in turn taught her to make empanadas, Chilean pasties. Despite her struggle with the Spanish language, they all bonded over rolling pastry and simmering apples with cinnamon in the kitchen.



*Sister Mary Susan Dewitt at her new clinic in Antofagasta*



*Sister Ingrid Luukkonen (center in yellow) with her baking class*



*Sister Theresa Spinler trying the waters of the Pacific Ocean*

For Sister Mary Susan it was a challenge to run a one-person clinic: “An endless line of hopeful and trusting people with never enough medicine or equipment, and no one with whom to consult. But I fell in love with the Chilean people, with their hospitality and laughter in the face of deep poverty, and with their courage and endurance under Augusto Pinochet’s brutal regime. They welcomed us into their homes and lives, sharing whatever they had to offer.”



*Thirteen communities of Sisters taught in Antofagasta*

By 1979 the mission was self-sustaining, and the Sisters left Antofagasta for the last time. Sister Mary Susan recalls how difficult it was to leave her beloved friends behind: “They helped me be a stronger, more loving, and more faith-filled person. There will always be a warm place in my heart for the Chilean people.”