

Province of The Most Holy Name

Franciscan Fathers

135 WEST 31ST STREET
NEW YORK 1, NEW YORK

OFFICE OF THE PROVINCIAL

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My dear Confreere:

The pilgrimage to the International Eucharistic Congress in Rio de Janeiro left New York on the S/S Brazil at 5 p. m., Thursday, July 7. After supper we met with Cardinal Spellman, leader of the pilgrimage; we were welcomed aboard and briefed for the trip. At 9:30 p. m. there was Rosary, Litany and Benediction. The daily schedule while at sea included morning Mass and evening devotions at 5 p. m., consisting of Rosary, Litany, special prayers, sermon and Benediction. On Sunday those priests assigned to the public Masses celebrated in the lounge were asked to give a five-minute talk. There were six altars for private Masses erected in the ship's library. Msgr. O'Donnell had set this room up as the Blessed Sacrament Chapel. Ample opportunities were given the pilgrims to get to Confession.

The ship's first stop was at San Salvador in the State of Bahia, Brazil, on July 17. His Eminence offered Mass in the cathedral for the pilgrims. Two Franciscan priests, Fr. Oderic, whom I knew, and Fr. Matthew, who had been in the States and spoke English well, met me at the boat. We went directly to St. Francis Church. There, after seeing the church and the special chapel for the Third Order next door, I visited with the friars and had lunch with them. The monastery at St. Francis is used as a House of Theology; that very day a newly ordained priest had offered his First Mass. I was informed that he will teach for a while and then go to St. Bonaventure for additional studies. After lunch, Frs. Oderic and Matthew took me to the cathedral, to the retreat house which they run, to the Church of the Bomfim, then back to the boat. We stopped en route at the convent of the Immaculate Conception Sisters where I met Sr. Johanna, a sister of Sr. Jacoba, the Superior of the Sisters at Holy Name College in Washington. When we returned to the ship a few clerics were there. I took them on a quick tour of the S/S Brazil and then went back to the pier to visit with them.

The friars in San Salvador direct the local Catholic Labor Organization numbering some 20,000 to 25,000 men grouped in clubs throughout the city. One source of income for the Labor Organization is from movie theatres which the friars introduced in San Salvador. The friars themselves now conduct two theatres in conjunction with the Catholic Labor group while the group conducts two more on its own. Another Religious Community operates two additional theatres. The Retreat House on the outskirts of San Salvador is a fairly large plant capable of accommodating over 100 retreatants. Retreats, given throughout the year, vary in length from one to three days. Most are three-day retreats, i. e., from Friday night to Tuesday morning. A list of retreats for the next eight weeks was posted on the bulletin board.

Two Notes re Bahia: There were four monasteries in the early days built close enough to each other to make possible a visible means of soliciting aid. The monasteries sought each other's help by prearranged fire signals.

The Portuguese settlers forced the African slaves to accept Catholic baptism. These slaves on their own or with the help of others began

to substitute saints for their gods. There developed, and I am told still exists, a cult or worship of these saints which has deteriorated into a sort of voodoo.

The S/S Brazil arrived at the pier in Rio at noon on Tuesday, July 19. Disembarkation had been announced for 1 p. m. so very few people were at the pier to meet us. But by the time we tied in and secured the gangplank many people including friars and Sisters had arrived. It was quite a meeting. I had been planning ways and means for having the friars and Sisters on the ship for a meal. After some negotiating, I was assigned the Captain's table (seating 14 people) for four nights, beginning the night of arrival. This meant Fr. James A. Schuck had to assemble the first night's guests that afternoon. He almost made it; there was only one empty place. After that, it was easy; we had a full table of friars and Sisters each night. The final get-together was in a private dining room in the restaurant at the Santos Dumont Airport in Rio. There were 50 of us.

Our schedule took us to a few of the religious services at Congress Square, a large area prepared for the main events of the Eucharistic Congress. Outstanding was the Midnight Mass on Friday night offered by Cardinal Spellman. This was the Mass appointed for men to receive Holy Communion. The Cardinal helped with the distribution for about a half hour. In all, some 300 bishops, monsignori and priests distributed Communion. These came down off the platform in waves of 50, went first to outer areas of the group and worked their way to the center aisle. Distribution took about 45 minutes. Many estimates were given of the number who received. My guess would be about fifty thousand.

The next major event was the solemn procession of the Blessed Sacrament preceding the closing Benediction. Fr. James Schuck and I found ourselves surrounded by soldiers in the square in front of the church from which the procession started. It turned out to be a great place to take pictures. The Blessed Sacrament, in a monstrance about six ft. high, was transported on a float. Cardinal Masella, the Papal Legate, vested in cope, knelt in adoration before the Blessed Sacrament. Lay organizations, nuns, clergy, bishops--in that order--preceded the float, the cardinals followed it.

We left Rio at midnight, Sunday, July 24, and arrived in Santos Monday at noon. After a three-hour sightseeing tour and Rosary and Benediction at the cathedral, we returned to the ship at 4 a. m. Tuesday, and were scheduled to arrive in Montevideo on Thursday, July 28, at 7 a. m.

Early on the trip Cardinal Spellman announced he would make the decision at Montevideo on whether or not to visit Buenos Aires. Actually he announced it on Tuesday, July 26, one day out of Santos. His Eminence stayed in Montevideo.

So the ship's chapel would be a Franciscan Church for the Feast of Portiuncula, August 1-2, I was appointed a full time pastor on the ship.

We left Montevideo at midnight, Thursday, July 28, and arrived in Buenos Aires at 10 a. m. the next day. By the time we got off the ship it was 11:30. As we stood by the rail before disembarking, a Lithuanian priest on board was signaled from the dock by a confrere in mufti. Three of us had decided to band together in an attempt to see a couple of the burned-out churches. We kept our eyes on the priest in mufti. When we landed we approached him for advice. He told us he had two cars available and would be glad to have us in the party he would take around. We visited the cathedral and the Church of St. Francis, two of the 11 churches involved in the burnings. The cathedral was not severely damaged but the rectory and the chancery attached to it were sacked, burned and looted. St. Francis Church and monastery were both razed by the rioters.

This sad chain of events was set off in the following manner.

On Saturday, June 11, there was a procession and a tremendous demonstration in connection with Corpus Christi at Buenos Aires. At this demonstration the Argentine flag was lowered, the Papal flag was attached below it; then it was hoisted again. The following morning the newspapers carried headlines decrying insults to the Argentinean flag, i. e., claiming it had been torn to bits and burned. This is said to be completely untrue. That same day, Sunday, June 12, word got out that a mob would set fire to the cathedral. The Catholics decided to defend it and succeeded well enough to prevent any serious damage. The police then moved in and arrested the male defenders who were later released. The mob met with less resistance in the cathedral rectory and chancery, and carried out its destruction according to a detailed plan. No room was overlooked; the place was practically gutted. Priceless treasures were smashed, libraries set on fire. Four centuries of chancery records burned. The procedure was to place things that would burn in the middle of a room, sprinkle the pile with kerosene or gasoline and ignite it. The destruction was quite complete. No lives were lost because the personnel were warned in time to flee.

Thursday, June 16, the revolution, highlighted by navy bombings, broke out. That afternoon and night the 11 churches were burned. I saw one and was told that although this was the worst damaged, it could well be multiplied by 11. The one I saw was St. Francis, the friars' church. The friars, the first religious Order in Buenos Aires, built the first church in the late 16th century. The Church of St. Francis, was built in 1710. The plant consisted of the church, a huge sacristy, a separate chapel in honor of St. Roch, a Blessed Sacrament Chapel off the main church, and a sizable monastery. About fifteen priests and 8 brothers live in the monastery. We were shown around by a friar in mufti, met a few other friars in mufti and a few in habits. It seems the cardinal specified that those moving about the city should dress in non-clerical attire. We did our sightseeing in regular clerical garb including a topcoat. It was really cold and I caught one.

The Church of St. Francis, about 800 or 900 ft. long, was beautifully ornamented. The high altar had a canopy held by 19 pillars of wood worked to make them look as if twisted. Again, the detailed planning of the mob was evident in the destruction here. The desecrators' procedure was first to heap in three well-spaced piles everything loose. Then the altars and confessionals were worked on with bars, torn down and everything that would burn, thrown on the piles. These were then sprinkled with gasoline or kerosene and ignited. The sacristy at St. Francis was about 20 to 30 ft. wide and almost 100 ft. long. It was lined on both walls with vestment cases and cabinets; all housing precious vestments and sacred vessels. The same procedure, the same result--total destruction. The chapel of St. Roch had seven altars; now it has four walls. The walls of the Church of St. Francis are 4 ft. thick so they still stand and hold the roof. Paintings, the magnificent altar, the exquisite ornamentation, the great organ, everything is ruined. The pastor begged the desecrators to spare the organ--the finest in South America. They replied by threatening to kill him if he continued to stand in their way.

In the monastery the mob went from cell to cell on the first floor. On the second floor they ruined the library and the archives. The friars are still living there.

St. Francis Church being a national monument will be rebuilt by the government. The Church authorities, however, preferring to rebuild the churches themselves oppose this. The monastery and chapel of St. Roch must be built by the Friars.

We inquired concerning the effect of this persecution on the people. The answer is not too encouraging. Most of them resent what has been done from a motive that could be called aesthetic not spiritual.

We departed from Buenos Aires at 6 p. m., July 31, stopped briefly at Montevideo harbor to take on Cardinal Spellman and were on our way north. We had a 12-hour stay at Santos during which most of the passengers went to Sao Paulo. Fr. James Schuck and I talked shop a few hours, walked about Santos, had lunch and parted company. Fr. James returned to Sao Paulo to haggle for cruzeiros and I took a nap. We spent about 10 hours in Rio during the course of which we visited the Rio Stadium. This field, mainly used for soccer, has a seating capacity of 200,000. Two thirds of the fans sit under cover and yet have no uprights or pillars to obstruct their view. The playing field is surrounded by a moat to protect the officials from the crowd.

Our next stop, August 11, homeward bound was at Port of Spain where the temperature was really tropical. Being assigned to services at Assumption Church in the town at 5:30 p. m. I stayed on the S/S Brazil until 2:30, took a tender and arrived on the dock a half hour later. After a visit to a Benedictine monastery on the mountainside, I returned to town, recited the Rosary, served as deacon for Benediction and then sailed back to the ship.

We reached New York August 17, at 7:45 a. m., 24 hours late. The cause of delay were winds from hurricane Diane. The evening after arrival I left New York to attend the III Order Youth Congress at St. Bonaventure University.

I will leave September 19 for Japan. I hope to give the retreat and dedicate the new monastery at Kiryu. I will return October 10. Fr. Donald Hoag will be in charge while I am away.

LATEST CHANGES IN PERSONNEL--

To St. Francis, New York:

Fr. Malachy Kain, Chaplain at St. Elizabeth's Hospital, N. Y. C.
Fr. Peter Claver Cavanaugh, Chaplain to the Franciscan Brothers at Wyandanch, N. Y.
Fr. Sebastian McKenna, Vicarius Coop. St. Francis.

To Christ the King Seminary:

Fr. Lawrence J. Kidder.

To St. Anthony's, Butler:

Fr. Conradin Rellinger, Assistant Pastor.

To St. Anthony's Arch St.:

Fr. Melory Collier, Procurator.
Bro. Philip Egan.

To Timon High, Buffalo:

Fr. Seraphin A. Sullivan.

Approved for Military Service:

Fr. Roger A. McQuarrie.

St. Bonaventure's, Paterson:

Fr. John M. Sullivan, Chaplain St. Mary's Hospital, Hoboken, N. J. (and Director of Third Order, Newark, N. J.).

Sincerely and fraternally,

Jesus Wheeler, O.F.M.

Minister Provincial