

NOTES ON EARTHQUAKE AT MAYAGUEZ? PORTO RICO

October 11, 1918

by
REV. GEORGE BIEBLEIN, C. SS. R.

Friday, October 11th, St. Fermin's day, at ten fifteen in the morning, Mayaguez suffered a terrible earthquake. It is simply impossible to give an adequate idea of this visitation. The noise was terrifying. It began with an oscillating movement and ended with a trepidation. Everyone ran to the street. A cloud of dust covered the city. People running wild-eyed with blanched countenances. Many hysterical. The Reverend Fathers went at once to the schools, to the hospital, the Asilo de los Pobres, and the Playa (the lower part of the city). Ruins covered the streets everywhere. By a miracle of God's goodness all our children, over 1500, were saved. All the Sisters' lives spared. All the Fathers and Brothers spared. Only Sister Perboyre, who had a bad fall down the stone steps, leading to the patio. She, herself, says she was hurt by the terrible strain of trying to save the children as they went down the stone stairs which jumped and shook like crazy. No bones were broken, but she suffered a severe strain.

The next scare, and perhaps the most terrifying event of the morning was the cry: "Ya se viene el mar!" "a tidal wave is coming!" Automobiles, wagons, cars were crowded going toward the city at full speed. "El mar, el mar. Ya se viene el mar!" Hundreds of terrified men and women, the whole population of the Playa going as fast as they could to the Plaza de Colon, from where they went to the Cuesta de Salud (hill of safety) - how well named - and the Mesa. This exodus of tired, terror stricken Mayaguez was horrifying. And there was reason for fear. Mr. DePass, the Postmaster, told me the other day, that after the earthquake everyone at once had to leave the post office and no one could enter any more, because the place was ruined. Mr. DePass

at once went to the Playa Post Office to close the safe and stow away or save the valuables. Suddenly he noticed that the people were running out in the street. He rushed out and heard the cry: "El mar, el mar!" and went as fast as possible to get into his auto near the Aduana (Internal Revenue Warehouse). By the time he got there the water was a foot deep. He cranked his auto, but just as he wanted to jump in a five foot wave covered him. A small yacht shot past him. A Ford car encased in a packing case was carried along in the water. One of Bianchi big trucks was carried across the street. The water went as far as the Playa Church. So there was great reason to fear.

Now the disaster that overtook the Habanera, the big Cigar Factory, in the first quake became known. That big building, filled with working men crumpled like a cardboard box, dealing death and destruction, crushing the lives out of many.

Another scene of disaster was the Playa Public School, whose thick cement columns crumpled like pieces of chalk. They say eight children, a teacher and a caretaker were killed. There are no safe rules to be followed in earthquakes. The Reverend Fathers who went through this building an hour after the earthquake found some rooms intact, others with the ceiling fallen. Had the teacher remained in the building she would have been saved. She was killed by falling cornices. On the other hand, many of the children were killed by the ceiling falling on them. One teacher, Jose Valez, saved many by an act of heroism. When he saw the ceiling falling he bent over, caught the weight of the metallic ceiling on his shoulders, and thus allowed the children to escape under him.

All the while big black smoke arose from the burning building of the Agricultural College which is a total loss - \$40,000. with many valuable instruments, experiments, library.

The Church towers are cracked, ruined. The College of the Immaculate Conception ruined and St. Vincent's School badly damaged. Candelaria School, Sisters's Convent unsafe, Playa School ruined. Convent of the Siervas de Maria Unsafe. Spanish Sisters's Hospital in ruins. Spanish Colegio unsafe. The houses around the Plaza de Colon badly damaged. Balboa, one of the city wards near the bridge, a mass of ruins. Many houses on Meddez Vigo Street ruined. Playa nearly all in ruins. In all, according to the "Correspondencia" of October 24th, there were 735 houses in Mayaguez demolished. Every old house that was built of masonry is ruined. Only first class buildings stood the test. Wooden buildings as a rule remained standing. Combination of iron and cement structures, like the market place, are also intact. Our house, new and compact, a reinforced concrete structure, is the wonder of the town.

Relief work began at once. At noon when the Sisters had come back from the Mesa, the high hill overlooking the town, the tidal wave scare being over, the Reverend Fathers offered their house as a shelter to the Sisters. They did not want to accept. Some of the Fathers brought coffee to the plaza. The Sisters gave most of this at once to the poor. Then it began to rain. So the Sisters were forced to accept our offer, but all stayed on the kitchen floor, very much terrified. We set down to a little soup and crackers but no one could eat much. In the course of the afternoon when it became known how great was the ruin, the Reverend Fathers offered their house to the authorities for whatever use it could be put to. Toward evening it was published that the Home Guard and the firemen would help to guard the city. We invited all in the services of the city to come at any time in the night for soup and coffee, and offer which was gratefully accepted and made use of. The city was in complete darkness. We had a lantern at the Mendez Vigo Street door, and all night long firemen and Home Guards and relief

workers came to refresh themselves at the Redemptorists' house. It was really a blessing for ourselves and the Sisters as it kept us busy and preoccupied. We used all the coffee we had on hand and our beans, and rice and sugar as well. Then the Sisters gave all the condensed milk they had, and one of the Spanish Sisters who wanted to come. We also had invited the Siervas de Maria whose house was entirely unsafe, but they did not care to leave the shed they were in, a little outhouse of the kitchen in the ^Ward, as they were afraid to pass through their house in the dark, when at any moment another quake might bury them in the ruins.

Spiritual relief was not forgotten. The Fathers went to the Hospital and the Asilo of the Poor and Aged, to the ruins of the tobacco factory and the Yaguez theatre, which had hastily been turned into a hospital, giving general absolution to all and anointed with the short formula all who were in immediate danger.

At midnight we began to say Mass and distributed Holy Communion to the Sisters. We were in constant danger of death. One of the Reverend Fathers went to the Granas' house where the Colegio Sisters and girls of that College were staying, to the Yaguez Theatre that had been converted into a hospital and to the Asylum of the Poor and Aged at midnight to give Holy Communion. We repeated this three or four nights while the great danger lasted. All night long there were constant tremors and we were in constant fear. At half past four in the morning came a big shock which frightened everyone and drove all into the street. Then we were in fear and trembling waiting for the morning. It was a dreadful two hours. A hungry baby was crying, which kept our nerves on edge. Finally one of the Fathers sent back and got some milk and thus the baby was quieted.

When morning came the American Sisters went to the house on our farm as we were determed not to spend another such night in the city.

Meanwhile the work of helping the injured and the general government of the city suffered a kind of paralysis. The Alcalde ^cprotem, Cantio ^cOrtiz, lost his own house and besides did not measure up to the situation. Mr. DePass, as postmaster and Major of the Home Guard took charge of things.

It seems the athoritica in San Juan and the Military only found out as it were by chance, and then did not visualize the extent of the catastrophe.

Mr. DePass had called all the more prominent men for a meeting at the Red Cross headquarters; this however was superseded by the arrival of the ambulance from Las Casas with military aid. Lieuts. Malaret and Font were in charge - we had a kind of meeting but nothing much was done but talk. Meanwhile, Lieuts. Font and Del Valle raking advantage of our offer to help the city in every possible way, looked over our house and decided it would make a magnificent hospital, and at once took over the lower floors.

The Presbyterian Church, having a central location, had been taken over as headquarters by Colonel Shanton, who arrived from San Juan. A meeting was held and some kind of orginization effected; the Red Cross took charge of the expenses of the Base Hospital established at the Parochial House (Casa Parroquial).

All communication with San Juan had been cut off, so it was impossible to tell Father Rector, who had gone there for the Bishop's visitation the day before the earthquake, how serious the situation was. Nobody in San Juan realized the extent of the catastrophe. On Saturday morning we managed to send off a cable to Father Provincial - "Mayaguez Fathers, Sisters, Children, House safe".

The military and Red Cross having taken over the Casa P arroquial as a Base Hospital, the Reverend Fathers spoke to Colonel Shanton about the nurses. We mentioned that Sister Adelaide and Sister Fortunata, veteran nurses of the Spanish war were here and willing to take over the nursing of the sick. Colonel Shanton referred us to Lieut. Font, the doctor in charge, who accepted the generous offer of the Sisters with thanks. So Sister Adelaide was ^s installed as head of the nurses and the Sisters of the Base Hospital. In the afternoon the sick began to arrive and we fetched the Sisters from the farm in a big army ambulande, and so the big work began .

Alejo Llull and his wife Pola de Diego had taken Sisters Perboyre and Rosario out to their fine country home at Palmaris the very first day, where they took excellent care of the Sisters and gave them generous hospitality, and not only to them , but also to other Sisters and Fathers whom they took out to afford them a chance to rest. On Sunday evening Father Rector came Back from San Juan accompanied by Bishop Jones, Father Francisco Vicario, and another priest.

The next day came Rev. Father Visitor Nusstein C.SS.R. and Fathers Braun C.SS.R., and Father Knecht C.SS.R. The two former left with Father Wieniechl S.SS.R. next day. Father Knecht stayed behind until October 30th helping us very much in the parish work. Father Michel C.SS.R. was also here for a few days helping us in our work.

We all settle ~~d~~ down to a kind of routine in the house. The sick, over forty in number, occupied the chapel floor, the American and Spanish Sisters of Charity and Siervas de Maria, the floor above, while the Fathers slept on the ground floor. The Sisters devoted themselves ~~xxxx~~ with a holy zeal to the work of nursing and

only one of the patients died.

I am sorry I am unable to narrate a long list of generous donations but only one, so far as I know, came from Cabo Rojo. Twice we received from there, through the Cruz Roja, 14 chickens and I believe six dozen eggs.

The Cruz Roja generously paid all expenses. For the kitchen alone there must have been some \$300.- \$237.33 of which went through Father Minister's hands, for all of which he accounted with vouchers to the Red Cross. Besides they paid some large bills for groceries, bread and ice, which must have amounted to a few hundred dollars extra.

The routine was punctuated at times by an extra violent shock. I say "extra violent" because I believe the earth has not been wholly quiet since the first shock. Thus we had one on Saturday, October 12th, at four thirty A.M., another or rather several on Sunday night, others on Monday night, that made us all nervous - a big one on the following Friday or Saturday and a tremendous one at ten minutes before midnight of Friday, almost as bad as the first one on Thursday, October 24th. This did a great deal of damage, knocked down some walls, cracked more houses, made more buildings unsafe and took away all confidence from most of the people.

From news papers which we received yesterday we see that the disaster was known in the States as early as October 14th, a fairly accurated account appearing in the Boston Herald.

Not much more remains to tell. By Thursday, October 24th most of the patients at the hospital, Vasa Parroquial, had recovered, only about twelve remaining. These were transferred to the Yaguez, where for the present the Municipal Hospital is established.

The Army left on Saturday morning for San Juan.

We have been relieving by means of a soup kitchen the most pressing wants in Balboa. This was established at the Grand Stand,

where we fed every day on an average of two hundred and fifty persons. Cruz Roja paid most of the bills. Sisters Annie and Rosario, assisted by Miss Aurea Alemany ran this.

Another soup kitchen was established in the Playa under the direction of Sisters Vincent and Bartholomew, which also helped greatly to relieve the extreme need there.

Wednesday, October 30th, it was discovered that there were 30 cases of what the doctors considered Spanish Influenza on Luis Vilella's farm out on the Las Marias Road.

Spanish Influenza also developed in Camp Las Casas near San Juan. At the Bishop's request eight of the Mayaguez American Sisters of Charity went to the Base Hospital at San Juan to nurse the sick. There the regular nurses welcomed them as angels from heaven, because they themselves were too few in number and were completely worn out.

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