

HAYAGUZA, PUERTO RICO

Account of the Earthquakes,

October 11th, 1918.

COLEGIO DE LA MIRACULOSA CONCEPCION

INAYAGUEZ, PUERTO RICO

Since our arrival on the island, August, 1965, we have experienced, at various intervals, slight earthquake shocks causing momentary anxiety, and, perhaps a little fear, but as no destruction or damage ever resulted from these shocks, we paid very little attention to them and they were soon forgotten.

Many times, too, the oppressiveness of the atmosphere in the early morning has called forth the remark, "this seems like earthquake weather," but there never dawned a more beautiful day, and a bluer and more cloudless sky never looked down upon our peaceful little town of Inayaguez than that of October 11th, 1918. So perfect was the day that the children pleaded for a holiday to go to the country, little dreaming that before the morning had passed, they would be forced to abandon the school and flee for their lives from falling walls, beams and bricks, which menaced them on all sides, and without a special intervention of Divine Providence and the visible protection of our dear Lady of the Miraculous Medal, which every child wore, it would have been impossible for fifteen hundred (1500) children, present that day in school, to escape uninjured or alive, from buildings, which in less than half a minute were laid in ruins.

Nothing was ever more unforeseen or less apprehended than the terrible disaster of October 11th.

At 10:15 A. M. the first shock occurred accompanied by a frightful noise and in less time than it takes to tell it, with two or three exceptions, every building in Inayaguez was brought to the ground. The gentlemen in the neighborhood of the school seeing the buildings demolished, ran over to remove the dead bodies as they could not conceive it possible that the children, many of them tiny tots of five or six years, had managed to escape. The men stood in amazement on learning that such was the case.

The shock had hardly subsided when the frenzied parents and relatives came screaming and panic stricken to look for their little ones. They, too, looked upon it as a miracle that not a child had received a scratch. One of our Sisters, in attempting to save her children, fell from the stairway and was badly bruised.

The shocks continuing more or less violent we were forbidden to reenter that remained for our school and home so we wended our way to the Plaza which we found crowded with people

of every description, whom we tried to console and encourage as best we could, kneeling now and then to implore God's mercy and pardon, for it seemed His wrath was upon us. Many thought it was the day of judgment.

While we were there the cry came "Fly to the Mountains! A tidal wave! The ocean is mountain high! The water is rushing madly upon us!" -- At this universal scream or wail rose from the frightened populace, that made the heart stand still within the breast. The people became frenzied, ran about tearing their hair, yelling. Some streaming with blood, some carrying a child with broken legs, or a crushed baby, -- all fleeing towards the mountains, running hither and thither, -- The danger that threatened the city from the tidal wave impelled our good Father Bienlein to give us general absolution before our flight to the mountain.

Two of our Sisters who taught in the Playa, had not yet arrived, so I determined not to leave until I should see them or hear something about them. I sent the others to the Mountain and I waited. Oh, the agony of those moments! Were the two missing Sisters saved? If so, could they make their way amid the debris that blocked the roads? At last they appeared, covered with dust and worn out. My first question-- "The children?" -- "All saved." "And the school?" -- "Down to the ground," -- Another miracle of God's mercy!.....

Fortunately this tidal wave broke farther from the shore and caused less damage than had been apprehended, though it floated autos, huge trucks, boats and houses like bits of paper and carried far out into the sea many homes of our poor people.

The shocks were almost continual all day Friday; there was no place of safety so we remained in the Plaza. Our Sisters returned when they were told that the danger of the tidal wave had passed. Towards night the rain began to fall, the Fathers urged us to take refuge in their large house, which thus far had remained intact. We accepted the offer. However, no one dared venture upstairs. All remained on the ground floor, near the door. At eleven o'clock that night came a violent shock. We ran into the street and at a distance from the house for fear it might fall on us. The huge structure swayed backward and forward; still it stood, but who could tell the condition inside? At midnight Father gave us Holy Communion. After receiving our dear Lord, we felt stronger and fear giving way to compassion for suffering humanity, we reentered the house and set to work making soup and coffee for the hungry and homeless, the Fathers having kindly put at our disposal whatever their pantry contained.

At three thirty (3:30) A. M. came a violent and prolonged shock. Everybody was terrified-- all rushed for the street-- there we remained huddled together in the mud waiting daylight. Oh, the dreadful suspense! Everything seemed to have conspired to make that night most awful. A steady rain, no shelter, utter darkness, even the stars refused to shine so that the very vault of Heaven was hidden from us. One shock succeeding the other in such rapid succession, the earth became more like the "restless sea" trembling continually under our feet, threatening at every instant to bury us in her angry bosom. At times a death like silence prevailed, then again the shrieks of the terrified people, the groans of the wounded, the cry of hungry children. These indeed were agonizing hours. Now we longed for a ray of light! At last that interminable night came to an end -- day broke -- but alas! only to reveal what the mantle of night had concealed. As we wended our way in the direction of the farm out the country, footsore, weary and worn out, we began to realize the full violence of the earthquakes. What desolation! What sights met our gaze on all sides! One could scarcely recognize the way to any place. Where large stores and dwellings once stood there remained but heaps of rubbish and now and then a savage looking remnant of a building which seemed to warn us not to approach too near lest it might fall and crush us. We reached the farm exhausted. We had been on our feet since the morning of the previous day. Scarcely had we been there one hour when a message from the authorities and the Red Cross Society, came, asking us to take charge of a base hospital for the victims of the earthquake, which they wished to organize at once in the Parochial residence, the Fathers having generously offered it for that purpose. Needless to say we accepted. Soon large ambulances came to convoy us to the city, or rather I should say, where the city had been, for now there remained no traces of our once "beautiful Mayaguez."

When we reached the Father's house, another horrible spectacle awaited us-- the wounded were being carried in-- poor mangled forms they were; limbs, heads crushed, disfigured faces. Oh, such sights! This, however, was a blessing in disguise that our Lord had for us, for in presence of so much misery and suffering, we forgot our own and the danger in which we were, to give relief to these poor unfortunates. We labored night and day the Red Cross generously furnishing food, medicines, clothing, etc.

While we were thus engaged in relieving the wounded in doors, the hungry populace out in the streets were clamoring for food which could not be procured. The bakeries and stores had been destroyed; all the provisions that were in the city at the time of the first shock had been buried with the debris, there was nothing, absolutely nothing; and worse, all connections with other cities having been cut off bridges, telegraph wires, rails and tunnels. It took some time to adjust some kind

of transportation. As soon as this was done, the Red Cross again came to the relief, and on the 16th, two soup kitchens were started to relieve the most needy. This good work was also intrusted to us. Four SISTERS went every day for the distribution of the food.

By October 24th many of the patients having sufficiently recovered it was deemed advisable to send them to their families and remove the others to the Yaguen Theatre, a wooden structure that had withstood the earthquake and which the Spanish Sisters had occupied with their sick since the destruction of their hospital on October 11th. By three o'clock that afternoon all our patients were gone and the base hospital closed,- the rest of the evening was spent in straightening things, packing beds, clothing, etc. By night we were pretty tired and for the first time since October 11th we undressed and settled ourselves for a good night's rest. Soon we were "in the land of dream." At ten minutes of twelve we were awakened by the frightful noise and almost dashed from our cots. It was a violent earthquake,- seizing whatever clothing we could we made our way down the stairs which rocked and jumped like crazy. By the time we reached the second floor where the chapel was the shock had subsided. All we could do was to cast ourselves at the foot of the Tabernacle and implore for mercy.

At midnight one of the good Fathers gave us Holy Communion. No more bed, nor sleep for us that night. How grateful we were that our poor patients had gone for the panic would have been frightful, as a good deal of damage was done to the building, much plaster falling where the patients' beds had been, but through another miracle of God's mercy no one was hurt. This shock of the 24th was equal to the one of the 11th. The following day we had to seek new shelter, so for the second time we wended our way to the farm. The little barn being too small to accommodate our number-- fifteen Sisters -- two army tents were given us, also some cots and blankets.

From there we continued our care of the poor and sick, going wherever misery was greater. Hardly three days had elapsed when we were called by the Governor, through our good Bishop, to nurse the soldiers stricken with the influenza, in San Juan. In response eight of our number left immediately for the Capital, where we found two thousand (2000) poor soldiers, several doctors and a number of nurses down with the dreaded disease. Finding our number insufficient to attend to all as the disease was spreading rapidly and new cases were being brought in every day and hour, two more of our Sisters and six Spanish Sisters came to assist us.

We labored night and day, the work was hard, but the results most consoling. The poor soldiers were glad to have us, and we equally happy to be able to alleviate their sufferings.

Compared to the number of grave cases the death rate was small, only fifty-one died and not one without the Sacraments of Holy Mother, the Church.....

As the disease decreased and our services were no longer absolutely necessary, we were able to answer to the cry distress that came to us from other parts of the island where the disease had broken out in all its fury. Our little band here as well as those who had remained in Mayaguez was again divided, four remaining in San Juan, the others scattered about the island where most needed. In all places our Sisters were overburdened for want of help and without the all powerful grace of Almighty God to support us we would have succumbed under the strain.

Towards the end of December the disease abated and once more we returned to our quiet little tents on the farm where we first had taken refuge after the terrible and ever memorable date "October 11th," when our home and schools were laid in ruins.

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February 11th, 1919.

We are still "tenting" out -- still homeless and schoolless. But we were kept busy visiting our poor and sick, and aiding them as much as our scanty means will allow. Everything is still dead, no one has yet found courage to make any effort to build. The earth has never been quiet since the first shock, there are continual tremors and from time to time rather violent shakes. The roaring of the sea, at times deafening, is also a cause of great terror to all, especially at night.

Our dear Sister who was injured during the first shock, is still suffering greatly, not only was she badly crushed and bruised but the collar bone is fractured, the shoulder and arm broken. One can well imagine the tortures she has endured deprived of every necessary comfort and convenience, and for so long a time exposed to the inclemency of the weather, the dampness adding not a little to her sufferings. She has been called to the States by Superiors where we hope she will receive the proper treatment and care her condition so much needed.

Sister Adelaide D'aunoy