

## March 4th

On Sunday, March 4, 1928, a ship carrying five Spanish nuns arrived to Saipan following a five-day voyage from Tokyo.

The group – which included Sisters Loreto Zubia, Inocencia Urizar, Pilar Lorenzo, María Teresa Cortazar and Aurora Chopitea – was met by hundreds of the island's faithful when they came ashore at the old German pier in Garapan.

These sisters were members of the Mercedarian Missionaries of Bérriz (M.M.B), an order founded in the 1920s by Mother Margarita María Maturana who resided in the Basque region of northern Spain. The first overseas M.M.B mission was established in Wuhu, China in 1926.

Original plans called for the five sisters to establish a second M.M.B. mission on Pohnpei which was to be supported by Doña Victorina de Larrinaga, a well-to-do benefactress.

At the last minute, however, Apostolic Vicar of the Marianas and Carolines, Bishop Santiago López de Rego, ordered them to settle on Saipan. There they joined a small group of Spanish Jesuit priests and brothers who had been on Saipan since 1921.

Doña Victorina was unwilling to support the Saipan mission and Mother Margarita found it necessary to solicit needed funding from other sources. A third group of Mercedarians was sent to Pohnpei later in 1928.

For the first few months the sisters found life on Saipan challenging. The heat, a lack of proper housing, the challenge of learning new languages, and the isolation of the mission made their daily living difficult.

Life became easier in October 1928 following the completion of a new two-story convent/school building which was located immediately west of the Catholic Church in Garapan.

By this time, the sisters had organized classes for local girls. In the beginning, students were instructed in sewing and catechism. Later, the sisters also offered private classes in piano, Spanish, drawing, and artificial flower making.

Instruction was also offered to members of the Japanese community including Baptism preparation for Japanese men who planned to marry local women and catechism classes for children of mixed marriages.

Over the next decade, four additional groups of Mercedarian sisters arrived on Saipan to replace those who had been reassigned to other missions.

The outbreak of World War II in the Pacific in December 1941 put an end to normal mission operations. For the next three years the Mercedarians and the Jesuit priests and brothers were effectively cut off from the local community.

Following the invasion of Saipan by U.S. forces in June 1944, the Mercedarians and Jesuits were escorted out of Garapan by Japanese policemen.

For the next several days, they were forced to walk northward during which they were subjected to bombing and strafing attacks. One sister was killed and another seriously wounded along the way. Finally, after reaching the northern end of the island, they took refuge in a cave on a ranch owned by the family of Remedios Castro. There they were rescued by U.S. forces at the very end of the battle and reunited to the rest of the community in Camp Susupe that same day.

Two members of the original group – Sisters Maria Teresa Cortazar and Aurora Chopitea – were the last of the pre-war missionaries to leave Saipan. Sister Maria Teresa left in the late 1950s and Sister Aurora departed in 1960.

Today, 88 years after the arrival of the first M.M.B. to Saipan, there remains a Mercedarian community of Sisters at Maturana in Upper Navy Hill. The community is the retirement community for the Mission Area of Micronesia; theirs is now a ministry of prayer for the island and the whole world. Their apostolate of the Maturana House of Prayer, located in the same compound, is dedicated as a venue for spiritual retreats for both individuals and groups seeking to draw closer to God.



Members of the community line the Pantalan Aleman (German Pier) as they await the arrival of the Mercedarian sisters on March 4, 1928 (Courtesy of Mt. Carmel Cathedral).



The first group of M.M.B. sisters pose for a picture on the day of their arrival on Saipan (Courtesy of the M.M.B. Archive).