

## *No Greater Love Than This: The Life, Sacrifice, & Legacy of Father Sercu, CSSR*

*By Patrick J. Hayes, Archivist, Baltimore Province*

What begets the mark of heroism, when the extraordinary actions of an individual rise to clinch a place in public memory? For Father Raymond Sercu, it was a self-sacrificing love for a fellow human being that continues to conjure the admiration of those who hear or read about him.

Raymond Robert Sercu was born on August 22, 1890 in Rochester, New York. There he became acquainted with the Redemptorists at St. Joseph's Church, where he was baptized and confirmed. Sercu eventually made his profession in the order on August 2, 1915 at St. Mary's College, Ilchester, Maryland and was ordained at Mount St. Alphonsus in Esopus, New York, June 19, 1920.

From the beginning of his priesthood he longed for the missions, but was assigned first to OLPH in Brooklyn where he was assistant to the procurator. In April 1921 he took the place of a priest who became ill and was unable to go to Puerto Rico and set sail



for the island on a “banana boat.”

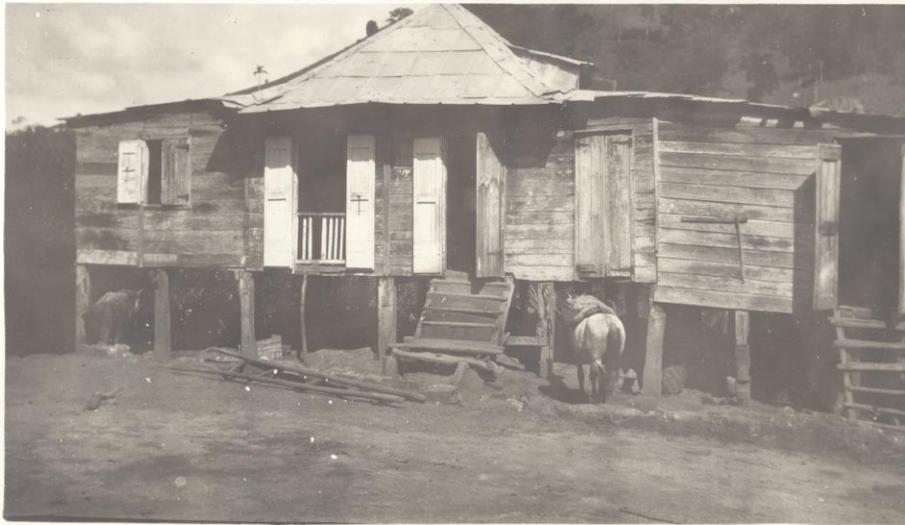
By all extant accounts, he labored zealously on behalf of the Puerto Ricans he met. Sercu had a cousin, Gertrude Dobbartin, who began a youth group at the Redemptorist's St. Boniface Church in Philadelphia. She was so inspired by the letters Sercu sent to her that she changed the name of the youth group in the parish to the “Puerto Rican Missionary Club.” It held card parties, picnics and other events to send funds to her cousin. He, in turn, sent raffle tickets to the club—for a cow that would be given to one of the lucky winners in Puerto Rico.

In the 1920s the missions of Puerto Rico were still largely rural the effects on social and ecclesial life came to a complete halt in the aftermath of a devastating hurricane in 1928. During that event many chapels built by Redemptorists were leveled. Father William Fitzgibbon, a member of the community at Caguas, recalled going out to his outmission: “The first glimpse of my chapel almost stunned me. Not a splinter of wood was left standing—some of the wreckage a thousand feet away—the big, heavy bell landed 150 feet away. After much labor I salvaged a bent-in chalice, my pyx, one soaked water-stained vestment. The rest is simply wreckage. Of our eleven chapels, connected with the Caguas house, nine in Caguas and two in Aguas Buenas, nine are flat to the ground. Accumulation of twelve years work gone.”

A story is related in a letter of Father Sercu's sister, Ethel, when Bishop Edmund Gibbons of Albany visited the island after the *tormenta*. He had come down on a fact-finding mission to assess the damage. Father Sercu accompanied him on horseback

to many of his mission stations. It is not known whether the prelate was motivated by saddle sores or simple charity, but he sent a Ford touring car to Father Sercu shortly thereafter.

It was in that car that Father Sercu decided to take a few members of the Altar Society attached to the church at Aguas Buenas, Los Tres Santos Reyes (an outmission of the community at Caguas until 1926 when Father Sercu took over) to see a



newly constructed chapel in Bayamoncito (the old mission station is pictured above). What began as a pleasant outing turned tragic. Here is the excerpt a transcription from the house annals of Caguas, where Father Sercu was attached as a consultor, relaying the events of June 19, 1929:

A sad day for the Caguas community—and a blow to the Redemptorist work on the Island. About five o'clock in the afternoon, Father Rector [Joseph Lorden] was in conference in our common room with some of the leading Catholic men of the town when he was called to the phone. The startling message was that Father Sercu had been drowned in the campo of Comerio, about one mile east of that town. The meeting was immediately

broken up. Father Rector accompanied by Mr. Manrique left for Comerio post haste. The story of what happened as reconstructed from all told us afterwards is as follows. After dinner, Father Sercu had taken the quasi-sacristan of Aguas Buenas Church, one Providencia, another elderly matron, two girls and a rather young girl to see the new chapel of Bayamoncito.

The mission station near Bayamoncito where a new chapel replaced this structure.

On their visits to this region, Redemptorists lived in this structure. The photograph is c. 1920s.

The short trip developed into a little outing when the girls wanted to continue onwards toward Comerio. Arriving at a suitable spot about one mile from Comerio, they decided to swim,

having brought bathing suits along. Most Porto Rican rivers are harmless, but this stream just at this point narrows and flows thru two high sections of rock, and is both deep and swift. Before long the girls were caught in the current and pierced the quiet country stillness by their cries for help. Father Sercu, minus his coat and one shoe and stocking raced into the stream. One girl grabbed him around the neck, another around the stomach, and all three went down. He never had a chance, tho a fair swimmer. The opinion persists among many that he must have received a blow from the rocks [though another account, relying on a doctor's report, states he died of a cerebral hemorrhage]. At least he never came up. A young fellow, working near the scene,

hearing the appeals for help, rushed to the river bank, and diving continuously rescued one girl [Evelyn Lizardi]. She was badly knocked out, but finally resuscitated. After some time, the other girl, Cristina Zayas, was recovered, but too far gone to be relieved and revived. Father Sercu was brought up last—one account saying that he had been down about an hour and a half. The incident took place at 3:15 P.M. Efforts on the part of a doctor from Comerio to bring him back proved unavailing. A Dominican Father from Comerio administered Extreme Unction and the body was taken to their residence in Comerio [to await] the Fathers from Caguas. We were informed only when the whole affair was over. News was immediately sent to Father [Vice Provincial Joseph] Murphy, who relayed the sad notice to the States. San Juan Fathers were in Aguas Buenas quite early. The town of Aguas Buenas received the news with consternation. Father Sercu by his untiring zeal and interest in their welfare had come to endear himself to the people of the town, as perhaps few other priests have been able to do in their respective parishes in the history of Porto Rico. His body, returned to Aguas Buenas, was placed in the Church, and the Fathers and people kept vigil thru a long, sad night. One of the house servants, Lorenzo Medina, rode to Canaboncito, Anon, and San Salvador, to notify the Fathers. He reached his first stop around midnight.

The three Fathers in the country, having come home by seven in the morning of July 20 [sic], all the community repaired to Aguas Buenas for the funeral Mass at 9:00 A.M. All of the Caguas and San Juan communities were present. Many religious Orders sent representatives, a number of



secular priests arrived in time for the Mass. Monsignor Torres came in person; Bishop [Edwin] Byrne, not having as yet made his official entry into his new diocese of San Juan, sent condolences and a delegation of five priests. Solemn Office of the Dead was recited before the Solemn Requiem Mass. Very Reverend Father Vice-Provincial preached a touching eulogy. The final blessing was given by Monsignor Torres. Outside the Aguas Buenas Church the funeral procession to Caguas started. It was interrupted when leaving the town by the “duels.” One of the men of the parish spoke, and the general opinion of the Fathers was that it was the most stirring and plaintive piece heard in their lives. Literally there was not a dry eye in the place. Father Sercu had owned Aguas Buenas. The procession to Caguas numbered more than thirty cars. Dinner at Caguas, another Libera followed in the Caguas Church at

2:30. Mr. Manrique spoke in the name of the people of Caguas. Father Rector had the Libra [sic] and spoke a few words. Some thirty cars accompanied the hearse to Puerta de Tierra for the third and last Libra [sic]. Father Sercu having labored in Puerta de Tierra in his early days in Porto Rico, the Church was filled and genuine grief evident. The first part of the funeral procession was on foot to Santurce. The funeral cortege out from Puerta de Tierra was larger than ever. At the grave, Monsignor Torres arrived on the scene again, in time to give the final blessing. A member of the Knights of Columbus of San Juan spoke a few final words of eulogy. Then we quietly returned home and in the quiet and rest that followed, we were able to appreciate for the first time the terrible blow with which God had seen fit to strike us and the work in Porto Rico. Aguas Buenas will feel the loss keenly. To the people of the town and the campo he was a friend, doctor and lawyer, but first of all priestly Father. He had put the fiath in Aguas Buenas once more on its feet. The new Church he erected for the town is his monument. The one quality that stood out most prominently in the virtues that made up Father Sercu was his untiring zeal. He never seemed to weary. His uniform good nature was also striking. Of course the great virtue of charity was the mainspring of these two admirable qualities. R.I.P.

Father Sercu's devotion to Puerto Rico was first instilled through letters of his mother's cousin, Father Charles Hoff, C.Ss.R. (pictured here at right), who had been on the mission there and was known as the "slum padre." He was later the rector of San Alfonso Retreat House in West End, New Jersey. Co-incidentally, Father Hoff also died from drowning while swimming in the Atlantic.

Almost immediately after his arrival in Puerto Rico in 1922, he endeared himself to

the people. His initial assignment was to San Augustin in Puerta de Tierra but he made his mark in Aguas Buenas where, together with Father Braun, he helped out for Sunday services beginning in June 1924, only to be relieved of the responsibility by a Benedictine. In January 1925 the opinion of the then-Bishop Jorge José Caruana was sought by the Vice-Provincial, Father Joseph Murphy, what he thought of using \$5000—a gift of a Mr. Knap of Rochester—to build a chapel for the high school in Caguas. The



bishop thought it impractical and suggested it be used for a chapel in Aguas Buenas. "It's too bad you are not still in charge of Aguas Buenas; that would be a good place for a chapel." Murphy reminded the bishop that he was the one who took Aguas Buenas away from the Redemptorists and so in January 1925 an arrangement was made to make the town a mission of the Redemptorists at Caguas, though the Benedictines would be relieved of their duties only after Holy Week. Several

months of further delays meant that Father Sercu was in limbo. By October 1925 the chancery sent word that Father Sercu and the Redemptorists would serve the people of Aguas Buenas from Caguas. In the Annual Report for 1926 the Caguas community counted Father Sercu as a consultor (a position he held intermittently until his death) and the following



year he poured himself into the work of building a new church—an edifice that fronted on a picturesque plaza (demolished in 1969). He came back to the mainland for fundraising in May 1927 and returned with a purse that finished the job. When news of his demise reached the ears of Father Provincial James Barron, he recorded the contents of the cable sent to him about the matter: “Body recovered, funeral Thursday, death heroic, circumstances edifying.” Father Sercu today reposes in the Porta Coeli Cemetery in Bayamón next to his confreres who also spent their lives in service to the people of the Island.