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Belizean Religious Sister Celebrates 50 Years Of Service To God's People And To The Church

By Deacon Nieves Hernandez



On Saturday, 15th August 2009, on the Feast of the Assumption of Our Lady, Sister Mary Avila Avila, OSP, celebrated fifty years of religious life. The celebration took place at Our Lady of Mount Providence Convent in Baltimore, Maryland.

Sr. Avila Avila is the daughter of the late Peter Avila Sr. and Sotera Nicholas Avila. Teacher Avila, her dad, taught her throughout her elementary education in the Catholic Schools in the villages of Corozal, Cayo and Orange Walk Districts.

Upon passing the Primary School Leaving Certificate Exam, Ligeria Rose Avila moved to Belize City to attend St. Catherine's Academy and graduated in 1958.

It was in high school that she met Sr. Felicia Avila, OSP, sister of the late Fr. Martin C. Avila and Sr. Aquinas Heusner, OSP and began discerning religious life. In the fall of 1959, Rose Avila left Belize for Baltimore, Maryland to enter the Religious Community of the Oblate Sisters of Providence.

She served God's people as an elementary school teacher and Catechist in a number of Catholic Schools including Baltimore, Maryland; Washington, D.C; Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic; Orangeburg and Charleston, South Carolina; Norfolk, Virginia; Wilson, South Carolina, Chicago, Illinois, Buffalo, New York, and Miami, Florida. Today, she is assigned at the Motherhouse in Baltimore, where she continues to do private tutoring to elementary students and chauffeurs the Sisters of her community to their doctors' appointments.

While Sr. Avila never served in her homeland of Belize, she was able to spend many summers in catechetical ministry in the communities of Seine Bight and San Ignacio. "I felt deep joy in being able to serve in my homeland as I ministered to some of the youth of Belize. I am thankful to the Almighty to have had this opportunity."

The Jubilee Celebration commenced with a special Mass in the beautiful Chapel. She was joined by four other Sisters, Sr. Dolorosa Bundy, OSP, Sr. Mary Annunciata Fernandez, OSP, Sr. Magala Marie Gilbert, OSP, and Sr. Marian Spearman, OSP, all of whom were celebrating sixty years of religious life. Monsignor Damien Nalepa, Pastor of Saint Gregory the Great Church in Baltimore, Maryland was the celebrant and was joined by over twenty five priests who concelebrated and two deacons who assisted. Among the clergy was Fr. Gerard Balinnya a friend of the Avila's who traveled from London and I, Deacon Nieves Hernandez, a cousin, who traveled from Yuma Arizona with my daughter, Denise. Also, on the altar was Bishop Lambert Bainomugisha, an Auxiliary Bishop from the Archdiocese of Mbarra in Uganda, Africa, a friend of Sr. Avila and her family. Bishop Lambert travelled all the way from East Africa to join in the celebration.

As the celebration began, Sr. Avila and the other Jubilarians processed into the Chapel. Sr. Avila was escorted by her two sisters, A. Magna Avila Gibbs and Joannem Avila Baker. Later during the liturgy, Sr. Avila renewed her vows and rededicated herself to continue serving God and Holy Mother Church. The homilist was Fr. Lowell Case, Pastor of Our Mother of Mercy Church in Houston, Texas. In his homily, Fr. Case spoke about the wonderful contributions that Sr. Avila had made to the Church. He praised and commended her for leaving her homeland of Belize to serve God's people in the United States. He thanked and acknowledged the hundred or so Belizeans who had come to celebrate with Sr. Avila. This simple gesture of recognition drew a thunderous applause from the congregation.

Many of Sr. Avila's family and friends had come from all over the United States to celebrate this special day with her. Among them were her two sisters, her brother Dr. Marvin Avila who traveled with their families from Los Angeles, California; and her eldest brother, Peter Avila Jr. and family from St. Louis, Missouri.

She was also joined by several cousins who had traveled from New York, Washington, D.C., Maryland, Arizona, California, and New Jersey. One such person was Mrs. Violet Olivas, who traveled from New York City. "I have been looking forward to this day for months," she said. "This day has been on my calendar since I was first invited to come to Baltimore to celebrate with my cousin, Sr. Avila. It was a beautiful celebration- one fitting for someone who had given fifty years of herself to God and to Our Church. I am indeed proud of her," she concluded.

Following the Jubilee Mass everyone was invited to a scrumptious reception which had been prepared to honor the Jubilarians. When asked to summarize the event, her sister, A. Magna Avila Gibbs had this to say. "I picture my parents and grandparents smiling from heaven with pride and great joy as they witness their five children continue the rich Catholic Family Tradition that they so loved and instilled in us--their children. The soprano voice of my sister, Gloria, must be filling the heavens with the praises of Sr. Avila's 50th anniversary as she leads our ancestors and the heavenly hosts in songs of joy."

Writer's notes:

1. Sr. Mary Avila and I, Deacon Nieves Hernandez, are second cousins.
2. There are two other Belizean sisters in the Order of the Oblate Sisters of Providence: Sr. Claudina Sanz from San Ignacio and Sr. Julia Apolonio from Punta Gorda. For more information about the Oblate Sisters of Providence go to: <http://www.oblatesisters.com>. You may also consult the December 1, 2008 issue of Ebony Magazine where the Oblate Sisters of Providence are featured in an article called "Walking with God" written by Kevin Chappell.
3. **Discerning religious life?????** <http://www.oblatesisters.com/Vocations.html>
4. Deacon Nieves Hernandez, his sisters, along with several relatives and friends, are planning a celebration for Sister Avila in New York City on 26 and 27 June 2010 as she continues celebrating her jubilee year. This celebration will be unique in nature. It will have a Garifuna flavor. It will also be an opportunity for family and friends to honor Sister Avila, and celebrate her great service to God and to his people. Everyone is invited to this celebration. If you would like to be kept abreast of the planning and specifics of this glorious event, periodically check the following website <http://www.sungarifuna.com/SisterAvila> or you may send an e-mail to sisteravilamass@yahoo.com.