**BIENVENIDA VELEZ, RSCJ**

March 22, 1924 – November 14, 2015

Bienvenida Velez (known affectionately as “Charlie”) was born on March 22, 1924, in Caguas, Puerto Rico, to Venancia Aponte of Puerto Rico and José Nicolas Velez of Spain. She was one of thirteen children, five boys and eight girls, growing up in a beautifully united family. She attended a country school run by the Notre Dame nuns, and grew to love the nuns. When she went to a school run by the Sisters of Saint Anne as a volunteer, she learned about the Society of the Sacred Heart. And so, at age sixteen, she applied and entered the Society as a Coadjutrix Sister at Santurce, on January 1, 1941. She reported this as a sad moment for her parents. Her sister, Ambrosia, had entered the Dominicans. Another sister, Andrea, had also become an RSCJ.

Bienvenida pronounced her first vows in the Society on August 28, 1943, then spent the next five years in Ponce, where she helped out in the Vestry, with the community clothing, and in the Poor School, teaching little ones Religion and sewing. In 1950 Bienvenida moved to Santiago, Cuba—a very happy time, she recalled-- where she was once again *vestiaire*. It was reported that “she made it her responsibility to help the people she worked with.” During this time she made her probation and profession of final vows in the Society on January 21, 1950.

In 1961, when Fidel Castro expelled nuns from Cuba, Bienvenida and Thais Ascanio, RSCJ, moved to Miami, where they lived with the Sisters of the Assumption during the Bay of Pigs incident, while awaiting their return to Cuba. Instead, Bienvenida was sent back to Ponce as *vestiaire* and cap-maker.

After a short interval in Ponce, Bienvenida responded to the call of Reverend Mother Bultó for missionaries to the new foundation in Miami; she offered and was chosen. She had learned English during her formal years of education, and now she began ministry at Carrollton, the new Sacred Heart school, where a mixed community of English and Spanish-speaking RSCJ was formed. She found herself in charge of housecleaning and the refectory. Someone commented, “Being charged with housekeeping, it became her mission to teach others and to educate any of the lay workers she was associated with.” As Bienvenida said, “Coming to the United States I found myself in charge of everything…I ‘grew up’ in the Society. If I found someone to teach, I worked with them, even helping them to read and write and how to frill caps.” Here she stayed for ten happy years.

Sister Anne Dyer, who lived with Bienvenida at Carrollton in the 60s, stated, “I spent three wonderful, happy years with Bienvenida. Some of the nuns, who found her name difficult to say, started calling her ‘Charlie’ as in ‘Charlie Brown,’ the comic book character.” She was far too gracious to say, ‘I don’t like it,’ but if you asked her which she preferred, she would tell you that she preferred her own name. “I remember her as the *vestiaire* at Carrollton. When I arrived from the juniorate, an aspirant in black winter habit in the middle of August, she had me in a light cotton habit by the next day! She also made all the white habits for the community as soon as we received permission from the Mother House to make the change. What a blessing that was, and what a blessing *she* was! In those early days, our community was half Latina and half Anglo. We truly blended cultures. She helped to make that happen.”

In 1973, after Religious of the Sacred Heart were no longer cloistered, Bienvenida and

and a group of RSCJ left for Naranja in Homestead, Florida, where, while living a very frugal life, they did parish ministry at Saint Anne’s Mission, working with migrants. She also was parish secretary.

Then in 1979, Bienvenida and Rosa Orjuela, later joined by Mercedes Posada, moved to La Belle, Florida to live and work among poor migrants. Bienvenida was in charge of both English and Spanish CCD. As she described this time, “I had the joy of spending these years in pastoral ministry, charged with the CCD classes, helping the migrants. What I appreciated was the fact that people in authority showed confidence in me and in anyone who was still learning.” She stated her call as “to give witness in La Belle and to continue to be more involved here in hopes that we might be role-models to others, especially by being very considerate of those we live with.” When asked what her wishes for the future were, she said, “to see that as RSCJ we continue to show confidence in members still learning, to see that we keep the spirit of Saint Madeleine Sophie and our charism alive, and to be very open to change.” These were very happy years in the lives of all three Sisters, who were joined in 1985 by Madeleine Desloge, an American RSCJ who spoke only English. Community life worked well, because the Spanish-speaking religious made every effort to communicate in English, while Madeleine did her best with Spanish. Madeleine devoted herself to parish life, working largely with English-speaking members of the parish. They became best of friends.

It was in 1995 that a great tragedy interrupted the happy lives of the sisters in La Belle. Two of them, Rosa and Mercedes, lost their lives very suddenly in an auto accident, which was no fault of the RSCJ driver. The whole town of La Belle was in mourning. At the funeral Mass, not only was the bishop of the area the celebrant, but thirty-one priests from southern Florida concelebrated. All the Knights of Columbus were also present. Our La Belle mission was never to be the same. Although two or three RSCJ from around the United States volunteered to fill in at La Belle, the Society’s mission there was not destined to survive. In 2004, the Religious of the Sacred Heart withdrew from this wonderful Florida mission.

At this point, Bienvenida went to stay with her sister, Ambrosia, who lived nearby, was ill and needed assistance. Ambrosia was no longer a Dominican, so she lacked the support of a community. Bienvenida stayed with her until her death in 2008. At this time, Bienvenida made the decision to move to Oakwood. Although she reported a great fear of earthquakes, she moved to Oakwood on February 27, 2008, and soon fell totally in love with her new home. She became well known for her beautiful hand-made articles, especially beautiful crocheted baptismal dresses and caps, blankets and booties for babies. She was a master at every kind of needlework until her hands would no longer cooperate and she had to give it up. Another love, animals: cats, birds, squirrels, goats, all animals… To the end, “Jesse,” her faithful, beautiful goldfinch sang for her.

Reflecting on her life’s journey, Bienvenida spoke of multiple physical problems, yet she heroically offered herself to a path of service for over fifty years. Those who knew her spoke of how she was venerated and loved by all those she lived with or served. Her quiet leadership evoked respect; her gentle, peaceful, and loving personality drew people wherever she was. In filling out a “Getting to Know You” questionnaire at Oakwood, Bienvenida reported that her “favorite ministry” was working with migrant workers; her favorite place in the world was “where I am;” and “something you might not know about me” as “that I don’t feel old.” In many ways Bienvenida never grew old. Despite all her illnesses, her spirit remained alive as long as she lived. After several months of hospice care at Oakwood, during which she gradually declined, she went to God very peacefully on November 14, 2015. At her request, her dear friend from her days in La Belle, Father Victor Caviedes, came from Fort Myers to celebrate her funeral on December 15, 2015.