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## The Saints in Puerto Rico

By Orson Scott Card



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... where new converts lead the Church with a lifetime's worth of dedication to the gospel.

In 1970—only eight years ago—the first Spanish-speaking branch, a dependent one, was organized in Puerto Rico. Now, six *independent* Spanish-speaking branches and one predominantly English-speaking branch flourish on that Caribbean island. And on 20 November 1977, the first all-Puerto Rican district presidency was sustained.

What does that *really* mean? It means that the Church in Puerto Rico is no longer limited to the American military personnel who happen to be stationed there. The growing strength of the Church is now among the Puerto Rican people.

Sister Lucila B. DeMobbille joined the Church in San Juan, Puerto Rico's capital, in 1969, when the island's first chapel was under construction. "It was January when two young men knocked on my door, saying they were Mormons," she recalls. "They were getting to know their neighbors. Imagine! They considered me their neighbor, and that made me very happy. I had a good feeling about these young men, so I listened to them. Little did I know that I would be the first person to be baptized in the baptismal font in the new chapel."

Sister DeMobbille has seen the Church spread among her fellow Puerto Ricans. "When I joined the Church, there were six active Puerto Ricans, a Mexican family, and a Cuban sister—all the rest were Continentals [English-speaking Americans]. But now we have complete Puerto Rican branch presidencies in both branches in San Juan! My testimony grows more every day because I know my Heavenly Father has blessed me since the day I met my neighbors, the Mormons."

Puerto Rico became part of the United States during the Spanish-American War in 1898. Since then it has been a territory, gradually acquiring more self-government over the years. Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens.

Although among U.S. states only Delaware and Rhode Island are smaller in area than Puerto Rico, the island has more than three million people—more people than either New Zealand or the Republic of Ireland!

First colonized in 1508 by Juan Ponce de León—the same man who hunted for the fountain of youth in Florida—Puerto Rico has been settled by Europeans longer than any other part of the United States. The name means "rich port," and indeed the bay at San Juan is an excellent harbor.

Today, Puerto Ricans have a closer relationship to the continental U.S. than ever before. As of 1970, more than 1.8 million people of Puerto Rican ancestry lived in the United States, and many others have lived in the continental U.S. and then returned to Puerto Rico. This can cause problems for the growth of the Church, however—part of the reason most of the Puerto Rican Saints have been members for fewer than two years is that many of the older converts have emigrated to the mainland to go to school or pursue better employment opportunities. This makes Puerto Rico's recent growth all the more remarkable: In January of 1976, there were 963 members in Puerto Rico, while in May 1977, only a year and a half later, there were 1,306 Saints in the San Juan Puerto Rico District, including the 19 Church members at the U.S. military base near Guantanamo, Cuba.

The influence of the Spirit has been obvious as the Church has grown in Puerto Rico. When missionaries first came to Caguas, a city of about 70,000 people, they had a hard time finding a meetinghouse for the tiny branch. Then a nonmember, a master carpenter, happened to see the Church meetinghouse in Bayamon, and became interested in the Church. He lived in Caguas, and when he found out that the missionaries needed a meetinghouse, he offered to let them use his shop. The missionaries thanked him, but the room was too narrow.

So Brother Laguna led them out of his carpentry shop to a little Spanish-styled house behind it, with arched windows and an arched door, a beautiful walnut-stained balcony and stained glass windows. There were no

partitions inside the house—it was just one big room.

“Will this do?” he asked.

The missionaries had a hard time containing their excitement as they told him yes. And it wasn't long before Brother Laguna joined the Church.

The Corteses were the first full family to be baptized in the Caguas Branch; and though they have since emigrated to Hollywood, Florida, they have fond memories of their conversion and baptism in Puerto Rico. Sister Cortese, afraid that her husband might be furious if he discovered she was investigating the Mormon Church, hid her *Meet the Mormons* book. All in vain—Brother Cortese found it anyway, and read it through. But instead of getting angry, he got interested, and they began the spiritual journey to conversion—which included a mad search for white clothing that would fit Brother Cortese, a very large man, for his baptism at the beach near Humacao.

Puerto Rican culture combines the slower-moving, warmly emotional culture of the original Spanish settlers with the businesslike efficiency sought after by Continentals who have worked there over the last eight decades. That emotional character, points out one member, means that many who join the Church are truly responsive. “When the prophet said to grow a garden, they grew gardens!” she said. “And food storage is coming well. Some have even installed their own water systems. Many of these new converts have moved away from the overdependence on credit that sometimes plagues Puerto Ricans, because Church leaders advise staying out of debt.”

This commitment means a willingness to sacrifice for the gospel. Many have struggled to make that visit to the temple—much easier now that the Washington D.C. Temple is only 1,600 miles away, half the distance to the Salt Lake Temple.

That opportunity was very sacred to Ivan Rodriguez, a young adult baptized by his father in 1974, after his father had been a member for two years. “On June 14, 1975, I had the opportunity to visit the Washington Temple,” he remembers. “There I was sealed to my parents. It was a very special experience.”

Another testimony is borne by Sister Neida Iris Pagan of the Arecibo dependent branch: “Three and a half years ago I was going to have surgery wherein I would probably lose a kidney. Some friends of mine asked me if I would like to receive a blessing for my health, and explained to me what it was. I accepted very happily.” When it came time for her surgery, it was not necessary to remove the kidney, and in her gratitude she began to investigate the Church. She soon joined the Church as did her sisters, and Sister Pagan was able to go to Florida last year to receive her patriarchal blessing.

As many as eighty-five missionaries at a time have worked on the island during the seventies—but in the last year, as Puerto Ricans became actively involved in the proselyting work, the Florida Ft. Lauderdale Mission was able to reduce the number of missionaries to sixty, with the members taking up the slack. The Church is gradually becoming better known for its high standards, and building sites are being purchased for new chapels while plans go ahead for the island's second chapel in Ponce.

What difference does the Church make in a Puerto Rican member's life? “All the difference in the world,” they gladly say. Sister Gracias Maria Jimenez found the Church at a difficult time in her life; but when she came out of the waters of baptism, “I was tranquil. I felt clean. I was at peace with myself.” And when she was called to be a teacher in the Sunday School, she found to her surprise that she loved teaching children. Since then she has pursued graduate work and is now a teacher in academic subjects as well. She will never forget, she says, the moment when the Spirit first touched her. “When I knelt, to ask humbly for strength to change my life, at that moment I felt the comfort of the Lord giving my soul the warmth of his love, reassuring my spirit. This was the answer from my Heavenly Father—that he lives and forgives us, and that his Son, Jesus Christ, lives, and that the Holy Ghost is the marvelous protector of our souls who helps and guides us in our spiritual progress.”

And that is the message of the Spirit to all the Saints, wherever they live and whatever language they speak.

[illustration] Illustrated by Parry Merkley

[photo] In the quorums, young Puerto Rican priesthood holders prepare to serve as missionaries to their friends and neighbors.

[photo] Young members of the Church in Puerto Rico learning hymns of praise—in Spanish now more often than in English.

[photo] For years most of the members were servicemen from the mainland United States; now the missionaries are carrying the gospel to the local citizens.

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