

Profile in Mercy: Sister Inés Villani

Growing up in Buenos Aires, Sister Inés Villani's education promoted freedom and focused on the importance and responsibility of work.

Her parents enrolled her in Santa Brigida School, a Catholic elementary school in Buenos Aires, mostly attended by the children of the Irish immigrants. The school encouraged creativity, promoted play, and emphasized education and work. The students were even responsible for cleaning the school. After finishing high school, Inés worked as an English teacher and continued studying.

While enduring the military dictatorship in Argentina (1976-1983) and teaching at different Mercy schools Inés had to make the hardest decision of her life and leave the schools behind to escape repression. "We were in the middle of bombs, very scared. It was chaos, but we were able to learn Mercy from another perspective."

Together with other Sisters of Mercy, they relocated to the north of the country, in one of the poorest areas - the Chaco - and then moved to the northwest and south. "We were in Chaco for a short time because we sisters were subjected to enormous persecution. Many sisters escaped at night facing a very hard road, but nevertheless, amid all that repression, we found a new life, and that was a very strong milestone for me".

Sister Inés, together with Sisters Norma Beatriz Fernández and Susana, discerned and arrived in Clorinda, Formosa - very close to Chaco -, where poverty was immense. "Our approach was always to ask ourselves what we are learning from all this, from such poverty. My conclusion is that the richness was in the people."

The sisters built the neighborhood together with the people, they laid the bricks and did everything that needed to be done. The presence of mercy is still alive today in the Ñande Roga Guazú, a community center providing programs and support for women, youth, and children especially those in vulnerable situations.

After six years, Sister Inés returned to the capital city to learn ways to deal with mental health issues and family violence. She developed a community center to help women who were victims of violence. The bonds that were created at that time are still maintained.

"I always held the poor in my soul, I did not understand why, but it was the most beautiful mystery that I still think of today," says Sister Inés. "God has always placed that fidelity in my life because only God can sustain someone in a life option and give you the grace to be able to walk in their presence with a spirit of mercy. Then, everything comes together in God, not in us."