

Zeal for the poor consumes her

Alicia Marill, founder of Amor en Accion, sees her life as mission

Ana Rodriguez-Soto

MIAMI

Alicia Marill speaks in calm, measured tones. Her words convey peace. But zeal for the poor burns within her, and her actions speak volumes about the love of God.

She is a teacher by training, a missionary by vocation. Three or four times a year, she travels to the hinterlands of Haiti — bumping along rocky, mountainous, winding roads; sleeping on earthen cots; sharing a meager meal of grapefruit with poor villagers and their priests.

She and other members of the group she co-founded, *Amor en Accion* (Love in Action), bring them rice, seeds, medicines and cash to pay for teachers' salaries and school children's meals.

More importantly, perhaps, they bring hope — a word of love from Miami to a people whose misery seems eternal, in a diocese so remote that, when famine strikes, the world takes no notice.

It is a giant undertaking for a tiny charity. But Ms. Marill sees it in far simpler terms. "If we send enough money, they can eat every day. If we send less money, the children eat two or three times a week."

It is this mingling of the personal and the charitable that sets apart *Amor en Accion*. Ms. Marill is similarly unique: Helping the poor is not a sideline. It is her life's mission.

"She lives for justice, social justice. That's what motivates her," says her close friend, Josefina Chirino.

Lay vocation

A single woman who shares a house with her parents, Ms. Marill views her missionary work as a lay vocation: "to live here in Miami as a bridge and reminder of the universality of our faith."

She discovered it in 1973, in the outskirts of Bogota, Colombia. But it began taking shape earlier, while growing up in Miami as a Cuban refugee.

Her family left Cuba in 1961. Her mother was pregnant with her youngest sister. Her father had been detained in Cuba as punishment for speaking up for some women who were being roughed up by the police.

At 12, Ms. Marill was the oldest of three. She remembers walking 14 blocks each day to get to school, and looking, with her younger brother and sister, for empty bottles to earn extra money for lunch.

"You would get two cents each. It was valuable money," she recalled.

She remembers feeling culture shock, going from a Catholic school in Cuba to a public school here, being sent back a grade, having to learn a new language.

"It made me more aware of the needs of others," Ms. Marill says. "Not to be understood, not to be financially solvent, to have to struggle since an early age."

Eventually, she also came to recognize the deep faith she had inherited from her family.

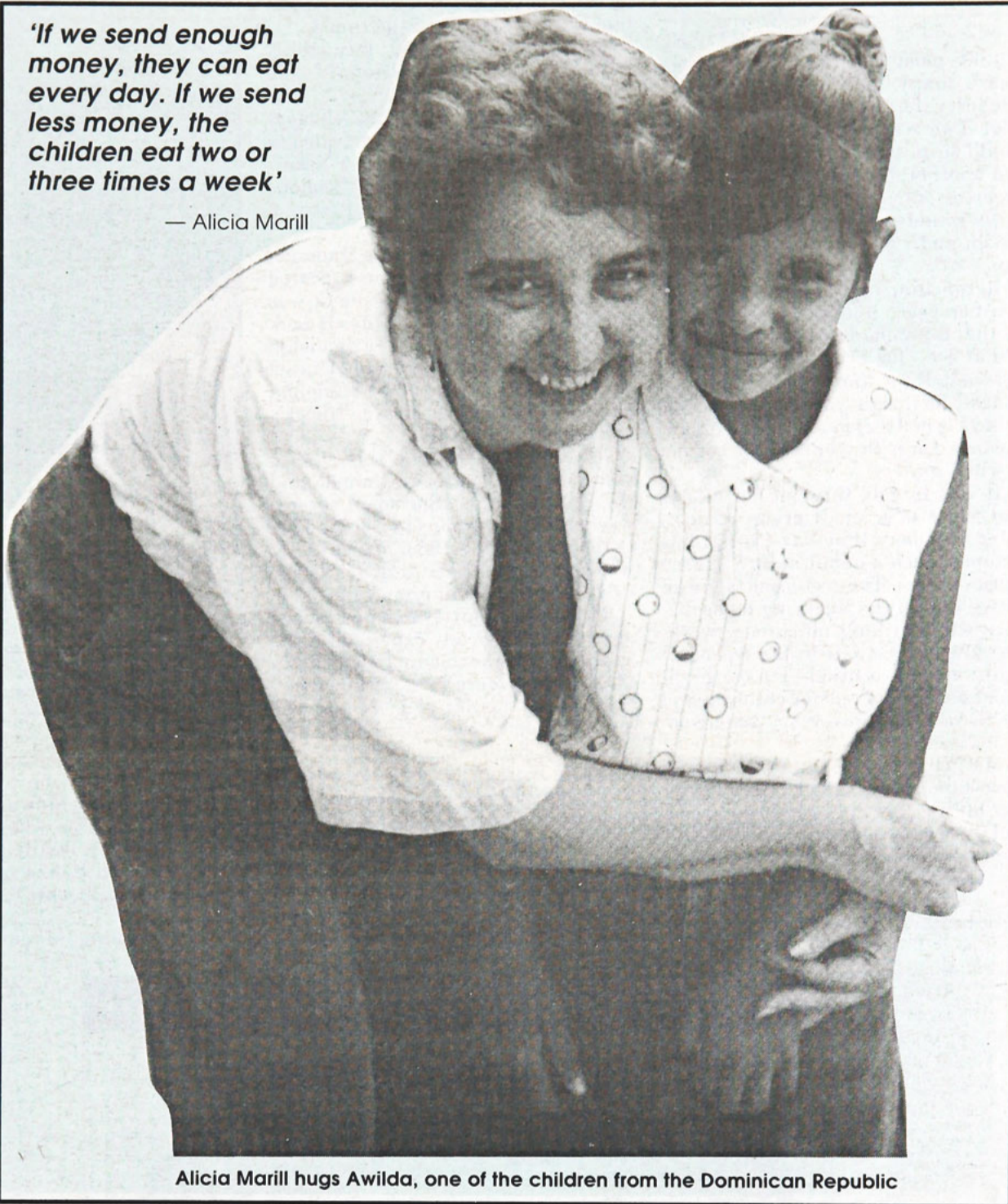
"It was a very courageous decision of my parents to separate, because they knew if we didn't take that opportunity we would have had to stay behind. I'm convinced it was their faith that got them through. They were convinced they would pull through no matter what. They believed that God would eventually unite us all."

Her father did arrive seven months later, as part of a U.S.-brokered exchange: medicines for prisoners.

Then, in 1972, as she was about to graduate

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— Alicia Marill



Alicia Marill hugs Awilda, one of the children from the Dominican Republic

from Florida Atlantic University, Ms. Marill met the Sisters of the Apostolate at St. Michael's Parish in Miami.

That's when her faith took on a totally new dimension, she says. "It just focused my life. From here on, my life became a conscious decision to live according to my faith. It became a commitment."

Missionary experience

Yearning for a missionary experience, she spent a month working with the sisters in the outskirts of Bogota, Colombia.

"That was the clincher," Ms. Marill recalled. "I cried a lot, and it was not sadness. I was overwhelmed at realizing why God had given me the eyes to see both worlds" — one of power and abundance, the other of poverty and injustice.

"Those people showed me that I was significant in the eyes of God. That gave me a tremendous sense of responsibility. It was they who taught me," Ms. Marill says.

A year later, she went to the Dominican Republic as a full-time missionary, again working with the Sisters of the Apostolate.

She taught in a school for 1,000 children in Guandules, on the outskirts of Santo Domingo, capital of the Dominican Republic. The children, she recalls, were constantly asking her for aspirin. "Their heads hurt because they had spent one or two days without eating."

When she returned to Miami, she started selling doughnuts after Masses at St. Michael, hoping to raise money to build a cafeteria for the kids in Guandules.

That's when she met Adriano Garcia, co-founder of *Amor en Accion*. He, too, had just come back from a Jesuit-sponsored missionary trip to the Dominican Republic.

They joined forces, and were invited to speak about their experiences at area Cursillo groups. They raised \$20,000, and 11 months later the

■ MARILL

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cafeteria was built.

But they needed to continue raising funds to stock it, so in 1976 they formed an organization. Inspired by Mother Teresa's words about putting love into action, they called their group precisely that: *Amor en Accion*.

To this day, its core leaders are Ms. Marill, Mr. Garcia, and Ms. Marill's closest friends from the St. Michael youth group, Lourdes Rovira and Ms. Chirino, both of them also teachers.

Animated by the spirituality of the poor, the group has no office, only a post office box, files and pictures of their missionary trips stored in members' homes.

From the beginning, they emphasized person-to-person charity, love on a small scale. Their frequent missionary trips involve not just taking material goods, but sharing spiritual experiences with those they help.

Ms. Marill says her faith is nurtured by seeing "the perseverance, the hope, the joy and faith these people have. There is a wisdom in their lives from which we learn."

Helping Haiti

In 1979, *Amor en Accion's* focus expanded to include the Diocese of Port-de-Paix in remote northwestern Haiti, which Archbishop Emeritus Edward A. McCarthy had adopted as Miami's sister diocese.

Home to about 500,000 people dispersed among 20 parishes in isolated villages, Port-de-Paix is a place "abandoned by nearly every institution," Ms. Marill says.

Currently, 15 of its 20 parishes, about 20,000 of its people, are experiencing famine. Yet aid from international relief agencies is not getting through.

"We are the most significant source of help to Port-de-Paix," says Ms. Marill. "While that is very honoring, it's also very sad. Because what we are doing does not suffice in

the least for all the needs they have."

Currently, *Amor en Accion* supports 6,000 children in Haiti and the Dominican Republic. The group sends about \$100,000 each year to pay for teachers' salaries and school lunches, as well as medical supplies or whatever else is needed.

The money is raised through a sister-school program which pairs 10 archdiocesan schools with 20 counterparts in Haiti; and a "Padrino" or godparents program which pairs individual donors with students in need of scholarships in the Dominican Republic.

In the summers, *Amor en Accion* also takes young people on two-week missionary experiences to the Dominican Republic. Members who are architects and engineers design school houses or medical dispensaries and join with local workers to construct them. Medical volunteers bring donated medicines and conduct routine examinations of school children.

"If I can dream, I would like to see *Amor en Accion* have the resources to be able to involve more parishes and more schools in concrete mission experiences in the Dominican Republic, but especially Haiti," says Ms. Marill, where the political turmoil of the past few

years has made such trips impossible.

Called to mission

Now teaching theology at the university level while pursuing a doctorate in ministry, Ms. Marill also works for the archdiocese's Catholic Charities, as coordinator of the Foreign Missions Board.

She sees parallels between her own life's calling and that of the Church in Miami.

"My dream is that Miami can have a mission institute," she says. Not simply to hand out degrees, but as a place where missionaries from all over the world can share their stories.

"So that we can grow in the sense of Church. So that we can be redeemed by sharing our stories as immigrants, as 'balseros,' as people who have been persecuted or tortured," Ms. Marill says.

She likes to quote from the prophet Isaiah (66:18-19): "I will send fugitives to the nations... and they shall proclaim my glory among the nations."

"In the good sense, there are many fugitives here, as Isaiah says. We have to recognize that we have been called," says Ms. Marill. "Because of what we have lived, I think we have been chosen to mission."



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