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A. S. Horn

W. J. Hoffman

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Recommended Citation

Horn, A. S. and Hoffman, W. J., "Madonna Study Group, Whole No. 2" (1962). *The Marian Philatelist*. 2.
https://ecommons.udayton.edu/imri_marian_philatelist/2

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THE MADONNA STUDY GROUP

The following is a literal translation of an article by Fr. Librado Russwurm, OFM. Cap., which appeared in the German "Gabriel" magazine.

CHILI: VOTIVE SHRINE OF OUR LADY OF MOUNT CARMEL AT MAIPU

In 1961 Chili celebrated the 150th anniversary of the founding of the first National Government, and on this occasion it issued two commemorative stamps and a souvenir sheet, the designs of which incorporated a view of the Votive Shrine of Our Lady of Mount Carmel at Maipu, Chili. The values issued were a 5-cent green (332) and a 10-cent dark brown and red brown airmail (C219), plus a souvenir airmail sheet (120 x 168 mm) containing one each of the above stamps.

Possibly the reason for this selection is the fact that the early history of Chili is associated with Our Lady of Mount Carmel, for in the early colonization of Chili by the Spaniards (1510) they brought the worship of the Mother of God under the title "Our Lady of Mount Carmel". Thus, it was that in Her honor several churches were built under the Order of the Carmelite Fathers.

For 300 years the Spaniards ruled Chili. However, on July 16, 1810 the last representative of Spanish rule, Don Francisco Antonio Garcia Carrasco, was forced to resign. The natives fighting for their independence had placed themselves under the protection of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, and the first official document of the new regime was signed on December 5, 1811 to honor Our Lady of Mount Carmel. Two freedom heroes--Don Bernardo O'Higgins and Don Jose Miguel Carrera--affixed their signatures to this document, which states "The Mother of God is the Patroness of our land and we have acknowledged to Her our praise".

The road to freedom was not smooth, and soon after their declaration of independence, the freedom fighters were afflicted by many defeats and withdrew over the Andes to Mendoza, but even there General San Martin proclaimed Our Lady of Mount Carmel as Patroness of the freedom army. To emphasize this proclamation, General San Martin placed an army marshal's baton in the right hand of the statue of Our Lady of Mount Carmel. However, soon after, fierce fighting began again and once more the army recrossed the Cordilleres back into Chili. On February 11, the day before the battle of Chacabuco, the entire freedom army renewed its pledge of devotion to Our Lady of Mount Carmel. Their great victory at Chacabuco on Feb. 12 was taken as "an answer from Our Lady of Mount Carmel".

July 16, 1817 was proclaimed a national feast day in honor of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, and on this day commemorative medals for the victory at Chacabuco were distributed.

On March 14, 1818 Don Bernardo O'Higgins called an assembly of the government, the army, and the people in the cathedral of Santiago, and again all renewed their pledge to the Mother of God, promising to erect on the place of their final victory a shrine in Her honor. The final battle was fought on Apr. 5, 1818 at Maipu, near Santiago, with the patriots victorious and Chili was finally definitely free.

Don O'Higgins was appointed Supreme Director of Chili. He immediately voiced his desire to keep the promise and erect a shrine to the Mother of God on the Maipu battlefield. On May 8, 1813 he issued his historical proclamation for the fulfillment of this promise by the people of Chili. Two patriots, Don Juan Alcalde and Don Augustin Eyzaguirra, were commissioned to undertake this great work. Work on the temple went at great pace for in November 1813 Don O'Higgins laid the cornerstone, consecrated by Msgr. Jose Ignacio Cienfuegos, a national priest-freedom here; all Santiago participated in this ceremony, and as history has it "only the prisoners and cloistered nuns were not present" at this ceremony.

The enthusiasm and enchantment soon wore off due to lack of funds, Indian wars, wars with Peru and Bolivia, the Pacific war, and revolution within the country. The partly erected structure became an unfinished ruin. Sixty-four years were to elapse before the pledge was again brought to the forefront by Archbishop Rafael Valentin Valdivieso in 1868, but it wasn't until 1875 that a new building commission was named. Work and progress was slow. In 1885 the President of the country, Don Miguel Santa Maria, took a walk to Maipu and saw the "ruins". He asked what they represented and was given the history, which so impressed him that money for the project was immediately allocated and work begun in earnest. In two years it was complete, no longer a poor man's structure but a magnificent temple.

The day of dedication, April 5, 1892, was declared a national festive day and once again all Santiago went to Maipu as Archbishop Casanova consecrated the Votive Shrine. The commemorative speech was delivered by the great preacher, Msgr. Ramon Angel Jara, who stated "this patriotic speech is a hymn on the unsurpassed beauty of the Virgin Patroness by the Fatherland which She took under Her protection". On Oct. 24, 1923, Our Lady of Mount Carmel was officially declared Patroness in Chief of the Republic of Chili. On Dec. 19, 1926, in the enormous Cousino Park, was held the coronation of Our Lady of Mount Carmel by the Apostolic Nuncio and Papal Legate Msgr. Masella in the presence of Government delegates and half a million Chilean citizens.

From Dec. 5 to 8, 1942, Santiago hosted the Marian National Congress and at the closing session the following resolution was adopted: "all here present, as representatives of all Chile, promise that from day to day our national aspiration shall be to transform the poor and simple temple of Maipu to a sublime, majestic Votive Shrine of a grateful fatherland for the heavenly Patroness. We will all participate in this goal, without any other thought, as glorification of God for our sublime Divine Queen and the Christian highness of our fatherland".

In 1943 the designs of Don Martinez Gutierrez, a Chilean architect and University professor, were unanimously accepted; they envisioned a monumental fore-court to the temple, surrounded by a pillared-hall, similar to St. Peter's in Rome. The cornerstone of this edifice was laid July 16, 1944 by the Apostolic Nuncio Msgr. Silvanio and in June 1945 construction began on this Shrine.