

“SISTER CARMELITA” (CARMELA ZAPATA BONILLA MARRERO) (1905–2003)

For Sister Carmelita, as she was affectionately known, life as a nun meant becoming a teacher, social worker, community activist, psychologist, role model, and mother figure. She was born in Cabo Rojo, Puerto Rico, in 1905. Her mother's death when Carmelita was thirteen brought her to live with family in Mayagüez. A born teacher, she volunteered to teach third grade boys at the Catholic school she attended. In 1923 she left for the U.S. to join the Order of the Trinitarian Sisters, the first Puerto Rican to serve in that religious community. During the Depression years, she was assigned to the Gold Street mission in Brooklyn, New York providing community services to hundreds of neighborhood children and their families of multiple nationalities. A founder of Casita Maria, a community settlement house established in 1934 in Spanish Harlem, her community involvement also included sheltering evicted families, and coercing neighborhood entrepreneurs and racketeers into raising funds for the needy. In 1967 she was assigned to New York's St. Joseph's Roman Catholic Church on Pacific Street in Brooklyn. By then, she had obtained a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Puerto Rico at Río Piedras, and a master's degree from Santa María in Ponce in the area of social work. In 1991 she moved into the motherhouse of the Blessed Trinity Mother Missionary Cenacle in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, assigned to the ministry of prayer. She remained a member of the Trinitarian Sisters until her death on August 21, 2003.