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of the

ANDES

By Rev. Paul Aronica, S.D.B.

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ISBN 978-0-89944-185-6



LITTLE CHIEF
of the ANDES

A Biography
of Blessed Ceferino Namuncurá
Araucanian Indian

SECOND EDITION

BY
PAUL ARONICA, S.D.B.

2007

SALESIANA PUBLISHERS
NEW ROCHELLE, NEW YORK

NIHIL OBSTAT

Rev. Bede Babo, O.S.B., Censor Librorum

IMPRIMATUR

James A. McNulty, D.D., Bishop of Paterson

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ISBN 978-0-89944-185-8

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*This is the true story of Ceferino Namuncurá,
son of Chief Manuel Namuncurá,
last king of the Araucanian Indians
of the pampas region in Argentina.
They were a hardy tribe,
descended from the ancient Incas of Peru.
Defying all domination, they ruled their long,
sweeping plains from the Andes to the Atlantic,
till the whites, under General Roca of Argentina,
made them bow to civilization in 1883.
Our story begins here.*



CHAPTER ONE *The Treaty*

THE missionary priest and his guide trudged along in the tall grass, while straight ahead of them, in a cloudless sky, burned the setting sun.

“We reach soon, Padre,” the Indian muttered in broken Spanish. “One more sunset. Look!”

Father Dominic Milanesio looked up and shifted his pack. The Indian slipped back into his Araucanian dialect.

“Our mountains! They stand like proud chiefs! They never bend to anybody!”

Father Dominic had to agree with him. For days now, as he plodded along the grassy plains of the pampas, he had been catching glimpses of the distant horizon of the Andes and had fallen under their spell. Icy pinnacles of rock, creviced by streams and glaciers, pushed their

spartip peaks into the blue of the heavens. For countless miles they stretched along the continent like the spiked humps of a dinosaur, their heavy, ribbed sides thick with forests, teeming with wildlife, studded here and there with silver lakes whose banks overflowed as glaciers slipped noiselessly into them and melted.

"There," the guide pointed proudly, "lives our great *cacique!*"

"And Manuel Namuncurá waits for me?"

"For the padre, yes. You are the only white man we trust. White men are bad. They kill our children and steal our flocks."

The padre trudged on silently. Let the poor Indian talk. Maybe some of the poisonous hatred that was stored up in his heart would pour out in relief. These were really hard days for the proud Indians of the pampas. Once they had roamed the pampas as conquerors. Then came the white men, who sought the rich plains and gold-bearing mountains. Broken treaties, raids and massacres, fire and sword—one after another in rapid succession they cut the tribes down to a pitiful few. There had also been Indian retaliations. Ranches were burned, cut up corpses of white colonists were found charred in the ashes, flocks were scattered, and every night Indian horsemen streaked like lightning down the slopes of the foothills in avenging raids.

The Indian seemed to read the padre's mind. "Ah, if we had more braves, we would make one big *malon* (mah-LON) on the dirty whites!" Father Dominic shuddered. He had heard of the Araucanian *malon*, avenging bands of Indians pouring into a ranch in the dead of night and leav-

The Treaty

ing nothing behind but a smoldering heap of ruins and dismembered corpses.

“The time for *malon* is finished, my friend. Now is the time for peace. Your chief seeks peace. That is why he sent for me.”

They reached the foothills. Now the grass gave way to tall, thickly grown forests, and, instead of the long rolling plains, there were short, steep slopes to climb. The evening breeze was cool, bringing the fresh smell of pine. They walked on for some time, till darkness settled on them.

“We sleep here. Tomorrow we reach the Island of the Tiger. There lives our *cacique*.” The Indian grunted in dialect. He made a fire of fresh pine branches, “to keep away the mountain lions,” he said, and then busied himself with the meal. Dried strips of *guanaco*, washed with cold water, served both hungry men well. Soon they wrapped themselves in blankets and slept quietly on plots of pine needles, lulled by the constant hum of forest noises.

They were on their way that morning before sunrise. Swiftly and silently the guide led the way through hidden paths and deep gullies, over steep cliffs, across rushing streams. Time pressed now, and they must hurry. It was late afternoon when the guide halted and proudly pointed to the west. Father Dominic heaved a long sigh of relief. Before them, tucked carefully away into the heart of the forest, lay a vast expanse of water, glaring white with the sun’s slanting rays.

“Nahuel-Huapí,” grunted the Indian. “The Island of the Tiger!”

Father Dominic knew about the lake. It was more than six miles long and ten miles at its broadest, and from its waters was born the Limay River, which flowed north to swell the great Rio Negro.

“Come, padre! The *cacique* waits for us!” The Indian plunged down the rocks.

It was dusk before Father Dominic could make out the rough outlines of a village. All the while they struggled through thick underbrush, while ahead of them the lake turned angry red with the sunset and its waters became blood. Such a picture of the Indian heart, thought the priest—savage with passion, crimson with slaughter.

Except for the barking of dogs, the village was quiet. There were no campfires, no war dances—just a low monotonous wail that came from a tent at the edge of the camp.

The Indian guide called. Then he said, “We wait here. The *cacique* comes.”

Father looked about him. Only one word was needed to describe the village—filth! Evidently, they had never heard of sanitation. The odors were a disgusting blend of rotten meat and dead animal matter. Poor Indians! And they called this life!

The flap of a tent opened. Like all the others, it was built of skins propped up on four poles, low, squat, and box-like. From the dark interior came the *cacique* Manuel Namuncurá. The priest now knew why the white men feared him. Tall, stocky, erect, he advanced quietly to the missionary, his bare chest gleaming in the late sunset. A true Araucan, he was copper-colored, his jet black hair parted in the center and hanging straight down his shoul-

The Treaty

ders, bound about the forehead with a leather thong. His leggings were of skin and revealed the outline of sturdy thighs and legs. There was majesty in his voice as well as in his walk.

“I greet you to my village,” he began in Spanish.

“I am the blackrobe from Viedma, the city of the white people. I came because you called me.”

“Come,” said the chief and graciously beckoned him to enter the tent.

Inside the priest found a warm meal for him, a boiling stew of ill smelling meat and burnt crusts of corn bread. It was bad tasting but nourishing.

After the meal he sat back and looked at Chief Namuncurá.

“You wonder why the village is quiet,” said the chief in good Spanish. “It is because my people are in mourning. Our braves have fallen in battle, we have no flocks and no homes and no land, our children are sick. The white men have taken everything. You hear that soft crying? It is the women who weep for their husbands.”

“This war was bloodshed,” answered the priest. “Why did you fight?”

“For our lands, padre, for our flocks. Once this was all ours. We used to hunt the guanaco in the open pampas, we used to herd our sheep on the hillsides, we used to plant our wheat and corn. We looked for no wars. Why did the white man take it all from us?”

The chief spoke softly, like a beaten animal. But there was a ring of pride in his voice.

“I fought because I am my people’s leader. My father, Calcufura (*Kal-ku-foo-RAH*), was the great cacique.

Under him my people were wealthy and happy. He ruled all the pampas."

"He was a good man," said the missionary. "But times have changed. The white man is now stronger than you. All the other chiefs have surrendered and made peace. Only Chief Namuncurá is left. What will you do?"

Chief Namuncurá bowed his head. "I called you to make peace with General Roca. We are whipped dogs! We can fight no more! My people are crying. We want peace. But you must promise us a good peace. We will not be cheated out of everything. We want lands. We want homes."

"You will get them," said the priest. "I come with a good treaty. General Roca promises you eight square leagues (about 32,000 acres) on the Chimpay River in the pampas. It will be your land, for your homes and your cattle. You will hunt the guanaco again. But you must promise not to fight."

"This war is our last. From three sides they attacked us, with guns that spit fire and iron. We fought only with our hands and with our bows and spears."

"You will continue being the grand cacique of your people, and you will receive the title and money of colonel of the Argentinian Army."

"I want no title," muttered the chief. "I had hoped that my children would be chiefs when I die, but now they will just be army officers."

Father Dominic went outside to sleep. At least there was a clean breeze outside. All through the night the soft wail of the women floated through the forest.

Camp was astir early. In the morning light the priest read his breviary, praying silently that this might really

The Treaty

mean peace for the Araucanians and the beginning of missionary work.

Chief Namuncurá approached. "Padre, before we break camp and come with you to General Roca, we must have our *camarujo* (ka-ma-roo-HO). You will wait for us."

Father knew about the *camarujo*. The Araucans had two gods, one good, called *Gneche*, the other bad, named *Gualicho*. The *camarujo* was the worship of *Gneche*.

The tom toms began their dull beat, and from the tents, pitched here and there in the clearing, came small groups of sad natives. There was a noticeable lack of men, and most of them were deeply scarred. The women joined hands in a ring and began to dance in slow rhythm with the drums. Soon the older children formed their own ring, within the women's, joining their high voices in the slow chant. The men waited.

Then the drums stopped. From a decorated tent stepped the *perimontan* (per-ee-mon-TAN) or priestess, covered from head to foot in a black skin cloak, under which was showing a white tunic. Slung about her neck was a small drum. Behind her, as if in submission, came Chief Namuncurá. She sat on a raised platform of logs and skins.

The dance resumed. But now the men joined in. The entire village danced, first in slow rhythm, then in a quickening pace, till the worship reached its climax in a screaming whirl of dancing figures. One by one they dropped from exhaustion, and as each one dropped, another put a cup to his lips. It was *pulcu*, an alcoholic drink made from apples and herbs.

The dance went on for hours, its strength constant. Every now and then the priestess raised her hand for

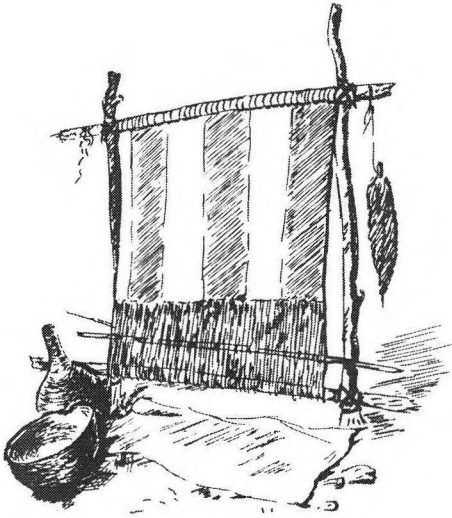
silence and, dancing alone in the center, intoned prayers. "O God, give long life to me and my people! Make us strong to beat our enemies! O Great Spirit, have pity on us!"

Toward evening the dance was over. The Indians lay about in a drunken stupor. The priestess retired to her tent, and Namuncurá told Father Dominic, "Tomorrow we rest; the next day we go to General Roca."

General Roca lived up to his promises. In a few weeks, the sad wars of rebellion were forgotten. Namuncurá and his people claimed their lands on the Chimpay.

"And now my sons are no longer chiefs," complained Manuel. "We have lost our name,"

"Who knows, *cacique*," comforted Father Dominic, "maybe some day your sons will be well known as great *caciques* of peace!"



CHAPTER TWO *Coming of Little Chief*

CHIEF Manuel Namuncurá and his Araucan braves took their defeat with bad grace. Licking their wounds like whipped dogs, they packed their families and herds and rode westward. By terms of the treaty, they settled in the fertile Chimpay valley, made up of rich, warm loam deposited by the abundant floods of the Rio Negro. It was an ideal site for living—but not for Indians who were used to roaming over the vast frontiers of the pampas. Though wearing the uniform of a colonel, Manuel bemoaned the fate which had made him the last of the pampas kings. He still ruled his people as their *cacique*, but his heart was out on the plains of the pampas and the ranges of the Andes.

And so, when news was brought to him on August 26, 1886, that his wife had borne him a sixth child, a boy, his

only remark was, "A son who shall never become the grand *cacique* of his people! He is born in disgrace!"

Life at Chimpay was prison for the Araucans. They tilled their soil, tended their herds of tame guanaco, and told tales of their former greatness. Namuncurá had once been a name to inspire fear; now it designated a broken warrior of a dying race. Only one sight brought some cheer to the Indians—that of their friend, Father Dominic Milanesio, who often rode to Chimpay on a pony, much like an Araucanian himself, his black cassock flapping over his tall, shining boots. Then the children flocked to meet him, chanting the prayers and songs he had taught them in soft, whispered Spanish or their harsh dialect.

It was Christmas Eve, two years after the birth of Manuel's son, that Father Dominic came to Chimpay after a long absence, during which he had set up several mission stations in the pampas.

Namuncurá greeted him with the words, "You may have my baby son. Baptize him in your religion."

And that night, as the flashing stars of the pampas smiled on them, the poor Araucanians assisted at the solemn baptism of their baby *cacique*. "Ceferino" he was called, after a great Pope of the early Church, meaning "Breeze," perhaps in the hope that this child might become a cooling breeze to temper the flames of hatred in his people's hearts. Mass followed in lowly adoration of the Infant—himself a grand *cacique* who came to earth of a dreary midnight ages ago.

Little Chief grew fast, hardened to a life in the open. Hunting and fishing were a daily need more than a sport, and soon the five-year-old lad could ride a pampas pony

Coming of the Little Chief

as well as his older brothers, or bend a bow equally well, or face the dangers of the woods with the same fearlessness. Like his father, he was stocky, with firmly knit muscles in chest and thighs, fleet of foot, springy in action, tireless in activity. His hair was jet black, coarse, and hung loose on his shoulders, bound about his forehead with a red band. But the most striking thing about him was his eyes—black as coal and glistening like stars on a cold night. One could read all his thoughts in his eyes, and in them was reflected his daring courage.

“He will make a grand *cacique!*” muttered Manuel to Father Dominic.

“Then prepare him for the task!”

“To lead a dying race?” questioned Manuel sadly.

“No, but to revive them. Chimpay is your land! Make it a permanent home, and let Ceferino be a real *cacique* of peace and prosperity!”

“We will see. . . .” And new hope fluttered in Manuel’s heart.

But the hope was short-lived. In 1894 the soldiers of Argentina rode into the Chimpay valley, with orders from the President to Namuncurá. The treaty was being modified. The Araucanians had to move further westward, to the uninhabited shores of the Alumine River at the foot of the Andes to make room for more white settlers and their ranches. Gnashing their teeth in hopeless anger, the Indians pulled up their tents again and rode into the setting sun. Namuncurá bowed his head in shame, once more to lead his people into exile.

The Alumine Valley was lost in the wilderness. Overgrown with vegetation and overrun with fierce ani-

mals, it was no place to live. Setting his face in angry determination, Manuel reassumed his authority of *cacique* and began to reorganize his people—this time in the hope he might some day strike back at the white man's treachery.

By the time Ceferino was eleven, his father had formed his plans. He would be the next *cacique* of Alumine. The braves gave their consent, and on a fall morning of 1897, Manuel Namuncurá donned his colonel's uniform, saddled two horses, and rode with Ceferino and a small party along the Rio Negro to Buenos Aires. He went boldly to the army academy and demanded as his privilege that his son be accepted as a cadet. That same night he bade his boy learn the art of war well and rode back to his people.

Little chief did not like life at El Tigre ("Tiger") Academy. He was the only Indian there. He was laughed at, called insulting names, and tricked beyond all patience. Especially, he missed the wide open hills of the Alumine valley . . . his horse, his friends . . . and he missed the little chapel where he and Father Dominic often prayed and chatted together. Soon he lost weight, could not attend classes or drills, and word reached Chief Manuel that his son had best return home.

"Why not send him to the mission school in Buenos Aires?" suggested Father Dominic. "We will make him a good *cacique*!"

Manuel agreed, and he and Father Dominic undertook the long journey to Buenos Aires.

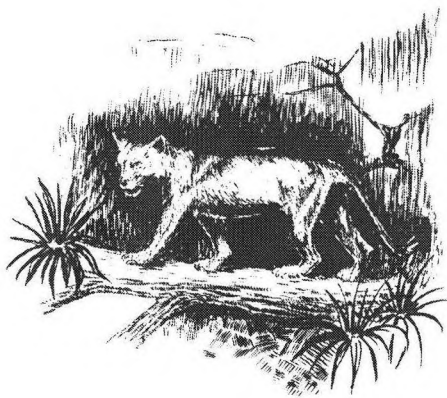
"It is good we have come," muttered Manuel, when he saw his sick boy. "They will kill him here."

Ceferino agreed to go to the Salesian School of Pius IX in Buenos Aires. No sooner had he and Manuel entered

Coming of the Little Chief

the grounds, than his face brightened at the sight of the priests who were playing with the boys, and he said, "Papa, I like it here. I will not get sick again."

And Manuel rode back to the Andes with the words ringing in his ears. "We will make a grand *cacique* of your son!"



CHAPTER THREE *First Holy Communion*

LITTLE Chief did not like everything at Pius IX School. He liked the priests, yes, because they were kind to him. He liked the boys, who were very different from the cadets at El Tigre Military Academy and went out of their way to teach him Spanish and make him feel at home. But school discipline—how that hurt! Not that he balked at orders, but he hated bells and schedules. Flying on horseback across the plains, fishing and hunting hours at a stretch, roaming the woods with no concern for a clock—that was his Indian view of life! But now he moved like an animal in a cage! How it pained to be locked up! Slowly, patiently his teachers instructed him, and, grinning broadly, Little Chief would answer in broken Spanish, “Very hard, but me go to school. Soon be a *cacique*”

That Spanish! The boys used to like to hear Ceferino struggle through his sentences, and he soon got to laugh good-naturedly at his own silly mistakes.

“Little Chief,” asked his superior once, “do you like this school?”

“Much, much!” was the answer.

“What do you like most?”

“The church and the food!” came the answer in a grin.

“You little glutton!” laughed the priest.

“Yes, but they won’t give me the Bread at the altar!”
Now Little Chief was serious.

“When you learn your catechism, you can receive the Bread of Christ too,” announced the priest. “Can you make the Sign of the Cross?”

The boy did—in perfect Spanish. “My friends teach me!” he said proudly. After he had walked away, the boys exclaimed: “He’s a great little chief! Heart of gold!”

Ceferino fitted himself into school life more or less well after a few weeks. He loved to play, and he played with full zest. One thing he would not stand for—and did not understand: lying. He could not see how a baptized child of God could tell a lie. Once that led to a serious quarrel. He was playing a game with his friends, a particularly hot game, in which each player had to tag his opposing runner. Little Chief dashed across the field and loudly tagged an opponent, named Joe. Joe kept running, and Ceferino yelled out, “I tagged you!”

“You did not!” screamed Joe. His friends ran to his side. “You never touched him!”

Poor Little Chief stared at them with wide open eyes.

First Holy Communion

Everybody in the field heard the noise and saw the play. Why should they now lie?

"You liar!" Joe yelled.

Indian Chief started to burn. "Big mouth cheater!" he answered.

Fists began to fly, and the boys piled on Joe and Namuncurá. But a teacher managed to pull them apart. Going to class, later, Joe stared at Ceferino. "I'll get you for this!" he whispered, and he clenched his fists.

The feud was talked about for days. "You know, Joe's got it in for you, *cacique*," a boy told him.

"I don't see why," he answered. "I have no grudge against him!"

The spiritual retreat began within a few days, and naturally the fight was forgotten. Joe had even admitted to his friends that he had been wrong, but he also said, "Cef's an Indian. A white boy doesn't apologize to an Indian!"

Ceferino had other thoughts in his mind during the retreat. The school director had told him he could make his First Communion on the last day of the retreat. Cef was happy beyond description. Finally he could approach the altar.

On the last day of the retreat, both Namuncurá and Joe knelt for confession. He nudged Joe gently.

"Got a prayer book?" he whispered. "Let me use it."

Joe passed it over. Little Chief opened it to "Confession."

"I'm scared, Little Chief," said Joe. "How about you?"

"I'm not, Joe! I've been to confession before, and the priest is very nice. Don't be afraid!"

"Hush, here comes teacher."

Little Chief returned the book. "Pals like before, Joe?" he asked humbly.

"Pals!" answered Joe, and both boys heaved a sigh of relief. The fight was over.

Little Chief made his First Communion on September 8, 1898. He was twelve. It was the greatest day of his life. "That day," writes his superior, "left a deep mark on his personality! It gave him the features of an angel!"

From then on—as it had been in the case of Dominic Savio, whose life Little Chief had read—the Indian boy ran far ahead of his schoolmates in holiness.

One day, during class, his teacher noticed that there was a far away look in Ceferino's eyes as he sat at his desk. He was staring into the corridor. He called on him suddenly. The boy had a prompt answer. But when he sat down, his eyes were again fixed on the corridor. The next day the teacher changed his place. "Daydreaming about his ponies and the reservation!" he grunted. "This will wake him up." But after class Little Chief came up to his desk.

"Please, Father," he asked. "May I go back to my former place?"

"So you can stare into the corridor and waste time?"

"No, Father. In the new place I can't see the tabernacle lamp burning near Jesus in the chapel."

The priest went to Ceferino's former place. Yes, there was the tabernacle lamp. "You may go back to your former place," he said. "Jesus misses you, too!"

As he walked away he shook his head in a daze. An Indian had taught him a lesson in prayer!



CHAPTER FOUR *My Poor People*

“HEY, Little Chief, come over here!”

Ceferino Namuncurá ran across the playground at his friends' call. Tall and stocky, smiling happily from ear, to ear, he was a typical school boy, not very much like the little roughneck Indian he had been just a year ago. Boarding school life was changing him.

He came to a group of boys surrounding a tall, serious-looking priest.

“This is Little Chief, Father, my best friend,” said Joe. “And this is Father Beauvoir,” he added to Ceferino. “He’s a missionary!”

“Hello, Father!” exclaimed Namuncurá. “Do you come from the pampas? Have you met my father?”

"I'm from the Land of Fire, at the opposite end of the pampas, but your father's name is well known there. He is a great warrior!" said the priest. "And you are Little Chief! How old are you?"

"Thirteen, Father, and I like it here at the Salesian school."

"I have some Indian weapons here, Cef. Can you show us how to use them?"

Little Chief fingered the bow and its long, needle-point arrows, delicately feathered by patient Indian hands.

"Sure, Father," he exclaimed as in a dream. "Watch!" Raising the bow and inserting an arrow, he bent it. Thud! The point buried itself into a thin tree. Then one arrow after another followed in rapid succession, and all buried themselves in a ring about the first.

"Excellent, Little Chief! You are as good a warrior as your father!"

"Those are the games I used to play, only we used to shoot from horseback!" Ceferino answered very simply.

"And you will teach other Indian boys these tricks when you go back home?"

Namuncurá became serious. "No, Father, I will be my people's *cacique*. I must teach them what they really need—about God and His sweet Mother—we poor Indians never knew about them till the padres came. I will teach them about God."

"Father," volunteered Joe, "you should hear Cef recite his prayers and catechism! He beats most of us!"

"That's because Joe teaches me," grinned Cef in return. Life at Pius IX School agreed with Little Chief, indeed.

My Poor People

“He’s a tough plugger,” his teachers used to admit. “He’s far from bright, yet he manages to stay at the top half of his class.” Even the boys had to admire the Indian lad’s perseverance.

One day the school director found Namuncurá braced up against a tree, lost in his catechism. He interrupted him. “Cef, how about some recreation?”

“We have a religion test today, Father, and I have to get a good mark, because I want to ask Father to let me be an altar boy!”

Later that day the director again met him. “Well, Cef, did you make it?”

A broad smile spread across the Indian’s face, and his eyes sparkled. “Yes, Father, I’m starting to study Latin now! Oh, you can’t imagine how much this means to me. I can serve the true God!”

The director paused and then broached a subject he knew Namuncurá did not like to discuss. “Tell me, lad, is the Mass different from your Indian sacrifices?”

Little Chief grew sad. “My poor people,” he muttered. “They have no idea of the true God and how good He is. In their sacrifices, they slaughter animals and splash hot blood on their bodies and dance until they faint, and then they get as drunk as pigs . . . and they think they are adoring God! Oh, how it hurts them, Father.” And now Little Chief’s voice became strained with emotion, and he gasped: “It’s the devil! I know it! He is dragging my poor people to hell! But I will fight him! I’m the *cacique* . . . he will be afraid of me!”

The priest patted the lad’s shoulder. “You will, Cef, I know you will!”

Little Chief prayed for his father and his people, and often the boys admired him as he prayed, especially after Communion, his face tense with effort, his eyes shining with devotion. Some would join him, whispering, "He's praying for his tribe. Let's help him!"

There was excitement at Pius IX one day, when Big Chief Namuncurá came to visit his son. It was the first time some of the boys had seen a real Indian chief, and one whose name appeared in their history books. They stood in awe of his bright military uniform and high boots. Ceferino ran up to him.

"And how is my little *cacique*?" demanded Manuel in Araucan dialect. When Ceferino smiled and answered in the same harsh tongue, Manuel was pleased. "My son does not forget he is a *cacique* of the Araucans!" he muttered.

Father and son spent several days together. Manuel was treated as an honored guest, and Ceferino was a great hero in his schoolmates' eyes.

"Son, you will soon be ready to return to your tribe. What will you do?"

"I am not sure yet, but when I return I will teach them the ways of God. I will start a school for the children and teach them peace."

"You are wise, Little Chief," answered Manuel. "War only killed us. Teach our people the ways of peace!"

Before leaving, Manuel slipped a ten pesos bill into Ceferino's hand. "Use it for yourself, son."

Little Chief ran to his director. "Here, Father, are ten pesos. Use it to decorate the altar of our Lady!"

My Poor People

“But it’s your money, lad!”

“That’s why! I want to use it for Mary alone! She must become the queen of my people!”



CHAPTER FIVE *The Best Choice*

FIVE years at Pius IX School passed very quickly for Namuncurá. He was now seventeen. As far as he was concerned, the future was already fixed. "I am going to be a Salesian priest," he used to repeat, "and I'm going back to my people to be their spiritual chief."

Bishop John Cagliero, the superior of all the Salesian missions, liked Little Chief. He admired the boy's strong determination and marvelous sense of innocent, simple piety. When Ceferino told him of his desire, the missionary was inwardly thrilled.

"It's going to be hard, lad," he warned. "But I will gladly give you the chance you ask. You'll have to go to the seminary at Viedma. And maybe some day I'll have the supreme joy of ordaining you to the priesthood myself!"

"I'll do what you say," answered Namuncurá.

Even in 1903 Viedma was not a town to be looked down at. Situated at the mouth of the Rio Negro, it was fast developing into a river and sea port, becoming a thriving market for the fertile river valley and a good harbor for seagoing vessels. Out of the city proper, in the open valley, was the Salesian school of St. Francis de Sales, being used as a minor seminary for eleven students. Namuncurá found himself at home. There was the same cheerfulness as at Pius IX, and pupils and teachers formed one happy family.

The open valley breezes did Ceferino a lot of good. His studies told less on him, although they had really become harder. Especially that Latin! What a complicated language compared to his simple Araucan tongue! Poor Little Chief plodded on through the grammar courageously, struggling with rules that to him made no sense. "I've got to learn Latin," he used to tell his teacher, gritting his teeth in determination, "otherwise I can't be a priest! I'll learn it!"

One day, during recreation, Ceferino went to the corral and leaped on a spirited young horse. Whooping as he used to do back home, he tore around the meadows, arms swinging wildly, guiding himself by the sure touch of his knees. His long black hair waved in the breeze. He was an Indian again, riding the pampas. A schoolmate shouted out to him, "Hey, Little Chief, what do you like best?"

Namuncurá pulled his horse sharply by the mane, causing it to rear high into the air, and shouted back, "One thing! To be a priest!" And off he dashed again, riding with the wind!

The Best Choice

There was no doubt that his mind was made up, and nothing would ever change it. It was while at Viedma that he had a strange dream. He distinctly heard his name called out in sleep, "Ceferino, come with me!" When he awoke he had a holy picture of the Blessed Sacrament in his hand; normally, it rested under his pillow. And, as he kissed it reverently, he distinctly heard the words again.

"I am coming," he answered in his heart,

Cef was visited by his uncle in early spring. Paineofilu was his Araucan name. The two of them toured the entire school, while the boy explained everything to him. "Well now, Little Chief," asked his uncle in their harsh dialect, "is it true that you don't like girls?"

The answer was short, deliberate, decisive: "No, I don't. I'm going to become a priest, and I'm going to work for our people!"

Paineofilu asked no more questions. It was the first time an Araucan Indian had said, "I don't like girls!" Such modesty was not natural to them.

Namuncurá's classmates were seminarians, but they were whites. Yet they liked their Indian friend, were willing to coach him in Spanish and Latin, and liked his simple, honest ways. He in turn liked them and tried his best to help them when he could. He taught them how to ride or use the bow and lance of his people, how to fish, how to trap, how to cure wild meat. All in all, they made a strong unit.

One day one of the boys noticed that poor Cef was stuck on a Latin translation. The Indian scowled and strained and searched his dictionary. Then impulsively he took the crucifix which Bishop Cagliero had given him

and which he kept on his desk. He kissed it loudly. The boy snickered at the Indian's simplicity.

Namuncurá gave him a cold look and murmured loudly in deep tones, "Why are you laughing?" Then he smiled and put his finger to his lips "Sh. . ."



CHAPTER SIX *Summer at St. Isidore's*

“HEY, come on and look! Cef’s taking the dugout into the river!”

The seminarians rushed to the bank of the muddy Rio Negro. Seated in a rough hollowed log was Little Chief, waving to them. With a slight push, he glided swiftly into the rolling current, let himself drift for several hundred feet, and then, standing up, paddle in one hand, he deliberately tipped the boat over. For a few seconds boat and boy disappeared, while the Rio Negro continued its majestic flow toward the ocean. Then both reappeared. Cef clutched the tossing canoe, regained his breath, and then, remembering what his father had taught him, skillfully righted the boat, rolled into it, and paddled against the current to the little boat landing. Cheers greeted him. His only

comment was his usual broad smile and, "Every Araucanian boy has to learn how to do that!"

This was St. Isidore's, where the seminarians used to spend their summer vacations, away from their books. It was an agricultural school for Patagonian boys begun by Bishop Cagliero, Little Chief's friend, and now conducted by the Salesian missionaries. Situated right on the long, rolling banks of the Rio Negro, it was an ideal summer camp, with its broad fields, clumps of woods, and miles of grassy meadows. It suited Namuncurá beautifully. For two months he became an Araucanian again, at least in outdoor activities.

Archery was his choice sport. He used to make his own bows and those of his schoolmates, riding into the woods for the best and straightest boughs of hardwood trees, shaping them between his strong fingers till they responded to every touch of the hand.

Then he made his own arrows, using the methods he had learned as a boy in the tribe, slitting them from long, thin, straight water weeds, tipping them with flint, and capping them with neatly clipped bird feathers. It was a long, patient process, but everyone admired the skill of his thick hands.

Archery contests were common, with Cef instructor and judge. Then the boys would take short hunting trips into the woods, returning with bags of small game. It was common knowledge that Little Chief could wing a bird in flight as well as he could down a *guanaco* standing still.

"If I didn't learn how to shoot," he remarked, "I'd have had to go hungry!"

Still, in the midst of all this fun, Cef never forgot his ideal of becoming a missionary priest. He did not forget his Indian customs because he wanted to be an Indian all the time, but he perfected himself in piety and virtue. He could often be seen in fervent prayer before the Blessed Sacrament, rosary slipping between his brown fingers, "praying for my people back on the Alumine reservation."

One of his schoolmates remarked, "During the six months I lived with Namuncurá I saw him relive all the virtues I had read about in the life of Dominic Savio!"

Little Chief never forgot the lessons taught him by good Father Milanesio, who had converted his people and baptized him—"Serve God with joy!" Everyone who knew him used to remember him for his broad smile, stretching almost from ear to ear, his thick, dull-red lips curled over his ivory-white teeth. His was not a handsome face, but it was a very characteristic face; it was a wide-open book where people could read the thoughts of this simplehearted, trusting Indian lad who did not know how to lie or deceive.

Though Namuncurá had to plug hard at his studies to make a passing grade, he had the natural quickness of an Indian. His bright eyes darted with lightning speed to catch anything in sight. It was hard to "put one over" on him.

He used to enjoy the surprise on his schoolmates' faces when he would play card tricks for them.

"Hearts or clubs?" he quickly asked once when some boys got around him. In his hands flashed a deck of cards, fanned out in a semicircle.

"Hearts!" cried one. Cef flipped a card on to the ground.

"It's clubs!" all shouted. "You muffed that one!"

"Are you sure," asked Little Chief, picking the card up and placing it on top of the deck in his hand.

"Sure, look at it yourself, Cef. You better go back to the reservation!"

"Watch!" was his reply. He held the pack out, blew over the top card. "Look!"

It was hearts!

"You lose. Now you have to make a visit to the chapel with me and pray for my people!"

"Go back to the reservation," did not hurt Little Chief. He was not sorry for being an Indian. But he was sometimes embarrassed by the roughness of his schoolmates, who did not realize that his smile often hid very hurt feelings. The geography book they were using in school, for example, carried a picture of his father in native Araucanian dress, with the caption, "Chief Namuncurá, great *cacique* of all Araucanian tribes." It also carried an account of the big chief's war against the whites and his defeat. Sometimes Cef's classmates used to open the book wide at this page, nudge him, and smilingly point it out to him. It meant deep embarrassment to Cef. But he never got angry. He smiled. "I've seen it before," he would say. "But those days are over. My people want peace."

One day he really had to put his patience to work. One of his classmates, a good friend, was with him and several boys. Cef was talking about the Araucanian hunts, explaining how cleverly his people could use their long lances, bows, and slings.

Summer at St. Isidore's

"They ride like the wind over the plains," he was saying, "steering their horses only with their knees. Then they flip an arrow from their quiver slung over their back, and before you know it, they have a guanaco pierced through the neck. Only one arrow does it."

"Do they do the same in war?" asked a boy.

"They have to," answered Cef, forgetting himself. "It's war, and they must fight."

"Cef," suddenly asked his friend, "how does human flesh taste?"

It was a cruel question. It cut deeply. A deep hush settled over the group. Everyone looked at Namuncurá.

"I don't know myself why I asked it," the boy later admitted. "It just slipped out of my mouth. Cef did not answer. He only bowed his head. Tears rolled down his cheeks. Then, straightening up, he took a deep breath, and continued talking about hunting."

Little Chief could not hide his sentiments. He knew the crimes of his semi-civilized people. He blushed for them. But he knew also how good they were at heart. Someday, he would convert them all and teach them the ways of Christian peace!



CHAPTER SEVEN *First Failing*

It was July 20, 1903. Viedma, being below the equator, found itself in the midst of a bitterly cold winter. Freezing winds blew from the Antarctic and swept across the open pampas, forcing men and animals into crude shelters. Little Chief Namuncurá climbed the rude ladder to the top of the chapel steeple. Below him lay a vast expanse of hills and plains. High up in the open, the winds blew cold and steadily. He put his hands up against his mouth to warm them with his breath. Then, clutching the bell rope, he pulled slowly. A low "bong!" rolled across the meadows. He waited for the space of half a Hail Mary. Then he leaned heavily on the rope again. "Bong!"

"Hail Mary," he kept saying and ringing, while his hands grew red with cold and the winds gripped their icy

fingers upon his neck and back. Little Chief was used to the cold of an Argentinian winter. Many a time he and his brothers would ride out to the frozen pampas to hunt small game or bring in a stray guanaco for flesh and clothing, and he had often spent long nights cuddled against the warm body of a sheep as he kept the night watches over his father's flocks.

Now he kept up his sad duty of ringing the death knell across the hills of Viedma. Pope Leo XIII, the White Father who had sent him the Salesian missionaries, had passed away in Rome. And Namuncurá felt he had lost a friend. From Father Milanese and Bishop Cagliero, Little Chief had heard much of Pope Leo and had always felt grateful to the White Father of Rome who loved the Araucanian Indians.

For three days, in the bitter cold, Namuncurá climbed the steeple three times a day and rang the death knell fifteen minutes at a time. And steadily his prayer arose to God for the dead Pontiff.

Ceferino was seventeen. He was doing well at St. Francis. Even Latin was becoming somewhat easier, and he found his Indian tongue could master the difficult sounds. He was very happy at his work and studies. He served Mass often, and now he had even been appointed sacristan.

That was the job he liked best. "I am now so near to my Master in the Blessed Sacrament," he wrote to his friends at Pius IX School in Buenos Aires. Apparently, that was his only desire—to be near Jesus.

His schoolmates often remarked the simple piety of this Indian chief. His genuflections were made with such

First Failing

devotion that the boys sometimes smiled at his seriousness. Once, while he was making a visit in the chapel, three boys came in and, kneeling there, began to talk. Cef turned around to face them and quietly remarked, "I'm surprised to see that my friends have forgotten this is God's House." Not the slightest tone of anger—just innocent surprise. Gosh, this Indian boy's soul was as innocent and simple as a baby's!

The boys at St. Francis were poor. Namuncurá, although a chief, was just about the poorest. His clothes were mostly hand-me-downs from the boys or gifts of the missionaries' friends in the city. One day—it was Sunday—Little Chief was busy in the dormitory, dressing. Carefully he brushed his threadbare clothes. Then he rubbed guanaco fat over his ill-fitting hobnail boots, which were discards from the army.

"Well," remarked a youngster looking at him, "look at Little Chief. Getting all slicked up, even greasing his boots! Where are you going?"

The answer was typical of Cef, brief and guttural, "It's time for church. God deserves to see me clean!"

"I'll never forget Little Chief," one of the upperclassmen wrote, "especially for his ambition to work in the church. He always asked for more work. He never got tired of cleaning and dusting and setting up the altars."

On September 24, 1903, the feast of Our Lady of Mercy, Little Chief went all out to prepare the best celebration he could for his queen. With his superior's permission, he organized a solemn procession across the fields around the school. People flocked in from the city, singing hymns and reciting the Rosary in soft, flowing

Spanish. There was Mass in the open, the altar banked high with flowers.

And in the midst of it all was the smiling, bright face of Little Chief. "For my people, dear Queen," he kept saying.

That night it was a weary Little Chief who went to bed. And that night, though he did not know it, Little Chief's prayer that he might suffer for his people was answered. In the darkness of the early hours, while everyone was asleep, Little Chief awoke with a choking sensation in his throat and sharp needle pains in his chest. He sat up, put a handkerchief to his mouth, coughed a few times. It hurt so badly! When he looked at the handkerchief, it was soaked with blood!

Exhausted he lay back in bed. The taste of warm blood was still in his mouth. His chest ached dully. He closed his eyes. In the morning he would tell Father Director.

The director immediately knew. So did Namuncurá. The disease that was slowly wiping out the entire Araucanian tribe had finally caught up with Little Chief—tuberculosis. Bad nourishment, unclean surroundings, unhealthy living conditions caused the dreaded disease which, in those days, had no cure.

Bishop Cagliero was notified that his Little Chief was consumptive. He came to see him. The boy was not a bit disturbed. "Don't worry, Father, I'll get better. If God wants me to be a priest, I'll be one. And in the meantime, what's a little bit of suffering?"

Namuncurá knew the pains of wasting away which were the lot of all tubercular victims. He had often seen them die back home in the Alumine reservation. He knew that one day, not too far distant, he would also cough for

First Failing

the last time and watch his life pass away in a final flow of blood.

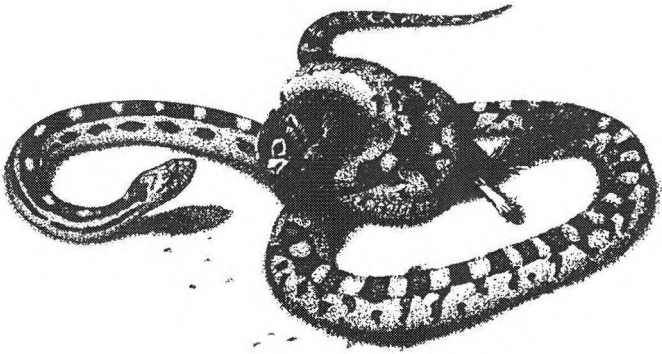
The bishop wasted no time. He sent Little Chief to St. Joseph's Hospital in Viedma, which he himself had founded. There the Salesian Sisters could care for him and maybe nurse him back to partial health.

"Little Chief rarely talked," writes the hospital chaplain. "We often thought he lived in continual prayer to God. He never gave signs of impatience or disgust. Grateful for any service, he smiled his thanks to all and obeyed every order given him."

In April 1904, Bishop Cagliero received news that His Holiness Pope Pius X had appointed him archbishop and had summoned him to Rome. He went to St. Joseph's.

"Little Chief," he said, "your father has just agreed to let me take you with me to Rome, where the great White Father lives. It is dry and warm in Rome, and you will probably get much better there. Also you can continue your studies. Will you come?"

Little Chief was thrilled beyond words. "Yes, Bishop, right away." And when I come back to my people, I'll be a missionary priest!"



CHAPTER EIGHT *In the Eternal City*

“WHEN I come back,” Little Chief had told Bishop Cagliero, “I’ll be a missionary priest.” But little did he or the bishop know that as their ship pulled out of Buenos Aires harbor, he would never again see his native land or his people. He would have to be content to be his people’s missionary from heaven.

After a month at sea, Cef put foot on European soil. His dark Indian eyes were round with curiosity. How different this land was . . . what tall buildings, and all made of stone . . . the narrow cobblestone streets where he could hardly keep his footing . . . the innumerable wagons . . . and so many people talking strange tongues! In such cramped quarters of the city, where he could scarcely see the sun,

he felt so closed up . . . so cooped in! But still, it was all so wonderful!

Little Chief was anxious to get to Turin, to see the school Don Bosco had founded and especially to see the basilica of Mary Help of Christians. The bishop had told him that from its sanctuary every year large bands of missionaries went out to the distant quarters of the earth.

"Then I'll go from there too!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, and you'll be ordained there, Cef!"

Cef walked into the church . . . how immense it seemed as he walked reverently down the wide aisle . . . so different from the chapels of the pampas! And above the marble main altar, covering the whole wall, was the colorful painting he had longed to see, Mary Help of Christians surrounded by the Apostles. He knelt in humble prayer "for my people!"

That picture seemed to be a magnet. As long as Cef was in Turin, he walked as if in a dream. But always that picture kept drawing him. "Every time I looked for him," says the priest who took care of him, "I found him praying before the picture of Mary Help of Christians."

"What are you praying for Little Chief?"

The answer was always the same: "For my people."

One day Bishop Cagliero called Namuncurá. "Would you like to see Don Bosco?"

"But he's dead these sixteen years!"

"I know, but would you like to see his body? Today a small group of priests and friends are going to transfer the body to a better coffin, and we will have a chance to see him. Would you like to come?"

In the Eternal City

And so it was that Ceferino saw the face of Don Bosco, in death of course, but still uncorrupted. "It was a great favor," he said.

But there were other surprises in store for Little Chief during his last months of life. Everywhere he went people were nice to him; mostly, they were surprised at his refinement. "Where did he ever learn such manners?" they wondered. "And how did he ever manage to learn Italian and Spanish so well?" Especially at Don Bosco's school, the priests were very kind to him, because they realized his holiness. To his astonishment Ceferino even made the newspapers in Turin and Rome; he smiled to see his name in print. Just an Araucanian Indian of far off Argentina—yet a national figure!

While Ceferino was in Turin, a big mission exhibit was held in Turin. Thousands flocked to see the mission articles sent in from all over the world. But the big attraction was a real Indian chief, dressed in his native garb—Little Chief himself. One day a handsomely dressed lady, attended by several noblemen and women, came to Ceferino's booth.

"Her Majesty the Queen!" one of the attendants announced.

Little Chief bowed graciously, looked up into her motherly face, and smiled. Then he spoke to her in his soft, deep Indian tone. "What a fine young man," complimented the Queen. "Have him escort us through the whole exhibit!" And all afternoon Little Chief walked by the Queen, entertaining her by his accounts of the vast prairies. "A perfect gentleman!" the sovereign commented.

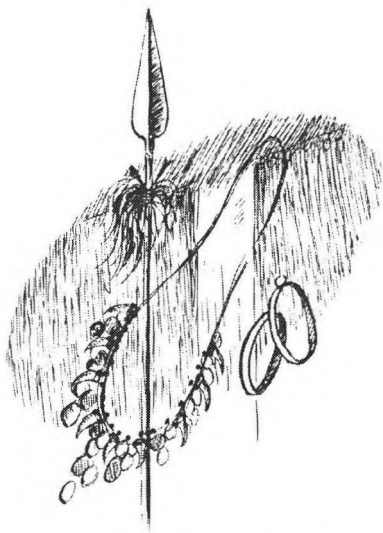
But Cef's biggest thrill came on September 29, 1904. He was taken by Bishop Cagliero for a private audience with Pope St. Pius X. How his heart beat wildly as he walked with the bishop up the majestic "royal staircase" of the Vatican! Guards snapped to attention and saluted. The massive marble halls, covered with priceless paintings, echoed with his footsteps. On and on he walked, lost in the splendor, till they came to the Supreme Pontiff's private apartment.

He genuflected before the saintly old Pope, kissed his slipper, and then looked up with his clear dark eyes into the fatherly eyes of Pius. He took a little piece of paper from his pocket. "Holy Father," he read in simple Italian, "I represent at your feet all your children of the Araucanian tribes of the pampas!" The Pope listened carefully as Cef told him about his people, how anxious they were to become Christians. Pius X was deeply moved by the simple faith of the little chief who stood before him. He smiled when he heard, "I want to become a priest and go back to teach my people!"

"I bless you," he answered, "you and all your beloved people, my dear Indian children of Patagonia!"

Cef had his fill of happiness. Never again could he be so thrilled. He had seen and spoken to Christ's Vicar on earth!

He returned to Turin, where he was supposed to attend classes to begin his seminary studies. He threw himself into his work with all the energy he could. "I can't waste time! I must be a priest and then go back to my people!"



CHAPTER NINE *For My People*

THE winters of northern Italy are brief but intense. Heavy clouds of fog come rolling down the Alps, and their dampness sinks into the bones, giving one a helpless feeling of chill and weakness. For a boy used to the dry winds of the pampas, this moisture-laden air was painful. Cef began to cough violently, as the cold dampness sank into his lungs and gripped its icy fingers around his chest. Trying to study with such physical pain was impossible. Bishop Cagliari became worried.

“How is he doing?” he asked the seminary director.

“He has a heart warm with God’s love. It’s a heart of gold and sees no evil in anyone. It’s a treat to hear him talk about God and our Lady. He loves God like we love our

mothers—warmly, intensely, as though he were always in God's presence!"

"Yes, I know," replied the bishop. "He's a saintly young man. But his health? Can he hold out under the strain of study? We cannot afford to lose him!"

"Then take him to a warmer, drier climate. This Turin air will kill him!"

Bishop Cagliero arranged to have Namuncurá switched to the Salesian school newly opened at Frascati, just a few miles from Rome, in the heart of the famous Frascati vineyards. He could not have chosen a better spot. It became Little Chief's home for six months—the last six months.

During this time Cef seemed to take gigantic steps to holiness. His sanctity seemed to shine in his face; certainly, it flashed from his eyes. "He smiles with his eyes," his schoolmates said of him.

"And they were right," the seminary director later admitted. "I never saw Cef smile with his lips. Rather, he was quite serious, almost to a point of sadness. But his eyes made up for this by their flashing brightness. Yes, he really smiled with his eyes!"

Did Little Chief suspect that the end was near? Is that why he did not easily smile in these last few months? Or was he worried about his father, his people?

Whatever it was, it did not keep him from his studies. He was second in class. His hard work was beginning to pay off. His superiors smiled in relief. If he kept on making such progress in health and studies, he would have no trouble in reaching the priesthood.

But when March of 1905 came, Cef suddenly took a turn for the worse. Almost overnight, he lost weight,

For My People

thinned down to a shadow of himself, and found he could push himself no longer. He was evidently in pain, as he tried to study and go to the chapel and attend classes. But his gentleness and the smile of his eyes never left him,

“He got worse day by day,” his director wrote, “yet he was never impatient. He suffered, but he held on to his cross generously.”

He retired to the infirmary, putting his books away for the last time. He knew the dreams of his youth were shattered. He could never be a priest. He did not mind for himself—the priesthood was always a goal too high for him, he thought. But his people—a priest of their own blood would mean so much to them!

Now his nights became as painful as the days. His chest burned in the long dark hours, and he tossed about, his rosary in his hand—praying “for my people!”

Bishop Cagliero had him taken to the hospital of the Brothers of God in Rome. The good brothers admired this young Indian, especially as he bore his cross of suffering so heroically. All day long he lay patiently in bed, while his rosary slipped through his fingers and his eyes gazed upon the blank walls of his room. On them he could see the faces of his father and brothers, and the confused forms of thousands of his people. They were waiting for him to come back and make him their Big Chief . . . but now that was a thing of the past.

He received the last sacraments and once more affirmed his allegiance to the Catholic Church. With the beginning of May, the Brothers knew that it was just a question of days before the beautiful soul of Little Chief would rise to his God.

LITTLE CHIEF OF THE ANDES

Death came quickly, as it does for tubercular victims. On May 11 at six in the morning, as the brothers knelt by his bed and prayed, Ceferino Namuncurá went to the embrace of his beloved Father in Heaven. He was 18 years and nine months old.

Little Chief's body was buried in Rome, but in 1915 at the insistence of his people it was brought back to Patagonia and buried at the Salesian school of Fortín Mercedes. Strangely, one day Cef had served Bishop Cagliero's Mass there, as the two were traveling, and after Mass the bishop had found his altar boy praying before the picture of our Lady known as "Our Lady of the Abandoned." The youngster's eyes were aglow with devotion as he faced the vast shores of the Rio Negro. Yes, the bishop had known then, he was praying "for my people!"

Some day, we hope and pray, God will elevate this Little Chief of His to the honors of the altar, and his people, still existing in the poverty of the pampas, will look up to him and greet him as their own "Little Chief of the Andes."

APPENDIX

Blessed Ceferino

By the Salesian News Service ANS

ON November 11, 2007, at Chimpay, Argentina, the Church officially recognized the holiness of Ceferino Namuncurá by declaring him “blessed” in a solemn rite of beatification presided over by Salesian Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the Holy See’s secretary of state.

Also participating were Fr. Pascual Chavez, S.D.B., the successor of St. John Bosco as Rector Major of the Salesians, members of the general councils of the Salesians and Salesian Sisters, and an estimated 200,000 people.

With such huge public interest in the church ceremony in the remote location—Chimpay is far up in the Andes foothills—the Argentine government re-opened for the occasion the railway line that used to cross a large part of the provinces of Río Negro and Neuquén, to facilitate the movement of pilgrims.

The beatification liturgy was broadcast live by several of Argentina’s television channels.

Some months before Ceferino’s beatification, the bishops of the Patagonia-Comahue Region of Argentina published a pastoral letter for “all the men and women of Argentina, our homeland.”

The letter presents Blessed Ceferino by situating him in his cultural and historical context and referring to some

important events in his life, mainly emphasizing the special way Ceferino lived his Christian life. Being a Christian with the cultural wealth of his people behind him—the Mapuche, the “people of the earth”—who accompanied him in his journey toward holiness. That holiness was shared also with other blessed of the same era and the same general locale—Laura Vicuña, who died at Junín de los Andes in 1904, and Brother Artemides Zatti, S.D.B. (1880-1951), who lived in Viedma. They also are mentioned in the letter as examples of holiness in Patagonia.

(The Mapuche are the principal tribal group among the Araucanian peoples.)

The bishops of Patagonia invite people to see Ceferino’s beatification in the light of evangelization, indicating some features of his life that make him an example of missionary activity.

“His life is a message of holiness lived seriously among his people,” the bishops’ letter says. “He was an example of how to take up the Gospel as a way of life lived with great simplicity and humility. His message is a witness that draws others in. He is a real Mapuche and a real Christian, with the strength of his background and the grace of his baptism; with a holiness rooted in the Gospel and in his own people. He gave himself to God and exhorts us to follow his example. Ceferino opens the way and encourages us to follow in his footsteps.”

On November 11, the Argentine postal service issued a stamp in honor of Blessed Ceferino, as part of the many initiatives linked with his beatification. It shows the new Blessed dressed in traditional Mapuche costume and his

Blessed Ceferino

signature, in which can also be seen the initial letters of “Jesus” and “Mary.”

Accompanying the issue is a summary of the life of the young man which, among other things, says that “he resolved in the best way the conflicts that saw others losing themselves in violence and blood.”

A separate post card printed by the Argentine Post Office pictures Ceferino with the text, “Beatification of Ceferino Namuncurá,” and the theme chosen for the celebrations, “Ceferino, son of God and everyone’s brother.”

Letter of the Very Rev. Pascual Chavez, Rector Major, to the whole Salesian Family on the occasion of the beatification of Ceferino Namuncurá, November 11, 2007.

Rome, November 1, 2007
Solemnity of All Saints

Dear Brothers and Sisters, all the members of the Salesian Family, dear young people,

I am writing to you with a heart full of joy for the beatification of the [498] Spanish martyrs, at which I was able to take part on Sunday, October 28, in St. Peter’s Square. The Lord has blessed us with 63 new [Salesian] blessed who confirm what Fr. Rua said: “The holiness of the sons is proof of the holiness of the Father.” They are an incentive to us in our efforts to make holiness a program of life, especially at this time when society needs passionate witnesses to Christ at the service of humanity.

The joy increases like a river in flood with the approaching beatification of Ceferino Namuncurá, on Sunday,

APPENDIX

November 11, this time in Chimpay, where he was born and which over the years has become the destination of pilgrims. His reputation for holiness goes back to 1930, when Fr. Luigi Pedemonte began collecting and publishing testimonies, and was recognized first of all when he was declared Venerable by Pope Paul VI in 1972, and afterwards by the decree for his beatification, which Pope Benedict XVI signed on July 6, 2007.

The holiness of Ceferino is the expression and the outcome of Salesian youth spirituality: a spirituality of joy, friendship with Jesus and Mary, the fulfillment of one's duties, giving oneself to others. Ceferino represents the convincing proof of the fidelity with which the first missionaries sent by Don Bosco succeeded in reproducing what he had done at the Oratory at Valdocco [a section of Turin]: forming young saints. This continues to be our task today, in a world in need of young people inspired by a clear sense of the meaning of life, daring in the choices they make, and firmly concentrated on God while they serve others.

The life of Ceferino is a parable that lasted scarcely 19 years, but full of lessons.

He was born at Chimpay on August 26, 1886, and was baptized two years later by the Salesian missionary Fr. Milanesio, who had negotiated a peace treaty between the Mapuche and the Argentinean army, making it possible for Ceferino's father to keep for himself the title of the "great cacique" and for his people the territory of Chimpay.

He was eleven years old when his father enrolled him in the government school in Buenos Aires, wanting to make his son the future defender of his people. But Ceferino was not happy there, and his father transferred him to the Salesians' Pius IX College. Here grace began

Blessed Ceferino

its work and transformed a heart not yet enlightened by the faith into a heroic witness to the Christian life. He at once showed a great interest in his studies, was enraptured by the practices of piety, loved the catechism, and was appreciated by everyone, companions and superiors alike.

Two experiences launched him toward the highest peaks: reading the life of Dominic Savio, whose fervent imitator he became, and his First Communion, when he pledged himself to complete fidelity to his great friend Jesus. From then on, this boy who had found it difficult to “line up” and “be obedient to the sound of the bell” became a model student.

One day—Ceferino was already a Salesian aspirant at Viedma—Francesco De Salvo saw him ride up at the gallop and called out to him, “Ceferino, what would you like best?” He expected a reply connected with horse-riding, an art at which the Araucanians were experts. The boy, however, reining in the horse, replied, “To be a priest,” and then rode off again.

It was in these years of growth in the interior life that he became ill with tuberculosis. They arranged for him to return to his native climate, but that was not enough. Bishop Cagliari then thought that it would be possible to find better treatment in Italy. His presence in the country did not go unnoticed: newspapers wrote admiringly about the Prince of the Pampas. Fr. Rua had him dine with the superior chapter [general council]. Pius X received him in a private audience, listening to him with interest and giving him his *ad principes* medal. On March 28, 1905, he had to enter the Fatebenefratelli Hospital on Tiber Island, where he died on May 11, leaving behind him a memory of his inimitable kindness, diligence, purity, and cheerfulness.

APPENDIX

He was a mature result of Salesian youth spirituality. His remains are now in the shrine in Fortín Mercedes in Argentina, and his tomb is the goal of constant pilgrimages, because of the reputation for holiness he enjoys among the people of Argentina.

Ceferino incarnates in himself the sufferings, the distress, and the hopes of his people, the Mapuche Indians, who in his adolescent years were introduced to the Gospel and opened their hearts to the gift of faith, guided by wise Salesian educators. There is an expression that sums up his whole program of life: "I want to study so as to be useful to my people." In fact, Ceferino wanted to study, become a priest, and return to his people in order to contribute to their cultural and spiritual development, as he had seen the first Salesian missionaries do.

A saint is never like a meteorite that unexpectedly flashes across the sky of humanity, but is rather the product of a long and silent gestation in a family, and in a people whose best qualities are expressed in that son of theirs.

The beatification of Ceferino is an invitation to believe in young people, even in those scarcely evangelized, to discover the fruitfulness of the Gospel, which destroys nothing that is truly human, and to discover the contribution made by education to this stupendous work of shaping the individual person so that he reproduces in himself the image of Christ.

Whoever thinks that religious faith is a form of adjustment or a lack of commitment to social change, is mistaken. On the contrary, it is the force that makes the transformation of history possible. Holiness, which by some is considered a peculiar condition little adapted to everyday life, in fact signifies humanity at its fullness, translated into fact. The saint is someone who is genuine, fulfilled, happy.

Blessed Ceferino

The testimonies of the contemporaries of Ceferino are unanimous in affirming the goodness of his heart and the seriousness of his commitment. "He smiles with his eyes," his companions said. He was an admirable, holy adolescent who today can and must be proposed as a model and example to the young. Grateful to God for the extraordinary gift that He has given to them in Ceferino, Salesian Argentina has the obligation of feeling responsible for keeping his memory alive, convinced that it can continue to propose to young people valid paths of holiness.

While we praise and give thanks to the Lord for this new piece in the beautiful mosaic of Salesian holiness, let us renew our faith in the young, in the inculturation of the Gospel, and in the Preventive System.

Affectionately, in Don Bosco,
Fr. Pascual Chavez Villanueva, SDB
Rector Major

