

The Canadian Province in Peru: 1965-

Taken from *Harvests of the Spirit*, by Jeanne Beck

In May 1964, Mother Loretto received a letter from a Reverend William Francis of the American Society of St. James who was the pastor at Comas, a slum area of some 30,000 people on the outskirts of Lima, the capital city of Peru. He described his parishioners as people who were living in dire poverty, in paper and bamboo shacks without electricity or running water, and in dire need of sisters who would teach religion to the children in the three or four public schools in his parish. In September



Sister Agnes Begin in the day nursery, a service for working mothers. Comas Lima, 1971

while on vacation in Boston he had visited Mother Loretto to pursue the matter. Father Francis was well-connected — his mother was Cardinal Cushing’s sister and a generous benefactor of the parish which he had been attempting to establish. He showed Mother Loretto slides of his work illustrating the progress of the previous two years during which he and his two assistants had built a church, rectory and clinic. He was now making plans to build a convent and a community centre. She promised to give serious consideration to his invitation to send sisters to his parish.

Following her visit to the sisters in Bolivia in October, Mother Loretto visited him at Comas where she experienced first hand “such poverty, such dirt and stench, but at the same time, such appreciation of what the priests are doing for these poor people! After this tour, Father asked us: “Can you accept this challenge?”¹

On her return to Notre Dame at Waterdown, Ontario, Mother Loretto applied to the Generalate in Rome for permission to open a mission in Comas, Peru. It was granted immediately by the Mother General who added her gratitude that they would be working “among God’s poorest in the ‘Barriadas’ of Lima”². Mother Loretto’s newsletter to the sisters disclosed the plans for the venture. Three sisters would be chosen who would attend a six week course in CCD [Confraternity of Christian Doctrine] at Marquette or Catholic University, Washington, as they would be teaching religion to school children

and adults as well as training lay catechists. They would be allowed to have home visits before beginning their packing for an early November departure.

She described Lima and Comas as cities situated at an altitude of 500 feet so there would be no health problems caused by high altitude. "The chief drawback as regards climate is the fact that many days, especially in the winter months, are dull and dreary, with no sunshine a very depressing effect on some people."³ Beginning on November 15th, the sisters would be attending a concentrated four-month course in Spanish as well as lectures on Indian culture at the Language School (funded by Cardinal Cushing) situated twenty miles from Lima. They would meet their first classes in Comas in April 1966.

Instead of first calling on those who had volunteered for Bolivia, Mother Loretto said she was starting afresh and calling for a new slate of volunteers. "The missionary needs good health, a sense of humour, a very equable temperament (no moodiness or emotional upsets), a love for teaching religion, sufficient ability to learn a foreign language and to take this four-month course successfully."⁴ Also useful on this mission would be an interest in helping in the clinic and an ability to teach women how to knit, and to operate a sewing machine

On September 4th, 1965 a departure ceremony was held at the Hamilton Cathedral of Christ the King for the sisters selected from the forty-two volunteers. Sister Agnes Begin, appointed Superior, was a graduate of Notre Dame Academy in Waterdown and the Hamilton Teachers College. She had taught for five years at St. Mary's School in Kitchener and for sixteen years in England at the Congregation's schools at Lingfield and Crowborough before she returned to Canada to be principal of the school at Formosa. Her work in Peru was to include teaching catechetics to lay teachers and also social work. Sister Marita Schnurr, also a graduate of Hamilton Teacher's College had taught at Galt and Oakville; Sister Claretta (Helen) Zettel had been working in Bolivia for three years, and would continue in Adult Education.

The social and educational problems presented by the 15,000 or more parishioners of St. James parish were huge. There were 200 abandoned mothers with, it was estimated, 1,000 children. Most of the jobs available were in construction and textile manufacturing and paid only \$1.75 a day; about 10% were unemployed. There were no sewers or electricity in the area (except what was supplied by generators), and although water tanks had been installed, the water supply was still deficient. The education level of the adult poor was very low, and the local fiscal (public) schools were overcrowded. Yet, the sisters were optimistic, and would soon be describing the people as "progressive and . . . becoming more responsive to the various educational programs we are now offering."⁵ Cardinal Cushing, the founder of the Missionary Society of St. James had advised Mother Loretto against

having the sisters staffing any school. “Confine your efforts to the teaching of Christian Doctrine, to visitation of the sick and other forms of Christ-like charity [and] not to expect miraculous results.”⁶

The parish was being run by three American priests of the Society of St. James, a Peruvian social worker, Miss Celeste Zender, and a group of women of the parish who were in charge of the day nursery, social centre, and assistants in the parish clinic. As religion was a mandated course in the state schools, the sisters were asked to concentrate first on instructing the school teachers in teaching a new catechetical course and also to help parents prepare their children for First Communion.

Soon the sisters also became involved in the medical clinics, of which there were several—general, pre and post natal, dental, baby welfare, child care and nutrition. By 1969 these clinics, run by Brother John Watson, M.D. and assisted by Sister Agnes served 11,000 patients who were seen for a minimal 25 cent fee. Sister Agnes also did home visiting of the sick and attended births in the homes. In 1968 a parish nursery was opened that operated from 7:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. caring for 50-60 children of working mothers for a daily fee of three soles (ten cents). The children were cared for by a group of eight women of the parish who received a monthly wage of 1,200 soles (\$30.00). The nursery was directed by a young woman of the parish who reported to the pastor Father Mahoney, Sister Agnes, and the President of the Association of God-Mothers (Madrinas). The latter were volunteer women—Peruvian, American, Cuban, Bolivian and European—in the community who were wealthy enough to contribute a total of \$200 monthly to run the nursery.

The youth work became an important part of the mission. Sister Martin de Porres worked with Father Robert Lapan on the Catechesis Program in the schools. In 1966 the sisters were appointed Supervisors in the religious programme by the Ministry of Education and this authorized them to instruct both the children and their teachers in the new Catechetics course. This the sisters did, not by lecturing on theory, but by example. First they would teach a class while teachers observed both the content and their technique. The teacher would then take over the class using the content and the methodology they had observed. One report noted the progress made by the teachers and their students after following the example of Sister Martin. She had worked with the teachers and students of five public schools and several small ones comprising 3,000 pupils and sixty teachers. By 1970 the sisters were able to make weekly visits to classrooms and because of their earlier role as teachers to students and teaching staff, their visits were welcome by both, at the school and on the occasions when they visited them in the student homes.

Sister Marita together with Father Emmett Farrell worked with the youth in the parish. At first they concentrated on instructing the teen-agers to teach catechism. But they discovered that this was less successful than instructing the parents to be the children’s principle religious educators. This freed

Father Farrell and Sister Marita to introduce the teenagers to setting their own goals “in helping in whatever way possible in their community, and also to be more united and form true friendships among themselves.”⁷ This system was more difficult to direct, “especially when things do not get done as efficiently, but in the end, the results are much better in the personal formation of the teenagers.” By 1970 reports indicated that the sisters had been successful in tutoring the teachers in new methods of teaching religion to the children.

But Peru was a stressful and difficult country to introduce any kind of new ideas or progressive systems. The government was a succession of dictatorships each of whom kept a watchful eye on change or unusual activity. An example was cited in the Chronicles:

Susana, our affiliate, found herself detained in the police station for seven hours for the act of taking a picture of flowers in our desert area, a phenomenon that was caused by having great abundance of rain. Marty and Ricardo her brother spent some anxious moments while Susana was accused of being a terrorist. This gives the atmosphere that the country is living with—Martial Law—no dignity for the person.⁸

In 1982 a second convent, Villa El Salvador, was opened about ten miles south of Lima. Sister Martin de Porres Kimpel (now being known as Sister Marty) was asked to go to the Villa to work with women who might be interested in investigating a religious vocation. The sisters formed a close cooperative community with the local people. Children were invited to come and play while the sisters taught their mothers how to cook collectively. Sister Marty organized the mothers to run a cooperative soup kitchen. This was a project she had introduced very successfully at St. James, and it proved an equal success at El Salvador. It was all part of a carefully thought out programme to teach the poor to live cooperatively, help each other, and to take pride in the joy and dignity of their daily work together.

The joy and pride in the Villa El Salvador project was heartening as this was a difficult time for the Peruvian people. The population in the Lima area had been growing rapidly, housing was scarce and the government was unable to stop the rampant inflation which was devaluing the meagre wages of the nine million people who by 1993 were living in Lima and its suburbs. Crime in the poor districts was rife. The Chronicle of 7 March, 1995 recorded that two youths tried to grab the shoulder bag of Sister Marcella Reitzel. She hung on while they dragged her several yards trying to dislodge it. They did not succeed in spite of her suffering two sprained fingers and a damaged sandal. The boys fled when people started approaching and she was triumphant that she had managed to protect her keys, identification papers and her agenda book.

In January 1989, Villa El Salvador became a Novitiate house and the first Peruvian sister took her vows in March 1993. Soon there were many novices being trained.

A third mission was opened in Canto Grande by the School Sisters of Notre Dame from the Wilton Province, U.S.A. Canto Grande, which was east of Lima, had a difficult climate with the sky overcast 360 days of the year but no rain for nineteen years. Over 100,000 people lived in shacks made of bits of cardboard, straw, plywood and tin with no electricity or water except for that which was sold daily from trucks. The Canadian sisters joined the Wilton sisters in 1995. Here they did parish ministry, worked with seniors and set up a library. Their work was a collaborative interprovincial effort. In fact, there were many instances of collaboration between four SSND North American provinces working in the suburbs of the Lima district. Sister Jacqueline Glessner of Wilton wrote in 1986

Each month we get together with the other two SSND houses for meetings, prayer and celebration. There is a real interprovincial spirit here. We represent four provinces (Canada, Wilton, Chicago and St. Louis). We actually think of ourselves as one because of the deep roots that have grown among us.⁹

The Canadian sisters had been especially helpful to Sister Helenann Nelson of Wilton when she first arrived in Canto Grande. Sister Helenann wrote in *Soundings* in 1983 about the Canadian SSNDs working in Comas: “They have been our lifesavers during these past months. We’ve spent most weekends with them as we wait for our home. We’ve become one community. They truly live SSND hospitality.”¹⁰ In 1988, Sister Helenann was asked by the Canadian Province to be the pre-novitiate director for Peru. She prepared Lili Davila Coral to enter the Canadian Novitiate in Villa El Salvador in 1991.

Fe Y Alegría

A new and important project in rural education, *Fe Y Alegría*, was started in northern Peru in 1996 in the province of Piura in the Malingas Sector (Tambogrande District). This movement was founded by a priest, Father Jose Velaz, SJ, in 1955 in Venezuela as an integrated educational and social reform plan. Based on Christian faith and values its teachers worked for the development of the natural creativity of men and women in both urban and rural locations, teaching them to value their culture and through the acquisition of literacy and practical skills, to develop a sense of hope and pride in their communities.

Since its founding, the movement had spread throughout Latin America, reaching Peru in 1966, where it had built many schools, from kindergartens to high school and colleges. All of the latter had workshops teaching sewing, electricity, wood-working and typing.

The organization's next project was to extend into the northern rural district of Peru in the Province of Piura, in the District of Tambogrande. The latter was listed as having 169 villages with 63,950 inhabitants of whom 82% were listed as rural where rice, cotton, mangoes and papayas and honey were cultivated. Tambogrande was joined to Piura by a highway, but the villages were joined by very poor roads and were quite far apart. Clean water, taken from the Piura River and irrigation canals, was scarce. There was high unemployment, a high birth-rate and much poverty.

The Malingas zone, where the team of four SSNDs were invited to work, was very poor and listed as exclusively rural, and the geographic centre of 39 villages settled on barren land close to the fields established in the 1950's when a reservoir was built to irrigate about 15,000 acres. The average land given per farmer was eighty acres. These lands were subdivided due to population growth and barely covered basic needs of the farming families. The public schools in these villages were poorly constructed and lacked electricity, drinking water and sewage services.¹¹

The objective of the sisters in joining *Fe Y Alegría* was to improve educational opportunities in the schools, starting with kindergarten, proceeding through primary education and high school. They also hoped to improve the basic standard of living of a desperately poor population by training young adults in practical skills of sewing, carpentry and food canning. Special emphasis was given to developing women's skills and self esteem through acquired competency in running various projects that would improve their living conditions.

With 80% of the children being malnourished they began a special School Food Programme where children were fed a breakfast of soya milk and bread, and a dinner of rice or noodles with tuna fish and vegetables. The philosophy behind the project was to meet the need for a comprehensive

quality education by the active participation of teachers, principals, parents, students and the general community. Teams of experts on teaching community development visited villages and gave workshops. Parents were encouraged to keep their children in school.

The project started by the School Sisters of Notre Dame in 1996 was #48 of such projects being worked on by educators in Peru. New courses of study were to be devised and teachers' guides published for general distribution. There was also a social component to the work with the teachers as one of the objectives listed in the plan for improvement of the area stated that, "The teacher promote freedom, solidarity, justice, democracy, ecological values in the classroom. That the teacher be an active agent, interacting within the community where he (she) works."¹²

An interesting footnote to the successful efforts of the four sisters who worked in northern Peru on the *Fe Y Alegría* project was found in the Peruvian Chronicles of December 1 2000: "The School Sisters of Notre Dame received an honour today from the Municipality of Tambogrande—a medal given for the recognition of what the community is doing for education in this zone. Beyssa accepted the medal in name of the SSND community". [Beyssa is Sister Beyssa Apolinario Rojas, SSND, one of the Congregation's first Peruvian sisters and one of the four School Sisters of Notre Dame who started with this project in 1996.]

Father Wm. Francis wrote a reflection on the work of the Canadian Sisters in which he declared that the Church in Latin America was first in implementing the renewal called for by Vatican II. The sisters were doing pastoral work in Peru even before others in North America, and worked in concert with the priests in the parishes. They saw the need and responded to it. He reminded everyone that, "Three School Sisters of Notre Dame from Canada came to bring life, love, hope and the 'good news' to the poor of Comas, and they did it well." The South American story of the Canadian Missions drew to a close in June 2000 when all the SSNDs working in Latin America met to form the District of Latin America. Present were 53 sisters from Paraguay, Chile, Bolivia, Peru, Honduras, Guatemala and Puerto Rico. The institution of the District was a preparatory status which it was hoped would be completed by meeting the criteria in *You Are Sent* which enables a unit to become a Province in the congregation. Sisters Hedwig Ganter, Rita White, Mirta Cucchetti, Mary Marcella Reitzel, Beyssa Apolinario Rojas, Martin de Porres Kimpel, Yvonne Nosal, Sonia Rodríguez, Lili Dávila Coral and three postulants were declared by Provincial Leader Sister Rose Mary Sander to belong to the District of Latin America.

ENDNOTES

¹ Mother Loretto. "Letter to My Dear Sisters." December 12, 1964.

² Ibid

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Distrito de Comas. Lima-Peru Peruvian Mission Report of the School Sisters of Notre Dame — Waterdown Ontario, p. 1. No date in the heading of the report but page 3 of the Report refers to "now in 1970"

⁶ Report Peni Comas and Villa El Salvador, Dec. 13, 1982 (For Prov. Chapter) Quotation from a letter from Cardinal Cushing to Mother Loretto

⁷ Peruvian Mission Report of the School Sisters of Notre Dame. Distrito De Comas. Lima Peru. No date in the heading but page 3 of the Report refers to now in 1970".

⁸ Peru Chronicles Oct. 4. 1986.

⁹ *Communiscope*, February 1986, p.7. [A publication of the Wilton Province]

¹⁰ As quoted in "Wilton Begins a Mission in Peru," Jacqueline Glessner, *SSND Soundings*, December 1983, p.9.

¹¹ Pamphlet, *FE Y ALEGRÍA* Rural Education in the Malingas Sector, Tambogrande District, Province of Piura. 7.

¹² Rural Education Program In the Malingas Sector Tambogrande District Province of Piura: *Fe Y Alegría* 48, Educate For A New Life. P. 8. The information in this chapter on the origin and objectives of the *Fe Y Alegría* project was obtained from the above 14 page document. The title *Fe Y Alegría* is therein translated as "Faith and Joy".