Lay Missioners Spur Workers' Hopes

Bogota, Colombia — (RNS) — Two women here — known throughout the city simply as "Berta and Pilar" — are bringing back to an active Catholicism hundreds of the obreros, the workingmen and women who crowd Bogota's 120 poor districts.

Culminating this year's program, 1,000 men attended weekly conferences during the past month on the duties of the Catholic father in the family and community. The conferences were concluded with an outdoor Mass at the new workingmen's center, "Union Social," which the men themselves helped to build.

"What we are trying to do is to show the workingmen that the Church is interested not only in his spiritual welfare, but in helping to raise him up from his poverty and ignorance," said Berta, the senior member of the team. A Chilean, she has worked among the obreros since 1920 in Spain, Chile, Argentina and for the past 13 years in Bogota.

The four conferences here — given in a centrally-located church by a young Dominican priest — were the only strictly religious exercises which Berta and Pilar organized during the year. Backbone of their work is a varied social and educational program available to all without any reference to whether or not they are practicing Catholics.

Each Saturday 700 women gather in a public school building lent to Berta and Pilar for classes in reading and writing of Spanish, English, homemaking, arithmetic. Fifteen young women from the offices of Bogota come to assist.

Sunday is the men's day. "The eagerness to learn is very strong among the working people, especially the men," said a North American teacher who visited the men's classes recently. "I was interested to see that the English classes are particularly popular. English seems to be the symbol of a better life."

The men's classes include reading and writing, mechanics, electricity, typing and accounting. Average attendance is 1,500 men per Sunday.

"The men are extremely faithful in attendance," Berta said. "Each year we plan an outing by train to a nearby town for the men with perfect records. Last year we had to arrange for eight railroad cars because 500 men had never missed a Sunday."

Besides the adult education program, Berta and Pilar run a medical and dental clinic at the workingmen's center. Volunteer doctors, nurses and dentists from Bogota come to assist. Treatment is free for those who are associates of the center — 1,500 men and their families, and 1,425 women and their families.

There are 200 additional families where both husband and wife belong to Union Social. Called "socios," these men and women have membership cards which also entitle them to the adult education classes and to the family fiestas which are held regularly to "lighten a little the difficult life of the workingman."

"We never moralize the workers," explained Berta. "You see they are often so far from the Church that any direct reference to religion would only drive them away. We never ask about their religious status — we leave this strictly up to their own consciences. Nor do we check up to see if they have returned to active practice in their respective parishes. We know, however, that many do."

The overall aim of this workingman's movement is to bring about a closer contact and cooperation among the classes of Bogota — the rich, the white collar and the obrero. "In a sense, the higher class has abandoned the obrero," according to Berta.

"The plight of the worker does not, in many cases, even enter the consciousness of the rich. To build a Christian society in Colombia — a social union — it is necessary to awaken among Catholics an awareness that the present class structure is evil — that social justice demands that not only the few, but that every person has a right to a decent house, adequate food, education for their children."

Berta and Pilar work with the full approbation of the Church authorities, and their workingman's center was dedicated by the late Grisanto Cardinal Luque of Bogota. While Berta is Chilean, Pilar comes from Toledo in Spain.

She has been working eight years in Bogota. A young Colombian joined them five years ago. "We find it difficult to attract more full time workers," Pilar observed.

"First, the idea of lay women dedicated to the Church is very new here. Secondly, although we don't lack part-time volunteers, not many girls are willing to live and work full time with the obreros. Our apostolate demands that we are with the workers constantly — morning, noon and night, Sundays and holidays.

"We are trying to make apostles of these workingmen, men and women who in turn can be apostles among their own people."

German Banks Issue Medals

Munich — (RNS) — Special medals are being distributed by banking firms in West Germany and West Berlin to commemorate the 37th International Eucharistic Congress that will be

The medals, coined in gold and silver, depict the Lord's held here July 31-Aug. 7, 1960. Supper beneath a cross on one side. On the other side is the official emblem of Munich and the coat of arms of Joseph Cardinal Wendel, Archbishop of Munich and Freising.

Portugal's Highest Honor

New York — (RNS) — Msgr. Joseph Cacella, 77, publisher of A Luta, the only Portuguese Catholic newspaper in the U.S., is decorated by Dr. Jose Manuel Fragoso, Portuguese General Consul, with the Order of Benemerencia, the Portuguese government's highest honor in recognition of his outstanding efforts on behalf of his native countrymen in the U.S. The monsignor, who recently celebrated the 50th anniversary of his ordination, is director of St. Anthony's Welfare Center in New York and also publisher of Our Lady of Fatima Magazine.

Minister Convert To Open Danish Boarding School

Hejlsminde — (NC) — A former Lutheran minister is laying the groundwork for Denmark's first Catholic boarding school.

Siegfred M. Hiishoejgaard, Danish State Church minister until two years ago when he and his wife were received into the Catholic Church, announced he will open the school at nearby Gravenshoved next September.

The school is expected to attract young people from the other Scandinavian countries as well as from Denmark. It will not be a preparatory school, but rather a "continuation" school to give further education to young people over 14, the age at which schooling is no longer required by law.

Such young peoples' schools are an adaptation of the adult education system the Danish folk high school movement, which began in 1844. Its original purpose was to give young farm people between the ages of 18 and 25 a general education in the humanities during the slack winter months. The movement spread from the country to the towns — and soon throughout Scandinavia. It is under the auspices of labor, political and other groups. The folk high schools, though helped by government subsidies, have always been "private" schools reflecting the interests and attitudes of their sponsoring organizations.

Denmark Eyes End To Ban On Catholic Teachers

Copenhagen — (NC) — The government has asked the Lutheran State Church to decide whether it ought to lift the ban against Catholics as history teachers in public schools.

THE REQUEST was sent by the Ministry for Church Affairs to the assembly of bishops of the State Church. Officially, Catholics are barred as history teachers on grounds that they would not be able to teach properly the history of the Protestant Reformation.

In practice, however, the decision rests with school principals, and several Catholic teachers have been history teachers in public schools in recent years.

The question is understood to have come up at this time because the government would like to sign an international convention upholding the equal right to work for all citizens.

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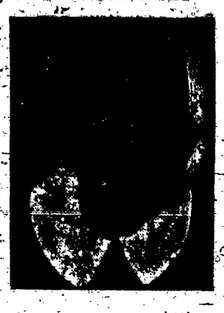

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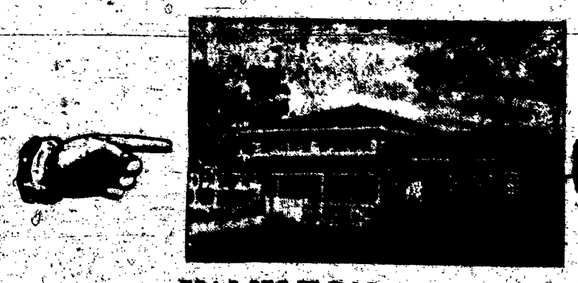

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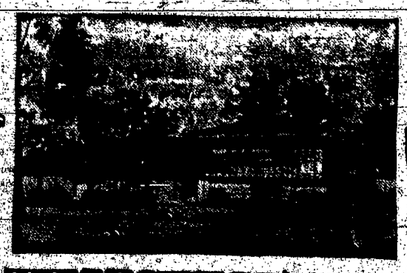

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