

Reports from Latin America

Lay Group 'Outstanding' in Bolivia

During the course of the summer a team from the Priests Council visited the parish of San Jose Obrero in LaPaz, Bolivia, for an evaluation of the work done there. The parish formerly was staffed and continues to be funded and supported by the Diocese of Rochester. Father Daniel Torrey, a diocesan

missioner who had worked there, was a member of that team. The following is his report to the Courier-Journal.

"I do not know of any parish council or pastoral team in our diocese which has yet been evaluated by a six-member

delegation of the Priests Council together with the Bishop as to its liturgical life, its social and community service, and the whole process of evangelization.

"But such an evaluation was recently held at the parish of San Jose Obrero in LaPaz, Bolivia. In addition to the Bolivian group of clergy, a team of five, priests and layman, representing the Diocese of Rochester was at this evaluation session because this is one of the parishes in Latin America that continues to be funded and supported by the Diocese of Rochester. Sisters of St. Joseph and Sisters of Mercy staff parishes in Brazil and Chile. This parish in LaPaz is staffed totally by the lay parishioners with the lay coordinator Jorge Jimenez, and the collaboration of a Bolivian priest, Father Cleto Hinojosa, who has recently joined their team.

"This experiment in ministry dates back to 1966 when the first Rochester priests went to assist the local church in Bolivia. The phase-out of our personnel was finally accomplished in 1974. This summer the Rochester delegation of Fathers Paul Freemesser, Edward Golden, Peter Deckman, myself, and Tim McCluskey returned to the parish for evaluation of their two-year old project.

"In the report submitted jointly to Bishop Hogan of Rochester and Archbishop Jorge Manrique, Archbishop of LaPaz, the priests council of LaPaz and the delegation from the USA agreed that the lay board had done an outstanding job in the care of the parish.

"A large group of lay catechists, some only teenagers, had been formed to give instructions, to conduct burial rites, and to bring Holy Communion to the sick.

"The finances had been well-administered by the parish committee. The addition of a parish library, the utilization of parish hall for literary classes, continuation of the dental and medical clinics and improvements in the playground and soccer field all were noted in the report.

"While the Eucharist had been celebrated each week as well as the baptisms and marriages, the more active presence of a priest-team member living at the rectory to give greater help to the committee was noted as one great need and will be one of the improvements that will come from the evaluation.

"When the Rochester priests departed two years ago, there was some opposition to this innovative approach to such a poverty-stricken parish. Many American missionaries voiced skepticism about the plan. But in two years, opinions and critiques have changed much. Bishop Bernard Schierhoff, Auxiliary of LaPaz, and a former diocesan priest from St. Louis, Mo., praised the work of the parish pastoral team, especially the administrator, Jimenez, a former seminarian, a popular national sports figure, and a graduate student at the Catholic University in LaPaz.

"Jota Jimenez (as his name is noted on the sports pages) had put tremendous faith in the blessings of God upon this venture in which he was so dedicated. He now attributes its success to God's love working among the people, the continued confidence that Rochester has shown over the two year period, and the collaboration of neighboring parishes and volunteer friends.

"The return of the 'gringo' missionaries was celebrated by young and old alike. Reminiscences of the 'old days' when the people of the neighborhood were building their own water and sewer system, the

previous visits by Bishop Hogan and other Rochester visitors, late night births at the San Jose clinic, fiestas, violent political disorders — all were recalled as chapters in a dramatic missionary tale. There were reunions with fellow American missionaries from Buffalo, St. Louis, and Maryknoll.

"And for a brief moment of solitude the Rochester group went off by themselves, to sit on the shore of Lake Titicaca, at the foot of some of the world's highest mountains, and to pray for and wonder about Rochester's next missionary effort."

Guatemala

Guatemala City [RNS] — Six months after an earthquake killed 23,000 Guatemalans and briefly unified the country, its Roman Catholic bishops have deemed it necessary to denounce an upsurge of violence and widespread "land speculation."

In a pastoral letter, the Guatemalan Bishops' Conference also accused the government of responding to the earthquake disaster with "favoritism and repression" instead of "constructive efforts."

"Our home land," said the bishops, "is undergoing an insufferable bloodbath, as subversion follows oppression and subsequent subversion is further repressed in an escalating spiral of violence."

(In recent weeks newspapers in Guatemala have devoted their front pages to photographs and reports of deaths and disappearances. The list of right-wing and left-wing terrorist actions since the disaster has continued to grow.)

The bishops scored "the terror kidnappings and assassinations" which they said were being perpetrated by guerrilla groups roaming the countryside in support of "various political factions."

Referring to "land speculation" in the wake of the February earthquake, the prelates declared: "It

is a sin of injustice, crying to Heaven, to hoard land for speculation. Feeble attempts at 'land reform' have produced legislation that favors the private property of the few."

They said the situation was particularly bad in the so-called development areas of Guatemala, where large land owners seek further expansion of property by taking over land legally owned through many years of cultivation by small farmers.

Acknowledging that the National Institute for Land Recovery — a government agency — had managed to distribute some land to farm workers, the bishops said the institute's accomplishments had been marred by "politics and social discrimination" and "by a lack of proper assistance to the new owners."

Guatemalans, the bishops went on, "in addition to suffering an acute housing shortage," in the wake of the February catastrophe, "also face undernourishment, poor health care, serious unemployment, and tragically inadequate educational facilities."

Charging the government with indulging in "favoritism and repression," the prelates said: "There is corruption in the public administration and even the courts have been used to serve political factions."

Nicaragua

Managua, Nicaragua [RNS] — The Roman Catholic bishop of Esteli and 14 of his priests have protested a government order forbidding the return to Nicaragua of a U.S. Capuchin priest who is being accused of "subversive activities" while serving in the Esteli diocese.

The priest, Father Evarist Bertrand OFM, Cap., of the Detroit-based St. Joseph Province of the Capuchins, was one of 31 Capuchins who recently signed letters to Nicaragua's president, Gen. Anastasio Somoza-Debayle, and to several members of the U.S. Congress, denouncing "serious infractions of the human rights of Nicaraguan people" living in various mountain areas of the country.

Bishop Clemente Carranza Lopez of Esteli and several members of his clergy declared in a protest letter to the government that the charges against Father Bertrand are unsubstantiated and no evidence of subversive activity has been produced.

"Having worked together for several years in our pastoral mission we are especially concerned by this (government) attitude, since indirectly we are subject to the same accusation," the letter said. "Using our rights as citizens we ask for concrete evidence of what the Catholic Church is being accused of in the person of Father Evarist, to whom we give our complete support."

Nicaragua's Minister of Foreign Relations, Alejandro Montiel Arguello informed U.S. Ambassador James Therige in July that because Father Bertrand has

been involved in subversive activities the government has decided "to forbid his re-entry into Nicaragua."

According to the Capuchin's Detroit headquarters, Father Bertrand had gone to Puerto Rico in late June for a vacation. He is one of six Capuchins assigned to the Esteli diocese that signed the letters protesting atrocities in Nicaragua. The other 25 serve in the Vicariate of Bluefields.

In their recent appeal to the U.S. Congress to call attention to "documented" instances of murder, torture and kidnapping in Nicaragua by government forces, the Capuchins listed a variety of incidents involving the disappearances of poor farmers (campesinos) and terrorism by National Guard troops.

These events have interrupted the normal life of farmers in these (mountain) zones," the Capuchins said. "Fear has been instilled. Many families have fled abandoning their homes and land."

ARGENTINA

Buenos Aires [RNS] — A respected Argentine Roman Catholic journal of opinion has demanded a government crackdown on the printing and distribution of "Nazi" publications. *Cristero*, a bi-weekly magazine published here under the editorial direction of Father Jorge Mejia, a secular priest, said it was "unacceptable" that the government, which has banned the distribution of "subversive" materials of the political left, should permit unhindered circulation of subversion by the right.

Ecuador

Washington, D.C. [RNS] — Six U.S. Roman Catholic leaders, including four bishops, characterized as "serious and disgraceful" the arrest and detention of participants in a pastoral meeting of bishops, priests and laity in Riobamba, Ecuador.

"We do wish to protest the unfounded suspicions of the Ecuadorian government concerning the meeting, and most especially the violent and forceful manner in which the meeting was disrupted," they said.

The statement was issued by Archbishop Robert Sanchez, of Santa Fe, N.M.; Auxiliary Bishop Patrick Flores of San Antonio; Auxiliary Bishop Gilbert Chavez of San Diego; Auxiliary Bishop Juan Arzube of Los Angeles; and Father Edgar Beltran and Paul Sedillo, a layman, both of the U.S. bishops Spanish-speaking secretariat.

Drawn up in a military barracks in Quito where they were detained for more than 24 hours, after a five-hour bus trip from Riobamba, the statement was issued by the U.S. Catholic Conference here.

It said that the six Americans

were invited to attend a meeting in Riobamba, hosted by Bishop Leonidas Proano Vilalba of Riobamba, from Aug. 9 to 14. The purpose of the meeting was the sharing of pastoral experiences. The American contingent took part "in order to receive greater understanding" of a large number of Latin Americans in the U.S. and to make their pastoral ministry "more effective."

The statement stressed that the meeting was "in no way secretive," as Minister of the Interior Javier Manrique had charged. "Our participants were present with the knowledge of their respective national conferences of bishops. We further wish to clarify that there was nothing subversive about the meeting."

The six Americans protested the disruption by armed military police, dressed as civilians, who forced all the members of the household of the Holy Cross retreat house in Riobamba, together with participants in the meeting, to be transported to Quito. They noted that the arresting police never offered any identification nor explanation of the arrest.

Chile

Santiago, Chile [RNS] — Officials of the Roman Catholic Church here declared excommunication of secret police agents who allegedly took part in a violent, rock-throwing demonstration against three Chilean bishops.

The demonstration took place at Pudahuel Airport on the return of the three bishops from Ecuador, where they had been among churchmen arrested and expelled.

Demonstrators waved signs accusing the three of being Marxists. They were Bishop Carlos Gonzalez Cruchaga of Talca, Auxiliary Bishop Enrique Alvear of Santiago, and Bishop Fernando Ariztia Ruiz, Apostolic Administrator of Copiapo.

The bishops were among more than 40 Catholic leaders, including 17 bishops — four from the United States — participating in a pastoral conference (Aug. 12) in Ecuador broken up by gun-wielding police on charges they were promoting "subversion" and planning to interfere in the internal affairs of the government.

In a statement read to reporters at the Santiago archdiocesan headquarters, a spokesman for the Chilean bishops' Permanent Committee charged that persons identified as members of the National Intelligence Directorate (DINA) had "directly participated" in the demonstration against the three bishops.

The statement, signed by Cardinal Raul Silva Henriquez of Santiago and four other members of the Permanent Committee, said that according to church law, "Anyone who exerts violence against the person of an archbishop or bishop incurs automatically (the penalty of) excommunication."

The committee also charged that a government-owned newspaper and the national television station had "disfigured" the truth and provoked "a climate of militant hostility against the Church" perfunctored in its pastors.

A government communique "deploring the incidents" denied that intelligence personnel had been involved.

At the archdiocesan headquarters press conference, one of the bishops who had been attacked — Bishop Gonzalez Cruchaga — said that those who participated in the violence without being identified are excommunicated as well, "in conscience."

The statement from the bishops' committee pointed out that "the Church believes in dialogue and in persuasion in patience and fruitfulness of pain. However, the nature of her mission can in some circumstances force her to have recourse to extreme measures," a reference to the excommunication.

ALSO ARGENTINA

Father James M. Weeks, MS, a missionary to Argentina, returned to his Worcester, Mass., home last week following two weeks of incarceration and being held incommunicado in Argentina.

Father Weeks reportedly was arrested on charges that he possessed Marxist literature — a book written by a Catholic bishop — and a record of "subversive" songs by the Beatles.

Father Weeks was released following a visit paid to him by a U.S. State Department official.