

To Look Through Each Other's Eyes

"COULD A GREATER MIRACLE TAKE PLACE THAN FOR US TO LOOK THROUGH EACH OTHER'S EYES FOR AN INSTANT" -HENRY DAVID THOREAU



Logo by Maureen Servas

Riberalta: A 'Dynamic' Mission Base

By Fr. Daniel P. Tormey

For many years the Rochester mission presence in Bolivia has been identified with high altitude, cold temperatures, snow-capped Andean mountains, and the crowded urban areas of the capital city, LaPaz. But for the past two years Father Peter Deckman has represented Rochester and Maryknoll in the hot, rain forests of the lower area of Bolivia, bordering on Brazil. This is an area so remote and inaccessible that the local bishop, Bernard Schierhoff, advertises it as the only safe spot in the event of nuclear war. It is a land of rubber trees, alligators, and waves and waves of mosquitoes.

It is also a mission base of great enthusiasm, hopefulness, and heroic activity. Riberalta is the "metropolis" of the jungle, and the center house of Maryknoll activity which fans out down a winding web of rivers (the head waters of the Amazon River)

through hundreds of miles of tropical jungle. This is where Maryknoll first came in Latin America when the doors of mainland China closed behind them in World War II. Forty years of the Maryknoll commitment has borne fruit in a whole people of deep faith, great involvement in the Church, smiling faces of friendly people, and now native vocations. The Maryknoll story includes a hospital, several schools, food and credit co-operatives, a radio station that reaches far out into the jungle, and rickety river boats that carry the missionaries much farther than that.

The American missionaries are older and gray-haired now. They include Father Peter from Rochester and Bishop Schierhoff from St. Louis, Missouri, besides the Maryknoll men and women. But now there is Father Oscar, a man of this river-city, whose family has always lived here; there are Bolivian

sisters, Bolivian seminarians who spend two months away from their studies doing pastoral work, and the young, spirited, personable lay men who come to do pastoral work on the rivers and in the tiny villages.

Bishop Schierhoff believes that the Holy Spirit is arranging the dramatic play that sees the rise of local and lay leadership in the Bolivian Church coinciding with the transition and the graying of the foreign missionary. The Bishop himself came from St. Louis over 20 years ago in much the same way that the Rochester priests came to LaPaz in the 1950s. He argues strongly that there is still an important role for missionaries (and he's biased toward Rochester). But to watch the local people of a remote village conduct their religious instructions and their own liturgy is to know that the missionaries' task is now different. It is to bring out the gifts that are already there, free up the people,

facilitate their baptismal dignity, and move on down the rivers.

Such dynamic Church life is played against a background of terrible economic crisis, of continual political unrest, of scarce foodstuffs, and primitive medical supplies. It is located in an area accessible only by weeks of a boat trip or four hours by air across miles of remote jungle. The social and domestic life of the remote villages clearly resembles 17th and 18th century USA except for the intrusion of short-wave radios, computers, international rubber companies, and a flourishing and illegal drug trade. The crashing paradox of different societies and different centuries in tension makes Riberalta like a location from a fictional adventure movie. It makes one take seriously Bishop Schierhoff's invitation to spend "The Day After" along the Madre de Deos River.



Bishop Bernard Schierhoff and Father Peter Deckman in Riberalta, Bolivia. The bishop sports a St. Louis Cardinal shirt while Father Deckman a University of Rochester shirt.



When Fathers Dan Tormey and Ed Golden visited Father Deckman (above) recently, all three had a happy reunion with Donna Carmen, who had been cook and housekeeper for the Rochester team for so many years in LaPaz.

The Rural Ministry Of Southern Missions

Some elderly folk had asked her to "help out with starting" a Bible Study group, and Sister Mary Claude Loeb, in rural ministry in Alabama, responded. As a result, between 10-20 senior citizens regularly gather to study the Bible and pray.

But more than that...Sister Claude, a Sister of Mercy of Rochester, tries "to draw them out, to help them improve their self-image, to enable the building of a caring support group and the experience of the presence and consolation of a loving God...I'm always enriched and encouraged by their wisdom and deep awareness of the Lord."

Vredenburgh, the base of her outreach, is a small town, near Selma, on the county line between Wilcox and Monroe counties in southwest Alabama. She works with the people of this rural area as part of the Edmundite Southern Missions.

Like other rural ministers, she serves persons in non-urban areas where ministry and access to services are compounded by isolation and distance.

Like those in social ministry, she is involved in the basic Christian work of assisting the poor, hungry, neglected, deprived, sick, etc.

Like justice ministers, she is concerned about civil and civic rights and the responsibility of society and Church for the materially poor and is moved to advocacy and concern for the oppressed.

About 85 to 95 percent of the residents in depressed areas, such as the one she serves in, are black Americans. Many families live on incomes 40 percent below the



Mrs. James McCants of Vredenburgh, Alabama and Sister Mary Claude Loeb, RSM.

poverty level. Most of the people are very poor; there are serious health problems; there is a high rate of unemployment.

Her approach to ministry is simple, she says, and not highly organized; it is similar to the personalism of Catholic Workers, based on recognition of individual dignity and gift. She sees her outreach as "accompanying them on their journey insofar as I'm able to."

She often serves as contact and/or liaison in matters of health and human services; regularly visits the elderly, sick and hurting; lends support to citizens in community development by trying "to help them articulate their own needs and rights."

"I spend a lot of time on the road," she says. "Monday I may take a child from rural Wilcox to see a specialist in Selma; other days I may be visiting shut-ins in Monroe County or spending time at the senior

citizen center in Vredenburgh or taking people over to the Pine Apple Health Clinic."

Father Roger La Charite, SSE, director of the Edmundite Southern Missions, reflected on the Vredenburgh ministry in a recent Edmundite Missions Newsletter. "She gives them hope and builds up their self-confidence. It may be a long time before the people of Vredenburgh solve their problems -- but now they've started trying to solve them. That makes an enormous difference."

What does Southern rural ministry mean to this former nurse, teacher, pastoral minister, inner city minister and Rochester Catholic Worker?

"Challenge and risk," she responds. "It means political concern as well as social action. It's a setting in which we are the Catholic Church -- but our presence, being, simple activity and the naming of ourselves."

Address of The Month

Main address for Sisters of St. Joseph in Brazil: IRMAS DE SAO JOSE C.P. 38.400 Uberlandia MINAS GERAIS, BRASIL

Villa Rica: 'Differing Vision of Church'

By Sr. Beatrice Ganley, SSJ

Sister Suzanne Wills, Rochester Sister of St. Joseph, is stationed in Villa Rica in the interior of the state of Matto Grosso in the northern part of Brazil, a developing area of the country.

Here land is opening up for settlement. With government support, colonizers are arriving from the south to take advantage of the many opportunities for speculation and profit in a developing region. She writes of the problems that this creates:

"My work in Villa Rica continues to be a challenge. As families arrive from the south, the gap between these well-to-do people and the people of the region becomes larger and larger. These new settlers (called colonos) have a vision of Church which is opposed to the vision of the Prelature here. The Prelature has made an option for the poor, but the colonos do not want to hear of the land problems and struggles which the people of the region are facing. They do not want to hear talk against the government which is oppressing more and more of its

people. They do not want to hear homilies which speak of the rich growing richer and the poor suffering greater injustice. It is this differing vision of Church which makes working with the colonos difficult and leaves one wondering if we will ever succeed in forming a united Church which stands with the poor and oppressed.

"I ask your prayers for our work here that we may be sensitive to these people and to their culture and traditions, while at the same time helping them to understand this new vision of Church."



Sister Suzanne Wills visits with a child in Villa Rica.



Sister Suzanne Wills (left) shares some of her experiences with Sister Ellen Kuhl at a recent gathering of the Rochester Sisters of St. Joseph missioned in Brazil.

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