

# Father Peter Deckman Concludes Maryknoll Assignment in Bolivia

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** The following article was sent to the Courier-Journal by Father Stephen DeMott at the request of Father Peter Deckman. Father DeMott, who worked as a seminarian in Guayaramerin, Bolivia, from 1973 to 1975, is now associate editor of Maryknoll Magazine.

By Stephen T. DeMott, M.M.

I first met Father Peter Deckman in Bolivia 12 years ago. Squared off like a boxer in the middle of a ring, with a large grin and a fiesty two-fisted approach to life, Pete gave me some of my first words of advice about Bolivia. "It's a tough country," he told me. "It will either make a man out of you or destroy you."

I saw Pete again this past April in the bustling border town of Guayaramerin, located on the banks of the wild Mamore River in Bolivia's steamy, mosquito-infested jungles that face more of the same in Brazil. Pete's curly hair is now salted with gray, but other than that he hasn't changed a bit. The gusto is there, his frame is trim; the smile is the same and his laughter still erupts like a cannon blast. After 14 years in this South American country (nine in the thin-aired mountain-top city of La Paz and now five in the sweltering "Green Hell" of the Pando Vicariate), Pete is getting ready to return to Rochester in November.

"Tell the people in New York to look for Pete Deckman when the snow flies," he said. "I haven't seen any for five years."

As an associate Maryknoll missionary, Pete is playing a key role in one of the most important transitions to take place in the Pando. After 43 years of missionary work in that isolated northern zone of Bolivia, the Vicariate now has three native Bolivian priests, two with Pete in Guayaramerin and one in Riberalta, and six seminarians getting ready to join them. Maryknoll's goal of "working ourselves out of a job," has been a long time in coming, but in the near future it looks as though there will be enough native vocations to the priesthood and religious life to provide local leadership for the Church in Bolivia's difficult jungle regions.

Working right along side the clergy are dozens of well-trained, dedicated lay men and women without whom priests and sisters would accomplish very little in this vast area of 53,000 square miles where travel is mostly done on 20 navigable rivers.

"I'm excited to be part of this process of maturation of a native Church," said Pete. "An important part of this work is that I have to step aside, to let someone else do it." Pete lives in a newly constructed brick and concrete rectory with Bolivian Fathers Jaime Susli and Juan Carlos Crespo. The new rectory and the large, plain church with a corrugated tin roof that stands next to it are signs of Guayaramerin's burgeoning growth. In the past two decades, Guayaramerin has expanded from a ramshackle, riverbank hamlet to a city of more than 20,000.

Reminiscent of the Wild West with its low, tile-roofed houses and shaded boardwalks, Guayaramerin's dusty, rut-filled streets are constantly rumbling under the weight of trucks carrying huge doughnut-shaped masses of raw rubber, sacks of Brazil nuts or stacks of logs hauled out of deep tropical forests. Many of these products are moved illegally out of the country with payoffs to

police and military, as is a steadily-growing amount of cocaine that in Bolivia begins its long journey to street corners in the United States and Europe. Drugs and contraband have introduced their share of violence and corruption into the Pando Vicariate making the work of the church that much more difficult and that much more important.

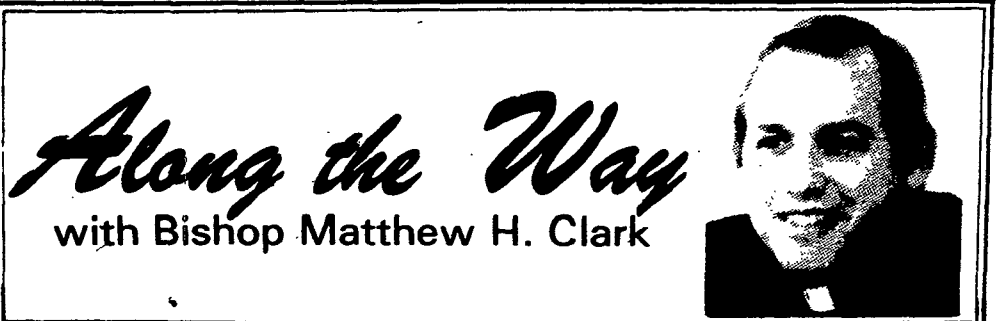
"Killings here are often drug-related," said Pete. "Cocaine traffic started with the pilots, but now everybody is getting into it. Farmers are beginning to plant coca (the leaf from which the drug is derived) and can get as many as three crops a year. It pays well and, besides, it's a lot lighter than rice and easier for them to carry into town."

Bolivia's estimated \$2 billion a year cocaine industry, however, does little to benefit the majority of Bolivians. Studies indicate that \$1.8 billion leaves the country to be invested in banks in the Bahamas, Miami and Switzerland. Meanwhile, this Andean nation of 6.2 million people holds the record for being the poorest country in all Latin America. The infant mortality rate in Bolivia is 213 per thousand, while in Haiti, the continent's next poorest country, the rate is 165 per thousand. (In the United States it is 21 per thousand.) Bolivia has the lowest life expectancy of all Latin nations: 47 years. And, according to the World Bank, it has the worst distribution of wealth. The top five percent of Bolivian society controls 39 percent of the income while the poorest 20 percent receive only two percent.

The 47-year-old Father Pete and his two Bolivian counterparts speak out strongly about the social ills in their parish. Three times a day, every day of the week, they take turns doing radio programs, drawing on the social doctrine of the Church and designed to inspire, instruct and organize the people. In addition to his radio ministry in Guayaramerin, Pete is also an adviser for Radio San Miguel in Riberalta, some 50 miles west over a jarring washboard road. San Miguel directs its wide variety of programs to the many rice and banana farmers and to the rubber cutters and Brazil-nut harvesters who live in isolated communities along the rivers. The radio, once busted up by one of Bolivia's military governments, is constantly criticized by wealthy and unscrupulous plantation owners for "stirring up the people."

Apart from the radio, Pete's principal task is to accompany the two young Bolivian priests. He encourages and challenges them to help build the parish into a vital, vibrant, and independent local church. "I find it challenging," said Pete, "not only for myself but for the whole team." Although Pete is the only "gringo" on the parish team — and the only gringo in town for that matter — he says he doesn't feel like an outsider. "My ideas are challenged and respected," he said. "I do enjoy it!"

Fourteen years in Bolivia have done nothing to dampen Father Pete's enthusiasm. And listening to the words of gratitude and admiration that Bolivians and fellow missionaries have for this dynamic Rochester priest, I could only conclude that Pete had passed his own test. His experience in Bolivia has helped him achieve the full measure of manhood.



Sunday Evening

Tonight, on the first day of what I hope will be a week of special grace for all of us, I have been thinking about how best to share with you in these days of prayer and fasting as we remember the devastation caused by the explosion of atomic bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

I will try to eat a lesser amount than usual. For me that usually means a full meal a day, usually in the evening, with the other two meals not equalling the principal meal. In addition, it means for me no sweets or alcohol and no snacks between meals. Under ordinary circumstances that sustains my health and allows me to work. It also leaves me with the realization that I could eat — and would enjoy — more food. That awareness calls me to prayer and reminds me of my total dependence on the Lord for every breath I draw.

In prayer, I hope to make the beatitudes my theme for the week. I shall try to spend some extra time each day reading the beatitudes and letting the truth of them sink into my heart so that they become more and more the dispositions of my spirit and the norm of my conduct.

As part of that prayer I wish to present to the Lord for His healing touch all of the relationships in my life which are not what He wants them to be and I shall ask for the grace never to act out of rancor or spite or anger but to act always as He would. I ask your prayerful support in all of this and promise you my own

as you choose your way to join our community of faith in this special time.

One may wish to pray for, and work on, a restoration or strengthening of one's marital relationship. Another may be inspired finally to face and fight a growing tendency to be too hard with the children. Still another may judge in the grace of this week that it's time to grow up and to accept more adult responsibility for self and for others.

There is no end to the ways in which members of our communities — you and I — need the Lord's healing and reconciling mercy. And although we may experience it in different ways as we are given longer years there is no time in an individual's life when she or he is free from the need for that kind of compassion.

So, dear friends, please be a part of this week of special memory of a tragic event so that in it we can reappraise the Risen One's powerful gift of peace and communicate to others this gift with which we have been so richly blessed.

Thanks to St. Boniface and Holy Ghost parishes for the joy of worshipping with them this weekend. To be with such people is to be reminded in a life-giving way that when we gather for Eucharistic liturgy God is active and loving us in the Word, the Bread, and the assembly.  
Peace to all.

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