

CATHOLIC MISSIONS

# Evangelization in the New World

## In Latin America, 500th anniversary recalls oppression and suffering

BY FATHER MICHAEL BASSANO

**SANTIAGO, Chile** — For those of us who live as missionaries in Latin America, the way of viewing the 500th anniversary of the Spanish conquest is a sad, horrible reality.

The indigenous peoples of Brazil, the Aztecs of Mexico, the Incas of Peru, the Quechua and Aymara of Bolivia, the Guarani of Paraguay, as well as the Mapuche of Chile, suffered violence, slavery, and death at the hands of the conquistadors and religious who brought both the sword and cross to this continent.

If to evangelize means to share the faith and love of God for all peoples, then the conquest was a failure resulting in the destruction of primitive cultures and many injustices in the pursuit of gold, land, and wealth.

In spite of the arrival of the Spanish, the Mapuche Indians of Chile have a proud history as an indigenous people. They were the only Indians who were never conquered by the Spanish. The resistance was so great that the Spanish had to withdraw from Mapuche territory.

Some of the courageous chiefs of the Mapuche — such as Lantaro, Galvarino, and Caupolican — suffered violent deaths at the hands of the conquistadors, which only fortified the resistance. When Pedro de Valdivia, the leading conquistador and founder of the city of Santiago in 1541, was killed by the Mapuche, there was no further attempt to dominate these indigenous people.

According to Father Eugene Theisen, a Maryknoll missionary presently working with Mapuche in Chile, "The Mapuche, or 'people of the earth,' systematically attacked and destroyed Spanish settlements, constantly changing tactics to confound their would be colonizers. Although Spain reportedly lost just 500 soldiers in its conquest from Mexico to Tierra del Fuego, several times that number of 'conquistadors' lost their lives in the failed attempt to subjugate the Mapuches. Realizing it would never conquer them, Spain enacted treaties with the Mapuches, allowing them to live in peace in that part of Latin America (Chile) that Spain called the 'graveyard of the Spanish.'"

The Chilean people today are a mix of both Mapuche and Spanish blood as well as other European influences (German, Italians, Yugoslavians) who immigrated to Chile at the turn of the 20th century.

When Chileans speak of their Mapuche origins, there is a strong sense of pride and gratitude to an indigenous people who bravely resisted the Spanish conquest. There are approximately 500,000 descendants of Mapuche in a nation of 13 million people. They continue to struggle to preserve their land, culture, and traditions in the southern part of Chile.

Today in Latin America, Oct. 12, Columbus Day, is not a day of celebration, but of mourning for the thousands or, better stated, millions of indigenous people killed at the onset of the

Spanish conquest.

The only Mapuche member of the present day Chilean Congress recently told a daily newspaper: "I am in solidarity with Mapuche organizations who reject the so-called 'Discovery of America.' The Mapuches and other indigenous groups have nothing to celebrate. On the contrary, for centuries they were the owners of the land, their lives, and their destinies. The 'Discovery of America' was, simply speaking, a war of conquest that signified death, destruction, and the marginalization of indigenous peoples."

In the face of all this, how can we celebrate the 500 years of evangelization of Latin America or Columbus Day? What is the real challenge for us as human beings as well as members of the Catholic Church? What is God asking of us who believe in his love for us and all peoples? How can we proclaim the gospel of Jesus that brings life and hope to all? How can we announce the "good news" of the dignity and worth of every human being on the planet while denouncing the political, social, and economic injustices that enslave and oppress? These are questions that seek answers.

The dominant forces that shaped the future of Latin America at the time of the conquest were the Spanish Empire and the Catholic Church. The Catholic religion was imposed upon the indigenous people without respecting the cultures or traditions of the people. A native place of worship was destroyed and a Catholic church was built over it.

As the violence and abuses against the indigenous increased, various religious spoke out against the injustices, such as Franciscan Friar Bartolome de las Casas, as well as the Society of Jesus. Their prophetic voices went unheard, even leading to the expulsions of the Jesuits from Latin America as depicted in the film "The Mission."

If the "celebration" of 500 years of evangelization is to have any meaning for the people of Latin America, we must first seek the truth at all cost. We, as a Catholic Church, must admit the errors that took place during the conquest and seek pardon for the atrocities that occurred against the indigenous population by imposing our culture and religion upon them. We must then rewrite the history of the Spanish conquest, not according to the triumph of a dominant culture over an inferior race, but rather of how a lack of respect for another culture and religion resulted in such violence and injustice.

The most important task for us as a Catholic church is to make the continued effort to understand and learn from the culture of another. Now more than ever we must see the presence of God already at work in another cultural tradition. Only then can we grow together in effective interchange of faith and hope that can enhance our cultures.

No longer can we impose our belief upon another; no longer can we try to dominate another believing that our way is better; no longer can we be blind to the dignity and presence of God in another culture — especially in

the poor.

Through my mission experience with Maryknoll over these past four years in Chile, I have come to appreciate the Chilean culture as well as the ongoing struggle of the people to rise above the economic injustice that keeps five million people in poverty.

In the poor sectors where I work, the Chileans ask me to listen to their reality, to understand how the violence and injustice of 17 years of a dictatorship have affected and still affect their lives, even though we are now in a democracy. They invite me to enter into their life experience and to share with them my own reality and culture, to share with them my faith that God lives among the poor and that together we can overcome the injustices and fears that keep us from being fully alive. It is only in this way that we can effectively evangelize and share the good news of Jesus with others in forming viable Christian communities that unite others in hope.

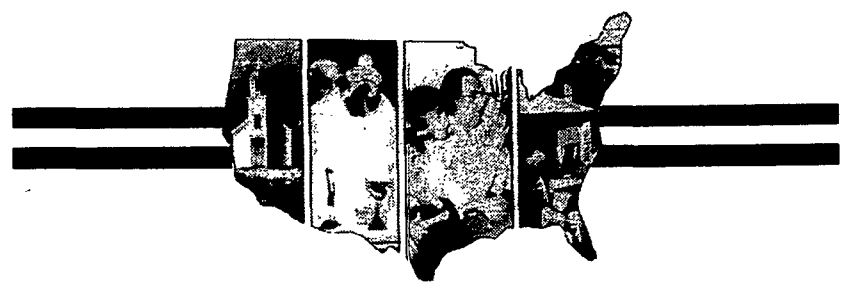
When Pope John Paul II visited Peru in 1985, the indigenous people of this nation gave him a letter, which stated: "We, Indians of the Andes Mountains and of America, decided to take advantage of the visit of John Paul II,

to return to him his Bible because in five centuries it has given to us neither love, peace or justice. Please take the Bible and return it to our oppressors, because they need its moral precepts more than ourselves. The Bible arrived to us as part of the imposed colonial plan. It became the ideological weapon of the colonial assault. The Spanish sword which by day was attacking and assassinating the bodies of Indians became at night the cross that attacked the Indian soul."

In spite of what has happened in the past, may our celebration of the 500 years of evangelization continue to be a prayerful, truthful, reflective rediscovery of what is the reality of Latin America today, of what are the struggles of the indigenous and the poor who cry out for justice. We can neither be deaf nor silent to their voices that seek our response.

I prayerfully plead for your solidarity with the indigenous and oppressed poor of Latin America.

*The author is a priest of the Syracuse diocese who is currently serving as a Maryknoll associate missionary in Santiago, Chile.*



### Not all missions are foreign

There is a country where people are so impoverished and isolated that they must gather for Mass in a tent. Where parish priests travel 75 miles or more to offer Mass. And where millions of people have no religion at all.

Many of the poverty-stricken survive in tiny sheds of rotting wood—often housing as many as 20 family members. Their homes have no electricity, no running water. Their travels made difficult by roads of dirt and gravel.

#### The country? The United States!

From the mountains of Appalachia to the snowy barrens of Alaska, there are many people within our borders who need your help. And it is only their strong Faith that enables them to overcome their hardships.

Since 1905, the Catholic Church Extension Society has been collecting funds to help these people in the poor and isolated home mission areas of America.

Please join us and assist these needy missions. Your gifts will make the difference in keeping the Faith alive in the hearts of people in great need.

*Mission America*

The Catholic Church **EXTENSION** Society  
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Enclosed is my gift of \$\_\_\_\_\_ to help the home missions.  
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