

Sisters tough it out in Latin America

On Jan. 9 my niece, Grace Early, and I left the United States for a two-week visit to our Sisters of Mercy in Chile and to our Sisters of St. Joseph in Brazil. We will be home on Jan. 25. This week and next in *Along the Way*, I offer some thoughts about our experience.

When we celebrated the Eucharist with the Mercy community just before leaving Chile, Sister Jane Kenrick prayed for the people of the Diocese of Rochester "without whose financial and moral support through these 32 years we could not be here doing what we are doing." Jane put into those words of prayer our expression of gratitude to you that I heard a great number of times from the sisters while here.

I first came here 18 years ago this month. I'll never forget that experience. I had been bishop for almost two years and was dealing with some difficult questions at the time. It was good to be off the scene for a few days. I realized then and realize even more now how significant it was to be in a place where everyone's experience of church was so different from our own. And I shall always remember how gracious and understanding were those first sisters I met on that visit. Of those I met that year Janet Caulfield and Jane Kenrick remain in Chile; Katherine Popowich, Barbara Orczyk, Suzanne Wills, Marlene Roeger and Chris Burgmaier are still in Brazil.

Our sisters describe themselves as ordinary people doing ordinary things. I understand that and I agree. And yet I want to object. It is true that they teach. They do parish pastoral ministry. They train people for leadership and walk with the poor. They work to save young women from becoming de-personalized in the sex industry. They encourage HIV/AIDS patients. Many of their sisters back home do those same things. But our sisters here do these works in circumstances that are frequently much more difficult than ours. It is also important to me that they remind us all that the life of our church goes beyond our spatial boundaries. They remind us that we are all called to be missionaries wherever we are by virtue of our baptism.

I had never been to Ronque or Montenedro in Chile before. Sisters Theresa Rutty and Ann Marie Mathis now minister in those communities and hosted

along the way

BY BISHOP MATTHEW H. CLARK



Grace and me for an overnight visit to them. These small communities rest in a dry, very hilly area. As I walked the streets I thought of the Western movies of my boyhood. That may not be too much of a stretch because before land reform the whole region was ranch land in the hands of very few families. Theresa and Ann Marie introduced us to Signora Maria, a woman well into her 80s whose family owned the ranch and who today is still regarded as "padrona" of the region. Maria is a good friend of our sisters and strong supporter of parish life.

For the second time I missed visiting Copiapo, site of ministry for Sisters Judith Frikker from Detroit, Joanne Deck of Rochester and Marie Inez, one of our three professed Chilean sisters. God willing, I'll get to that northernmost of the Mercy missions on my next visit. If we follow normal patterns, that visit will occur in 2002.

We had the pleasure of spending time once again with Sister Josephine Twomey, who is a proud daughter of Cork. Josie lives with Janet Caulfield and devotes her energy to parish life in the region around San Luis. I am not sure if it flows exclusively from her Irish heritage, but Josie has a gift of quiet hospitality that would make any guest feel at home. That same kindness is evident in Sister Veronica Ekerick from Brisbane, Australia. Veronica is about to move from Huamachuco to work with children in another area of Santiago.

On Sunday in Brazil, Sister Annie Marvin led the liturgy of her community for the first time. Anne said

she was nervous about the prospect. If she was, she certainly didn't show it. When we stopped by to pick her up after the liturgy the people of the community were clearly delighted by her efforts. Anyone who has ever started from scratch with a foreign language will realize what Anne and our sisters here have accomplished. It is an achievement that I truly admire.

I had the privilege of presiding at three Sunday Eucharistic liturgies. Marlena helped me practice pronouncing the Portuguese. Normally, when you do something three times, you do it better the third time than the first. In this case I managed to reverse the process! The people were very patient with my treatment of their beautiful language. The language of our common faith was stronger than my poor efforts in Portuguese.

The third member of the Oberlandia community is Sister Ireny Rosa da Silva, one of the Brazilian women who is a professed Sister of St. Joseph. Nega, as she is called, is gifted in many ways. I love her humor. I also admire her courage and that of the other Brazilian and Chilean women who have committed themselves to our North American-based religious congregations.

When I asked Willias, a young seminarian, what attracts him to priesthood he did not respond immediately. After some thought he said, "I have always felt called to help people. As I have grown older I can see that the life of priesthood offers a wonderful opportunity to be one who helps others."

In another conversation that day, I asked Lucimar, who had just been officially named minister of her community, what was most rewarding about the experience. Her reply: "It is such an honor to serve the people. Nothing affects me more deeply than to offer someone the Body of Christ. It is a beautiful and very humbling experience." I hear such responses from our seminarians at home and from lay ministers in our parishes. To hear them in this place as well is an interesting meditation on the life of the church.

The people here are beautiful. So is the land. On the way home last evening, I saw a display of lightning such as I have never seen before. It played out across 90 degrees of the horizon and was lively for at least a half-hour. It was spectacular.

Peace to all.

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