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The International House at El Alto, Bolivia

by Franc Pavlič, C.M.

Province of Slovenia

The house of the Vincentian Community in El Alto, Bolivia, is located about 20 minutes from the international airport of the capital of this nation, La Paz. This same house is about eight hours from the rural mission area where we minister (on the Peruvian border). During the rainy season (which lasts for three months) and the time of roadblocks (which lasts for two months), communication between the city and the mission is impossible.

The place where we work is noted for its high altitude: an average of almost 4,000 meters above sea level, and includes communities of the altiplano that are between 2,600 and 4,800 meters. The population is peasants, very poor and their language is mainly Aymara (with some exceptions where the people speak Quechua). The root of the material poverty is the spiritual poverty. The people were evangelized 400 years ago but in their heart and mind they have maintained their traditions. Therefore there is a passive resistance toward the Good News, though there are some exceptions of committed people who proclaim and live the faith. The root of this resistance is historical (the domination of the masters over the natives which continues even today) and political (the original trade unions wanted to implant a new system that is cruel: a form of "native communism").

During the 1950s, some missionaries from the then Pacific Province worked among the Aymara and Quechuan of our rural area and the altiplano. Some confreres worked in the seminaries. The first missionary who remained in the actual work area of the international mission of El Alto was Fr. Manuel Blanco, C.M., a Spaniard. He was a true Vincentian pioneer here and he ministered in a very extensive area (Puerto Acosta, Umanata, Mocomoco and Italaque). His words and his character are still present in the hearts and minds of the people, especially the catechists.

Fr. Bernard Massarini, C.M., French, came to the mission in 1994. A while later, Fr. Bogusław Sroka, C.M., Polish, arrived. They

worked in the area that was “ours” until 1997. Frs. Aarón Gutiérrez and Homero Elías, Mexicans, arrived in 1995. Fr. Homero ministered in Italaque and Fr. Aarón in Umanata. Two years later, Fr. Krzysztof Wrześniak, Polish, volunteered and began to work in Mocomoco. With the arrival, however, of Fr. Rafał Brukarczyk, also Polish, a change was made. Fr. Krzysztof began to minister in two parish chapels in El Alto and with the Vincentian Family in the country, while Father Rafał worked in Mocomoco.

With the arrival of Fr. Abdo Eid, C.M., Lebanese, in 1998, the house had a formator. Fr. Homero left the mission at the end of 1999 and Fr. Aarón who was working in Umanata since 2001, was named the Director of the Daughters of Charity in Mexico. The last two missionaries to arrive on the mission were Frs. Franc Pavlič, Slovenian, and Aníbal Vera, Peruvian. Fr. Franc works in Italaque and Fr. Aníbal in Umanata, El Alto and with the Vincentian Family.

At present, Fr. Abdo works in the area of formation, Fr. Rafał in Mocomoco, Fr. Franc in Italaque and Fr. Aníbal in Umanata, El Alto and with the Vincentian Family. We still need two confreres who are willing to volunteer in order to cover the basic needs of the International House; that is, one for the mission and another for the pastoral ministry in the rural area. The following are the lines of action for our ministry.

1. Education

a) The formation of the seminarians is done in Chile. Before sending them there, however, Fr. Abdo prepares the candidates for one year in Chaskipampa. The candidates in whom a vocation “is perceived” are sent to Chile to continue their formation and studies. The reason for sending them there is to provide them with a place where they can prepare themselves well in the Vincentian vocation and so that they can return afterwards and work in our mission of Bolivia.

b) In two alternative secondary educational centers in Umanata and Italaque, we prepare young people and adults so that they might have a better future in obtaining work. Those who have to travel a long distance, eat and sleep at these centers.

c) Through means of the day care centers (in Umanata and Italaque) we help the children by providing them with nutritious food and caring for their health, hygiene, pre-school education, etc. During the meetings with their parents, we insist on the importance of the family and education.

d) In Mocomoco, Fr. Rafał has taken the first steps in working with the JMV. In Umanata and Italaque, as well as in the two chapels of El Alto, youth groups have been formed. The three parishes in the

rural area have dedicated much effort to the formation of catechists and sacramental preparation. Beginning this year, there is also a football (soccer) school in Italaque. The confrere there wants, through sports programs for children and teenagers (there are more than 70 students in the different communities), to help them overcome longstanding animosities and bloody quarrels among the communities.

2. The Vincentian Family

Fr. Krzysztof began to meet with and encourage the different lay groups in Bolivia, which were dispersed throughout this large country. Fr. Aníbal has continued this work, visiting the lay groups, encouraging them, assisting them in organizing, etc. Today the problem of dispersion has been overcome and the groups know one another within the country. They are in a much better situation: they know one another better, plan their work and undertake missions with the support of the Daughters of Charity in Bolivia. Fr. Aníbal gives retreats and formation talks to the different groups of the Vincentian Family.

3. Pastoral Work

The three parishes of the rural area have the same pastoral lines of action. For this reason, we have no problems with mutual assistance and collaboration. Time and energy are dedicated to visiting the communities spread out in the mountains and plains of the Cordillera of the Andes. The catechists who have been formed and are committed are our collaborators in these communities. We also take seriously the pastoral lines of actions of the Diocese of El Alto and we believe that we have enriched them with our own charism. According to the bishop our parishes are alive and are always searching for an adequate pastoral approach to the people.

The work of Fr. Abdo in the diocesan seminary should be highlighted, as well as his vocational work together with the Daughters of Charity and other congregations in Bolivia. Before he leaves Bolivia, Father Rafał wants to furnish the new day care center that he built in Mocomoco. In Italaque, the rural university, "San Vicente de Paúl," is about one-third completed. He is seeking financial assistance in order to complete the construction. And, with the help of God, we also hope to have a home for the elderly of the entire Department of La Paz, for those who have been abandoned by their families in the rural area.

4. The Future

We are in urgent need of two more Vincentians to continue the activities in which we are currently engaged. We are overwhelmed with work but happy to be able to serve these people who have been forgotten and abandoned in their material and spiritual poverty. We would be able to continue and strengthen our basic activities with these new volunteers. Within a few years we hope to be able to reinforce the pastoral work with the help of the first Bolivian missionaries who are currently in formation in Chile.

This last point is crucial for the International House in El Alto: **all the religious Congregations have their house of formation in the city of Cochabamba.** The Vincentians are the only exception. The city of Cochabamba has a better university (theology) than La Paz. This fact has to be taken into consideration to give the young Bolivians the possibility of being formed *in* Bolivia and *for* Bolivia — for a future **“Vincentian Region in Bolivia.”** In this way the economic support that we receive from the Curia for the students in Chile could be reduced. If this proposal were to be accepted then the door would be open **to restructuring the House in El Alto**, and we would have the possibility **of opening a new house in Cochabamba** (where we could count on the support of more priest volunteers since the climate is better, the altitude not as high, the political situation less conflictive and there is more security for the pastoral, social, and educational work). I do not mean to imply that we should abandon the “dangerous” Altiplano, but rather that we should think about **moving out** into other areas while maintaining the work that is already in place. The distance between El Alto and Cochabamba would not be a serious problem because we would be able to communicate daily with one another by radio (as the Daughters of Charity in Beni and the priests and the bishops in some vicariates of Bolivia do). In fact, this type of communication already exists among the three parishes in the rural area (Umanata, Mocomoco and Italaque). The missionaries work here wholeheartedly! We ask that, in any case, these suggestions be analyzed by the Curia. Moving to Cochabamba would also open us to a greater possibility of economic self-sufficiency.

(CHARLES T. PLOCK, C.M., translator)