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New International Missions

by Victor Bieler, C.M.

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1. Bolivia

This mission started because of a request from the Bishop of El Alto, Msgr. Jesús Juárez Párraga, SDB, to help in the Alto Plano of Bolivia.

The confreres here work in three parishes: San Miguel de Italaque, San Pedro de Mocomoco and San Francisco de Umanata in the highlands of the country (at an altitude of around 4000 meters). They also serve in a quarter of La Paz. In total they serve the people of 100 communities.

Actually the confreres working in this mission are: Franc Pavlič (Slovenia), Abdo Eid (Lebanon) and Aníbal Vera (Peru). We hope that an other confrere, Diego Plá (Madrid), will soon come to reinforce this community.

The challenges the confreres have to face are in the first place the great material poverty of the people. Then there is the fact that Christianity has not really taken root yet in spite of the evangelization begun already in the 14th and 15th centuries by Spanish missionaries. There is still a very great religious ignorance and people practice a strong syncretism, due to the long years of absence of priests in the interior of the country. The presence of several Christian denominations (Lutherans, Methodists, etc.) makes the work even more difficult.

Besides that, the climate is not very friendly for humans. Living at such an altitude demands lungs that can conserve great quantities of oxygen, or that one gets used to the thin air, which is not possible for everybody. Some people never get used to it. Moreover, the local people are very reserved and the language, Aymara, is not easy to learn.

More confreres are needed in this difficult mission.

2. Papua New Guinea

Holy Spirit Seminary in Boroko, Port Moresby, had approached the Congregation of the Mission several times through some of its teachers there and through Archbishop Barnes, of Port Moresby, the

chairman of the Seminary Board. What the seminary needs most is spiritual direction for the students.

Rolando Santos, a member of the Province of the Philippines, volunteered to help in that field. He has been there since 2001. Two other confreres joined him since then. They are Homero Marín Arboleda of Colombia and Tulio Cordero of the Province of Puerto Rico. During my last visit earlier this year, they told me they were happy to be there and happy in their work.

Indeed, since the coming of the confreres to this seminary, the atmosphere has changed notably. The confreres are a great asset for the Church in Papua New Guinea: Rolando with his experience in spiritual direction; Homero because of his missionary experience and enthusiasm; Tulio with his musical talents has made the students sing.

3. Solomon Islands

In 1999 the three bishops of the Solomon Islands had requested the Australian Province for personnel to take the direction of a major seminary in this country. Until then they had sent their candidates to Boroko in Papua New Guinea. However, because of cultural differences between the Papua New Guineans and the Solomon Islanders, they thought it better to start their own major seminary.

The first volunteers for this mission were Marcelo Manimtim of the Philippines and Tom Hynes of the Eastern Province. A year later Stanislaus Reksosusilo of Indonesia joined them. Tom returned to the U.S.A. Then, later, followed Rafael Sualdito, from the Philippines, who died, and Jack Harris of the Province of Ireland, then Marek Owskiak of Poland and Agustinus Marsup of Indonesia.

Now the confreres in the Solomon Islands are Frank Vargas from the Philippines, Marek Owskiak from Poland, Agustinus Marsup from Indonesia, Joseva Tuimavule from Fiji (member of the Australian Province), Chacko Panathara from India South.

Frank, Agus and Marek are in charge of the Holy Name of Mary Seminary, Joseva is the Director of Nazareth Apostolic Centre, a school of formation for catechists and a pre-seminary, while Chacko is the parish priest of Good Shepherd Parish in Tenaru.

During my last visit earlier this year, Archbishop Adrian Smith told me that the bishops plan to have a full seminary program and that in the future they will no longer send their students after the three first years in Honiara to Boroko in Papua New Guinea. This means that that the Vincentians have to find more confreres if they wish to accept the new situation and continue the direction of the seminary until the local clergy is able to take over. The necessary construction of new buildings is almost completed.

4. Conclusion

There are still requests coming in from bishops asking for help in the field of formation and evangelization. We are still in demand regarding the formation of the clergy. But it would not be bad if we strengthened our presence in the Pacific, which is the most forgotten part of the Church. We should not forget that we already have confreres working in Papua and Papua New Guinea, Australia and Fiji and in the Solomon Islands. However, preparation for a missionary call is needed. One of the most important elements is the ability for inculturation, which, unfortunately, is not always present. However, I am convinced that our Founder wanted us to practice the five virtues: humility, simplicity with modesty, great zeal and mortification, in order to be able to bring the Good News to people of other cultures.