

13-B-67

INTERESTING LASALLIAN MISSIONARY WORK IN THE ANDES (1)

How it began

In 1977, three of us, Brothers of the District of Bilbao, Spain, presented a project for greater dedication to the poor. The Brother Visitor and his council approved it. The choice indicated was some poor area in Ecuador where our presence would be useful in various ways. The Brother Visitor and his Council received us graciously.

We joined the Azogues community where two elderly Brothers were running a primary school and a secondary school. We three Brothers made use of the weekends for making contact with the native country folk, so numerous in that area and with some less numerous ones at the school in the provincial capital.

We were going to a nearby farm community to do some work towards literacy. This simple experience was enough to learn the deep causes of the underdevelopment which was all around us. We then decided upon a plan of action for the benefit of these local country folk and we also involved the Brothers of the Bilbao District in the work. Their response was truly exemplary.

During the summer vacation groups of Brothers and secular helpers began pouring in. They worked not only in catechesis and evangelization, health, and advancement, but they were also making a well thought out evaluation of the work. The conclusion was this: "Enough of this petty almsgiving; we must have a group of Brothers and co-workers to live among the local people so that this strength in personnel and economic help could achieve a maximum of usefulness and could be a witness of the dedication which the poor deserve and which the Districts ought to offer".

So, since 1983, a team of three Brothers and four co-workers are doing this varied work.

Among the local people

During the mornings, we work in the school, which needs religious personnel so badly. This also provides us with some funds for our subsistence. Right after lunch, we go to the nearby high Andes to live among the local farm people and to share with them our faith in Jesus.

The choice of a place was not made at random. After studying the needs and possibilities of more than 40 villages, we chose, with the agreement of the local ordinary, the most poor, cold, deprived, and pastorally neglected place. The center of operations is found in Aquarongo: a small farm community at 3,500 meters altitude. The field of activities goes all the way up to 3,800 meters. The climate is very cold all year round. The soil is poor and the lands are the edges of the large estates. Still, for these country folk it is their only treasure; I say treasure because this is the first time that they have been owners of land.

Almost all here are immigrants from the nearby villages. They are a people with a will to work, with an immense desire to improve their learning, to create new sources of work, to better themselves, and to take better care of their families.

At the root of our first contacts with these people, we were asking the following question: "What do you expect from missionaries?" The answer was always "We want them to talk to us about the Word of God and of things of the Christian faith".

Hardships

An initial investigation and visit to each of the families made us see clearly the grave problems which they were complaining about:

- High infant mortality.
- General illness: intestinal parasites, lung ailments, respiratory infections, cerebral hemorrhages, skin diseases of bacterial origin, etc..
- Deficient and unbalanced nutrition.
- Illiteracy.
- Superstition and magic.
- Sub-human living conditions, a deplorable lack of hygiene.
- A serious lack of infrastructure: they had no electrical current, no running water, no toilet facilities; many houses had no beds or furniture.
- Medical attention was distant and costly.

What should be done?

The feeling of inadequacy was enormous. We really felt ourselves poor in face of the magnitude and variety of the problems we had to resolve. But the strength of the Spirit and the confidence of our team encouraged us.

One rural family let us rent their poor house for the team's lodging. We moved in. They went to live in a nearby very poor hut. It was not possible to convince them to do otherwise.

Our team took periods of prayer and reflection in order to program the work we were going to do, confronted as we were with such an amount of work.

We beg the readers' kind indulgence for stating in schematic form the fields of activities in which we are now engaged. We just want to say that these activities are carried out in the following country villages: Aquarongo, Yanochocha, Chiripungo, Cungapite, Charón, Curuquina, S. Francisco, Quinuapata and La Tranca.

1. Christian animation

The urban center of the area and the 40 country villages were being attended to by a 94 year old priest. Therefore, the need was both serious and evident. We have been working in various ways:

Evangelization: the Brothers and helper, two by two, direct weekly reflection meetings in all the villages. They do this with the help of slides and other visual aids. They also help in the liturgical celebrations.

Catechesis: each week a Brother gives a two hour lesson on catechetical methods and content to 18 rural catechists, two from each village. Each week an evaluation is made of the progress made with the children. Now we are working towards the *formation of Christian animators* from the rural communities.

Youth Groups: there is one basic point which we are aware of: the country villages will be renewed, in all their aspects, to the extent that we prepare the young. Because of this we take special pains to look after the young people: Every fortnight we have a morning or an entire day dedicated to youth animation with an attendance and participation which we never would have dreamed of.

2. Culture

Taking into consideration the fact that, because of the non-existence of schools in the area, practically all the adults are illiterate, we have been meeting this problem with *literacy courses* in five villages. At this moment all those instructed are already literate and have had their courses officially recognized on three levels. We have continued on with:

Regular courses: With official recognition:

- electrical courses;
- carpentry courses;
- courses in cutting and sewing;
- care is also given to having a bit of humanistic culture.

Monographic courses:

- cooking, balanced diet, and culinary preparation;

- general and specific hygiene;
- childcare;
- accounting and basic administration.

3. Health

Upon our arrival in this zone, we observed a truly lamentable situation in this regard. Sickness was widespread throughout the population: intestinal parasites, colds, skin infections, lung maladies, and children dehydrated by diarrhea, etc..

Through the team's nurse, emergency aid, the study of causes, prophylaxis and health education were begun.

However, seeing that much of this was beyond our abilities, measures were initiated with the Regional Delegation of the Countryside Social Security as well as with a campaign to make the country folk interested in getting into health organizations. The work succeeded in getting the majority of them into this social service. This includes, among other things: free medical care and medicine, retirement pension, and also free surgery. A doctor and nurse offer their services in the zone.

Also a course for country nurses is given which has up to eighteen students. For our part, we continue to give special assistance to children between two and five years old. A large hot-house is being put up in view of cultivating medicinal plants.

4. Nutrition

The nutrition is very unbalanced. We notice grave deficiencies in protein because of the failure to eat meat and fish. Meat is sold to buy cheaper food such as corn, rice, and other cereals and for clothes, heating, minimum schools supplies, etc..

There is also a lack of vegetable vitamins. The cold weather does not allow for the cultivation of garden products. For this reason one of the big tasks of the Team was the installation of a *hothouse*. Various experiments were carried on and at present the production is significant. In order to provide meat, the raising of guinea pigs called "Indian rabbits" and poultry has been promoted. The hothouses have succeeded in producing lettuce, cabbage, garlic, turnips, carrots, and leeks. Along the same line, facilities for fish production are being undertaken.

Brother Julián JAUREGUI