

THE LASALLIAN PRESENCE IN BOLIVIA

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The year 1994 signaled seventy-five years of Lasallian presence in Bolivia. On this occasion Brother Saturnino Gallego published a book that recalls the principal Lasallian events and ministries in the country.

This paper will attempt to highlight this important commemoration.

The beginnings.

The Brothers first arrived in South America from France in 1863. They went first to Ecuador then to Chile in 1877 and the first Brothers arrived in Bolivia in 1919 from Chile.

It was Tuesday, December 16 when Brother Denis-Donatien, the first Brother to step on Bolivian soil, arrived in La Paz. He was French and he had spent many years in Indochina before going to Chile.

He was the director of St. Augustine primary school which was attached to the La Paz Seminary. In January, 1920, two other Brothers arrived to form a community. There was a Frenchman by the name of Judule who came to be known as Julio and Lucio de Jesús, a Chilean, who remained in Bolivia until his death in 1976 at the age of 80.

In Brother Alban's "Histoire de l'Institut" (pp. 395-397) he reports the beginnings of the Lasallian presence in Bolivia in this way:

"By the beginning of the twentieth century the presence of the Brothers of the Christian Schools was already being sought. But it was not until 1919 that three Lasallians from Chile arrived in the capital, La Paz. They had landed in Arica, the northernmost Chilean port. From there they crossed the rugged Western Mountain range on horseback. At the Tacora Pass they entered Bolivia. This was only the beginning for the new horseback riders, of whom one, Brother Denis, the director of the small group, weighed more than 100 kilos (some 220 pounds). Being full of energy and courage, the three Lasallians thought about nothing other than the souls of the children who were waiting for them and they continued their forced march. They arrived in La Paz, altitude 3,658 meters (12,071 feet) exhausted and hungry. They were welcomed at the Seminary where they would set up their new ministry.

Some rooms in the immense building were made into classrooms and the Lasallian school, which was first called St. Augustine, opened its doors for the numerous children. The unselfishness, skill and total surrender of the new teachers soon won the esteem and the affection of the students

and their parents.

Nevertheless difficulties came quickly and the most serious of these was the economic factor which soon made their position untenable. When the Brothers were preparing to return to Chile, the Apostolic Nuncio, Bishop Caroli, who had been the chaplain at the St Joseph School at the Spanish Steps in Rome, intervened so they could stay. They changed locations and were welcomed by the Jesuit Fathers at San Calixto school who put them in charge of the primary section. Repeatedly, families requested the superiors to open a totally Lasallian school. The Brothers began shop in 1923 in an old building which used to be a women's hospital, St. John of God, and they adapted it in the best way possible for the new ministry. And so the La Paz school was born and the future for it looked bright.

In 1929, a Congress meeting in Havana, Cuba, called the American Evangelist, declared open war on Catholic schools throughout Latin America. Catholics would be lost, they said, if they didn't give up ownership of their schools. As a result, in La Paz a campaign of intimidation was begun by the press, with stories of scandals and with pressure exerted on parents of the children who attended the Lasallian school.

All these efforts were in vain when they came up against the good reputation that the Brothers had acquired and the affection that their students had for them. The sheer number of students was significant since 518 were squeezed into the classrooms at the La Salle school, a number which aroused the envy of their adversaries. Results of official examinations in which 30 students received recognition eloquently proclaimed the value of Lasallian instruction and the quality of their methods. The city of La Paz, for its part, ceded to the Brothers the old hospital which the school occupied and authorized them to make whatever improvements they wanted. It was then that Brother Armel Edmond, the future Visitor, arrived, who had shown his considerable architectural talents in Colombia, Venezuela and Ecuador. The superiors named him director of the La Salle school in La Paz and they gave him enough authority to make the necessary changes while he directed the school. He swiftly carried out his plans and work projects moved along at an established pace without interfering in any way in the academic classes. The school, with its seven floors and large chapel was one of the most beautiful buildings in the Bolivian capital".

This long citation aptly summarizes the essentials of those early years in La Paz. We'll end this section pointing out the death of the two young Chilean Brothers in 1922, Luciano Pedro, age 21 and Octavio Pablo, age 26. They were buried in the Jesuit Fathers' mausoleum but on May 18, 1984 their remains were transferred to the crypt in the La Salle Chapel in La Florida.

Expansion.

The second Bolivian city to receive the Brothers was **Cochabamba**. The "Catholic Womens' Circle", under the direction of Mercedes Torres de Rivero, had requested the Brothers' services on numerous occasions. Sister Claudina de Santa Clara, a Clarisse sister, donated a house of the sisters' property so that land for the new school could be purchased. In 1923 work began on the site currently known as Junín Street, located between Mayor Rocha and México, under the direction of Brother Perrin Thomas, a Frenchman and the former Visitor of the Brothers of Rome, who at the age of 78 left Chile for Bolivia to carry out the new ministry.

On January 7, 1925, the school year began in the new building for the De La Salle School with three community Brothers: Perrin Thomas, Colombin Edmond (Edmundo) and Clementien Abel (Abel).

The beginnings were difficult on account of the campaigns unleashed by the Protestants and the Masonic Lodge of Cochabamba and students were scarce. Soon, however, the educational quality of the institution was duly noted and in the 1930's the capacity of the existing building was no longer sufficient so that it was necessary to rent space on Ecuador street and use it as a school annex.

Again, Brother Alban says about this ministry:

"The school had four classes at first. These humble beginnings were later crowned with success which encouraged the Brothers to add a primary school to the Bachillerato program. In spite of the 1930 Revolution and other political and military events that rocked Columbia and neighboring countries, La Salle Cochabamba stood its ground without appreciable damage and continued onward when peace was restored. In 1938 the school was bolstered by an influx of Austrian Brothers who were fleeing from Nazi persecution and also by an increase in the student body so that it became necessary to build another building which was one of the most beautiful in the city. Brother Ireneo Gabriel was an excellent architect and La Salle enjoyed a period of prosperity with some 1,300 students of which 200 attended free of charge".

The student enrollment currently stands at 1,600 of which some 175 attend classes free of charge. The first Lasallian vocation in Bolivia came from this school in the person of Brother Carlos Hugo Crespo Mérida who throughout his life as an educator was concerned with several apostolates and he also wrote various books dealing with science and biology which were published by the Bruño Publishing Company of La Paz.

The next city to receive the Brothers was **Santa Cruz** at the request of the Bishop and the City Council. The Brothers took charge of the Orphanage Institute know as "José Mercado A.". Its first director, Brother Ludovico María, took over in 1949. In the same area there was also the "La Salle" private school which operated at the same time and since 1962 it had its own property on Cristóbal de Mendoza Avenue. The first stone was blessed by Bishop Agustín Arce Mostajo, of Santa Cruz, in September, 1957.

On November 21, 1958, the **House of Formation** was blessed in the Cochabamba Valley located some 12 kilometers from the city in the area known as Qollpapampa in the Colcapirwa district. In the beginning the Aspirancy program was located here and today it is home for the Postulancy program. The Novitiate was also located here from 1983-1990.

In 1962 the Brothers arrived in the city of **Trinidad** at the request of the bishop of Beni, Carlos Anasagasti. The De La

Salle school of Trinidad was dedicated on April 29 and the first community was composed of five Brothers.

The Brothers were also wanted in the diocese of **Oruro** and Bishop Jorge Manrique Hurtado saw his request fulfilled in 1966. The school began with the courses appropriate for the fifth and six levels of primary school and the first level of secondary school according the study guidelines then in force. The first graduation of occurred in 1971.

In order to support the educational mission the Brothers in Bolivia established the **Bruño Publishing Company** in La Paz in 1967 for the publication of academic books.

On January 8, 1969 the eight Lasallian communities in **Bolivia formed a new District**. The first Visitor was Brother José Carlos Carrillo Cascajar who was in office from 1969 until 1974 and again served another term from 1977-1980. He passed away on October 12, 1991. Until that time Peru and Bolivia formed one District. With the new district organization subsidized schools opened (financed in part by the state) in La Paz (1971), Santa Cruz (1972), Cochabamba (1977) and the intermediate and middle levels of the Archbishop Daniel Rivero subsidized school was completed in Santa Cruz.

On the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the arrival in **Cochabamba**, a free school was established as a sign of the Brothers' educational service. The city government offered property which was waste land along the Rocha river in the Villa Coronilla neighborhood and construction began in February, 1977. Today there are 19 classrooms and some 1,500 students in three mixed shifts.

In 1977 the office of the Archbishop of La Paz put the Brothers in charge of the **San Gabriel radio** station in order to take care of the needs of the Aymara farmers. Currently there are many organized programs which include a visit to the various localities of the Altiplano by monitors who are specially trained for this purpose. In 1991, this ministry received the Bartolomé de las Casas award from the government of Spain, awarded in honor of his defense of the rights and cultural identity of indigenous peoples.

Since 1972 Brother Argimiro Felipe (Felipe Palazón), the author of the national plan to eliminate illiteracy, has been in charge of the Antoniano school in **Tarija**. A community of three Brothers was established in 1978 and the work has continued to grow right up to the present day.

May the 75 years of Lasallian presence in Bolivia enlighten all those who work there and may they also serve to bring down the Lord's blessings on the future as the anniversary for the first century draws near.