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The Maryknolls

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Institute of Current World Affairs
522 Fifth Avenue
New York 36, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers:

When we reached the adobe chapel at Ccaccallacco it was almost noon. There was no shade on the rocky hillside, and the Indians grouped near the chapel door stood patiently in the harsh sun waiting for the priest to come. The drought had been severe in the pampas, and most of the farmers were working in the distant fields trying to plant their crops in the powdery soil. For that reason there were only a few men in the group. The dark color of their clothing was lost among the brilliant orange and red of the women's skirts.

The priest walking through the old corn field to the chapel was an American. His black cassock made him look taller and blonder than he really was. The church officials came down the slope to give him the traditional embrace of greeting, and the women stepped aside to let him pass. The American walked slowly to the rude altar built outside the chapel door and sheltered from the pampa wind by a pair of blankets. He stopped to greet the women and children, then disappeared into the interior of the tiny building to hear confessions.

The three Indian catechists assembled the congregation in front of the door and started a hymn in Quechua. The men strained to reach the high notes and the voices of the women were off pitch and keening. Although they were reading the words from their hymnals, the catechists occasionally lost their places and faltered. Then they smiled sheepishly at their friends and waited to catch the right words from one of the strong-voiced women. From a heavy suitcase the sacristan took the priest's vestments, the altar cloth and the articles to be used in the Mass. He paid no attention to the laboring choir except for a stern look at the catechists when they made a particularly bad mistake.

The chapel at Ccaccallacco

The priest came out into the sunlight, put on his vestments, and the Mass began. The women replaced their bowler hats with embroidered shawls (llijllas) and the men bared their heads.

The voice of the priest droned on, and behind the congregation the sheep belonging to the villagers dozed in the sun. Lambs wandering near the chapel were snatched up by the women and rocked in their arms until they slept. Crying babies were passed from hand to hand until they reached their mothers. Women spread their shawls wide to protect their children from the sun.

The congregation grew as the Mass progressed. Shepherds coming in from the pampa let their sheep mix with the village herds and joined the group of kneeling Indians. One man carried a sick lamb in his arms, letting itsuck on his thumb for comfort. The new arrivals stood at the back of the congregation. Women carrying babies on their backs moved their torsos gently to rock them to sleep. The movement was unconscious, for they were deeply absorbed in what the priest was saying.

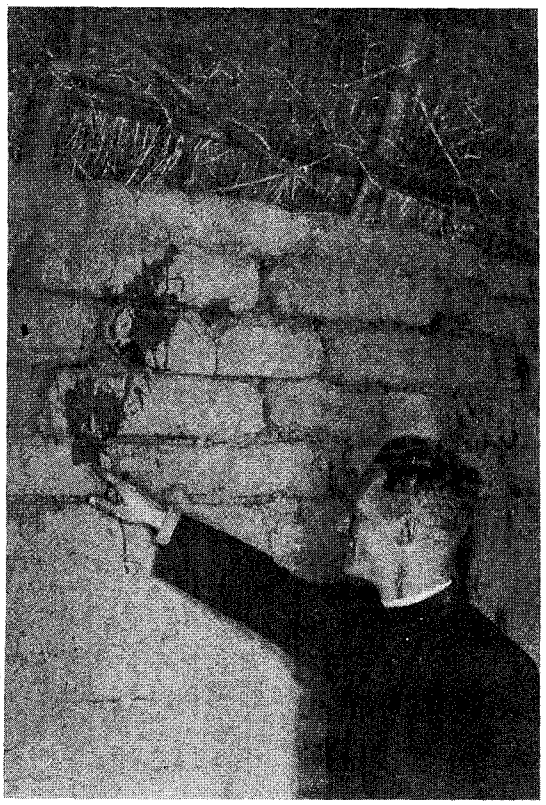
After the Mass, the priest spoke to the congregation in halting Quechua. He told them that they should spend more time studying with the catechists and practicing their prayers. They were learning rapidly, he said, but there was much still to be done. Then, while the sacristan held up a colored picture of the Nativity, he explained the story of the birth of Christ. He pointed to the kneeling characters in the picture and repeated their names several times, the congregation mumbling and trying to get the correct pronunciation as he spoke the words.

The catechists divided the congregation into three age groups and began their classes. The subject was the Catechism, and the questions and responses were in Quechua. The priest was notified that there was a sick man lying in a hut about an hour's ride from the chapel. Someone lent him a poncho, for storm clouds were racing in from the hills. Then he mounted a horse and took the trail that led up the slope. A few minutes later the storm broke, savage as are all storms in the altiplano.

Thomas Verhoeven is the name of the priest. He is a member of the Maryknoll mission in Azángaro, and he travels hundreds of miles per year visiting the isolated ayllus and hacienda villages in the hills and pampas of the district. He has a chance to get out of the altitude every six months for a short rest in the Maryknoll establishments in Arequipa or Lima; he gets home leave every nine years. During most of his life, however, he will live and work among the Indians of the altiplano. Like most of the men who make up the Maryknoll missions in Puno, he is young and energetic. (The oldest Maryknoll priest in the sierra is just over forty.) Ten years of intensive study in the seminary on the Hudson River have trained him in medicine and other valuable skills as well as theology. He has occasion to use those skills almost every day. With the three other priests who live with him in the comfortable house in Azángaro, he must care for the sick, keep the parish church in good condition, visit lonely settlements which can be reached only on horseback in the rainy season, and be able to take care of himself on the vast, silent plains of the altiplano. He must be priest, doctor, carpenter and outdoorsman.

The Maryknolls now have five parishes in the Department of Puno: Ayaviri, Azángaro, Huancané, Ilave and Puno. (In addition, there are Maryknoll missions in Bolivia's Cochabamba valley and the primitive jungle area of the Beni.) Puno was their first sierra parish, set

up in the early 1940's when the bishop of the Department asked the missionaries for help in solving the great problem of giving religious instruction to the Indians. At first, the Maryknolls met with active and open opposition. Puno priests were used to an indolent life full of formalities and pomp. They did not take kindly to the young gringos who paid little heed to such things. They were shocked by the drive with which the priests tackled their job, by the way they shucked their cassocks and donned working clothes when the occasion demanded. Some clerics reacted by spreading tall tales about the newcomers. The most common story: the Americans had come to rob the churches of their altars and images. (On seeing the wooden cases which the Maryknolls sent down to Arequipa to be filled with provisions, many puneños believed the trumped-up story). Hostility came to a head in 1947 when the Maryknoll fathers were forced to barricade themselves in their church while the mob outside howled for their blood. To this day, the instigators of the anti-Maryknoll riot are unknown to all but a few puneños.



Father Murphy in his home in Ichu. Stain on wall is sheep blood placed there during house building ceremonies to ward off evil spirits

Today, after fourteen years of administering to the spiritual and physical needs of their parishioners, the Maryknolls are more than welcome in the sierra. As one Puno schoolteacher put it: "They are really good Catholics; we didn't think so at first when we used to see them going to the movies or riding in the trucks without their cassocks, but now we know better. They speak what they think, and they teach the people that being a good Catholic doesn't mean going to Mass once in a while,"

In my opinion, the reason for the success of the Maryknolls in Puno has its roots in the characters of the men themselves. So alike are many of the priests in their frankness and dedication that one might almost say there is a Maryknoll "type." Most of the priests with whom I talked have rich senses of humor. Some smoke, some drink, and all give the impression of being relaxed and capable.

Father Martin Murphy, a blue-eyed Irishman in his early thirties, is a good example of the Maryknoll "type." He has lived in the Puno area for four years, travelling the dangerous sierra roads on a motorcycle. Recently Father Murphy took us to the isolated town of Ichu where he has been living alone in a small hut and studying the Aymara language. The Indians of Ichu are said to be the most rebellious in the area. Their distrust of the white man is legendary. When we walked down the streambed that serves as the main street of the ayllu, the children ran to hide behind the patio walls. Occasionally we saw a head bobbing behind a boulder or a pair of eyes staring at us from the darkness of a doorway. But Father Murphy had come prepared. In the pockets of his cassock were several pounds of candy

sent to him by a parochial school in the States. He he held out his hand to a blank wall, and a small boy suddenly appeared on top of it. He looked distrustfully at Peggy and myself, then climbed down from his perch to accept the candy with the dignity of a man. The villagers knew Father Murphy and trusted him, judging from the smiles on the faces of the ayllu officials as they greeted him. In Ichu smiles for a white man are a rare compliment indeed.

Before we left Ichu, Father Murphy visited the house of a sick woman. She was very old, and the skin of her face had shriveled away to show the lines of the skull. She lay on a pile of filthy blankets in one corner of a room inhabited by her daughter and three grandchildren. One naked baby was crawling in circles on the foot of the bed. The family's younger members crowded close to the doorway to hear what the priest was saying. Father Murphy felt her pulse and talked to her in Aymara. With the bedside manner of a professional doctor he soothed her until she began to smile. When he left, the old woman followed him with her eyes.

Father Murphy and Ichu children

During the time we lived in Puno, Peggy and I visited three parishes: Azángaro, Ilave and Puno. The setup was about the same in each place: three or four priests working together, each one responsible for a share of the work load. The Maryknoll quarters were comfortable and the food good. As Father Peter Halligan of the Ilave parish told me, "In many cases the Peruvian priests who had these parishes before we came were forced to live alone in the villages. They had no other priests to talk to, no one to keep them from unconsciously lowering their style of living. The result was that many of them adopted the manners and habits of the Indians among whom they were living. With us it is different. We are sent out in threes and fours supplied with enough money and materials to live and eat comfortably. It stands to reason that a man can work better when he enjoys the comforts of hot water, good food and the company of his friends."

In Ilave, a district where poverty, ignorance and a vile climate mix to wear down all but the most abiding human values, the Maryknolls maintain a high standard of living. Their recently completed home is modern; their meals are American and their cook is well trained. The house is equipped with good books, records and comfortable furniture. The three priests we met there are obviously good friends. Their leisure hours were few, but they took advantage of them by talking, joking and relaxing together.

In every parish now staffed by Maryknoll priests, the work load is staggering. Ilave, Azángaro and Puno are suffering from acute

overpopulation, and the job of ministering to the thousands of Indians in each village group is impossible. To reach as many of their parishioners as possible, the priests have inaugurated a program of Indian catechists - reliable men who can read and speak Spanish and are willing to give up several hours each week to receiving instruction from the Maryknolls and, in turn, giving classes in Bible history and the simpler Catholic doctrines to the people of their villages. The system has worked well in Azángaro where over one hundred thousand people live in the small towns and ayllus. The Indian group select their own catechists, and only a handful of choices have proved wrong so far. Using Quechua translations of prayers, hymns and responses, the catechists have been successful in giving their people a more solid base in their professed religion than they ever had before. Only a few of the catechists are paid; most accept the position because of the social prestige that goes with it.

Poverty caused by overpopulation and ignorance of modern farming techniques is another element which must be faced by the Maryknolls. As Father Daniel McClellan, pastor of the parish of San Juan, told me: "You have to raise the standard of living of these people before you can expect them to benefit from anything but the simplest religious instruction." At present, most Indians refuse to deposit their savings in the banks as they are afraid they will be cheated by the misti. Therefore, to help the Indian save what money he can and, at the same time, give him the opportunity to borrow money from an organization of which he is a member, Father McClellan and the other Maryknoll priests in Puno have established a system of credit unions in their parish. (Father McClellan, a fast talking man with a passion for bull fights and flying, had to go to Lima in person and convince Government authorities that his plan was sound in order to get a presidential decree legalizing the unions.) There are now some two hundred members of the Puno credit union, most of them Indians. They pledge themselves to save so many soles per month; the sum is deposited with union officials who are responsible for banking it. On the basis of individual savings, loans are granted to those members who need extra money for the improvement of their farms, special equipment or other projects which have been approved by the credit union. Father McClellan is convinced that the credit union system would bring the Indian into the national economy and, at the same time, raise his standard of living. He hopes that the unions will be installed in all Maryknoll parishes as quickly as possible.

If overpopulation and poverty constitute the Maryknolls' greatest physical problems, resistance to change among the Indians and a lack of sincere religious convictions among the upper classes form the most pressing spiritual ones. The conservatism of the Indian (and the mestizo) resulted in one recent misunderstanding which could have had serious consequences. In keeping with their policy of keeping their churches as clean as they can, the Ilave Maryknolls and their helpers began cleaning the altar and the images of the church of San Miguel. The robes adorning the image of the good saint himself were found to be in great need of soap and water, and the priests set to work to rectify the situation. They had already disrobed San Miguel when a crowd began to collect in the church. The women keened and wailed, and the men talked excitedly. Word had been spread that the Maryknolls were going to steal the images and ship them back to the United States. Those who were ignorant of the

rumor were horrified to see the images removed from the pedestals, and those who believed it were ready to go into action. Surely, they said, the saints and spirits will harm us because of this. Although the town officials quieted the crowd, nothing more could be done in the way of cleaning up San Miguel.

Father McClellan told us that when the Maryknolls first arrived in the city, they found themselves in the center of a large group of free thinkers to whom Catholicism was an obsolete and inadequate religion. Church attendance was at an all-time low, and those few puneños who did go to Mass were roundly scorned. In the succeeding years many of the free thinkers changed their views and rejoined the Church, in some instances influenced by the Maryknolls, but the deep faith which the priests would like to see is still lacking in the circles of Puno society. A layman friend of mine in the city told me that most of his acquaintances consider themselves good Catholics simply because they walk in the street processions and occasionally go to Mass. Their minds rarely bother to venture beyond the mechanical trappings of their faith. Although their verbal support is sometimes long and florid, monetary contributions to the Church are few and far between.

The Maryknolls have found that their Indian parishioners are deeply devout people who will walk leagues in the sierra rains to go to Mass or be confessed. But, as I have pointed out in previous newsletters, the average Quechua or Aymara of Perú has very little idea of what Catholicism really means. Four centuries of priestly effort to convert him by persuasion or force has left him groggy, confused and, at times, filled with a deep hatred for both the religion and its priests. In describing the karikari spirits of the Aymara legends, Harry Tschopik, Jr. [1] says: "These are the spirits of deceased Catholic priests who wander the roads at night, knifing their victims." Tschopik quotes an informant as saying, "They take away all of a man's fat and make soap out of it. They look like Franciscan Fathers." He continues, "This belief, as well as certain folk tales representing priests as evil and immoral individuals, indicates the suppressed hatred underlying the attitude of the Aymara toward the clergy, a point of view that is well documented in other situations and from other sources." Under the above conditions, it is obvious that decades will pass before the Maryknolls can succeed in replacing the old hatreds with a new sense of trust in the Church and its priests. The fact that they have been accepted by so many Indian communities illustrates the progress which has been made already; but the completion of the task lies a long way in the future.

Having once put their program on a solid footing, the Maryknolls will probably be withdrawn from Puno. Father McClellan told me that the priests will be recalled in fifty years or so. By that time, a sufficient number of Peruvians will have been trained in the Maryknoll seminaries in Puno and Cuzco to take over the parishes now managed by the Americans. There are several Maryknoll-trained men working in conjunction with the missions at the present time. After talking with one young Peruvian in Azángaro, it was obvious to me

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[1] Harry Tschopik, Jr. The Aymara of Chucuito, Perú - I. Magic, Vol, 44: Part 2, Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History, New York, 1951

that the seminary had done its job well; he was just as informal and energetic as the rest of the black-cassocked men with whom he was working.

The American priests have come a long way from the early nineteen forties when a small group of men, most of them suffering from acute mountain sickness, took over their first parish. In those days health was so poor that serious thought was given to shutting down the mission. Today, due to the fact that younger and better equipped men are being sent to the area, the health problem is a minor one. With their customary energy which by now is legendary in Puno, the Maryknolls are doing a job of religious and secular education which is unequalled by other Catholic missions in the sierra.

Sincerely,

William H. MacLeish

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