

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

WLM-4

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Dear Peter,

For the last two weeks I have been travelling through the northern coast and cordillera (sierra) of Peru, in the Departments of Ancash and La Libertad. I left Lima on 19 June and took a bus up the Pan-American Highway to the port city of Chimbote. I worked as a lay volunteer with the Catholic Church in Chimbote from 1985-86. Then I assisted the small campesino village of La Victoria in the construction of a 7 kilometer-long irrigation canal. After two years' absence, I was quite eager to visit La Victoria and observe how the community had changed.

La Victoria sits in the Lacramarca Valley, about 20 kilometers east of Chimbote. "Village" may be a misnomer; in 1986, La Victoria was little more than a squatters' settlement in the middle of the coastal desert. Seventeen families had trickled down from the sierra during 1978 and 1979. They were part of the larger wave of migration from sierra to coast that has changed the face of Peru since 1940. The families came in search of land and water. Absentee landlords were banned by General Velasco, ruler of Peru's military government from 1968-75. Velasco's Agrarian Reform Law broke up the huge sugar and cotton haciendas on the coast; the prospect of owning land for the first time and escaping the threat of drouth in the sierra encouraged thousands of campesinos to invade the desert, hoping to stake their claim to a farm. Although it almost never rains in the Peruvian desert, campesinos can count on the precipitation which falls upon the Cordillera Negra and Cordillera Blanca to provide water in the form of irrigation. These parallel mountain chains, which bisect northern Peru, are inundated with rains from November to March; during this period, a system of state-owned canals feed muddy water to the coast. Since 1978, the campesinos of La Victoria had struggled to construct a canal of their own that tapped into a state-owned canal in the neighboring Santa River Valley. I left in 1986 just as the campesinos were entering the final stages of construction, lining the canal with cement to prevent filtration. Earlier this year, I received a letter from the community telling me the canal had been completed.

My eagerness to see La Victoria once more did not make up for the fact that I am out of practice when it comes to bus rides in Peru. The chauffeurs here drive with a recklessness and disregard for danger that I have never witnessed elsewhere. Rarely a week goes by without a truck plunging off a mountain curve or a bus overturning on the Pan-American. North of Lima, in Pasamayo, the Pan-American actually disappears in places. Massive dunes partially cover the Highway before dropping away to form sheer sand, limestone, and basaltic cliffs below. The chauffeurs refuse to stay in the right lane. Instead, they play

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chicken with the slower cars that stand in their way, passing them without concern for the width of the Pan-American, the blind curves, or the limits to life imposed by such. Once the Pan-American veers inland, one can rest more comfortably. Even so, the desert on either side of the Highway is marked intermittently with the crosses and tombs of Peruvians who chose the wrong bus.

Anticipation kept me glued to the window, ready to observe if a pueblo joven had appeared here or disappeared there. "Pueblo joven" is the name Peruvians have given to the "young cities," composed of poor persons, which have sprung up along the coast to house migrants in reed shacks. Aside from the lunch that cost five times what it had in 1986, I did not notice any change. Familiarity can be ugly, and the familiar smell of Chimbote presaged our arrival 20 minutes before we actually entered the Plaza de Armas that afternoon. Chimbote's citizens used to tell me that if the stench from the PescaPeru fishmeal factory was especially appalling, it signalled prosperity. They also added that if the copper cloud belching from the SidePeru steel furnace was particularly acrid, Chimbote was in the midst of a positive boom. Two years of life in the United States made the assault on my senses seem more brutal. I got off the bus confident that Chimbote had entered the Golden Age.

After storing my gear at the Hotel de Turistas, I set out for the San Francisco de Assis convent. There live the Catholic nuns with whom I worked in 1985-86. I neither wrote nor called ahead to announce my visit, preferring to surprise them. After a few reminiscent detours, I crossed the park in front of the convent at dusk. Two years ago, I hated being caught in Chimbote after dark. One of my friends was robbed twice that year; the first time, he was forced to give up his sneakers and walk home broke and barefoot. In fact, thievery had been the only real danger in Chimbote. However, I was too happy to be back to let it bother me that evening. It seemed a matter of course that I would open the door to the convent, hug the nuns, and share in laughter at their shock. My humor began to fade when five minutes of knocking produced no answer.

Finally, a light came on and a small face appeared behind the leaded glass window beside the door. It was Madre Catherine, a frail Irish nun who has worked in the parish for the last four years. I welcomed the friendly face. But Madre Catherine did not recognize me immediately from the small crack through which she peered. She required a short explanation before she would move from the window to open the door. She was more nervous than I. When she did remember me, she softened a bit, but did not ask me in. I had to invite myself. Madre Catherine was alone in the convent and once the door was shut, she apologized and explained her caution. Four weeks ago, Madre Catherine was speaking on the phone to another nun in Lima when Sendero Luminoso terrorists threw a dynamite bomb at the Guardia Civil post two blocks away. The Senderistas acted in haste, and the dynamite exploded in the park. The shock waves shattered the windows of the convent and the surrounding houses. The Guardia Civil post was not damaged. Madre Catherine slammed down the receiver and rushed to the roof with one of the Sisters to see what happened. The two retreated quickly, terrified by the bullets that were landing on the roof as a result of the wild machine gun fire coming from the Guardia Civil post. Inexplicably, teenagers and parents from the neighborhood poured out of their homes and congregated around the Guardia Civil post. As Madre Catherine described the scene, the Guardia Civil had to blame someone; they detained several youths. The incident never appeared in the press. The nuns are uncertain of the youths' fate.

As Madre Catherine finished her story, Madre Martha walked in. Madre Martha is also Irish and has worked in the parish for five years. I commented that she

looked tired and she replied that, yes, this had been a difficult day and a difficult year. She noted that more young persons were volunteering for Church-sponsored activities; however, the Madre attributed the increase more to unemployment and desperation than a profound commitment to the Church. She described youth in the parish as "crazy with worry." The youth fall into two categories: (1) those who are obsessed with passing university entrance exams and (2) those who have tried to enter university and failed. The former are preoccupied that if they do not gain entrance this year, inflation (estimated to be 400% this year) will push exam fees beyond their reach. The statistics are not encouraging. Of the approximately 370,000 applicants to university last year, nearly 260,000 were left out in the cold. To increase the odds of acceptance, high school students have flocked to preparatory academies which are supposed to review subject matter with the students. More often, the academies teach only test-taking techniques. Even so, they are increasingly popular. In 1969, there were 60,400 students enrolled in the academies; today, that number has soared to surpass 300,000. The costs vary depending on^{the} quality of instruction and reputation of the academy; normally, a hopeful student can expect to pay from (Intis) I/. 3,000 to I/. 18,000 per course. (US \$1 = I/. 165)

The latter group of youths are stuck in Chimbote where jobs are scarce. Said Madre Martha, "I have lost count of the number of young couples who cannot marry because the men cannot find jobs. The stress these couples endure scares me." The conversation was certainly sobering. Neither of the nuns is given to exaggeration. In 1985-86, I do not recall that either expressed outright frustration or fear. As I left the convent later that night, I realized that the nuns' worry was not the only new feature of life in Chimbote. On the wall of the high school across from the convent someone had painted the graffiti, "Long live the martyrs of June 19." The slogan refers explicitly to the Senderistas killed in the prison uprisings of June, 1986, in which the Army killed some 300 prisoners after they had surrendered.

The nuns did leave me with the good news that La Victoria's canal would be inaugurated later in the week, June 24. Thus, I used the intervening days to ascend the Cañon del Pato and visit the capital of Ancash, Huaráz. In Huaráz, the Peruvian government, the United Nations, and the U.S. Agency for International Development (AID) are sponsoring a coal-for-kerosene fuel substitution project. Kerosene is in short supply and the government has had to subsidize the purchase price to keep it within reach of the poor persons who use it to cook. The aim of the project is to create a market for coal briquets -- they can be made quite easily from a simple press -- and thereby, create jobs by reopening coal mines in the area. While talking to engineers in Huaráz, I saw that the city is not the carefree mountaineers' hangout it once was. Above the city is located Huascarán, at 6,768 meters above sea level, the highest peak in the Tropical Zone. Below, in the city itself, striking teachers [WLM-3] picketed the streets each day. Friends tell me that a "non-aggression pact" between foreign mountaineers and Sendero Luminoso has broken down. Indeed, one discotheque and the archeology museum bore the marks of recent bombings. When I boarded the bus to return to Chimbote the night of 23 June, I was relieved to see that life was still normal in one sense: all of the cerros (mountains) in the Cordilleras were alight with small fires lit by campesinos to commemorate "El Día del Campesino," which fell this year on 24 June. But normalcy can be fleeting in the Andes these days. At Huallanca, three Guardia Republicana, armed with machine guns, stepped on to ride shotgun. Security concern for the HydroAndina hydroelectric plant in the Cañon has grown so great that the Guardia are taking no chances. Whenever the bus stopped for one of its three flats, the Guardia hopped off and stood fast for trouble. I slept little.

If my initial meeting with the nuns in Chimbote sobered me, then I can write honestly that my reunion with the campesinos left me dumbfounded. Upon arriving back in Chimbote the morning of 24 June, the Bishop of Chimbote, Monsignor Luis Bamberén, drove me and other members of his entourage out to La Victoria. He was present in the community to bless the canal and offer mass. I was so obviously tired that no one cared when I slipped away from the mass to visit with Aurelia and Agrepino Moreno. Aurelia and Agrepino were my host parents two years ago. Agrepino, 32, has been a hired hand, or peon, his entire life. Aurelia, 26, is now the mother of five children. Her most recent child, a baby girl, was born eight days before I arrived in La Victoria.

It was immediately apparent that nothing had changed for the better in this household. I asked Agrepino why he stayed away from the benediction and mass. He answered that he did not own land; hence, he did not have a right to participate in the celebration. Two years later, Agrepino still identifies manhood and legitimacy with the ownership of land. No only is he still landless, he is poorer than before. The minimum wage in Lima is set at I/. 3,500 per month; unfortunately, La Victoria is very far from Lima. Agrepino earns I/. 2,000 per month. (US \$1 = I/. 165) He supports seven persons on \$12 a month. He told me he is in debt because of informal loans extended to him last year when he fell ill from insecticide poisoning. The family's economic plight showed most graphically in the face of the youngest son, Freddy. Freddy, 2½, was born with a hormone deficiency that requires the daily administration of a hormone supplement. When I left in 1986, Aurelia promised to continue the dosage. Poverty forced her to break her word. A truck ride into Chimbote, plus the cost of the medicine, now equals a week's wage. Thus, she buys the medicine when she can. The irregular dosage has caused Freddy's tongue to swell beyond the confines of his small mouth. He can neither talk nor walk. The other three sons -- Abilino, Jonah, and Wilmer (5, 6, and 7 years old, respectively) -- did not seem to have grown at all. I presented them with three alpaca sweaters from Huaráz; they were all too large. As for their spirits, the boys were still boys. Wilmer complained because the teachers' strike keeps him home. Abilino has destroyed Wilmer's books while pretending to read. Jonah could not be happier about the strike. He does not want to read or write. He wants to tend sheep in the sierra.

The completion of the canal is a mixed blessing for Agrepino and the community at large. For Agrepino, the canal threatens his home. He lives on his brother's land and he worries that the parcel lent to him will soon be put under cultivation. For the community, a secure water supply is only the beginning. Access to credit from the Banco Agrario has not improved dramatically for the campesinos here; most cultivate too few hectares to be considered risk-worthy.

Once the mass finished, La Victoria began to celebrate 10 years of hard labor with a banquet and drinkfest. I readily participated in these drinking marathons two years ago; to decline was to insult campesino culture. I rested in the house this time, dreading the drinking. When several campesinos insisted I join the banquet, Agrepino refused to accompany ^{me} ~~me~~, murmuring that the banquet was for important persons. Like the Gringo. As I walked to the locale, a long rectangular adobe structure that has always reminded me of a Viking mead hall, I remembered my first days in La Victoria three years ago. Then, the locale was used as a communal kitchen. Charitable foodstuffs had been provided by Catholic Relief Services and CARITAS, the local Catholic social action agency, to allow the campesinos to concentrate on the construction of the canal instead of the cultivation of their fields. In those early days, I had been appointed to climb

up onto the roof of corrugated ceramic panels and cut a chimney hole to allow the smoke to escape from the cook-fire below. Prone across the roof, I reached too far, my weight shifted, and I came crashing through the roof. To the screams and laughter of the campesina women circled around the kettles, I landed inches from the fire and boiling soup. That feeling of landing too close to the fire returned. Everyone wanted to toast me; everyone wanted to know where I had been. I spotted an anthropologist who works with the Church in Chimbote and steered his way. It was too early to drink.

The anthropologist and I talked between mouthfuls of rice, chicken, rice, lamb, rice, guinea pig, and more rice. He was interested to hear of the Institute and my research. Looking about the locale, he confirmed my suspicion that life in Chimbote had deteriorated. I commented that I felt less safe after the killing of an American economist* in Huancayo. He told me not to worry; here in La Victoria, the campesinos remembered that I was with the Church. As for the American economist, he surmised, "That man committed two sins. He was working for AID, and it is well known that AID and the CIA have shared information in the past. He was also working for the Peruvian government. Those are sins that Sendero never forgives." The anthropologist was correct in describing Sendero's attitude. His own conclusion, however, that development specialists attached to AID were CIA agents ruined my appetite. The anthropologist went on, brushing off the Pope's visit to Peru in May. "Everyone here talks about peace, but everyone is actually preparing for war."

I encountered these feelings in 1986; they are not new to me. I greatly respect the preferential option for the poor espoused by the Catholic Church. I wonder, however, if priests, nuns, and lay volunteers are willing to recognize that the Catholic Church -- and particularly, the Liberation Church -- is not the only institution working for positive change and equality in Peru. Has the grace of God become so politicized in Peru that individuals will determine those who live within His domain and those who do not?

The farmers of La Victoria did not allow me to reflect on this subject for long. Once the Bishop and his entourage left, everyone wanted the honor of drinking the Gringo under the table. Ten earthen jars of "chicha" had been prepared. "Chicha" is a cider-like fermented corn and sugar concoction that fills the stomach quickly and inebriates one even more quickly. One enterprising campesino was selling bottles of Pilsen Callao, the local beer, to all comers. Once the drinking began in earnest, Agrepino forgot his former shyness and joined me in the locale. I tried to drink politely, remembering the bouts of diarrhea that accompany too much chicha. Agrepino and the campesinos of La Victoria would hear nothing of moderation. As I watched them drink, I recalled what I had read about the customs of Andean Indians: drinking is the catharsis that follows weeks of monotonous labor. I thought about the nuns' advice that I must respect the manic inebriation. After all, poor people have a right to celebrate. But as Agrepino further indebted himself -- and his family -- by picking up bottle after bottle of beer, I could not agree.

* I incorrectly identified the American as an engineer in [WLM-3]. The economist, Constantine Gregory, was killed en-route to Aramachay, in the Central Mantaro valley. Gregory was not employed by AID. A graduate of the University of California, Gregory was here as a volunteer to assist in the development of improved reproduction rates among rabbits and guinea pigs. The project was sponsored by the Central University, National Institute of Agrarian and Agro-Industrial Studies; this Institute received money from AID.

Friday night wore on and the men from La Victoria began to stumble and fall in drunkenness. Agrepino was still standing, but little by little the farmers of La Victoria were replaced by campesinos from all over the Lacramarca Valley whom I did not know. Word of a fiesta spreads fast in the country. A few men knew me by sight as the odd Gringo who preferred to walk between towns rather than hop a truck. The majority of the latecomers had no idea who I was, however. Agrepino had to intervene continually to explain my presence. At first this did not bother me; two years ago, there were plenty of curious campesinos. One campesino was not satisfied with Agrepino's introduction and said so. He took it upon himself to instruct me in the evils of imperialism, exploitation and capitalism. He literally followed me around the dance, quoting from Mao Tse Tung to highlight the obstacles faced by campesinos and students in their fight for social and economic equality. With Agrepino too drunk to mediate effectively, I left the dance, hoping to forget all with a good night's sleep.

I awoke Saturday morning, 25 June, determined to push the negative thoughts out of my head. The youngest daughter of Maximo Perez came early to the house, inviting me to breakfast with her family. Maximo is the village wiseman, and two years ago had been my primary professor. He taught me how to use a shovel, to determine best the course of water through shifting sand, and always, he regaled me with tales of the hacienda days in Peru. Saturday the conversation centered on why I was not married yet. Maximo has five daughters. The breakfast passed too rapidly.

When I returned to the house, Agrepino was up and out of the hut already, drinking anew. Friday my abstinence bordered on the principled; Saturday morning, it was a physical necessity. The shock of the food and chicha had overwhelmed my intestines and I felt miserable. I did not know what to do. It was barely nine o'clock in the morning. In the end I had no choice. Before the hour was out, a self-appointed drinking committee of six campesinos invited me to share more chicha. Feeling that I had been too awkward on Friday, I relented. Yet try as I did, I could not enjoy myself. Talking with my drunk friends was impossible. They did not want to talk; they wanted to drink. To these campesinos, it was as if I had never left. I tried to explain that I could stay for only three days. They did not understand. Out there in the desert, where the season's only change is the morning mist in winter, time has no meaning. If I was wearing a watch, that was my fault. Three hours later, I managed to pull Agrepino away with the whisper that Aurelia awaited us for lunch. Of course, that was a sorry excuse, since it was Aurelia's duty to wait. All seven of us returned to the house. Though Aurelia had killed a chicken, there was not enough for six drunk men, one sick Gringo, and four hungry boys. I remained silent for most of the lunch, trying to recapture in my mind the La Victoria that I knew two years ago. My conversations with fellow Churchworkers, the alienated man the night before, the drunk campesinos before me -- all served to corrupt

the image of tranquility I had cherished in La Victoria. The poor, the innocent, those who would inherit the earth: had I expected too much of them?

I was saved from further drinking by the fortuitous arrival of a corn buyer. Since I was the only sober adult male in the bunch, I was elected to make sure the buyer weighed out the owner's corn without cheating. An hour later, the thirty 80-kilo bags had passed from the scale to the truck, but the buyer had no money to pay for the corn. Juana Alva Chinchay, the campesina woman representing her husband Raymundo, protested. The middleman possessed a little cash. He left the meager deposit of 1/. 3,500 out of nearly 1/. 28,000 owed to the family. Juana told me this practice has become increasingly prevalent. Middlemen in the valley try to take advantage of the Inti's (I/.) devaluation against the dollar and rampant domestic inflation. They take delivery on the

spot and pay later, when the money is worth less. Juana resigned herself to the fact that now she would have to pay the truck fare into Chimbote and nag the middleman for payment.

The corn on its way to Chimbote, I was invited to drink again. This time I could handle only two toasts before becoming ill. Aurelia was in the house, complaining about Agrepino's drinking when he came in, glassy-eyed and incoherent. He apologized for the drinking, but asked me to share another toast with him and the other campesinos. I could no longer conceal how I felt about the drinking. I told Agrepino that it was useless for me to stay in La Victoria while everyone was senseless; we would talk when he was sober. I promised to return the next day, Sunday morning, 26 June. His head rolling, Agrepino agreed. I picked up my pack and he collapsed into bed, dead drunk.

I set off down the dirt road to Cambio Puente and Chimbote, hoping that a truck would pass soon. Had I changed so radically? Did I no longer care about the poor? I reassured myself that no, I had returned to La Victoria and Peru in a different capacity. Not too happy with my own answer, I stopped to wait for the truck kicking up dust behind me. It slowed and I climbed on, sitting atop the cab to survey the fields of corn and rice, sick of thinking. Rocking with the ruts in the road, we picked up the odd campesino or two until the bed was full of Indians and mestizos. A kilometer before Cambio Puente, we reached a spot in the road that was nearly impassable. Evidently there had been a rupture in the earthen canal running parallel to the road; the water had rushed into the road, gouging out a depression and creating a miniature lake. The truck, loaded down with campesinos and cargo, barely made it. Suddenly from the bed of the truck a campesino in his 50's began to shout, "These bastards! I swear I am going to contract Sendero to bomb their houses. Which of you has the guts to help me? Throw a few sticks of dynamite at their houses and we'll see who forgets to clean the canal next time!"

I could not believe my ears. Two years ago, taking the truck into Chimbote was my diversion of last resort when I wanted to forget about La Victoria and the canal. I used to sit in the cab with the chauffeurs and we swapped tall tales. The conversation sometimes moved beyond women to the drug trade, but we never discussed politics. I never heard the campesinos talk about Sendero. Why? It seemed irrelevant then.

In the truck bed, the old campesino became more enraged, at times shouting hysterically. He had all the answers. The problem with Peru was the lazy Peruvian. All the young men who stood around in Chimbote all day doing nothing were traitors. They should be shot. He worked; he worked to move Peru ahead. He began to preach the virtues of Stalin's regime in the Soviet Union. Maybe Stalin did kill millions, but so what? Russia was better for it. If Peru was poor, it was because Peruvians sold her cheap. Did not First World nations spend billions of dollars on weapons while the Third World starved? The time had come to take charge, and if killing was necessary, then so be it.

I kept my peace. Noone in the truck responded to the campesino until his language turned from the profane to the pornographic. One campesino then spoke up in defense of his wife. Another joined in, lambasting his countryman for extolling Communism. Back and forth the three argued until we reached Chimbote.

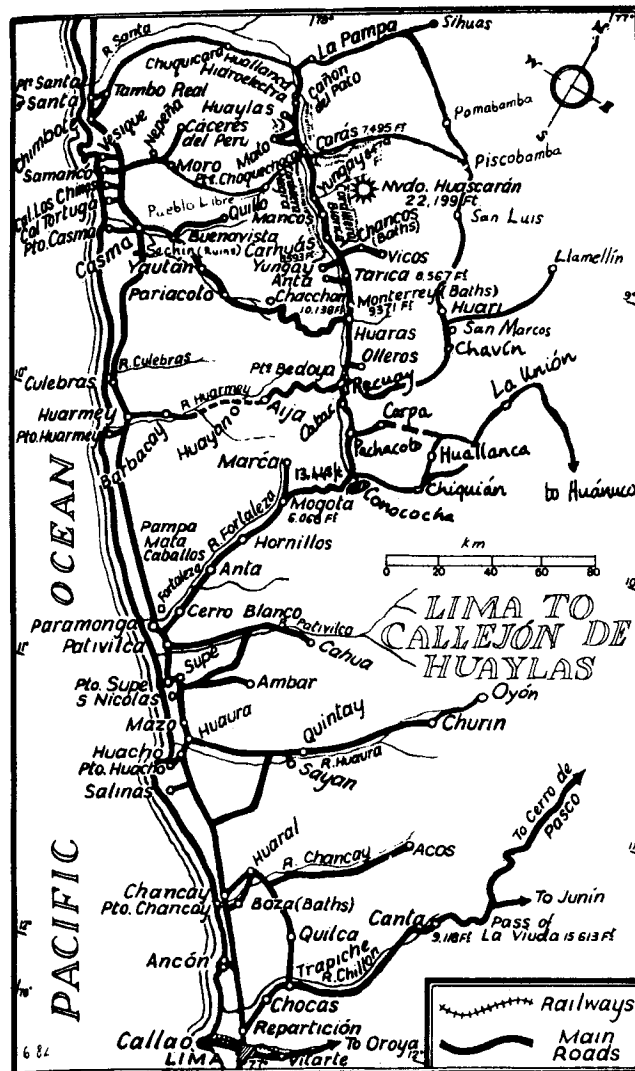
I returned to the Hotel de Turistas. I slept so soundly that I did not hear the explosion that killed a Senderista as he tried to plant a dynamite bomb near

the Guardia Civil post and convent in the San Francisco de Assis parish. The bomb prematurely exploded in the terrorist's hands as he tried to set up a booby trap in the road. I did not learn of the incident until I was back in La Victoria, Sunday morning, 26 June. One campesino asked me if I had heard of the massacre in Chimbote. Even though the campesino was mistaken, and the local radio had turned one death into dozens, the facts still call attention to themselves. Peruvians have been forced to live with violence. They now speak about violence openly. If the three days I spent in La Victoria can serve as a fair measure, it would seem that Peruvians have grown increasingly willing to judge the crimes of humanity for themselves. And, not only are they willing to judge; certain Peruvians are willing to mete out their own brands of justice. Violence, fed by fear and frustration, has become commonplace in Peru.

As ever,

W. L. Huber

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Map taken from: The 1986 South American Handbook, London, 1985, page 659.