

In the Footsteps of the Foundress

Sr. Angelica McMahon

THE LORD IS CALLING us to come out of ourselves and to share with others the goods we possess, starting with the most precious gift of all our faith." These words of Pope John Paul II in his Encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* echo for us, Missionary Franciscan Sisters, the desire and determination of Mother Mary Ignatius to leave home and country to serve the poor as a missionary.

Today, for the Sisters who minister in Latin America, the determination of Mother Ignatius to leave all finds a new challenge in trying to respond to the call for a new evangelization. The response to this call requires us to "go to the house of the other . . . ," to leave behind our own way of doing things, assume the ways and customs of those to whom we minister, allow them to make decisions that affect our life. This challenge would have been welcomed and supported by our Foundress, because she had great respect for the individual person. "... there is a great difference between managing individuals and forming them-one answers to the present, the other produces for the future . . ." The fruits produced may not be visible at the moment, but the dedication, service, and challenge prepare the soil.

For over twenty years now, our Sisters have labored among the Aymara Indians in the Diocese of Coroico, Bolivia. Bolivia itself is an insignificant country of Latin America. It never makes world headlines. Its only claim to fame is coca! The Aymara Indians have an ancient and rich culture with many interesting customs and traditions-religious, social, and agricultural. The Sisters have been challenged to integrate the Christian message into these customs, always trying to respect the religious tradition of the people. According to Leonardo Boff, the first step in evangelization

means to bear testimony to this vision of respect and acceptance of all culture on account of God and the divine work within the cultures. The first missionary is the Holy Trinity, which through the Logos and the Spirit becomes present in every cultural fabric. Thus, all must engage in mutual evangelization, in as much as all must confront the signs wrought by God in all cultures, evaluating them, accepting them, admiring them, respecting them in their difference from our own, and entering into communion with them as one enters into communion with God ... None evangelize without first committing themselves to life, to the productive forces of the culture they seek to reach with their evangelization. It is not enough to be merely "there": sheer presence in the culture. One must share that culture, discover life meanings in it, love it, and finally be in solidarity with it. This is possible only through a process of identification with its advances and retreats, its potentials and limitations." (*New Evangelization*, Leonardo Boff, pp. 23-24)

This is not an easy challenge-learning the language is only the first step of many to be taken in accepting, admiring, and respecting the differences between the Aymara culture and our own.

The principal activity of the Aymara is farming; they see in each plant and animal a living being whom they reverence and venerate. The New Year of the Aymara is not January 1. It occurs when the agricultural year ends, the crops are harvested, and preparation begins for the next planting. November is the time for planting, when the first rains come. The new year coincides

with the feast of All Souls-the feast of "Life." It ushers in a period of growth during which time the people are attuned to the powerful forces of the earth, offering sacrifices and fasting. This period culminates in Carnival and Easter, and is followed by a period of festivity honoring patron saints, and asking their protection and blessing on the harvest. Each mountain community has a patron saint, and these celebrations are an occasion of evangelization. A part of the Sisters' ministry is to prepare the catechists of these mountain communities so that they can help their people to appreciate the Mass, which is usually an important part of the feast, and lead them to value the Eucharist as the true celebration of a Christian community. The Aymara have a real sense of community, but it is a long, long process to help them see themselves as a faith community. .."that is a community born of faith in God who has sent the divine Son to fulfill us humanly and redeem us.... Evangelization is aimed, not at individuals but at persons in their social and community relationships" (Boff, p. 88). One of the challenges facing the Sisters is assisting and accompanying the Aymara to recognize and to respond to the presence of the Spirit in their culture.

The formation and leadership training of catechists was one of the first missionary endeavors of the pioneer Sisters, and it continues to be a priority for the Sisters today. Catechists from the mountain community are given training workshops three or four times a year. In accordance with the Puebla document, this training involves basic doctrine, knowledge of the Bible, celebration of the Word, as well as personal formation and the development of pastoral projects that will suit their respective communities. Many of these men, especially the older ones, began as catechists, having first persevered in learning to read and write. Their level of education is really basic, some not having studied past grade three. It is in these poor men and women, who have no formal education nor any of the modern techniques, that one sees in action the power and gentle action of the spirit.

The woman in the Aymara culture is a strong person. Her ideas and suggestions are important to the community despite the fact that she is subjected to mistreatment and abuse and rarely assumes a position of authority. Therefore, an important work begun by the Sisters was a program for women where they could learn the basics of reading, writing, and arithmetic, as well as come to appreciate themselves as persons with dignity and deserving respect. These basics, along with the ability to knit, sew, and cook, allow them to return to their communities with some self-assurance and self-esteem. Today, the Sisters continue, although in a limited manner, the formation and education of women. This ministry is a crucial one, since its effects have a positive influence on the whole society and help free the cultural context from one of its limitations. The family unit is strengthened when the woman comes to appreciate herself and is accepted and valued in the Church and among her own people.

When Mother Ignatius founded our Institute in Belle Prairie, she lost no time in establishing a school. She was aware that, as Vatican II would later promulgate:

Since every man, of whatever race, condition and age, is endowed with the dignity of a person, he has an inalienable right to education corresponding to his proper destiny and suited to his native talents, his sex, his cultural background, and his ancestral heritage.

(Vat. II Doc. Educ. I.)

Education has always been an important ministry for our Sisters. This ministry takes on many forms in Bolivia, and is directed to the service to the Aymara Indians. The educational facility at Carmen Pampa, which ministers to young people from kindergarten through grade twelve, has made a tremendous contribution to this mountain community. Founded, staffed, and administered by the Xaverian Brothers, it provided hope and promise for a future for the young men of the area initially. When our Sisters were invited to participate in this ministry, the pro-

gram and scope were broadened, at our request, to include young women. Adults deprived of the very basics in education, seeing what was possible, showed an interest. An adult education program was developed, and the school, as it were, took to the mountain roads and communities. A more recent development was the construction of a branch of the Catholic University close to the site of the Carmen Pampa educational facility, which will ensure the continued support and involvement in this important ministry to the people.

Ministry to youth and children is an important form of education that is provided through the family catechesis programs. Time is spent with little ones, who love to sing, draw, and listen to Bible stories. Through the various programs developed for young people, we seek to accompany them with support and guidance in the long process of formation in the life of faith. We are present to them as they confront the problems of unemployment, drugs, and a public educational system that does not respond to their needs. Most Aymarans are very musical, so that guitar playing and singing are means of animating them to respond and commit themselves to the service of others. The family catechesis program is a very significant ministry for the Sisters. It is an attempt to involve the parents in the preparation of their children for the reception of eucharist and penance. It serves the two-fold purpose of helping the parents grow and deepen their faith and commitment to each other and to their children. It is also a way of having the children receive the sacramental preparation in a family setting, recognizing their parents as their first teachers. The Santo Domingo Document calls us to make the family a priority in our pastoral ministry:

It is basic and the frontier of the New Evangelization; ... it strengthens the life of the Church and society; enriches her through family catechesis, prayer in the home, the Eucharist, Reconciliation, the reading of the Word of God, so that she may become a ferment in the Church and in society.

At the present time, perhaps the greatest challenge for the Sisters is the promotion and acceptance of native vocations to religious life, so that we as an Institute can continue the missionary work begun by Mother Ignatius and reaffirm her lifelong commitment to mission. The respecting and acceptance of cultural differences is vital to this ministry. Very often we need to be transformed so that we can integrate authentic cultural values into our own Franciscan charism ... "always taking the person as one's starting point and always coming back to the relationships of people among themselves and with God" (*Ev. Nun.* No. 20).

It is difficult for young people to respond fully to God's call to leave all and follow in Jesus' footsteps and live a Gospel life, especially today when so many other influences call and beckon them. For the youth in Latin America, family is an integral part of the culture—it is a unit, an extended family of parents, aunts, uncles, cousins. To leave this family, this belonging, and to take the risk of belonging to a religious community "family," demands courage and a deep faith. This faith and trust are present, but they need to be nurtured, strengthened, and brought to life. There are forces present today, as in the past, that work against the total dedication of generous souls to God and to the service of others. Those who are now involved in the process of fostering native vocations may not see the fruits, but the seed is being sown. We draw inspiration from the words of Mother Mary Ignatius: "I was convinced that patience and the very sweetness of charity, a compassion for sinners that Jesus had and which saints were full of must be the spirit to work any good results, love never betraying any repugnance, gentle yet strong, pliant yet firm, not weak, not passionate or proceeding from nature."

Our twenty years of service, despite difficulties and challenges, have been blessed in many ways. I would like to end these reflections with a quote from the Gospel of Luke (X:2): "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore, ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest."