

Bolivia

The Sisters came to Bolivia in 1992 and communities can be found in Azangaro, Potosi and Sucre. The sisters work with others to find creative responses to the harsh realities of life, based on solidarity and sharing, attitudes that are so much part of the Bolivian culture.

As the IJ mission in Peru evolved it was the hope of the Institute to respond to needs in another countries in South America. Providence finally led the sisters to Bolivia.

Bolivia, in the heart of South America, is enriched by great cultural and ethnic diversity.

The majority of the people are of indigenous descent so the Andean culture is more present here than in any other country of the continent. Owing to its remoteness and high altitude, and despite its natural beauty and vast historical attractions, Bolivia was the least visited and one of the poorest and least developed countries in the region. The economy depended largely on mining exports and the international markets were unpredictable. Bolivia produced great riches for its colonisers in the past, but the country was left with the crumbs, so that the people became very poor.

In 1992, having looked at various options for a community in Bolivia, it was finally decided to explore the possibility of working in the diocese of Potosi in the rural area of Azángaro, at an altitude of 4,000+ metres. The sisters came from Spain, Malaysia, Singapore and Italy and one sister from Peru, witnessed that the missionary spirit of the Institute had taken root in that young foundation.

The first two sisters, Andrea Arnáiz (Spanish) and Elisa Moscoso (Peruvian) arrived on February 28, 1992. Teresia Mowe (Malaysian) and Joan Tay (Singaporean) arrived on April 1, 1992. Having travelled from Asia, their journey through Bolivia had to take place in stages, in order to adjust to the high altitudes. All received a rapturous welcome from the people and experienced the hospitality and culture of the land that was to become their home. The local women had arrived early in the morning to prepare the meal. The musicians and dancers soon followed, and the little church was full to capacity for the Mass being celebrated to welcome them. Afterwards, everyone joined in the feasting and dancing, typical of the life in Bolivia that was to become so familiar to our sisters.

The objective given by the bishop to the sisters was primarily to form basic Christian communities who would have their own local leaders. He encouraged them to create links of friendship and trust with the people, participating in their lives whenever possible. He encouraged them to evolve a way of living that would speak to the people of God whichever form their ministry might take. Although the majority of the people were Catholic, they had received little instruction, and their faith expressed itself mostly through popular devotions.

The sisters set to work at once, with weekly mobile missions in the mountain villages, supervising little schools, providing pastoral work for youth and formation for the women. Soon young Bolivian women were asking to join the community and welcoming them became an important part of the community life. Thus the Institute, strengthened in numbers and increasingly integrated into the culture, began to develop.

Since the Institute came to Bolivia in 1992, its mission has expanded. It is now present in Azangaro, Potosi and Sucre where, with faith and courage, it carries on its ministry. Wherever possible, it seeks to work in partnership with priests, religious and committed Christian lay people. One of the greatest joys and fruits of the work of the pioneers is that three young Bolivian women have expressed their desire to commit themselves unconditionally to Christ as Infant Jesus Sisters.

All of the sisters are motivated to search for creative responses to the harsh realities of life, based on solidarity and sharing, attitudes that are very much a part of the Bolivian culture.

Since the beginning, going to visit distant villages has been an important part of the sisters' ministry. Some 80% of the men work in the mines, while a high percentage of the women are engaged in small businesses. In these villages, the sisters support the different parish groups and take part in the local religious celebrations and festivities.

In Azangaro, situated along the way from Sucre to Potosi, the sisters' house serves as a place of meeting and prayer for people of the neighbouring villages, mainly farming communities. To date, 40 families have accepted to pray regularly, making their homes a centre of pardon and peace. The sisters visit their homes regularly and share faith and some skills with these marginalised families, who have little financial income or possibility of education, evangelisation or development. These farmers own very little land and in some areas are greatly exploited. Many indigenous farming communities are now being organised to defend their rights and to look for solutions to the land problems. They are undergoing a process of defining the land limits that correspond to each farming community and putting title deeds in order.

Women in particular are even more marginalised by a lack of education and a male chauvinist culture. The sisters recognise the need to offer education and skills training to these women. In a spirit of solidarity, the sisters share 50% of the expenses involved in the production of clothing and artistic items. These are sold to subsidise family income. They also offer formation in human relationships and Christian values. These women, having received formation themselves, accompany other women, grouped in about 40 rural organisations, each with about 800 members. Some travel over 60km to the live-in workshops.

In Bolivia there are thousands of marginalised young people with no vocational future. About 100 years ago, an Italian Franciscan priest offered a remedy to this situation when he founded The Schools of Christ. Some of our sisters teach in these mountainside schools and some are also involved with the students of the Jesuit Fe y Alegria (Faith and Joy) schools. The young people who live in faraway villages are provided with board and lodging in hostels attached to the schools. This facility is a great encouragement to them to complete their secondary education. In addition to human and spiritual formation, horticulture and various forms of creative skills are encouraged. Scholarships and nutrition are provided for the most needy young people. In return, they help in the parish community and in institutions that offer an alternative education to needy children and adolescents.

The sisters are also involved in other forms of youth ministry, such as the Child and Adolescent Missionaries. This is an international movement in which thousands of children are helped to deepen their faith and relate to other children and to society in general. Since many of them come from disturbed homes, personal development workshops are organised for them. They learn to reflect on their reality in the hope of building up their self-esteem and learning to cope with the problems and challenges of daily living. The community in Cielo Pata, Potosi, welcomes and accompanies young people who want to continue their education in nearby colleges or who wish to live their Christian life for a while in a community setting. Others come to explore the possibility of a vocation to religious life. Meetings with parishioners involved in the pastoral ministry are held in the sisters' house and their small library is open to all who want to read or do research. Whatever the work or service rendered, the vision is always the formation of leaders for society.

With the help of a retired nurse, and through the St John of God school, the sisters minister to children and young people with special needs, encouraging their families, reflecting with them, accompanying them and their mothers when they go for medical attention, and providing them with wheelchairs and other facilities that make life easier for them and their families. These children, loving and lovable, full of joy and fun, teach the importance of a smile and a hug in daily life.

With great hope, the Infant Jesus Sisters now welcome their 'extended family'. It comprises 25 Bolivian lay people who wish to continue living and deepening their spirituality as Friends of the Infant Jesus. They have regular monthly meetings and seek to live out their commitment in their place of work or study. Some are involved directly with the sisters in the pastoral ministry.

Looking to the future, the sisters trust that the Spirit will continue to help them read the signs of the times and be ready to explore new ways of responding in faith in Bolivia.