

## 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 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.

#### [Testimonies of IJ friends](#)

*I have known the IJS since they arrived in Azangaro, in the Potosi area. Gradually I have come to know the life and spirit of their founder, Nicolas Barré – his great love for children and young people, his commitment to God and deep life of prayer. This encourages me also to live with greater trust in God's love, knowing that my prayer is heard, since God says "ask and you will receive, knock and the door will be opened for you".*

*All families can have difficult moments, but if we put our full confidence in God, we can move forward. In my own family, we have been through some difficult times, but at the same time we are very aware of God's love. One of my sisters got very ill with gallstones. She developed some complications and went to hospital where she was put in intensive care. It was a very anxious time for us. Her life was in danger and she has young children. All we could do was to place everything in God's hands and ask Nicolas Barré to intercede for us. Despite the seriousness of the situation, we decided to take her to Sucre – a three hour journey by road, without thinking about what could happen on the way. We put our trust in God and in the intercession of Nicolas Barré. We arrived at our destination without incident. She was given immediate attention. All the tests were done. As it was very serious, she was kept under observation for 3 days. They then decided to risk an operation, which took place a week later in the presence of a few specialists.*

*Thanks to the support and prayer of the Sisters and the intercession of Nicolas Barré and my family's continual trust in God's love, all went well. Today, we continue to enjoy my sister's company, we appreciate the goodness of God and the value of prayer.*

*Angélica Quintanilla*

*Among the reasons for which I am grateful to God is the opportunity I have been given to get to know the spirituality handed down from Nicolas Barré to the IJ Sisters in both Bolivia and Peru. Even though I have never been to Peru, there is a sense in which I feel part of the Sisters' community there also.*

*When we met in Sucre with the sisters from both countries for their Chapter, we felt very welcome. I even got the impression I had known the Sisters for many years already.*

*During this assembly, we reflected a lot on the reality lived in each country, while at the same time sharing the important points that emerged from the Chapter, such as:*

- *listening to the sharing of the pastoral and social work taking place in each country*
- *reflection in groups in which the sisters and lay people were able to work together*
- *times for the celebration of meaningful liturgy, which was well prepared*
- *we, the lay people, felt appreciated and listened to by the Sisters, as we searched for better ways of working together.*

*Ismael Soto*

*During this chapter, we had an opportunity to share together with the sisters from both Bolivia and Peru, all of whom made us feel very welcome. During the times of liturgical celebration, I saw the sisters as people of prayer, which helped me to get in touch with God. I also became more aware of their commitment to God's desires and to their charism in the context of where they are. This challenged me very much in my own life.* Aydeé Quintanilla

### The Chapter in Bolivia.

We, the sisters in Bolivia are very happy that the chapter took place here, with the Sisters from Peru. It was a long hazardous journey from Peru and we appreciate the effort they made to get here to Sucre.

We began with our annual retreat: 14-20 January. We were accompanied by a Jesuit priest on the theme "Keeping Christ at the centre of our lives and keeping our focus on God's way of looking at life". This really helped us to open our hearts to God's way of looking at life and to be attentive to the action of the Holy Spirit.

Our Chapter opened on the 21<sup>st</sup> January with the celebration of the Eucharist. We used the following symbols: a clay pot – "as clay in the potter's hand", the names of all the participants and a lighted candle.

At the end of this celebration we went in procession to the meeting room, where Fr Isaac and Carlota called us by name and gave us a lighted candle in a small clay pot as a symbol of light. Fr Isaac stayed with us for the Chapter, guiding us with some input now and again.

The time was well organised. The first day, we shared the strengths and weaknesses of our two countries, which was very enlightening. We got to know and understand one another better. We worked a lot in small groups where we could express and own our ideas, thoughts, feelings and desires in an atmosphere of togetherness, simplicity, humility, responsibility as well as an openness to search and a desire to journey together.

The participation of our lay friends (one from Peru and five from Bolivia) helped us to get a clearer sense of the reality where we live and has increased our desire to journey together in proclaiming the Kingdom of God, with the spirituality given to us by Nicolas Barré.

We concluded on 24<sup>th</sup> January with a Eucharistic celebration, where each one received a lighted candle, as a sign of our unity and being sent on mission for the Kingdom of God as well as being an expression of gratitude to God for this meeting which has helped to strengthen our faith.

*Hilda and Giusy*

Forming Youth Groups and Working with the Laity is now the newest projects.