

Peru

Responding to a request for sisters, the first group arrived in Peru in 1967. Today, the Sisters are responding to needs both in the Andes area and in the barrios around Lima. Education continues in schools as well as through health care, agriculture, nutrition and other domestic skills. As well as Lima, the Sisters live in Callao, Cusco and Huamali.

The early 1960s will be remembered as the years of the Second Vatican Council, with its huge impact on the life of the Church. It was also a period of new missionary outreach. Calls were being heard from the churches in Africa and South America. Spanish-speaking countries felt called to South America, since they already had a common language and felt a responsibility towards those who had entered their history 500 years earlier.

In our own Institute, our Spanish sisters felt drawn to start a foundation on the continent and set about researching possibilities. Around this time a request came from a bishop in Panama. A congregation was withdrawing from a mission there and he wanted sisters to replace them.

Before a decision was reached, however, another request came, this time from Cusco in Peru. The archbishop there suggested that our sisters visit him on their way to Panama, though they had little hope of answering two needs at once. Then, word came that the sisters we were to replace in Panama had decided to stay on. This left them free to think again about Cusco.

Srs Pilar Maynar and Rosario Brandoly flew into Lima on an exploratory visit on February 13, 1967. They broke their journey there and visited Fr Izuzquiza SJ, well known to the sisters in Spain. He took them to visit the shantytowns mushrooming around the city of Lima. One such place was Comas, to which the sisters came on mission three years later. On February 15 they reached Cusco, flying over the Andes on a four-engine plane where they were given oxygen by mouth! Having spent two weeks in Cusco, they were more and more convinced that Divine Providence was calling the Institute to this area of Peru.

The 'scouts' returned to Spain with the good news and preparations began for our first foundation in South America. The first step was to choose five sisters who not only had a great desire to go to Peru but whose health would survive the rigours of the high altitude in the Andes. Having undergone medical tests several sisters, sadly, had to give up their dream. The first group of three sisters – Encarna Perez, Gloria Coll, and Tere Vives – flew out from Madrid on May 27, 1967, and were later joined by two others.

Archbishop Durán's desire was to set up a Catholic university to ensure the Christian formation of youth. His hope was that the sisters would agree to take on this project. The sisters decided to begin by opening a hostel for university students in the city of Cusco. There was a great shortage of priests, and the sisters quickly got involved in pastoral work in Cusco and the surrounding villages. Later they moved out of the city and worked in a project initiated by the Jesuits, i.e., in one of their Fe y Alegría (Faith and Joy) schools in the poorer surrounding area. Then, in January 1970, they responded to a similar need in another Fe y Alegría school in Comas, Lima.

The philosophy of these schools, initiated by the Jesuits, was to involve all the people of poorer areas who wanted schools for their children. These schools always started in a very simple way and little by little were built up, with the aid of the parents. The curriculum focuses on preparing young people for life in a Christian context. In addition to intellectual studies, they also run workshops on carpentry, electricity, tailoring and secretarial skills. It was in such deprived areas that the 'cry of the poor' was taking on its deepest meaning.

The Institute took root and soon young Peruvian women were drawn to become part of our growing Infant Jesus family.

Peru is a country rich in local culture and natural resources, where creativity finds expression in so many diverse ways. It is also a country whose extensive territory presents great difficulties in communication, especially because of the Andes Mountains and the mighty Amazon River. Even today, the people living in these areas are often abandoned and unaware of the reality being lived by other inhabitants of Peru. The education system does not respond to the needs of the people. The percentage of the budget allocated to basic services like health and education is still very low. The teachers are not well trained and good traditional values are being lost. This is worse in isolated areas where nobody supervises teachers' work. Spanish is the medium of instruction, and the peoples' own languages, such as Quechua and Aymara, and other languages native to the Amazon region, are neglected. In the more isolated areas, pupils have less than 500 hours of teaching annually and for this reason their standard of language and mathematics is the lowest in South America.

The same difficulties apply to agriculture in mountain areas, where production is only for family consumption. Farmers are unable to produce for the market because of difficult climate, lack of modern technology and transport, and also because little finance is assigned to them in the national budget. Little by little people are uprooted, as they migrate to the big cities creating great sprawling townships. They gradually lose their cultural values of sharing, group work and solidarity.

The Infant Jesus Sisters try to respond to some of these challenges, both in the Andes and in the barrios around Lima. Some sisters from abroad still work in Peru, while the Peruvian sisters gradually take on ministries and leadership roles. Some young women express the desire to commit themselves as members of the Institute. This is a slow process and the sisters give time to their education, training and accompaniment.

Aware of the importance of education, many of the sisters are teachers, giving their students a solid formation so that they can face the future with responsibility and can serve their country, especially in isolated places. As in other parts of the Institute today, working with others of similar vision is encouraged, such as with the *Fe y Alegría* (Faith and Joy) schools and projects set up by the Jesuits. These schools work closely with parents, who help to build and fund the schools and share responsibility for the children's education. The staff, both lay and religious, work as a team, with a common spirit that reaches beyond the walls of the school into the society.

The sisters' ministry also goes beyond the schools. Some work more directly with the most needy families, offering healthcare and support. Boarding accommodation is offered to young people. This is not just a place to live: it also provides a broad education in elementary skills like hygiene, cooking and housekeeping, while enabling the children to attend the nearby public secondary school managed by the sisters.

One sister, who is trained as a nurse, works full-time in health education in the community. From this base, she is able to support women with unwanted pregnancies and other difficulties. Another sister trained in agriculture has been working for many years with the farming communities. In recent years she has been working as part of a team of priests, religious and lay people to improve nutrition for families living in the mountain area. Because of high altitudes and hard frost it is normally impossible to produce fruit and vegetables in the mountainous regions. This leads to illness and weakening of peoples' immune systems. To counteract this, some greenhouses have been set up in rural schools. Here the children are instructed in gardening, nutrition and cooking. From the schools the scheme reaches the families who also come on courses and learn to garden in their own family greenhouses. In fact, the whole neighbourhood benefits, as surplus produce can be sold, given as gifts or exchanged for other things.

In 2006 some of the sisters moved to another area of the Andes to reach out to new culture groups living in isolation. At present they are taking time to get to know where the greater needs are. The Infant Jesus Sisters are a tiny nucleus in a vast country. They trust that God will add to their number and help them to be a light for their people.