

BENEDICTINES IN PERU

IN 1968 the Abbot and monks of Worth Abbey in south-west England decided to make a foundation in Peru. Fr Bede Hill, who was to be the superior, had been sent out beforehand and, as a result of his report, it was decided to go to the Valley of the River Apurimac. There the Peruvian Government had put at our disposal the site of a farm from which it was hoped to help the people of the Valley. The situation was very isolated, and the monastery only approachable by boat or raft. For six years the four monks worked at building a simple monastery, clearing some land and in assisting the local people to improve their farming. They also helped to create a local Co-operative, which got the farmers out of the hands of entrepreneurs.

In 1975, the monks returned to Worth, in order to evaluate the foundation and its work and to plan for the future. At this meeting, it was decided to move the foundation to Lima and to ask the Archbishop for a poor parish on the outskirts of the city. There were a number of factors leading to this decision; but two important ones were that the site on the Apurimac was so isolated that it was unlikely that peruvian novices would join the small community; and further, that the population of Lima had almost doubled in the previous six years, so that there was a desperate need for priests to serve the poor who were crowding in from the Sierra and Selva. The Archbishop created a new parish of Las Flores, with a population of some sixty thousand poor people. Thus it was that the new monastery of San Benito de Las Flores was born. On 20 December 1976, the monks moved into their new monastery and parochial centre.

In the last four years the monastery has slowly put down roots in the locality. Whilst the people have grown steadily more friendly, we ourselves have tried to learn how to build up a christian community in what was for us a new and alien environment. One of the gravest weaknesses of the Peruvian Church is its lack of local vocations. We started a Lay Community for young Peruvians who were considering the priestly vocation. We try to help them deepen their christian commitment, and to find centres where they can study. They share our Divine Office, Daily Mass and our meals, while having separate living quarters. There are usually about seven in this Lay Community, where each spends about a year, with the object of making a decision on their future. So far, two have tried our Noviciate, and one, Br David, is still with us. Others have sought out diocesan bishops, or joined other orders.

Our life has the usual benedictine pattern of prayer, work and study. Much of our studies centres on the language and culture of Peru, and the outlook and methods of evangelization which the Peruvian Church shares

with the rest of Latin America. At the same time, we all play our part in the formation of our novice. Fr Richard Wilson, who has been in Peru from the beginning, is Parish Priest, and each of us is responsible under him for a part of the Parish. We plan to build a parish church next to the monastery, and a church hall. At the moment most of our Masses are said out in the open; but we also have plans for six separate chapels which we hope will form the nuclei of Christian Communities.

We have a dozen or more small groups of young people and adults; and as their commitment grows stronger, so they share more and more in our work of evangelization. At the same time, the numbers in our parish are so enormous that, even with this increasing help, it will be years before we make an impact on more than a fraction of our parish. Probably most bring their children for Baptism and First Holy Communion; but apart from that there is little further contact for the majority. Many live in such poverty that the struggle for survival absorbs their whole lives. The gap between the rich and the poor is very great in Peru. One wonders at the patience of the poor, and how long it will last. Those in the Church who work for social justice are often condemned by the rich as Communists. They are probably the only people who, if they are listened to, will save Peru from Communism.

For those children in our parish who are at secondary schools, we have built up a library of the books they need. It has a membership of over four hundred, and we have a large room where they may work under the supervision of an older youth. One of our groups has undertaken the task of training these librarians. A Benedictine charity, A.I.M., has given money to build up this library, which we like to think is a characteristically Benedictine way of helping.

During the last couple of years we have become increasingly aware of how the majority of our people are deprived of any health care. Sound traditions of basic hygiene are non-existent. The Peruvian Ministry of Health has admitted the need, but says that they lack the means to help. Slowly we have been accumulating the permits, the money, and the expertise to build and to organize a health centre. We have already started in a rudimentary way with basic health education, probably the most important element in health care, and we hope to develop an educational network. Our aim is to recruit mothers to take on the responsibility for a group of families, give them the essential training, and thus make the local people themselves responsible for their improved health. The building of the health centre near to our monastery should be finished by the end of this year (1980), though it will no doubt be several years before it is a really effective centre. However, there is already a significant reduction in ill health, and in the appalling statistics of infant mortality. One of the best aspects of this scheme is that we have had, throughout, the full co-operation of the local people who have undertaken to pay part of the cost.

When we moved out of the Valley of the Apurimac, the local Franciscan

Bishop asked us to leave one monk to continue to look after the spiritual needs of the people. Father Michael Smith began and has had charge of this mission for eleven years. It is a parish of some two hundred kilometres, up and down the Apurimac, with about forty villages. He travels mostly by boat and on foot, is often on his travels for two weeks at a time, and has to climb many thousands of feet to some of his villages. His eight hundred baptisms a year will give some indication of the magnitude of this task for a priest who is sixty-six.

It is too early to envisage the spread of Benedictinism in Peru. In the days of the Spanish Empire, the King of Spain forbade Benedictine foundations on the curiously unhistorical grounds that Benedictines were not missionaries. Hence we have no established tradition in the country. For some fifteen years now, the Benedictines from St Meinrad's, Indiana, have had a peruvian foundation. They now have two simply professed Peruvians, one novice and three postulants. It looks as though they are making a break-through. Over the centuries, Benedictines have much experience in founding houses from one country to another, which have eventually become indigenous. Until Las Flores has half a dozen solemnly professed Peruvians, it cannot claim to have achieved this. Yet there is nothing in our experience which tells us that it will not succeed. At the same time, our contacts are almost entirely with the poor, who, because of the uncertainty of their lives, find the idea of a permanent commitment very difficult. And of course it is not easy for them to envisage such a commitment with a foreign community. Furthermore, until recently, the peruvian poor have not been encouraged to think about a religious vocation. Against all this, however, is the fact that there are many young people with a deep christian commitment who relate well with us. These give us confidence that eventually there will be a local benedictine foundation for the service of the poor.

The five british monks who make up, with the single peruvian novice, the community in Las Flores, face in several ways a situation which is for them strange: a foreign land and culture, a much smaller community than they are used to, parish work and not school work. Yet I believe that they enjoy the challenge and the sense of being pioneers, and revel in the growing friendliness of their parishioners.

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