Canadian Province in Bolivia: 1961-1998

Taken from Harvests of the Spirit, by Jeanne Beck

In November 1960, the Reverend William A. Burns, CR, was touring Canada seeking donations for a new mission established by his congregation in La Paz, Bolivia. When he called on Mother Loretto at the Motherhouse in Waterdown he was not seeking a donation of money. He was seeking School Sisters of Notre Dame to staff the elementary school attached to St. Andrews College, a secondary



Sister Helen Zettel with Bolivian women. La Paz, 1964-65.

school in La Paz. This Catholic school had been founded in 1951 by some wealthy citizens of the city who were dissatisfied with the education being offered their children in the state schools because they believed that the teachers were either communists or were too sympathetic to communist ideas.

For the first eight years the school's staff had consisted of lay people. In May 1960 the School Board hired Father Burns, who was the Superior of the Congregation of the Resurrection in La Paz, as principal of the school, and also two priests of his congregation as teachers. As well, they asked him to secure a teaching order of sisters to take charge of the primary (grades one to six) section of the school. The priests and the sisters would receive salaries commensurate with those received by the local lay teachers. In addition, the Board would provide a rental allowance for a house for the sisters.¹

Father Burns was familiar with the history and expertise of the School Sisters of Notre Dame as he had been stationed in Kitchener some years before. In his letter to Mother Loretto outlining the Board's offer he recalled the previous success of their Congregations' collaboration in education and mission:

It would almost be a case of history repeating itself. After all, Fr. Funcken did have Sister Caroline come over and establish the Sisters of Notre Dame in the Hamilton Diocese. Since that time both the School Sisters of Notre Dame and the Fathers of the Congregation of the Resurrection have flourished in that diocese. O how wonderful it would be if history could be repeated and the sisters could come and start their missionary work in South America with us...

My idea in soliciting your help is to completely turn over the primary section of the school to your jurisdiction and we would look after the secondary. However any sister that would want to teach on the secondary level would be more than welcome. The school board will continue to own the school and be responsible for future building and the salaries of any lay teachers that we would have to employ. However we would have complete control of the curriculum and discipline and the hiring and firing of teachers....

The school board is prepared to offer a furnished house to the sisters plus approximately a \$50 a month salary which is top level pay according to Bolivian standards. I would be willing to accept any number of sisters. Naturally we would be able to use them immediately but we know you are committed for this school year but perhaps come June you would be able to send us some. Our school year in Bolivia extends from Feb. 15th thru Nov.15th.

Mother Loretto was willing to give this new venture serious consideration. She mentioned the proposed mission in a provincial newsletter to the sisters and suggested that, "Any sister who would like to VOLUNTEER for missionary work in Latin America ...write to me within the next few weeks" Fifty-two sisters responded. However before making a final decision or accepting any offer, full approval of this undertaking had to be given by the Generalate of the Congregation, the Canadian Episcopal Commission for Latin America in Ottawa, and the Pontifical Commission for Latin America in Rome. Permission was received from all of these agencies by February 1961 and Mother Loretto prepared to fly to Bolivia to inspect the school and the accommodations, and meet the local church and educational authorities.

Accompanied by Sister Ernesta Stroeder, her First Councillor, Mother Loretto flew to La Paz on the 10th of March 1961 and was welcomed by Bishop Rojas, the Auxiliary Bishop, and the Apostolic Nuncio. ... On the 18th of March she signed a contract with the St. Andrews School Board which stated that they would employ four and no less than three School Sisters of Notre Dame for the primary section of St. Andrew's (i.e. grades 1-6). ... The sisters would begin teaching at the beginning of the next scholastic year, February 1st, 1962. However the Board also agreed that the sisters' salaries would commence from the "date that they start their professional activities at the St. Andrew's College in La Paz, i.e. about August 1961." From September to December they would teach only two periods of English per day. This would enable them to

become acclimatized to working in the high altitude of the area (10,000 to 12,000 ft.) and to acquire a working knowledge of Spanish. Mother Loretto also made an arrangement with the Congregation of the Resurrection that the sisters would do catechetical work with the children in the outlying areas, as well as assisting in the local parish church of San Miguel.

From the large number of sisters who had offered to be the founding staff of this new venture, Mother Loretto selected four experienced teaching sisters... Sister Claretta (Helen) Zettel would be the Superior of the new community and principal of the elementary school. She had taught in Hamilton and Kitchener and was presently the Superior of St. Mary's Convent in Oakville. Sister Lucitta (Mildred) Straus was presently Principal of St. Anthony's School in Bridgeport and had taught in Owen Sound and Galt; Sister Marcella Reitzel was teaching at St. James School, Oakville, and had taught in Fergus and Hamilton; and Sister Martin de Porres Kimpel was teaching at St. John's School, Kitchener. The Catholic press was notified of the new missionary venture and in late June Bishop Ryan held a splendid service of blessing at the Hamilton Cathedral of Christ the King. Planning and shopping for the household and school supplies which would fill their sixteen trunks, and studying the most recent information on Bolivia's geographic, racial and social divisions filled their days before their proposed departure on August 22nd...

On August 22nd, the four sisters left for New York and stayed with the School Sisters of Notre Dame of Wilton Province at their convent in New Jersey. The sisters escorted them to some of the great tourist attractions of New York City for a day and on the 25th they assisted them to board the Santa Margarita, a passenger cargo ship that was carrying fifty-two passengers to ports in the Caribbean, through the Panama Canal and down the west coast of South America to Lima, Peru. Here they stayed briefly with twenty Silesian sisters who were in charge of a 600-pupil girls' school. On September 12th they flew to La Paz and were met by Father Burns who drove them down the mountain road to Calacoto five miles and 2,500 feet below the airport, to an attractive three-bedroom house that would be their convent.

The sisters had been forewarned that contractors were working on the house and hoping to finish necessary repairs before their arrival. As they entered it was obvious that completion would take much more time. In spite of the dust and confusion in several rooms of the two-storey house they were delighted to move in as they felt it was quite suitable for their purposes. ...

The most attractive feature of the house was the large well-kept garden filled with everblooming flowers of many varieties and kept in pristine condition by a gardener. ... Beyond the patio was a large garage and store room. In this section was also a maid's room for Esther the cook-housekeeper that Father Burns had hired for the sisters. The nine-foot high wall with a gate that was locked at night gave a feeling of security. ...

The next day Father Burns drove them to the school where they were officially welcomed with a party and a concert in which students from kindergarten to grade twelve sang, danced, recited or acted in playlets. It was a gracious and auspicious beginning, and the teachers invited the sisters to come to St. Andrews at any time and observe the classes. It had been decided that Sister Martin de Porres would teach grade one, Sister Marcella, grade three, Sister Lucitta, grade five and Sister Claretta, grade six. It was arranged that the sisters would start teaching English for two forty-minute periods a day during the early months that they were studying Spanish. On observing their classes, they found, as Father Burns had warned them, the classrooms were very noisy, even chaotic, with much running about, chewing gum, tearing paper, and eating, while some stood gazing out the window. When the teacher asked a question it was answered Bolivian style, by all at once shouting chorally. When the recess bell rang, students jumped and raced into the halls yelling as they rushed to go outside. The sisters quietly decided that they would first have to work on the chaos...

Shortly after the sisters' arrival, San Miguel church was officially dedicated and opened. It was still a basement structure, but great care had been taken to make it as attractive as possible. The sisters also attended Santa Rosa, a chapel built for the Indian population in another part of town and where they would also be giving religious instruction. They very quickly became aware of the great social, cultural and economic rifts in the new society where they were to work. There were state schools for the Indian children in the area but they were not as well equipped as the private school and the children were obviously needy. They were very discreet in mentioning these great social discrepancies in their letters home as the political situation was very touchy. Strikes were a frequent way of protesting. Mother Loretto's circular letter to the sisters in Canada who were writing to the new missionaries described the situation very frankly:

Sisters, may I pass a warning to you regarding correspondence with our Sisters in Calacoto, Bolivia. Fr. Emil Stec, C.R. recently made it very emphatic that in our letters to Bolivia we should never refer in any derogatory way to conditions in Latin America – No references to communism, the revolutions, etc.

Mail is frequently opened and the missionaries could feel serious repercussions for some careless remark written to them.⁵

The Chronicles of the Bolivia Mission (from which most of this narrative is taken) give a very vivid picture of the sights and struggles of the early days in Calacoto. The sisters were surprised that there were so many English-speaking residents who welcomed them with generous loans of equipment and gifts of food and a high altitude cook book! ...

The sisters met a different class of citizen when the priests introduced them to more Indian settlements higher up the mountainous districts around La Paz where an estimated ten to twelve thousand "campo" people lived in twelve settlements. They observed immediately that all of them, particularly the women and children, needed education, social and medical services and religious instruction. Soon, the sisters began to travel to these settlements after their teaching duties were completed at St. Andrews in mid-afternoon to distribute some necessities, clothes, extra food some medicines and bandages. They also investigated initiating some catechism classes for the children. In addition to these visits they also visited the state Indian schools in Santa Rosa, Cota Cota and Irpavi. These were three of the suburbs of La Paz that were home to the workers, natives or mixed blood who had low-paying jobs in the area. These schools were over-crowded and lacked the facilities found at St. Andrews. They arranged to teach the children religion and were also able to offer quiet support to some of the teachers....

In 1963 a third sister, Mary Eugene La Flamme joined the group and Saturday catechism classes were held at the Julio Patino Indian school in the city and religious instruction was begun at what became known as the "campo missions". In addition, First Communion and Confirmation preparation classes were given at St. Andrews, Santa Rosa and Julio Patino schools, and at Roosevelt American School. The latter was a private school for children of Americans working in Bolivia who attended San Miguel Church. The great split in these societies was sadly observed by the writer of the Mission Chronicle who noted that the sisters' discreet suggestion that these important sacraments take place with all of the children attending the service together at San Miguel, was firmly refused by the St. Andrews parents.

In March 1963, Sister Marcella was asked by the Bolivian government to become principal of Santa Rosa Indian School. She was joined in working in the Indian Schools by Sister Lucitta. At first they did not receive salaries as they wished the money to be used for lay staff for these overcrowded classes. Both sisters also taught catechism at the Indian Schools on Saturdays.

Eventually the sisters would be hired to staff four of the Indian Schools in the La Paz district. The number of sisters increased to seven to meet all these obligations.

The ever-present uncertain political situation became a reality near the end of the 1964 school year when the sisters found themselves in the midst of a revolution. The Chronicle of 1965 described its bewildering, explosive violence.

It all started on the 30th of October when the University students went completely loco. There are 5,000 students in university and about 2,000 took part in the demonstrations. They say 1,300 were taken prisoners. They ripped up the rocks in the roads and barricaded all the street around the university. Everybody who was for the government...marched to show their support of the M.N.R. Truck loads of the Indians from the Alto were brought to fight against the students. The Czech government supplied the students with the ammunition guns and Molotov cocktails. The latter are beer bottles filled with gasoline. The cork is a flaming wad of paper. When the bottle is thrown, the vapour escapes, unites with the fire, and boom! There was hardly a window left in the university building. The Bolivian government expelled the Czech embassy and broke relations. We in Calacoto were too far from the disturbance so we enjoyed a nice holiday since there were no classes during the trouble.

During the night after All Souls Day [Nov. 2] there had been a little more commotion than usual out on our corner, and some extra soldiers, but we thought nothing of it. When Father O'Connor and Brother Dan arrived for Mass at 6:30 a.m., Father said there were soldiers and machine guns all around, and the traffic was completely stopped. They had to leave their car on the street and walk to the convent, although no other people were allowed on the streets. After Mass...across the street was a soldier with his machine gun aimed.... No matter what street we looked down there were armed soldiers everywhere.... Nothing was moving in the city.

Nothing happened that day. Traffic started about 11 o'clock and much later we heard Cochabamba and Ororo had revolted at the instigation of the Vice-President, Barrientos and were now in the hands of the army.... The American and British Embassies told Father to get us away from the President's corner and closer to the city [La Paz] in case we would have to evacuate.... Everyone was to fill...all containers with water and have enough for one or two weeks. It was 8 o'clock when we started to pack a few things, grabbed our sleeping blankets, locked the house and headed for the Loretto convent. All was dark and eerie, the streets were deserted except for armed soldiers but we had no trouble getting through. On his way back to the rectory, Father picked up Esther and took her to their maid's quarters and also took the Blessed Sacrament to their chapel. There were 21 of us in all—four different orders, Loretto Sisters, Dominican Sisters, Missionary Sisters of the Immaculate Conception, and 7 of us....We all went out back for a game of volleyball. Then at 11 a.m...there were machine guns and other retorts on all sides of us. They were so close we felt they were aiming at us. We all made a mad dash for the house and crouched on the floor under the window. As the blasts continued we made our way to the third floor to the community room. We had just listened for a few minutes when we heard the announcement that Victor Paz escaped at 10 o'clock, and that one of the radio stations had fallen into the hands of the Revolutionary Forces, and then the electricity was cut. At the same moments bullets came pelting against the convent wall, so on our hands and knees we crawled to a safer side of the convent and listened to the transistor radio. There was only one radio station broadcasting now, one that was being run by a generator. Guns were booming ceaselessly, the announcements were wild and excited, and suddenly planes began zooming down and around us. Some Sisters thought it would be safer to go to the ground floor. From the transistor we learned that Barrientos was the head of it all, and that the university students were the main fighters for La Paz. Soon this station was captured and then some of the announcements changed their tune. Now all the citizens were to go out on the streets and help the Revolution Forces fight for freedom and liberate Bolivia from the criminal government of Victor Paz. They were to guard the embassies where his followers were seeking refuge from their crimes. "Viva Bolivia libre!" "Long live free Bolivia!" Long live the nation's army! Long live the university students of San Andres! Viva this and viva that; down with this and down with that. We listened to this kind of thing in between the blasts outside until a quarter to twelve and then decided to say the rosary together. At about the third decade the shooting stopped except for an odd bang and rat-a-tat-tat here and there. After the rosary more radio. The people of Bolivia should remain tranquil—Bolivia was free now. Anyone who could was to go out and help the wounded who fought so gloriously to win freedom.

While we ate our lunch there were very few gun shots. All afternoon and evening cars and trucks loaded with university students armed with guns kept passing the convent in both directions, but most of them were going to Calacoto. They all had a white flag or cloth waving from their vehicles and many of them had a machine gun or two. Several of them had a big red cross. Some truck loads were yelling Vivas and Hurrahs or "Hasta luego Victor Paz." Many of these truck loads were going to the Military College in Calacoto as it had not yet surrendered. Others were going to the hospital in Obrajes and still others were going to pillage and ransack the beautiful homes of the party men who had to flee with their families. Many of these homes are in Calacoto and several of the families were attending St. Andrew's. Soldiers were posted by the President's house so that nothing could be damaged or stolen.

In the midst of all this confusion youngsters phoned the Lorettos with the usual question, "Hay clases hoy?" That night there was a great deal of shooting again but the following day all seemed normal and after lunch we made our way hack to Calacoto.⁶

For the sisters, the revolution produced one fortuitous solution for an urgent problem of overcrowding in the small house they had been occupying since their arrival in 1961. The staff now numbered seven but until recently, larger houses at reasonable prices had not been available. Because of the change in government, some members of the cabinet had been advised or forced

to leave the country. One of these men sold his house to the Congregation at a reasonable price. On December 2nd,

the great move took place. All the priests and brothers, and several boys helped us. Sister Stephen Mary, S.L. also came with a Volkswagen. We had one big truck to move the large furniture. By 4 p.m. all the furniture was placed and the beds made in our new house. As usual, the C.R.s showed their thoughtfulness. They prepared a most delicious dinner for us that evening and sent it to our convent. Even Whitey, our dog, which we received from the McKees two months ago, was not forgotten.⁷

When school re-opened in February 1965, enrollment had increased everywhere: St. Andrews Primary had 308 pupils, Santa Rosa 242, and Julio Patino 373. On April 3rd, Sister Mary Eugene who was teaching at St. Andrews Secondary School had to return to Canada because of illness. Fortunately, Mother Loretto was able to send a replacement, Sister Frances Therese, by April 29th bringing the Bolivian Mission back to seven sisters. ...

The pace of work in the San Miguel continued to increase. Classes in religion were organized for the maids who worked in the houses of San Miguel parishioners and the classes for the students in the Indian schools increased. To make progress with the campo settlements much more time was needed. Thus when the time came for the renewal of the teaching contract with the St. Andrews Board in 1972, the sisters at the San Miguel Mission had decided that if they were to be faithful to the Congregation's charism as decreed by Mother Theresa, they should choose to work with the poorest members of Bolivian society. Accordingly, they asked that the contract not be renewed. The sisters' work entered a new phase—that of concentrating on ministering to the increasing needs (which the ever-present political unrest did nothing to allay) of the very poor Indian population in the mountain villages and the lower class in the city, usually of mixed race, who were struggling not to fall back into hopeless poverty. Instead of being limited to giving formal education in the schools they attempted to use a

holistic approach...to promote and encourage the people's awareness of their dignity as persons, to encourage their giftedness and leadership qualities for taking responsibilities in the communities as leaders with a faith motivation, and that the people continue their own development. We are working to promote a greater appreciation of the language and culture of the Aymara-speaking people trying to help them develop a "critical conscience" to be able to continue their positive cultural aspects, while trying to eliminate sinful customs.⁸

In this work the sisters intended to continue their collaboration with the men of the Congregation of the Resurrection and the parish church of San Miguel.

The sisters held many long, prayer-filled, soul-searching sessions on their objectives, and concluded that the key to developing native leadership lay in fostering closer relationships with the leaders as they emerged during the increased number of study groups they hoped to organize in the villages. The sisters could then begin to train these men and women as leaders of special urgent projects such as improving village health facilities and increasing the level of religious education in their own villages and also in the poor city districts. They accepted the difficulties inherent in this ambitious plan—that their numbers were few and the results forthcoming from their efforts would likely be slow and meagre for some time. But the high infant and child mortality rates and the wasted talents of this society because of lack of opportunity, impelled the sisters to work steadily and optimistically.

These long discussions also produced another realization—that their own progress in understanding this society could also be a long slow process and that an important initial step was their own personal conversion: "we are making personal efforts to live more simply and more in solidarity with the poor and marginalized of the parish."

When they thought of the city parishes, especially San Miguel, they concluded that, "there is a need for continuous education and awareness at the middle class level where much of the power to be able to make actual system changes lies." Out of the discussion on the matter of living among the poor came discussion on whether it was necessary to live *with the poor*. Cultural differences were for some insurmountable; this was accepted. For others, complete integration particularly at Fiesta feasts could result in severe illness for the priests and sisters, when one time both became very sick with illnesses for which they had not developed immunity.

Such acculturation was a difficult and politically sensitive task. Progress in all of this development ultimately depended on relative political tranquility, as the author of the report observed. During the 1980's, "this has not always been possible."

The sisters' hopes to develop native leadership in San Miguel parish especially in health and religious education did not begin until they had given up running St. Andrews School to concentrate on encouraging the potential of the native population. Even then results were spasmodic as it took much time and effort to organize basic training. Yet in the 1990's, the sisters were giving annual courses to catechists and their wives. One of the sessions on Baptism

included the Baptismal ceremony of the child of a catechist! It was at this time that recently arrived, Sister Dorothy Goetz, who had begun to do ground-breaking work in public health, had to return to Canada to battle Typhoid and Hepatitis. Fortunately, after ten months leave, she was able to return and begin work on the Great Water Project.

THE GREAT BOLIVIAN WATER PROJECT, 1994-1998

From the beginning of their work among the ten mountain villages in San Miguel parish the sisters had realized that clean water was the most urgent of the physical needs of the Aymara-speaking people. Sister Dorothy Goetz had recognized that their distressingly high baby and child mortality rate as well as adult ill-health often originated in water-borne disease and lack of sanitation. It was Typhoid Fever and Hepatitis that had put her in the local hospital for forty-six days until she could travel home to recover in Canada after only a short time in Bolivia. When she returned some ten months later nothing had improved except that she began to work with Dr. Juan Rocha, a local doctor and Sister Mirta Cucchetti, a Spanish-speaking SSND from Argentina who were both convinced that if money could be found, clear, fresh water from the nearby mountains could be piped into the villages. To date, neither the government nor other agencies had responded to requests for funding. Sister Dorothy asked the SSND Provincial Council of the Canadian Province to fund the project. Their agreement meant that it could start in 1994.

The three leaders organized it as a self-help project with the villagers to supply the manual labour and the Canadian money to buy the raw materials and technical support. Each village was asked to assume the responsibility of organizing themselves into work parties to dig the miles of trenches and lay the pipes from the mountain stream down the hills into the villages. It was a huge undertaking intended not just to bring water, but to teach the people that they could organize themselves to accomplish this and other great tasks now and in the future.

A few villages got on board immediately. They arranged to work in shifts on the water project so that some men could continue their regular work in the fields. Each village was advised to charge a small monthly fee for the service of the water so that they would have a fund for repairs of taps or pipes on the system etc., or to expand the water system in the future. Each village had a committee trained to oversee this. Before the water was brought into a village, it had to be tested so that it did not contain harmful amounts of minerals. Village by village they

engaged in piping water. While the largest aspect of the project was water, development included enhancing literacy skills and technical skills. In addition to learning to read and write there was cloth making, weaving, knitting, and sewing especially for women, but men also participated in classes.

An additional aspect was the training of health promoters, persons selected from each village who would serve the village as primary health-care providers. There were about twenty-five men and women prepared with basic concepts of western medicine as well as being trained in the preparation of herbal medicine.

Sister Dorothy coordinated the project, working closely with Dr. Rocha. She served as chief accountant, keeping the books and managing the money. She accompanied Dr. Rocha in purchasing supplies, paid the salaries of Dr. Rocha, the engineer, technical assistants, and teachers with technical skills. She supervised the teachers and depended on Dr. Rocha to supervise the work of the engineer, plumber and technical assistants. In addition, she organized and oversaw the training of the health promoters while continuing to provide basic health care in each village. She accompanied Brother David Ernst, CR, in continuing the work of faith development and sacramental preparation in all ten villages, while at the same time preparing catechists to continue the work of faith development into the future.

This project, which had started in 1994 and was completed in December 1998, was a remarkable accomplishment. Eight of the ten villages had participated in receiving fresh, piped water even into their homes; nine of the villages now had health promoters, nine had participated to improve their literacy and technical skills development and all had catechists trained to continue faith development, working with the priests in the parish of San Miguel. Sister Dorothy later declared that this would not have been possible except for the bases of faith and community leadership found among both men and women in the villages that were implanted by the succession of sisters who persistently and patiently had worked for thirty-five years in the mountains of Bolivia.

When the Water Project was completed the SSND Mission in Bolivia was closed. The sisters who were returning to Canada arrived in time for Christmas. It had been a mission where much was accomplished, there had also been set-backs when urgent changes of personnel, mainly because of health or the fatigue from trying to master more than one foreign language. Bolivia had been an expensive mission to maintain, with very high transportation and supply

costs. Sisters who had to leave could not be replaced by local novices as no Bolivian women had joined the Congregation and replacements were flown out from a diminishing supply of sisters in Canada. In contrast, the Peruvian mission that was originally founded by some of the San Miguel sisters who had transferred in 1965, had already accepted two Peruvian girls into the Congregation. The founding of the important Peruvian Rural Education programme enabled the training of teachers, family catechists and youth leaders into a network that by the year 2000 would reach sixteen villages in northern Peru.

When the decision to leave Bolivia was announced, the Provincial Superior of the Congregation of the Resurrection wrote to Sister Rose Mary Sander, the SSND Provincial Leader, expressing his regret and thanks, and he recalled that:

The hard work, sacrifice and cooperation of our communities over the 35 years of service in La Paz have had both moments of joy and sorrow but through them all have been the channels through which many blessings have flowed to the people and our communities.

Signed by Very Reverend Lorford A. Keasey, CR¹¹

ENDNOTES

¹ These terms were cited in a letter of May 12, 1960 from Senors Prudentia, the Secretary and Granier, the President of the St. Andrews College Board.

² Mother Loretto, Letter to My dear Sisters, December 12, 1960.

³ President and Secretary of the Board, letter to Mother Loretto, March 18th, 1961.

⁴ In this chapter the sisters mentioned are identified by their religious names at the time of their assignment to Bolivia. If they later reverted to their baptismal name, the latter is inserted in brackets.

⁵ Mother Loretto's letter to sisters re writing to sisters in Latin America

⁶ Chronicles 1964

⁷ Chronicles 1964-65

⁸ Study paper "Re-Assessment of Our Apostolic Commitment in Bolivia in Light of <u>You Are Sent</u>" November 1983. Evaluation done by Sisters Miriam Conroy, Rose Mary Sander, Yvonne Nosal, page 1.

⁹ Ibid, page 2, #3

¹⁰ Ibid, page 2.

¹¹ The Great Water Project, Bolivia Mission file, Canadian Province Archives