

Province of The Most Holy Name

Franciscan Fathers

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NEW YORK 1, NEW YORK

OFFICE OF THE PROVINCIAL

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My Dear Confrere:

In a letter dated September 28, 1955, Archbishop Humberto Mozzoni, Apostolic Nuntio in Bolivia, offered Holy Name Province a territory in that country which could readily become an independent jurisdiction, once staffed with sufficient men. After some correspondence with the Nuntio, consultation with Fr. Sebastian Rabin and Bishop Kilian Pflau, O.F.M., Vicar Apostolic of Nuflo de Chavez, Bolivia, the Definitorium showed interest and decided I should visit and inspect the territory. This letter is a report of that visit.

I left Miami Friday, March 23, at 4:05 P.M. on Braniff Airlines and arrived in La Paz the next day at 10:15 A.M. The trip consumed some 18 hours, 15 hours actual flying time and 3 hours for stopovers. Most of the flying was over water, save for the last lap from Lima to La Paz. On this portion of the flight we traveled inland from the Pacific, crossing over magnificent scenery featuring volcanos, high snow-covered peaks and the famous Lake Titicaca. This lake, 13,300 feet above sea level, boasts rainbow trout of 30-35 pounds and a year-round temperature just above freezing. The pilot circled all these wonders to give us a better view.

We landed on schedule in La Paz, the world's highest commercial airport (13,000 feet). The air here is so thin, runways 2 miles long are required. Archbishop Mozzoni, Msgr. Paul Marcinkus of Chicago, Secretary to the Archbishop, Very Rev. Louis Oefner, O.F.M., Delegate General, and Fr. Amadeus Donini, O.F.M., Delegate Provincial for the Tridentine Franciscans in Bolivia, made up the delegation greeting me at the airport. After Msgr. Marcinkus hustled me through customs and immigration, we began our descent into the city of La Paz by auto. On the way down I was guilty of a faux pas. Archbishop Mozzoni arrived at the airport without any evidence of rank, i. e. pectoral cross or ring, and no one introduced him to me when I arrived. I concluded the Archbishop was a local Monsignor who spoke no English. On the way to town I questioned Msgr. Marcinkus about the Nuntio, i. e. his age, etc. The Monsignor answered by saying the Archbishop was sitting right next to me and, . . . "take a look." It was a bit embarrassing, but helped break the ice.

After a 15-minute drive from the airport (the same trip takes one hour by rail), we arrived in the city proper, which lies on the side of a mountain. I was immediately impressed with its cleanliness. We drove to the Nunciature, where I stayed during my time in Bolivia, and where we were now joined by Most Rev. Abel y Rojas, Archbishop of La Paz, and some Maryknoll Fathers. After a luncheon and nap I began the first steps of my business

in regard to the proposed territory by consulting with Fr. Louis Oefner and Fr. Amadeus Donini at St. Francis Church, La Paz. These Friars wholeheartedly approved our coming.

St. Francis Church is in care of the Franciscans of the Bolivian Province. The original Church, finished in 1548, predates the present city. The present structure, begun in 1580 and finished in 1772, is the third Church. Many of its altars and much of its cedar and goldplated woodwork are from the original Church. The Indians in the vicinity gravitate toward St. Francis Church whenever they come to town, for here they seem to feel welcome and at home. The Indian women, who wear derbies of a sort, leave their heads uncovered in Church.

Sunday, March 25, I offered Mass at the Nunciature for some 40 or 50 people who usually attend Mass there. After breakfast, Archbishop Mozzoni and I drove to Sorata, a town and parish some 100 miles from La Paz. Here the Nuntio would like us to establish a Mission center. To reach Sorata, we climbed up out of the valley in which La Paz is located and drove along the 13,000 feet high plateau called the Alto Plano. The gravel roads along the Alto Plano were good and our jeep made about 40 miles per hour. After the first 80 miles we began a gradual five-mile climb until we reached 15,000 feet. Then we started a final 25-mile rapid, winding descent to Sorata which lies some 8,700 feet above sea level. This descent actually covered but 5 miles as the crow flies; but, to make the steep descent, the road must wind back and forth for 25 miles.

Nestling in the Andes, Sorata's altitude gives it a temperate climate, although the area is tropical. There are the usual two seasons, the rainy from November to March, and the dry. During the entire year the nights are cool, the days, because of the tropical sun, warm but comfortable. While in La Paz I wore a heavy shirt under my habit continuously, but only during the evening in Sorata. This town of 6,000 people is the central parish for a ring of several smaller parishes and mission stations servicing about 45,000 souls. The central parish Church is very old and is under the patronage of St. Mary Magdalene. The patronal feast, however, is celebrated on the feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross. We stayed overnight in the hotel. Government-built and maintained, the Sorata hotel is clean, comfortable and equipped with electric lights, showers and swimming pool, and has an excellent view of the picturesque mountains.

During the trip from La Paz to Sorata I noted the variety of Bolivian transportation--cars, trucks, jeeps, horses, mules and, finally, feet. In lieu of buses, the Bolivians use truck transport. The trucker uses the bottom of his carrier for produce and on top of his uncovered cargo he sits his passengers. The four-wheel drive jeep is quite necessary, especially during the rainy season. Most of the mules are pack mules and hence usually not ridden. Now and then as we drove along the Alto Plano we would see a horseback rider. I understand there are some areas in the new jurisdiction in which the missionary will be able to use only horse. This is true in the area where Fr. Sebastian Rabin had been working. Along the highway we also met large herds of sheep and, less frequently, small herds of cattle and llama. We saw many people on foot. Many of the Indians living on the Alto Plano were walking to and from La Paz and other places. On this particular Sunday many Bolivians were making their Easter Pilgrimage to the Shrine of Our Lady of Copacabana. This was another evidence that the Spanish Missionaries, unable

to leave the Blessed Sacrament, made it a point to implant love of the Blessed Mother and appreciation of penance in the minds and souls of the South Americans.

We reached La Paz Monday afternoon, napped, and then visited the proposed parish in the Alto section of La Paz. After a climb up to the same plain on which the airport is located and on which the highway to Sorata begins, we arrived at the new community in the Alto. Here 30,000 to 40,000 people, mostly Indian and poor, will form the nucleus of a new parish. The civil authorities have apportioned land in the area for a parish plant and are now in the process of building a Church. They will also build, or help us build, a rectory and Church and alter a school. The Alto now has water facilities and light, and promises of paved streets.

On Tuesday, March 27, we visited Coroico, the third possible mission, located some 60 miles from La Paz. From almost the front door of the Nunciature to Coroico we were either ascending or descending mountains. We actually crossed 3 mountains and were about two thirds of the way up the side of another when we reached Coroico. The single-lane roads hugging the sides of the mountains have periodic passing places which are close enough to one another. Each time a bend is turned (and there are plenty of bends), the driver sounds his horn and hopes to have an open passage. Bolivian chauffeurs are accustomed to this and pass on these cliffs with little ado. I was told that no car has ever fallen off.

After arriving in Coroico we immediately visited its Church dedicated to St. Peter. Here again the Nuntio desires to locate a mission center for surrounding parishes and mission stations to serve the 20,000 souls in the area. A new highway built by American Point-Four Aid will cut through the Coroico area, thus opening it rapidly for development.

Thus the visitation of the three possible sites, the Alto in La Paz, Sorata and Coroico, was completed. Their altitudes vary from 5,800 feet in Coroico to 7,000 in Sorata to 13,000 in the Alto. Archbishop Mozzoni requests that we staff these places by January, 1957, and this we shall try to do. We will attempt to station 4 men, at least, in each Friary for the time being. Hence, for now we will need at least 12 priests and 3 brothers for the Bolivian Mission. To adequately service the area, we will require about 25 or 30 priests and probably 6 brothers. We will try to bring the mission staff up to that number over a 6-year period. Thus we need now, and will continue to need, volunteers for this mission.

Within the past year the Sacred Congregation of Religious has issued a directive concerning Religious Chaplains which establishes the ideal period of a Religious Chaplain's enlistment as 5 years. We are now in the process of arranging a schedule to replace with younger Fathers those who have been in service for 5 years. We need, then, volunteers for the Service. I cannot promise that everyone who volunteers will be able to go. Age limits: Army-38; Air Force -36; Navy-33. The Military Ordinariate informs us that the most pressing need for priests is in the Air Force.

Sincerely and fraternally,

Jesus Wheeler, O.F.M.

Minister Provincial