

Reflection on My Experience in Bolivia - June 30 – July 16, 2015

by Marcia Lunz, OSF

“We want to have welcoming houses that are like vitamins.” This is the goal of the Bolivian sisters, and my experience of their hospitality is that I was fortified as well, if not better, than any vitamin pill I have ever taken. In this sharing I will give you some highlights.



Sister Marlene Weisenbeck and I flew to Bolivia with Sister Yanira, TSSF, who studied in La Crosse this past year. It was an overnight flight that started in Chicago with a connection in Miami. The plane made a short stop in La Paz, the capital of Bolivia, and then flew on to Santa Cruz. Sister Romana was at the airport to welcome us.

On July 2, we left on a small bus, with Tertiary Sisters from Italy, Austria and Cameroon, to visit Ascension and nearby missions where the sisters minister. This was a day’s journey, made more interesting by a roadblock by a family protesting the lack of court action on behalf of a family member who had been killed. All traffic was stopped both ways, and we waited for 50 minutes until the roadblock was opened up for a short period to let vehicles through. When we returned on the 4th, the roadblock was clear.

The meeting with the sisters started on Sunday, July 5, because the Pope was visiting on the 9th and everyone would be engaged in other activities that day. Sister Marlene, Sister Barbara Kraemer, SSSF (Spanish/English translator), and I received tickets to the Pope’s conference with religious. About 6,000 men and women religious gathered in the Coliseo Don Bosco for the event. The Pope’s talk can be found on the Vatican website, as well as his homily at the morning Mass.



The meeting of the Tertiary Sisters included the Leadership of each province/region and the generalate, as well as a JPIC representative from each entity. Sister Marlene and I were the facilitators, and the main topic was how the congregation work of JPIC is being engaged across the congregation. Father Francisco O’Conaire, OFM, who had spoken at their 2013 General Chapter, was invited back to this meeting. The highlight of his presentation was an overview of *Laudato Si* by Pope Francis which had just been released.

On Saturday, we climbed into another small bus and headed to San Miguel, one of the missions where the Tertiary Sisters minister. In this north-east section of Bolivia, there are 10 missions that the Jesuits founded in the late 1600s and early 1700s. If you have seen the film *The Mis-*





sion (1986), you know the story of the Jesuits being forced out of these missions by Spain. As a result of this film, UNESCO declared this area a world cultural site, and all the churches have been restored. We saw nearly all the churches, and each one is a remarkably beautiful place tucked away in poor towns. The church at San Miguel was actually used in the movie.

Our four-day trip covered approximately 1,200 kilometers, and this took more time because on the dirt roads we often did only 25 – 30 miles an hour. Back in Santa Cruz, we had a day to rest up before we returned to the States on July 16.



There are only 22 Tertiary Sisters in Bolivia, but the work they do is far reaching. Many of their schools and medical facilities have been handed over to others in recent years, because the missionary sisters from Austria are aging and new native vocations have been few. But their spirit of welcome and hospitality suffers neither from age nor numbers. It was a grace to experience their graciousness.



The photos are representative of the beautiful faces I saw. The map of the Jesuit missions will give you an idea of the scope of the foundations. The group photo shows the hand-woven gifts that the Bolivian sisters gave to each sister in attendance. I am so grateful to have been a part of this experience through our connection as part of the Franciscan Common Venture.