December 1996 -- Christmas in Bolivia

--by Fr. Pat Rearden

Christmas 1996

Dear Friends,

Greetings again to all of you and to your families. Here we are getting ready for all of our pre-Christmas activities. The liturgical biblical readings are most inspiring in this time of Advent, a time of hope and of preparation for Christmas. Some families here have the custom of having the Advent wreath in their living rooms and they light one of the four candles during each week of Advent. Some families have family prayers and the reading of Scripture passages on each evening.

The feast of Christmas itself brings different reactions to different people. For some of the elderly they often experience loneliness or at times the abandonment of their own children. For the poor children who pass by the store windows and see the nice Christmas toys and know that they will never be able to have such toys, there is another reaction. For people who don't believe in the coming of the child Jesus, as our Lord and Savior, there is another reaction. For other people who are so involved in their businesses and other activities, there isn't any time to even think of the true signification of Christmas. For those of us who are Christians, there is another reaction. It is that of joy, and peace and more than anything, a sense of great gratitude to God the Father, who loved us so much that He gave us His only Son (John 3:16-17). This same joy and peace was present in the simple shepherd when they visited the newly-born Christ child in his crib in Bethlehem, in the three Wise Men when they presented their gifts to the Infant Savior, and in Simeon when he took the Christ child in his arms and blessed God saying, "Lord, now you can let your servant die in peace, because my eyes have seen my Savior." (Luke 2:29-30) And what is our reaction when we ponder the Christ Jesus in the crib at Christmas time? Who is this child and why has He come into this world? His name is a manifestation of His love for all peoples of all ages. The words of St. Paul express this perfectly when he says:

> "But when the kindness and love of God our Savior for mankind were revealed, it was not because he was concerned with any righteous actions we might have done ourselves; it was for no reason except his own compassion that He saved us." (Titus 3:4-S)

During these first two weeks of December there are several important events taking place here in Bolivia From the 3rd to the 5th of December, the wives of the Latin American presidents, as well as Hillary Clinton from the United States, met in the city of LaPaz to discuss and evaluate the role of women in this part of the world. There were many interventions given and the final document was released revealing their concern for a more active participation of women in all levels of society as well as for elimination of serious abuses perpetrated against the dignity of women. Immediately following this meeting there was a meeting of the Latin American presidents and Mr. Albert Gore, the Vice President of the United States, was in the city of Santa Cruz. The main theme of their meeting was development in Latin America and collaboration between rich and poor nations.

Next Sunday, December 15, the Bolivian soccer team will play the Paraguayan team in the city of LaPaz. This is one of a number of matches to determine what four teams from South America will be the qualifiers for the World Cup finals to be held in France in 1998. In their first five matches, the Bolivian team won one game, tied two games and lost two games, so they have to win this match to better their record and have a chance to qualify for the finals in France in 1998. The team has played well but needs more scoring punch to be able to defeat their rivals.

When I last wrote to you in August, I had been busy and did some travelling. On Sept. 20, I traveled with the Bolivian delegation of 12 people to the Latin American Charismatic Encounter (ECCLA) in Paraguay. We left Bolivia and flew to Asuncion, the capital city of Paraguay. We were met in the airport there and after going through customs we were taken to the bus terminal to take a bus to Ciudad del Este where the Encounter was held. Previous to the Encounter, I assisted at two-and-half days of meetings of the moderator and coordinators of all the Latin Amencan delegations. This meeting was held in the archdiocesan retreat house. It was a good experience for me and for the other Bolivian men who attended. Then we attended six days of meetings for the Encounter. We were all lodged in the homes of Paraguayan families. All of our delegates were most impressed with the hospitality we received from the families where we stayed and also by the organizers of the event and their collaborators. The six talks were given by Padre Salvador Carrillo, a priest from Mexico, who is a biblical scholar. All talks were inspiring for us; on each evening we had the Eucharist celebration. Several times it was presided by Paraguayan bishops.

One morning, before we began our sessions the Paraguayan President came with several of his ministers to ask for prayers from the 180 delegates at the Congress. Besides the business part of the congress we had a visit to the Iguazu Falls located across the river from Paraguay on the Brazilian-Argentinean border. All of us were most impressed with the panoramic view of the Falls. That afternoon we visited the Itaipu electric plant located on the Brazilian-Paraguayan border, an immense area of some energy as well as a good part of the Brazilian electrical supply. Both of these phenomena of Nature were most impressive for all of us. Also people come across the bridge from Brazil to buy and take back their goods to Brazil. I have to mention that we were told that commerce in Ciudad del Este is third only in size to Miami and Hong Kong. Hard to believe unless one has seen the movement that takes place each day in that area. I celebrated a Healing Mass on the last Sunday we were in Ciudad del Este with over 6,000 people present. Really a manifestation of the strong faith of the people. The following night in Asuncion was very memorable for all of us in our Bolivian delegation. It was only the second time that I have been in Paraguay. My last visit was in 1990.

At the beginning of September I traveled to the city of Sucre for the priestly ordination of one of our Bolivians. His name is Johny Lujan. He had previously done six months of his pastoral ministry as a deacon in the city of Tarija. After his ordination, a short visit with his family, his first Mass in Sucre, and another "First Mass" in Cochabamba, he returned to Tarija where he continues to minister as a priest until the end of February. At that time, when we have our Vicariate Chapter and the visit of our Provincial, we will be making a few new assignments. We are also looking forward to the visit of our Master General of the Dominican Order, Father Timothy Radcliffe, O.P., along with his socius for Latin America. He arrives in Bolivia on the last week of February 1997.

In November I traveled to Santa Cruz on an all night bus trip with 15 delegates from Cochabamba for our National Charismatic Congress. All in all we were close to 100 delegates from Cochabamba attending the Congress. I gave one of the general talks. On Thursday we had a Christian music concert with well-known musical groups from Santa Cruz participating. Then on Saturday night we had the "March of Faith" processing through the streets of Santa Cruz and to the Students' Park where we had a Mass presided over by an Argentinean bishop, Msgr. Pedro Lira. We then returned on Sunday evening, back on the ten hour bus trip, to Cochabamba.

Since we had the opportunity to attend the ECCLA Congress in Paraguay, we have been giving the talks that we received there, here in Cochabamba, then in LaPaz, Tarija and soon in Oruro and Sucre. The people have responded well to them. This is part of our commitment to Bolivia having had the privilege to attend the Paraguay Congress. We have also made photocopies of the talks so those interested can read them and better prepare themselves to help others in their Christian faith. All of this is based on St. Paul's saying:

> "All that you have learned from me, hand it on to reliable people, so that they in turn will be able to teach" (II Tim. 2:2)

Besides these talks we have been giving at the St. Martin de Porres Center here in Cochabamba we have also had many other activities. On October 15th we had thirty-two youngsters receive the sacrament of Confirmation after a six month preparation program. On December 8th we had sixty four children receive their First Holy Communion at the evening Mass. All this is the result of the fine efforts of our lay catechists who worked so hard with the youngsters to prepare them well.

In late August we had our national leaders congress for Charismatic leaders. We had 140 people present for the long week-end Congress. Most of the talks were on Biblical themes to better prepare our laity. Right now our youth are having different fund-raising activities to help pay for their travel and enrollment costs. For three nights before the Feast of the patron of our Province of Chicago, St. Albert the Great, we had three nights of special Masses with different preachings on the life of St. Albert. On the night of the feast of St. Albert the Great, the 15th of November, I gave a summary of the history of our forty years in Bolivia as a Domunican mission from our Chicago Province. The four nights were well blessed, as have been our forty years of missionary activity in Bolivia. Thanks be to God. Since the Good Lord has blessed us with native vocations and our house is not large enough, we are now searching for a piece of land to build a new studium. Last Sunday evening in River Forest, Illinois, there was fund-raising dinner and program organized by our Mission Office in conjunction with some Bolivian doctors living in the Chicago area. From what we hear it was a big success. Many thanks to all of them.

For many months now we have been in contact with the Amanecer Foundation studying the possibility of transferring our Home for the street boys to their organization. They were looking for a place to transfer 55 boys as they had to close one of their nine homes and so we were able to enter into negotiations with them to take over the administration of our Home. They began administrating during the middle of September, I have hopes that the dream that we had to be able to take care of 120 boys will now be realized and done better due to the limited economic funding that we had available for this purpose. The Sister of Charity who directed the other home will be the new director at our Home. Their administrator has also come over to our Home as well as some of their employees. Most of our personnel will also continue in the new program. The new program is now called the St. Martin St. Vincent Home and has over 90 boys living in there. Some of you volunteer people will continue to help the boys. They have asked that I be a member of the Board of Directors. We still have our Soup Kitchen which functions on the same property. This will remain with us as well as some 3,000 square meters which will be used for days of retreat as well as for the 180 children that attend our soup kitchen each day. Right now we are preparing for our Christmas party on the 20th of December.

At our St. Martin de Porres Center we are also getting ready for Christmas with different preparations. One is the Christmas carol group that has been formed with young children and their parents. We are also sending out letters to ask for food and clothing for the poor with whom our parishioners are working. Some of the groups that will be helped are the children and families that live alongside the river or under the bridges, the children and adults in the men and women's jails, the children and adults living on the street as well as the people living in the marginal neighborhoods. Next Wednesday we will have a penitential ceremony for confessions. Our Midnight Mass will be at 8:00 P.M. on Christmas Eve. We will have several acts of the Christmas drama presented during the Mass by our drama group along with the Christmas carol choir. Many Bolivian families have the custom of having their Christmas meal after the Midnight Mass and not on Christmas Day.

The political and economic situation in Bolivia is not the best at the present time. Almost every day there are marches and demonstrations in the streets by different groups against some of the capitalization programs of the government. The latest demonstrations are against the new pension law and the possibility of capitalizing the National petroleum industry. Also the different political groups are selecting their presidential and vice-presidential candidates for the elections scheduled for next June. The present president and vice-president are not eligible to succeed themselves. I was

in LaPaz last week and the situation there is worse. Every afternoon different groups were demonstrating and this always effects greatly the movement of the traffic in the center of the city.

My family seems to be enjoying good health including my 99 year old Mother. I'm hoping we can have a nice birthday party for her next July when she hits the 100 year mark. Sorry to hear the Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, the Archbishop of my native Chicago, passed away recently. He was a great man and did so much for the Church in the States and for many terminal cancer patients as well as being a good argument against any legislation favoring assisted suicide attempts. I still remember back in 1985 when another priest and I accompanied him is a ceremony in Holy Name Cathedral when he ordained 30 new permanent deacons including my brother-in-law.

My prayer is that all of you and your families have a most Happy Christmas and receive the fullest of God's blessings during the coming New Year. On Christmas Day l will offer Mass for all of you and your intentions. May God bless you all. Thank you for your help and concern for our missionary work here in Bolivia.

MERRY CHRISTMAS

Fr. Pat Rearden, O.P.
