



Whew! Was I scared! I held on to the steering wheel of that rattling jeep as though it were a life buoy in the middle of the Atlantic. Soaking wet with perspiration from the torrid heat of a merciless afternoon sun, I slowly wended my way up a narrow, winding, bumpy mountain road, through a thick, jungle-like terrain toward the tiny pueblo of La Libertad, perched "way up there" on the top of the hill.

A prayer on the top of the hill

I was in the Central American Republic of Guatemala on a special assignment, and the experience was as interesting and rewarding as it could be nerve-wracking. Like now, for instance. One has to be seasoned to such a challenge and I found many excellent, seasoned missionaries in Guatemala. As one on the outside looking in, I could stand back and appreciate, perhaps better than those too close to the scene to observe clearly, or too involved to be self-commendatory, the fine mission work being done in all fields of endeavor — agricultural, medical, religious, educational, etc. It was a source of inspiration, satisfaction and pride.

But I had not come to Guatemala merely to observe. I was asked (and pleased) to help out wherever there was an opportunity or need — which is why I found myself in that jeep. I was on my way to replace one of our priests and attend to the religious needs of the people in the pueblo of La Libertad, in the Department of Huehuetenango. I hadn't been warned about the approach to the pueblo. I'm sure it was so "old hat" to the men it didn't even cross their minds that there was any particular need for counseling or cautioning me. This was one time (there have been several others, believe me!) when I learned something of what is meant by the Spanish proverb: *La letra con sangre entra.* (Learning comes through blood) — or sweat, at least!

Fortunately, I made it without accident or incident of any kind. After spending some time acquainting myself with the Indians there, I prepared to offer Mass. It was most gratifying to see the large number of people who crowded the chapel and to witness their reverence and devotion. But one of the most satisfying and unforgettable moments of that service came during the Offertory of the Mass. As is customary, I mentioned a few personal petitions and then asked, "If any of you have something special you would like to pray for, please feel free to offer it now."

Immediately, an elderly Indian man stepped forward, faced the assembled crowd and said, firmly and loudly, "Let us give thanks to God for the Padre who has come to offer Mass for us this special day."

What a beautiful gesture! The very first idea that came to this man was to offer thanks to God for the blessing of a priest. How many things he could have prayed for; what countless needs must have been on his mind. Yet, more important than anything else was to give thanks to God — for me.

Suddenly that winding, bumpy, narrow mountain road became a 4-lane highway to a tremendous sense of fulfillment and delight. It was worth the nerves, the sweat, the anxiety — and going down the next day, there wasn't a bump in the road!



Here comes Javier — again!

He was a cute, cherubic-faced lad with a captivating smile, and the large, horn-rimmed glasses he wore only added something to his charm. They made him all the more interesting and lovable.

I first met Javier soon after arriving in Bogotá, Colombia, where I was giving a Lenten Retreat to the men and women of Santa Cecilia, a Maryknoll parish of more than 100,000 souls, bordering the southern outskirts of the city in a barrio called Venecia.

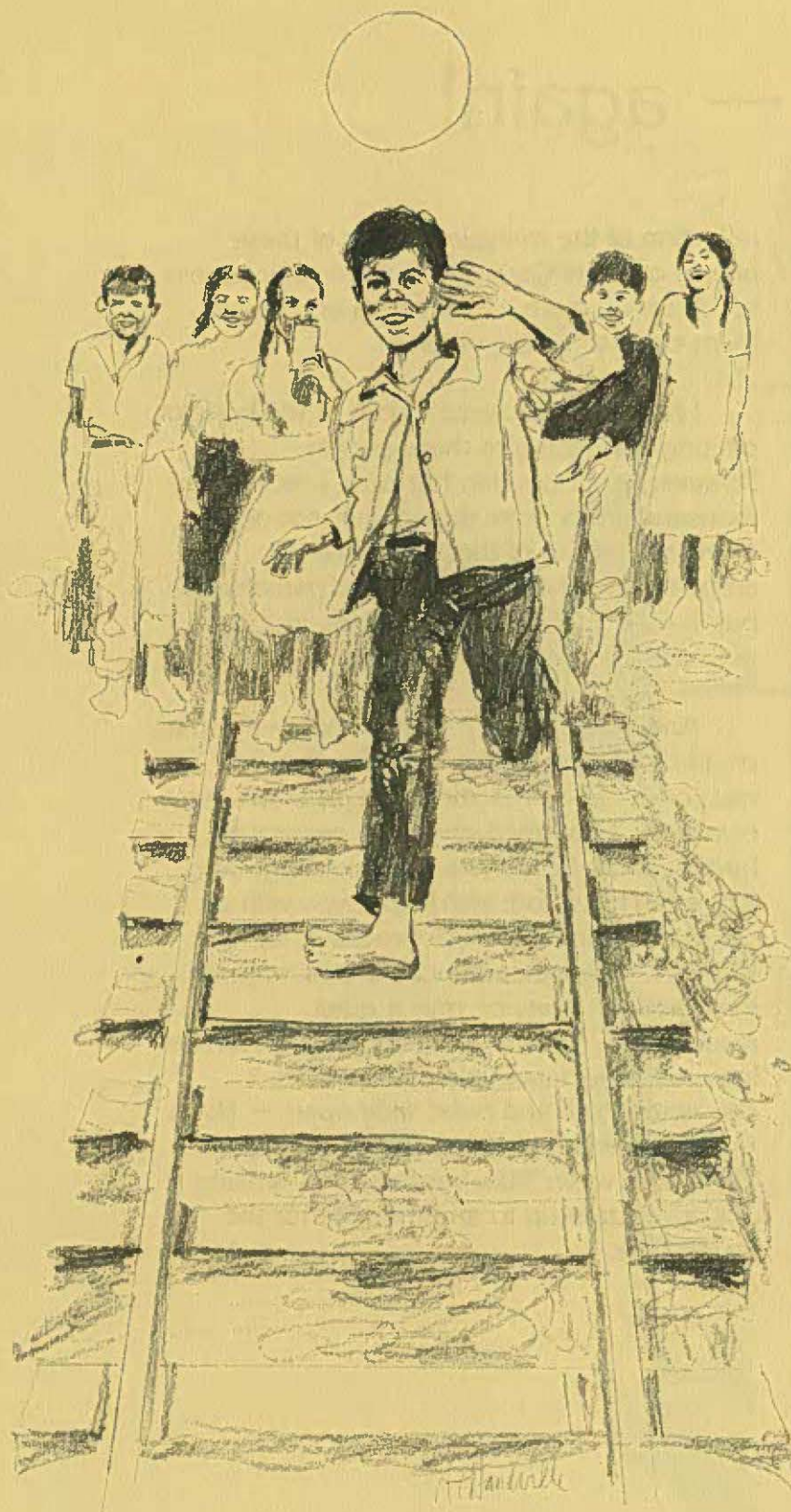
After the closing evening of the retreat, the entire packed congregation came up immediately to give me one of those famous Latin *abrazos*, to thank me and to wish me well. And there, in the middle of the crowd, submerged and almost crushed, his glasses dangling to the left and almost falling — but still smiling — was my little friend, Javier. After much shoving and pushing (not his; he merely moved along with the tide!), Javier reached the bottom stairs of the altar where I was standing and held up his tiny arms. I bent down to embrace him and receive his kiss. I think he was about to cry. About five minutes later, out of nowhere, Javier came up again. Before the evening was over, he had managed to wiggle his way through the crowd to give me a loving goodbye four times!

I doubt that this youngster was hungry for affection. I had visited his family and found everyone to be very *cariñoso* or warm and loving, and they were most expressive in their sentiments. Actually, Javier was merely a

reflection of the marvelous spirit of these people of Santa Cecilia, of a certain uniqueness which unites them to the parish and draws them close to one another.

I had come to Santa Cecilia in the hope of offering something to these people. However, as is so often the case, I received a thousand times more than I gave, not only in my awareness of their spirit and my admiration for their devotional and parochial life, but in their spontaneous affection, in their gratitude and genuine friendship.

And that's where it is, you know — in the people. How very much they give the missionary. How much they have given me in my own work. How often one finds generous, humble and affectionate human beings who make you feel good; who inspire you with a sense of being needed, appreciated and loved. At times, their affection, their warmth, their gratitude may be only a quiet reassurance, a silent understanding, an almost imperceptible, intangible oneness. Or, it can outdo itself and burst wide open — like it did that evening at Santa Cecilia in Bogotá, Colombia, when little, bespectacled, smiling Javier reached up to embrace me for the fourth time.



Children are great missionaries. They have a wonderful spirit about them — an enthusiasm, an eagerness to be of service. They have certainly been a help to me as a missionary, as well as a delight. I particularly recall how they came to my rescue on one of my first mission trips.

I'll be back soon, Pepe

I was in Cochabamba, Bolivia, when I received word that our Padres in *el oriente*, the eastern, jungle-like section of the country close to the Brazilian border, were badly in need of help for Holy Week. I traveled to the town of Cotoca and from there rode a small railcar to a settlement called Puerto Pailas. Arriving at 2:30 in the afternoon, I started walking slowly through the sleepy town. Suddenly, out of nowhere, a young lad came running up to me.

"Padre, buenas tardes. Bienvenido! (Good afternoon, Padre. Welcome!) What's your name?"

"Ricardo. What's yours?"

"José, but everyone calls me Pepe."

He grabbed me by the hand and took my small bag. "Come on," he said, "I'll take you to the church."

After a short walk — almost a skip — we came upon a large, barn-like building.

"Here we are, Padre. This is it."

The two of us pushed aside the heavy door and went inside. The church was very roomy — and very empty! I went up front to try the sacristy door. It was locked.

"Wait here, Padre. I know the lady who has charge of the keys."

Pepe rushed out of the church and I began to inspect the surroundings. Over against the wall, I saw what looked like a huge packing crate covered with a dusty, worn-out canvas. It turned out to be an organ (of sorts) and I began to finger it, dusting off the keys as I "played." The music drew a crowd of children, from tots

to teenagers, all curious to discover who was playing and to get a look at the stranger and introduce themselves.

"Buenas tardes, Padre. Bienvenido! We're glad you're here. There are a lot of people who have been waiting for you to come. You're going to get a lot of work!"

It wasn't long before I realized how right they were. From early morning until late at night, I had blessings, baptisms, confessions and the entire services of Holy Week. Thank God for the children; they took charge!

Jorge, about 10 years old, volunteered to take care of the bells to call people to the services. He was so conscientious that for almost two hours before every function, at 15-minute intervals, he kept asking, "Shall I ring them now, Padre?" When I gave him some coins for his help, he rushed out to buy a few small loaves of bread — and brought them back to me.

"Here, Padre. I notice you haven't eaten yet. You must be hungry."

The music was provided by Rosita, a girl of 14 or 15. She knew that she couldn't play well, or sing, and the Holy Week services were a mystery to her. But that didn't bother her in the least. I won't say that she was great, but she certainly put on a good show.

The Vigil of Easter, celebrating the "Light of

Christ," was held in total darkness! I had told little Pancho to turn out the lights at a sign from me and put them on again when I gave the word. He turned them off right on signal, but when I whispered to turn them on again, he yelled out:

"I can't turn them on! The motor went off!"

We stumbled in candleglow for the rest of the service, praising this "Night of Light."

The altar boys were ready and willing for anything, at anytime. Tiny Santos couldn't find a cassock to fit his small, skinny frame so he slipped off his belt and used it for a cord under the surplice. He tripped two or three times, almost lost his pants once, but was always smiling even at the end of a two-hour service. When I gave him some change for his help, he handed it back to me. "I want to buy a Mass," he said.

Many of the children came early and stayed late. They were praying (at least, those who could keep their eyes open) until it was time to lock the church. And I found them waiting for me when I opened the doors in the morning.

Soon it was time for me to leave Puerto Pailas and my lovable children — my missionaries.

Little Pepe was the first one to come around, just as he had been the first to meet me when I arrived. He wanted to show me the way again — this time, in the opposite

direction. Pancho was there, and Rosita and Jorge the bell ringer, and Santos who ran to greet me so swiftly I could hardly believe it was the same lad who tripped all over his cassock at that famous evening service a few days ago. And there were a whole bunch of other little boys and girls, everyone talking at once. We embraced . . . I received a lot of kisses . . . the railcar began to move slowly down the track . . . the children were running beside me. Finally, the distance lengthened. As I waved a final goodbye, I heard little Pepe shout:

"When will you be back, Padre?"

"Soon . . . very soon"

But it was more a wish than a promise, for I knew that within the week I would be returning to my mission work in Peru — and I have never returned. That is, not in person. In spirit, in love, in the joyful, grateful recall of so many wonderful children — my fellow missionaries — I shall always return. In fact, I have never really left.

A walk among the trees

The first thing I noticed when I stepped
out of the car was the smell of
fresh earth and the sound of
birds chirping in the distance.
The air was cool and crisp, a
welcome change from the heat of
the city. I took a deep breath,
savoring the scent of pine and
oak. The trees were tall and
majestic, their leaves a vibrant
green. I walked slowly, taking
in the beauty of the forest.
The path was well-trodden and
led me deeper into the woods.
I saw a squirrel scurrying
across the path, its tail bushy
and black. A deer stood
gracefully in the distance,
its eyes fixed on me. The
forest was alive with the sounds
of nature, a symphony of
life and growth.

I had heard that the forest was
beautiful, but I didn't realize
how truly magical it was. The
trees were so tall and old, their
trunks gnarled and twisted.
The sunlight filtered through the
leaves, creating a dappled pattern
on the ground. I felt a sense
of peace and tranquility that I
had never experienced before.
The forest was a world of its
own, a place where time seemed
to stand still. I walked on,
my mind filled with thoughts
of nature's beauty and the
wonders of the natural world.
The forest was a treasure, a
place where I could escape the
noise and stress of the city and
find a moment of peace and
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Have you ever walked among lepers? That doesn't sound like the most exciting or easy thing to do, does it. Well, I was among lepers yesterday and it was an enlightening experience. I must admit, I wasn't exactly elated

or enthusiastic about the prospect of such an encounter. I'm afraid my missionary spirit, in this regard, lacks that extraordinary depth of love and sacrifice which characterized the famous Damian of Molokai; a spirit which

A walk among lepers

continues to inspire many devoted religious who work here among lepers in the vast "Green Hell," at the headwaters of the Amazon.

I had no idea that being among lepers could prove to be so rich and rewarding — that is, until my visit of yesterday. In the interesting Malambo district of Lima, the oldest part of the city, a leprosarium lies near the bank of the Rimac River — quite hidden, little known, seldom visited. It was formerly a clinic for smallpox and bubonic fever until about 20 years ago, when it was converted into a sanitarium for the treatment of those afflicted with leprosy. Right now, there are about 40 lepers interned here, both men and women, their ages varying from 17 to 60. The vast majority come from the northeastern jungle section of Peru near the Brazilian border.

I was surprised (very pleasantly so) to discover a great spirit, good humor and an easy, conversational manner about these patients. At the same time, I couldn't help admiring the order and cleanliness with which these lepers take care of the hallways, the small garden, their rooms. The women of the leprosarium are responsible for the cooking and busy themselves in needlework and dressmaking. The men cultivate a small farm and try to keep the place in good condition and constant repair.

When I knocked at the door of the leprosarium, I was met by a very friendly miss in her late teens.

"Good morning. I'm Padre Ricardo. I'd like to visit for a while if I may."

"*Como no.* (Of course.) My name is Rosita. If you wish, I will show you around."

Rosita and I passed from hallway to hallway, room to room, as my gracious guide explained how the sanitarium functioned and introduced me to many of the patients. I imagined she must have been working there for some time.

"You seem to like this work, Rosita. How long have you been here?"

"Yes, I like it here. It's the only real home I've ever known. I'm also a leper, as you may have guessed. (I hadn't!) My parents brought me here from Iquitos when I was four years old."

As I prepared to take leave of Rosita and of my new-found friends, we embraced and everyone thanked me for my visit, insisting that I return. My own thanks to them seemed rather feeble and insufficient. It was difficult to express the gratitude I felt for such a memorable visit.

On my way home, I thought how the word "leper" had suddenly taken on a new meaning, a new imagery. It was a spirit of kindness and good will, an atmosphere of tranquility and resignation and easiness. It was gracious affability — and a girl named Rosita.



Today is the birthday of a very dear friend of mine and I'd like you to meet her. She passed away several years ago but it seems as though she is still around, and on this particular occasion many nostalgic recollections come to mind.

The last birthday I celebrated with Pastora, she was ushering in her 89th year. This young lady was suffering from diabetes and high blood pressure and had to go easy on the sugar so unfortunately (for me!) there was no cake to add extra sweetness to the day.

The last birthday with Pastora

Have you ever heard the name "Pastora" before? There are a lot of *pastoras* in the hill country of Peru, because the word means "shepherdess." But this kindly woman is the only one I've ever known who was christened Pastora. (When one recalls how Christ often referred to Himself as the *Buen Pastor* or "Good Shepherd," the name takes on added significance and beauty.)

One day my curiosity got the best of me and I asked Pastora how she happened to be christened with that name.

"My mother was a hearty woman," she recalled, "and a bit more headstrong than prudent. She was almost in her ninth month with me and still insisted on working in the fields around our pueblo of Yungay. One late afternoon in early December she was walking over the grassy terrain when, suddenly, she knew I was coming! Quickly, Mother rushed over to a nearby hut and there a young shepherd lady helped to put her at ease and acted as mid-wife.

"Mother wanted to reward the kindness of this woman. She felt that the best way to thank her, and to honor the memory of that event, was to have me bear her name — not her real name, but what she was and what she meant. So mother had me baptized Pastora, or Shepherdess."

There were many other things quite special about Pastora besides her name. For one, she did an excellent job of rearing a

dozen children — not a record, I know, but certainly above average.

I first came to know Pastora about two months after arriving at my new assignment in Lima. She lived only a few blocks from our parish church and received Communion daily at the 6:30 a.m. Mass I offered. I can still remember the day I returned to the parish after a few weeks absence and was surprised to hear Pastora say to me:

"Padre, we're glad to see you back. We've missed you."

I was still new to the parish and felt that I was, as yet, little more than a name there. Pastora suddenly made me feel quite at home — even necessary and missed. It was an encouragement which came at a very good time.

Gradually, Pastora's health began to fail. She was confined to her home and placed under the solicitous care of her two unmarried children, Oscar and Esperanza. Soon, I began to visit the enfeebled woman almost daily. I would bring her Communion and then linger a moment to enjoy a cup of coffee and a chat before rushing back to my work.

As I reflect upon that last birthday with Pastora, I recall saying to her:

"Pastora, you should be very proud of your

years. You've certainly lived them well."

"I hope so, Padre," she replied. "You know, we have a very good refrain as regards age: '*La edad no es llevarla, sino saberla llevar*.'" (It's not so important how many years you carry, but how you carry the years.)

"Pastora," I continued, "we don't have a birthday cake or candles for you to blow out and make a wish, but you're still allowed a very special favor on your birthday. Tell me, what would you like most to receive?"

"All I ask is the grace to bear well the time God chooses to allow me. Were it possible, I would like to embrace once again, before I die, all my beloved relatives — my dear children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren in Yungay. How I wish I could return there and feel, once more, the enchantment of that beautiful valley and the warmth of my unforgettable home which contains so many memories, so much happiness."

Who would have imagined, at that time, that this 89-year-old lady, praying but for the slightest extension of life, would actually outlive every one of those "beloved relatives" — children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren of Yungay. Less than one year after that 89th birthday, every one of Pastora's family in Yungay was dead, from the infants to the elderly.

On May 31, 1970, an earthquake shook the *Callejón de Huaylas* (Huaylas Valley), wherein lay the pueblo of Yungay. It rocked

against the imposing, snow-capped peaks of *El Huascarán*, which guarded majestically the valley below, and a torrential, savage avalanche of mud, ice and stone raced over those same fields where Pastora was born to inundate entirely — obliterate completely from the map — the entire pueblo of Yungay, adding the family of Pastora to a total loss in the valley of 60,000 deaths and 800,000 homeless.

Pastora herself died only a few months later, her death quickened by the shock and sorrow of this tragedy. Up to the final moment of her life, she knew how to "carry the years well." She was a joy and an inspiration and I ask her, especially on this her birthday, to help this missionary, whom she encouraged with her love and inspired with her friendship, to learn, also, how to "carry the years well."

A Spatter for Mars

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“What do you want for Christmas?”

How often do you hear that question asked during the final weeks of this month of December, especially when there are a lot of children around.

And believe me, there are a lot of children around this parish of ours with its 36,000 faithful. But so many of them are dirt poor that I'm usually afraid even to ask that question. Or rather, it's actually not necessary. A mere glance at the home conditions of these youngsters and the absolute nothingness which surrounds them immediately proves to me that the answer is “everything” or “anything”!

Well, I'm not about to take the place of Santa Claus (*Papá Noel*, as he is called here), and work a kind of magic for these impoverished ones. But Christmas is a good opportunity to reflect a bit of Christ's love for the poor with something of a special visit and a few simple gifts. And that's what I was

A sparkler for Maria

doing last night. Together with a small group of three men and their wives, I made the rounds for a couple of hours.

On our last visit we came upon a family of nine huddled together in a small, darkened room; so dark, in fact, that only through the dim light of a kerosene lamp we brought along were we able to distinguish just how many were actually in the room. After about 15 minutes of visiting, and following the distribution of a good supply of foodstuffs, we singled out tiny 5-year-old Maria, standing shyly in the corner, and asked her (foolishly, I suppose), "What would you like for Christmas?"

Maria's beautiful dark eyes flashed in the reflection of the lamplight as she smiled pleasantly and declared without a moment's hesitation, "A sparkler."

A sparkler! I said to myself. What a crazy thing to ask for! This little miss doesn't even have a decent pair of shoes nor a change for her tattered dress. I'm sure she's never enjoyed the luxury of the simplest toy or the tiniest doll. And she wants a sparkler! She's passed over all the 1001 gifts she might well have preferred and enjoyed or the numerous articles of clothing she is so desperately in need of, and has asked for only one humble, inexpensive thing. A sparkler!

I couldn't get this idea out of my mind. I couldn't imagine why this poor little girl should so immediately ask for a sparkler. And then, slowly, I began to see much reason, much

infantile, innocent wisdom behind this wish of Maria. Surrounded by darkness, almost hiding from herself and from life outside, she wanted to see, to feel, to touch — to delight in! — a dazzling, an electrifying moment of light. Desperately, Maria wanted something to brighten the darkest corners of the room; to entertain and enlighten her big brown eyes; to give her a momentary sense of brightness and beauty and life.

Maria, perhaps you have the right idea after all; indeed, the best answer possible. What more perfect gift could one ask for than the magic, the miracle of light. And, when you think of it, isn't that what Christmas is really all about? It's a "Story of Light." The recounting of a moment in history when another Maria offered Light to a darkened room, a darkened night, in order to bring brightness and beauty and life. It's the birth of Him who was to declare, "I am the Light of the world," and who came to brighten the darkness of men's lives, to enrich them with a blessing more valuable and more lasting than anything material; to spread a "dazzling something" over their shadows and their sufferings — a "sparkling light" as a message of hope and happiness and peace.

Ah, little Maria! How well you knew what you wanted. How much wiser you were than I. How can I ever forget you, Maria, and your sparkler. I see your tiny, smiling face and your eyes flashing in the lamplight whenever I hear someone ask: "What do you want for Christmas?"



I returned home late yesterday afternoon and was told that someone had been waiting for me for more than two hours. When I entered the office, I found a young Indian

girl, half-dozing in her chair.

"Buenas tardes. I'm sorry you've had to wait so long. If I had known you were coming, I

Those afternoon *muchacha* classes

would have tried to return much earlier. It's almost 2:30; have you had any lunch yet?"

"No, Padre. I didn't want to leave for fear I would miss you."

"Well, come on; let's have a glass of milk and a sandwich. We'll both feel better while we visit."

As we munched and drank, I found out a few things about this shy, soft-spoken miss. Her name is Delfina. She's 24 years old and comes from a small pueblo in the southern mountain terrain around Andahuaylas. Delfina arrived in Lima a few months ago to work as a domestic or *muchacha*, as they are called. Her problem of the moment had nothing to do with this job, her family, her difficulty in adjustment, or the like. Although baptized a Catholic, Delfina had been given no religious instruction whatsoever, nor had she ever received the Sacraments. There just aren't enough priests or religious up there to attend to all the spiritual needs of the people, and Delfina wanted to know more about her faith and to receive Holy Communion. Fortunately, I had initiated an afternoon instruction class for *muchachas*, and so, a few hours later, Delfina was sitting in front of me, smilingly attentive.

Undoubtedly, the desire of this woman to become better educated in her faith and to receive the Sacraments was encouraging. However, this is not unusual for the Indian girls from the mountains. Every month I begin a new class of instructions and every month there

is always a fairly good number enrolled. It is not always the easiest thing in the world to get across my "profound" ideas. It takes much patience and understanding. Asunta, for example, just sits there smiling all the while I'm talking. (I'm sure it's a sign of approval!) She has the same answer for every question: "Love God and love your neighbor." Certainly Asunta has the right idea and I definitely can't fault this dark-eyed, pigtailed girl for synthesizing the essence of all religion. However, it would be nice — just once or twice — to hear her enunciate a few of the other things I try to teach her!

Another young Indian lass, Julia, was not my prize graduate by any means. Last month, when her group was supposed to receive their First Holy Communion, she anticipated the moment and, approaching the sanctuary, knelt on the bottom step of the altar soon after the Pastor had begun the Mass. Not a little distracted, Father stopped and asked Julia what she wanted.

"I've come to receive CONFIRMATION."

The Pastor didn't recognize Julia as one of my students so he inquired who had instructed her "so well." The one thing Julia didn't forget was my name!

But it's a great experience, and girls like Delfina, Asunta and Julia show much good will. They make it all worth the effort on my part. Just as for Delfina, it was worth the long wait yesterday afternoon.



The courteous last wish of Esther

Among the people of Latin America one frequently finds a natural or ingrained courtesy. I'm aware, of course, that this politeness may often be merely a matter of custom and not quite as sincere as it appears. However, my purpose in writing this morning is not to open up a discussion about Latin manners or to make a comparison between cultures and customs. I would merely like to share with you something related to this imbued sense of courtesy — something rather amusing and quite touching.

First of all, let me explain what I mean about those exterior modes of courtesy.

A man may come into the parish office to speak about a problem or to arrange for a wedding, baptism, etc. and remain standing there in front of you for the entire length of the conversation unless you have the courtesy to ask him to sit down. Likewise, one is never supposed to rush into the business of the day without a greeting, like a simple "*Buenos Dias!*" or "Good Morning!" How often I have immediately blurted out what I wanted to say or what was bothering me, and the person to whom I was speaking (the victim of my monologue) would listen patiently and quietly. When I was finished, he would begin by saying, "*Buenos dias, Padre!*" I had forgotten to preface my remarks with a greeting.

In a reunion or a fiesta, one seldom lifts a glass to drink without first saying, "*Salud!*" (Good health!) to everyone. The same wish

of *salud* can often be heard after every sneeze you make — no matter how many times!

Well, yesterday, I was summoned to the bedside of my old black friend, Esther. For months now, I have been attending her, watching her progressive, painful decline. When I entered the room, I could hear that unmistakable wheezing sound, or death rattle, which told me that she was definitely on the way out.

As I approached Esther, I quickly reached for my oil stocks and immediately began to anoint her on the forehead. Just then (it may have been because of the dampness of this cellar-like room) I felt a sudden chill and I sneezed! Poor Esther, breathing her last, minutes away from her departure out of this life, couldn't hold back her ingrained, natural, automatic response — her courteous reply to such an action. Without moving her head in the least, nor with the tiniest flutter of her eyelids, the dying woman whispered, in an enfeebled, half-audible voice, "*Salud, Padre!*"

I'm sure that this courteous wish of Esther was the very last thing she ever said on this earth! I'm also quite convinced that she is enjoying much more good health now than I could hope for, or be wished, this side of the grave.



Last Sunday afternoon I went out to the large orphanage by the sea, run by the Sisters of Charity. There I visited my little friend, Javier, and passed many happy moments strolling and conversing. Javier is 8 years old;

A borrowed visit

his young mother, Elizabeth, is a simple Indian woman abandoned several years ago by the father of her three children. The mere pittance she earns by washing and cooking is hardly enough to support all of them, so Elizabeth found it necessary to place Javier in the orphanage while she remains at home with her two smaller ones.

Despite her own poverty and countless worries, this short, squatty woman with the engaging smile has a fine spirit. She is forever attendant upon the needs of others and tries to help them whenever possible.

With the beginning of the school year a few weeks ago, I helped Elizabeth purchase a new uniform for her younger son. The following day she came to the parish with the old uniform of her boy. It had been laboriously cleaned and pressed.

"Maybe it will serve for some other poor person who has absolutely nothing," she said.

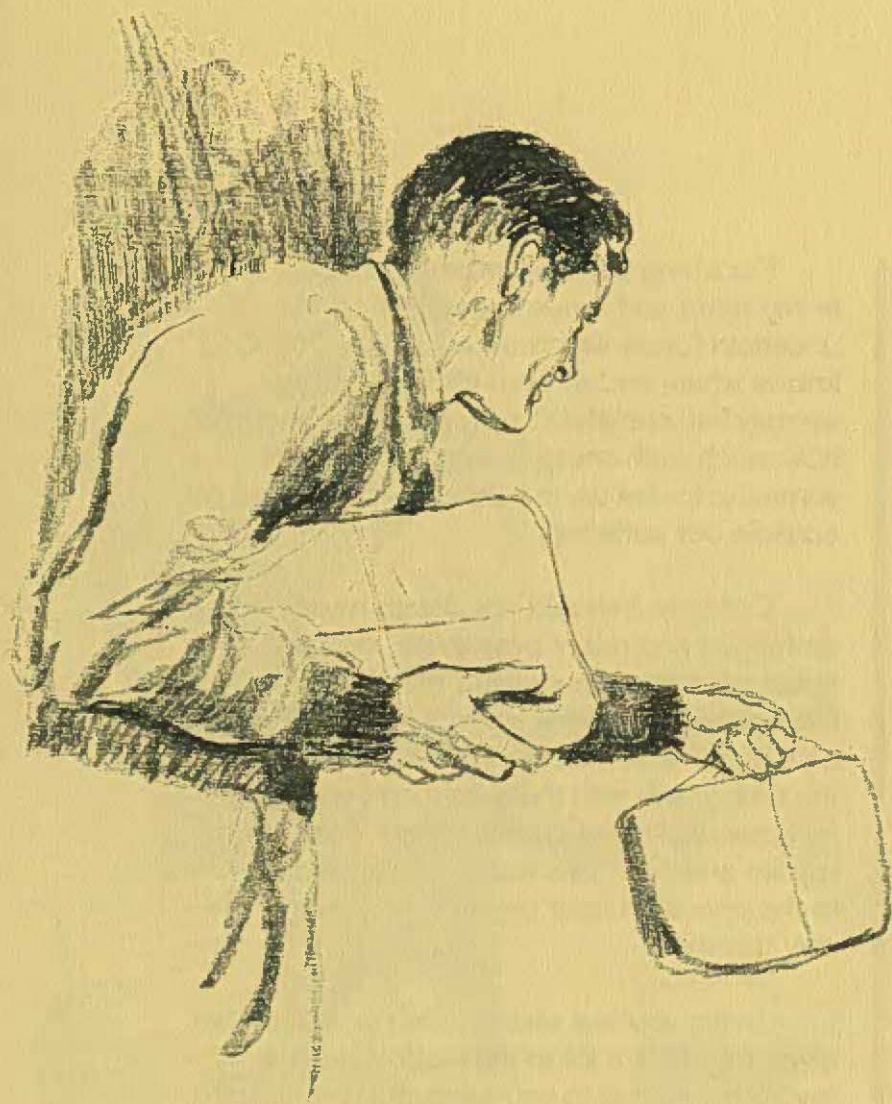
A few days after my visit to Javier, Elizabeth came to see me. She was smiling all over and couldn't wait to tell me how happy I had made her little boy by my visit to the orphanage.

"You know what Javier said Padre? He wanted me to tell you that your visit was only a borrowed one. 'I'm going to pay Padre Ricardo back,' he said, 'when he himself is alone, or sick, or old.' "

For a long time, that promise of Javier stuck in my mind and made me reflect on the uncertain future which awaits us all. Only God knows when, and in what circumstances, we may find ourselves at any given moment and how much each one of us may have need of someone to visit us, to lighten our loneliness, to console our suffering.

Certainly, I should not detain myself in prolonged and rather pessimistic thoughts about what the years ahead may bring me. Nevertheless, perhaps a simple reflection on that unknown future may help me to ransom the time wisely with that Christian concern for others which enriches the present moment of my life and promises honor and benediction to the uncertain hour beyond — or even at the very threshold!

Javier, you're a wise little fellow, and you've given me quite a lot to think about. I hope my borrowed visit to you will continue to inspire and encourage me as a missionary to show a little more personal interest in the abandoned and the lonely, the forgotten and those who suffer at my side. May it enable me to understand them better, to help them more, to accompany them with greater frequency through many such "borrowed visits" which a Divine Visitor, some glorious day, will pay me back a hundredfold.



"Muchas gracias! Que bueno es usted, Padre!" (Many thanks! How good you are, Padre!) I just stood there smiling rather sheepishly and feeling embarrassed. Actually, I had done very little, yet here I was getting all the thanks and praise. How I wanted to tell this grateful, jubilant woman where this gift had come from and who really deserved the credit. Unfortunately, I couldn't. I was sworn to secrecy by a promise to the benefactor that she would remain anonymous. So now I was stealing the show, getting all the credit for my friend's generosity. A popular refrain came to my mind: *Ganando indulgencias con Ave Marias ajenas* (Gaining indulgences from someone else's Hail Marys).

It all started when I began visiting a crippled young man named Raul. A lad of 23 years, Raul has been bedridden since childhood. His tortured, twisted body has never left those stuffy quarters in the overcrowded alleyway which he shares with his devoted mother. When I first visited this young man, I was appalled that anyone could live in such surroundings. The walls were flimsily covered with huge patches of cardboard and the room was littered with all the personal belongings the two of them possessed in this world. It was kitchen, bedroom, living,

Telltale initials

dining — everything in one. Old newspapers were wrapped around the thin, worn mattress on which Raul has lain for so long, and a ragged loin cloth indifferently draped his weakened frame.

As the damp Lima winter began to bring its penetrating cold into this cardboard room, Raul's mother asked me if I could get a couple of heavy sheets for her son. I promised that she'd have them before the week was out. I didn't know how or where I would get those sheets, but I had some ideas.

A few days after this visit, my good friend Consuelo came to see me. I didn't waste any time making her a partner in this project.

"I need your help, Consuelo. How about getting me some sheets for a very poor family here in the parish. Nothing new, of course, but in good condition."

Consuelo reacted immediately. "I'll bring them tomorrow."

The following night Consuelo arrived with the sheets.

"They're not new," she apologized, "but they are in good condition and I'm sure they will serve."

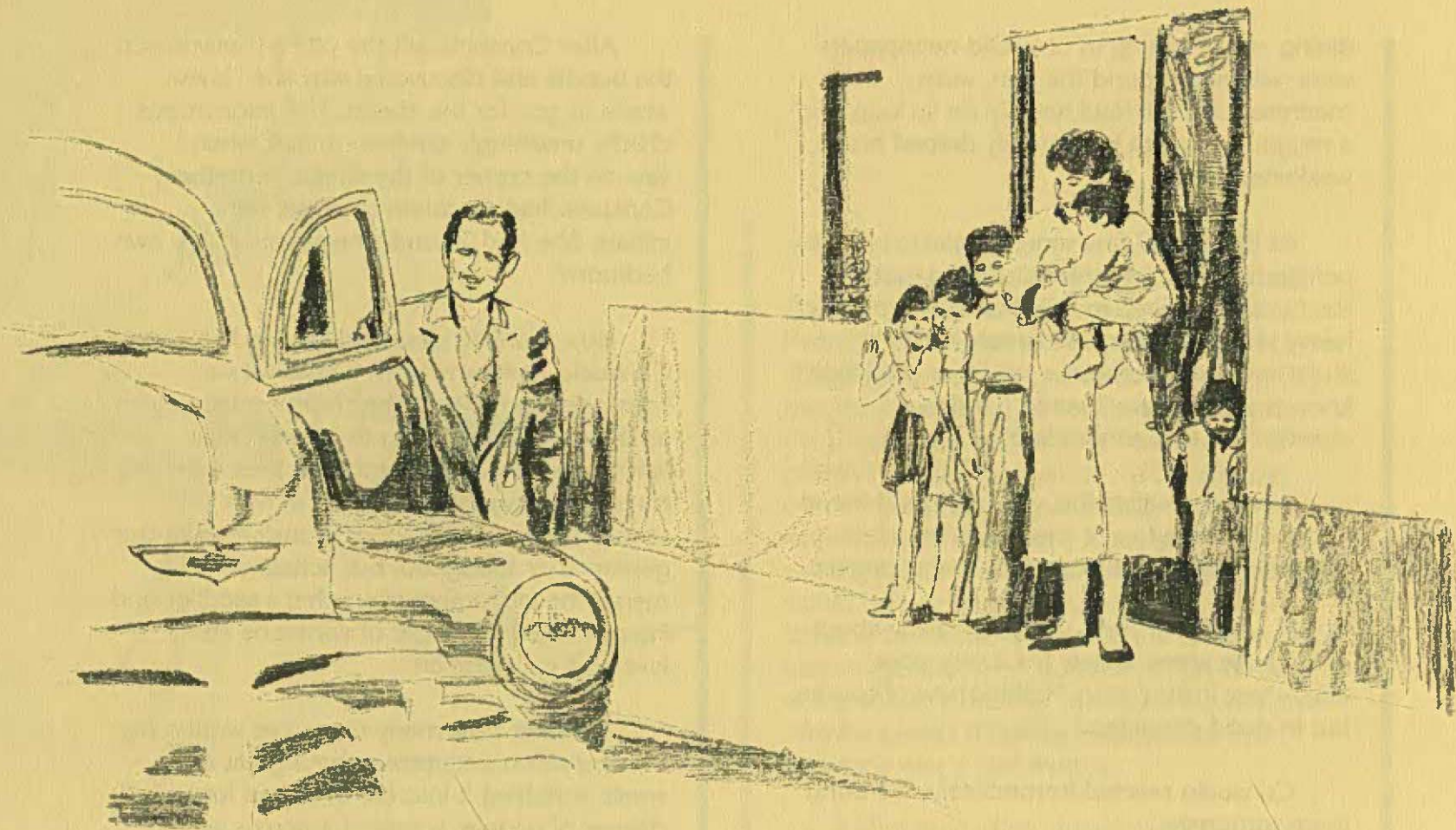
"Let me give you something for them."

"Oh, no, don't worry about it. I knew where to go for them. But please, Padre, do me a favor and don't let anyone know that I gave you these sheets. I don't want any praise or thanks. I'm just happy to do it."

After Consuelo left the office I unwrapped the bundle and discovered why she "knew where to go" for the sheets. Her anonymous charity unwittingly confessed itself when I saw on the corner of the sheets something Consuelo had forgotten to erase: her initials. She had "found" the sheets in her own bedroom!

How many kindhearted people like Consuelo make my work possible as a missionary. I am merely their representative, their ambassador, attempting to breathe their spirit, share their faith, manifest their concern. It's a humbling thing really — almost embarrassing — when one is considered kind or generous or thoughtful but actually is merely the instrument of another's sacrifice and interest, the messenger of someone else's love and compassion.

I wonder how many times I've written my own name on enterprises, both great and small; scribbled it into the lives and love of all classes of people; scrawled it across an infinite number of circumstances and situations of an everyday apostolate. I've been thanked and honored, praised and blessed. Yet, all the while, I know — only too well! — that the real signature which belongs there, the one God alone is capable of seeing, is that which bears someone else's initials — initials not meant to be seen but which can't be erased. Like those on the left-hand corner of the sheets which cover and comfort Raul at this moment.



I'm quite elated this morning as I write these lines. Several afternoons a week, and just about as many evenings, I make the rounds of our parish compound and come into contact with all kinds of people, the majority of whom are very poor, some actually in a near desperate state. I hear innumerable stories and listen to countless complaints as I try to understand and sympathize with all those

unpleasant circumstances which always leave so much unhappiness in their wake.

I can't possibly attend to all of these cases, nor even to a substantial number of them, and scarcely do I have many solutions. Perhaps I make a mistake, very often, by becoming just a bit too involved. Consequently, I find myself not only losing sleep from the

Francisco's secret of happiness

situation but even feeling a certain sense of guilt for my inability to offer some effective assistance.

Last night, however, it was a different story, and I returned to the parish quite pleased and very much at ease. It was all due to a middle-aged man named Francisco, a father of eight who struggles to earn a livelihood by working as a taxi driver from six in the morning until late in the evening. He somehow steers through the congested traffic of this capital city a rickety old jalopy that looks like a left-over from the late '30s; it seems to be held together with bailing wire and rubber bands.

Francisco and I talked for a long time last night and I became somewhat of an "expert" on the taxis here in Lima and on those who drive and ride them. As I went outside and prepared to return to the parish, my friend approached me and said quietly:

"Padre, I noticed you observing my home and family. As you could see, we don't have very much. But, I think we've got more than many other families around here and we're happy. My wife's not well-educated; in fact, she can't even read or write. She's a good woman, though, and very understanding. She knows I do the best I can."

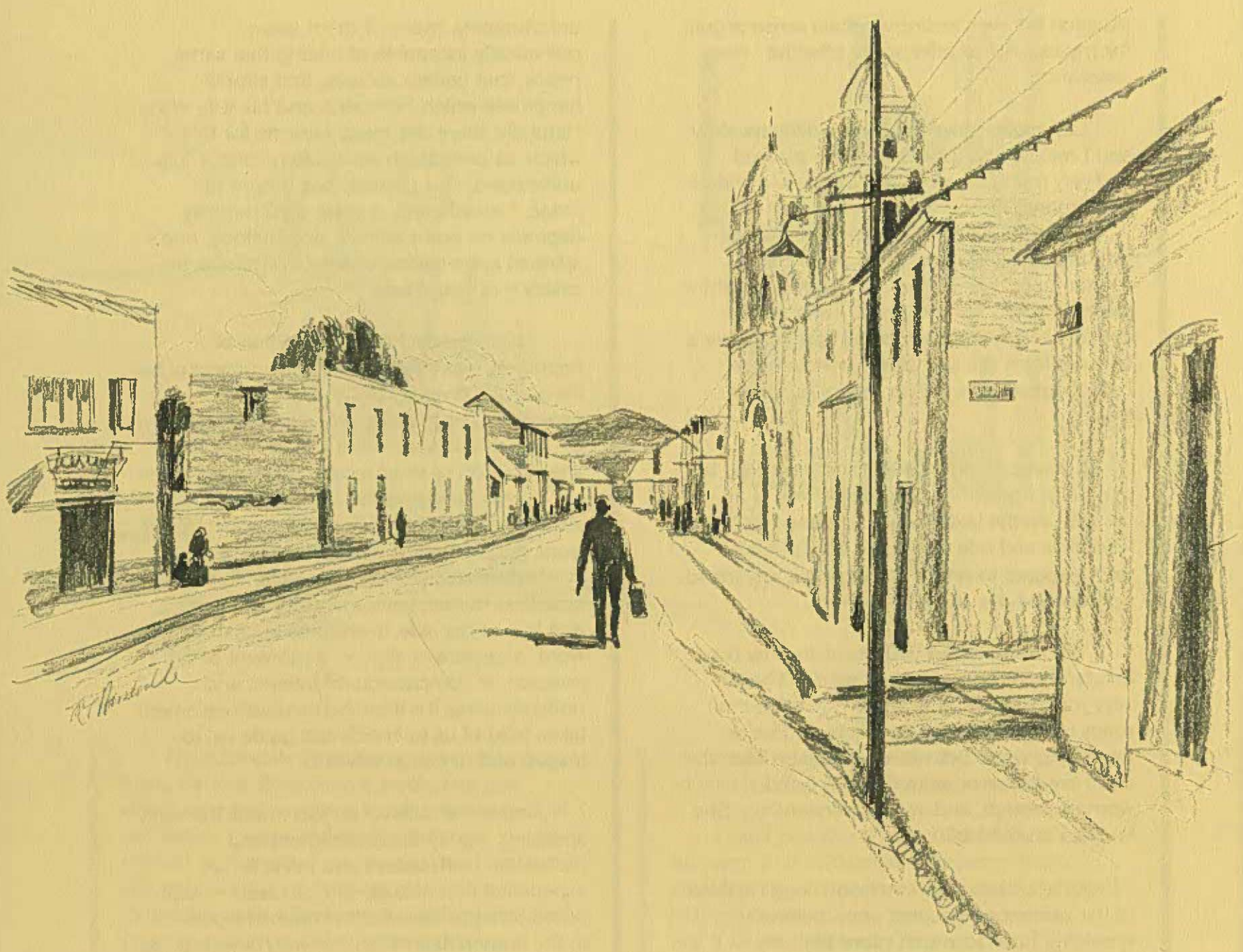
As I took leave of Francisco, I began to think of the numerous couples who, materially speaking, have so much more than my pleasant friend down the block. And yet,

unfortunately, many of them seem pathetically incapable of finding that same peace, that certain security, that simple happiness which Francisco and his wife enjoy. Naturally, there are many reasons for this which an outside observer often cannot fully understand, and scarcely has a right to judge. Nevertheless, a great deal certainly depends on one's attitude and outlook; one's spiritual appreciation of what constitutes the essence of happiness.

I suppose each one's definition of happiness is as different as the uniqueness of his life and the diversity of his desires. But, essentially, happiness is not so much something we find as it is something that finds us. It sneaks up on us when we are not looking; when we are not analyzing our unhappy state. It visits us quietly when we are distracted by our work, our profession, our responsibilities — or when we are involved with our family and with countless human beings who live and work and love at our side. It whispers to us through a word, a gesture, a sign — a moment of concern or compassion, of interest and understanding. It is then that this elusive element takes hold of us to enrich and guide us, to inspire and direct us onward.

And in the midst of all that would, humanly speaking, signify disappointment and disillusion, restlessness and infelicity, we experience that attitude of Francisco — that secret of happiness which so often whispers to the human heart in an everyday language, so simple it is seldom understood.

San Francisco's secret of happiness



R. H. H. H.

... and a missionary moves on

"How do you feel, Señora Elsa?"

"*Como cohete!*" (Like a rocket!)

Señora Elsa is way over 60 and a little too elderly to go to the moon. But her spirits were right up there with the planets yesterday afternoon; she was feeling better than she has for a long time.

What a contrast from the last time I saw her! That was several months ago when she came shuffling slowly, painfully into our Clinic complaining of all kinds of ills. Dirt poor and shabbily attired in an old, greyish-black dress, Elsa's spirits were down somewhere around her torn sandals. Immediately, Doctor Lidio Bardales gave the diminutive, stooped Señora a good examination and asked her some questions related to hygiene, diet and the like. He then supplied her with a few remedies, principally a large bottle of basic vitamins to supplement Elsa's poor nutritional routine. The grateful, gregarious woman returned twice a week, continued to take the vitamins and, gradually, began to perk up. Soon, she was smiling a lot more and even began to joke around. Yesterday, Elsa declared triumphantly that she felt "like a rocket"!

Certainly, these remedies, vitamins, and so forth didn't solve Elsa's real problem. Her social condition and family situation are too complicated and involved to be cured with a few pills. Nevertheless, this personal interest and attention gave Elsa a new lease on life

and much more enthusiasm for working out some effective solutions of her own.

We were able to start this Clinic for the poor of our Santa Rosa parish mainly through monthly contributions from the people themselves. When we opened it three years ago, several local doctors, like Lidio, offered to donate a few hours a week to the attendance of these needy ones. Likewise, they often accompany us on emergency calls through the *corralones*.

It is with and through such people like Lidio that a missionary is privileged to work. He appreciates their special talents and potentials and, offering his own ideas, energy and enthusiasm, collaborates with them toward a common goal. He acts as a catalyst to stimulate a movement and serve in its execution.

The apostolate of a missionary is essentially concerned with proclaiming the Gospel message of Jesus Christ as a means to a deeper spiritual awareness and an authentic human existence. How a missionary does this and, in the process, instills in his people a consciousness of their individual worth and their vitality as a Christian community, is as varied as the circumstances, needs and possibilities which characterize his particular commitment.

Some will find in a typical parish structure, such as that of Santa Rosa, an

excellent vehicle for the development and strengthening of a Christian community. Others will dedicate themselves exclusively to the training of future leaders, both lay and religious, as the foundation of a strong local church. Several will start cooperatives or direct human development programs in order to assure the needy and margined ones a more decent way of life. There will be those who will interest themselves in labor movements or in social action works which seek to promote a more just and equitable society. Many will become involved in educational and formative programs, while others may apply their skills toward particular needs in such fields as agriculture, farming, health, housing and mass media, or act as organizers and counselors among various youth and adult groups.

Whatever the particular direction and dedication through which his apostolate expresses itself, a missionary is forever conscious of the fact that he has come to serve and to learn as well as to guide and teach. He does not impose, but inspires; he listens more often than he speaks; he shares as generously as he receives.

Through such an exchange, a missionary comes to a clearer awareness of his own role and a deeper appreciation of the personal qualities and cultural values of those with whom his mission is concerned. He is as enriched by others as he is effective in their development.

A missionary is not seeking for himself a place in the sun; he is only interested in moving with others out of the shadows. He desires nothing more permanent than a remembrance in the hearts of his people. His main concern is not so much to be a leader as to direct others who eventually will replace him.

Once a missionary has fulfilled his particular commitment, whatever be its nature or length, he moves out and on to other peoples and needs, to future possibilities and promises.

But not without a certain emotional reluctance. Deep personal ties have been engendered among the people with whom the missionary has come to identify so closely in love, understanding and mutual endeavor. A bond has been formed which transcends cultures, customs and classes. Rather, it accepts and appreciates these differences as an enrichment of a newly-created unity of mind and spirit and purpose — a unity all the more significant and valuable in proportion to the diversity of which it is harmoniously composed.

And a missionary moves on, carrying with him all those whom he has loved and served and who have loved him in return. He goes with every Elsa and Lidio who has entered into and enriched his life. But he never really leaves.



A 50 *soles* bill is worth about one dollar at the time of this writing. But I have one whose value never changes and I wouldn't part with it for any price. Actually, it's more than a bill; there is a certain personality about it, a unique love story.

I short while ago, I was transferred to this southern Andean parish of *Nuestra Señora del Pilar* (Our Lady of the Pillar), here in Arequipa, 8,500 feet into the Andes. Arequipa is called *La Ciudad Blanca* (The

White City) because of the multiple constructions made of a white, porous lava stone called *sillar*, left buried under the city several hundred years ago with the eruption of Misti, the cone-shaped, snow-capped volcanic mountain which majestically dominates the entire surroundings of this rich, green valley.

After I had been in Arequipa for about a year I returned to Lima for a visit to the Santa Rosa Parish where I had formerly worked. There

A very special love story

I was greeted with a warmth and love unforgettably impressive; a manifestation which assured me of the deep gratitude of the people with whom I had spent eleven very happy and fruitful years.

Mingled with the many who came to call was an elderly, arthritic woman whom I had attended to almost weekly. I particularly recalled this lady, María Concepción, because I remember how difficult it was to understand her. She was extremely hard of hearing, often repeated herself, and spoke very slowly. There were times — I must confess — when I was anxious to get it over with and do what I considered “more important things.”

As this old woman, doubled over with her painful arthritis, shuffled toward me, her eyes filled with tears.

“Gracias, Padre.”

“For what, María?” I asked, a bit surprised.

“For all the time you received me and listened to me and helped me. I would like to give you something of value, a small personal remembrance, but I have nothing. Please, take this. Perhaps it will help you in your work.”

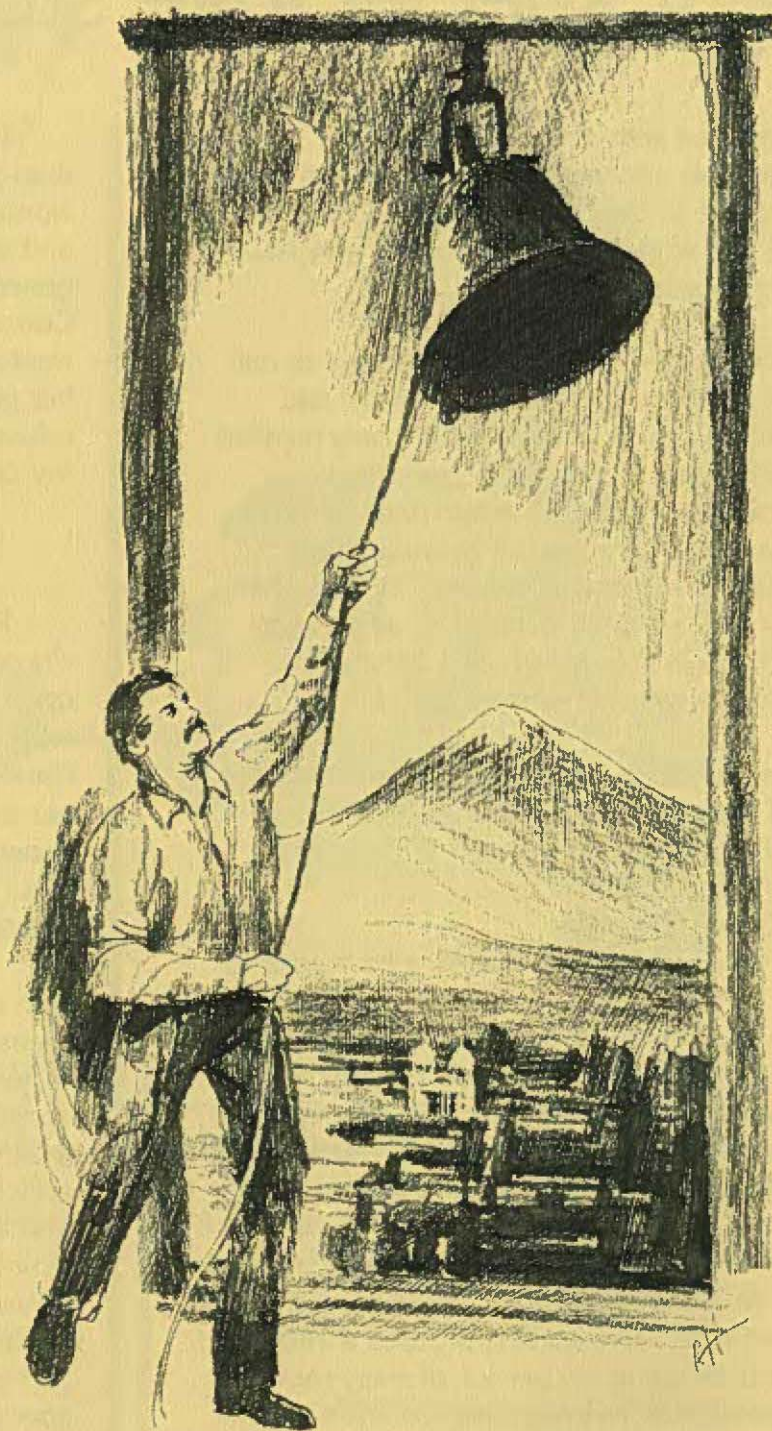
With that, María Concepción put her shaky, wrinkled hand into a well-worn purse, took out a 50 *soles* bill and pressed it into my hand. Begging my pardon at every moment for its smallness, its insignificance, she said the bill was merely “*un granito de arena*” (a grain of sand).

I knew only too well that this bill was more than just a “grain of sand” to this poor woman. It was the equivalent of a full day’s wage and she could scarcely afford to be so generous. And yet, I also knew that María Concepción wanted me to have it. She wanted to share what little she had as a token of her gratitude and love. Certainly I could not refuse such a gift nor did I intend to. I held on to my old friend’s hand and we then embraced.

“Muchas gracias, María.”

From that moment on, that 50 *soles* bill is my constant companion. Every time I come upon it, whether on purpose or accidentally, I see reflected the figure of my dear friend, María Concepción, her spirit of sacrifice, the depth of her love. I only pray that in my mission apostolate I may always be worthy of that love, that I might appreciate the significance of this simple but beautiful gesture.

In our agitated, daily life we are often wont to measure greatness and judge value by what is generally accepted as important or of considerable economic worth. Often, however, the truly valuable — that which inspires and enriches our lives and serves as a remembrance and a benediction — lies hidden in the simple, the humble, the less notable: a word, a gesture, a sacrifice — or perhaps merely a 50 *soles* bill, like this one with which I refuse to part and which continually recounts a very special love story between a missionary and a poor, old woman.



Gustavo and the midnight bells

"We've got to have bells for the Midnight Mass!"

Gustavo stood there squinting at me, slowly twisting his thick, black mustache. A gregarious, affable man with strong shoulders and a hefty frame, Gustavo is always on the move. He serves on innumerable committees and is forever into projects and plans of every conceivable nature. Many of his fantastic ideas never really get off the ground, but it's good to do a bit of daydreaming and wishful thinking with him.

Gustavo lives but a few blocks away in the barrio of Ferroviarios, and was part of our community here in Arequipa long before I arrived. In fact, he was already into things way back in the '40s when the Jesuit Fathers began this parish of *Nuestra Señora del Pilar*. Several years later, Gustavo was one of the founding fathers of the Parish Cooperative and served for a time as its president. He also headed a group of gentlemen called the *Caballeros del Pilar* who assist the parish in its liturgical functions and in its social apostolate.

Needless to say, with all his promoting, projects and participation, and with him but a stone's throw from the parish, Gustavo comes around almost every day, usually with some new idea in mind.

One of Gustavo's latest ideas concerned the possibility of doing something about the awful-looking tower of our church, left

unfinished for lack of funds when the building was completed in 1954. Through the years, the tower has been victim to all kinds of climatic onslaughts and not-a-few earthquakes and tremors. It gradually grew worse until it finally began to resemble the shell of the Coventry Cathedral after the German blitz. Gustavo and his *Caballeros del Pilar* agreed to cooperate in a fund-raising campaign and we began the work of construction.

The project was a bit complicated. We had to begin by tearing down completely the half-built shell of the tower, so precariously hanging there that the architect warned me, "Padre, another earthquake or even strong tremor and you're liable to find yourselves buried under a few feet of wood and cement!"

This has meant that we've had to remove the temporary bells which a huge beam of the tower was supporting, with a promise, of course, that they'll some day (God willing) be replaced. The absence of these bells has really bothered Gustavo. "It's just not a church," he insists, "unless you have bells!"

Last week, just a few days before Christmas, Gustavo claimed the bells were an absolute necessity.

"We've got to have bells for the Midnight Mass. It's a tradition to call people to the Christmas services!"

"I'm sorry Gustavo, but you'll have to go

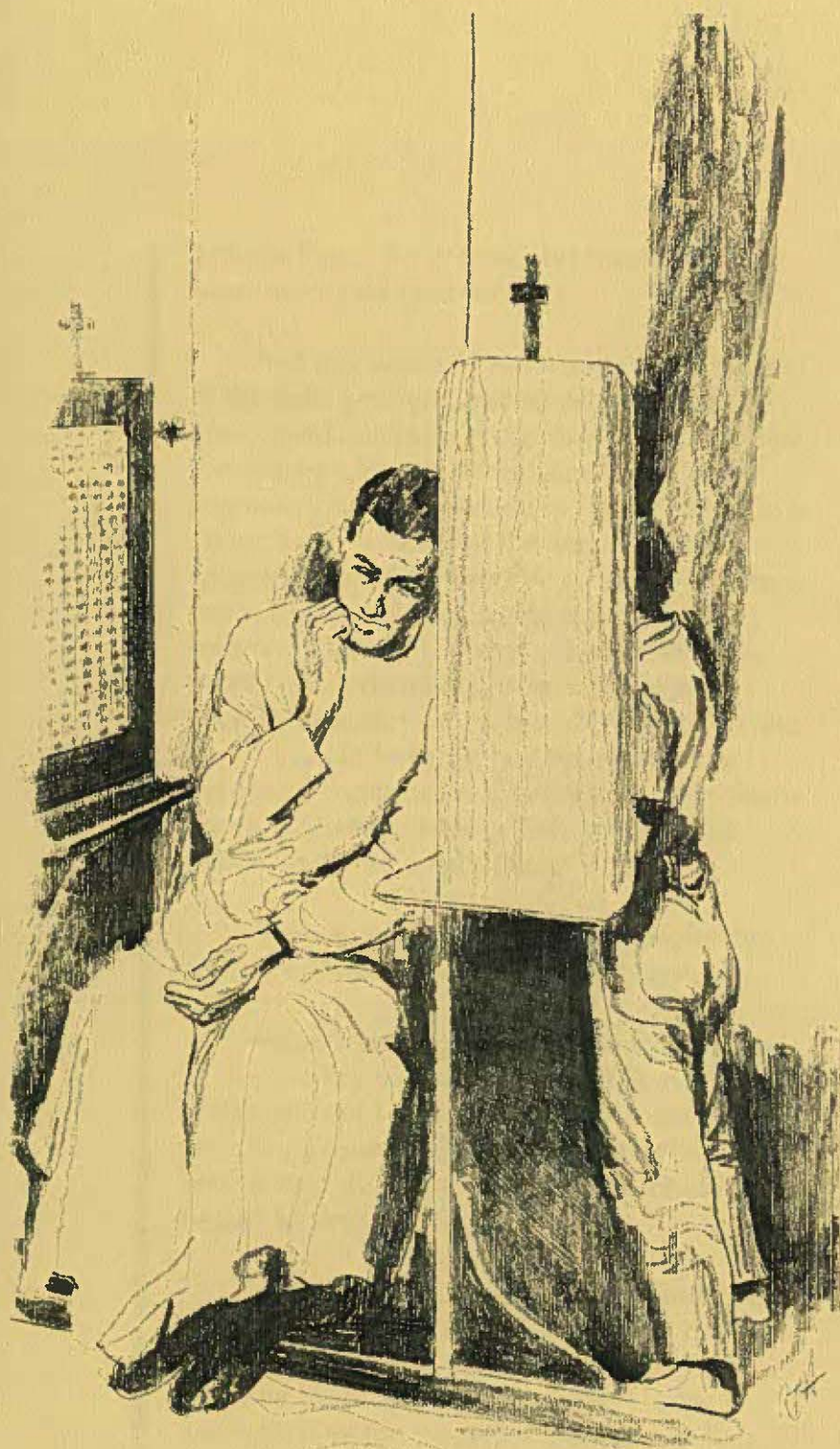
without them. Be patient and maybe we'll have new ones next year."

And that was it — no, it wasn't! The legend of the bells was not finished yet. Christmas Eve arrived and I was in the church preparing for the Midnight Mass. Suddenly, at 11:30, bells began to chime. (I should say, "ring;" chime is a bit too fancy a word for the way these bells sounded!) I couldn't believe it. Where did they come from? Quickly I made my way to the roof of the church. There, silhouetted in the moonlight and smiling broadly through his thick mustache, was my friend Gustavo. He had found the old bells we had removed from the tower, constructed a make-shift cross beam and was gleefully ringing them wildly to call people to the Midnight Mass.

"Here's your bells!" he yelled above the gongs, without ceasing to ring furiously.

We both had a good laugh and I went down to the sacristy to vest for Mass. The bells rang again at 11:45 and 11:55. There were a final few gongs exactly at midnight, just as I was proceeding down the aisle and the choir had begun to sing.

The church was packed — but guess who wasn't there? That's right, Gustavo! He had climbed down after the last gong and had returned home for a good sleep — after waking up all the neighborhood and calling everyone to Mass with his midnight bells!



"This is my last confession," the youngster said — and by the time we were finished I was so nervous I wished it were mine also!

Now, several days later, I'm much calmer and can even laugh about the incident. It all happened last week on Holy Thursday afternoon.

I was in the confessional box of our parish church of *Nuestra Señora del Pilar*, here in Arequipa — where I had been for hours! In fact, ever since Monday morning we had been hearing confessions morning, afternoon and evening. Holy Week is a most unique spiritual event in Peru. In addition to all the processions and liturgical functions which solemnize these final days of Lent, almost everyone feels obligated to fulfill a traditional religious practice by approaching the sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist. For some, this is a "one-shot deal," serving spiritually for the entire year. It is, likewise, a means of "proving" their faith and pleasing both God and their families.

The day I lost in the confessional

Undoubtedly, Holy Week is an exceptional time of grace and spiritual renewal, but after hundreds (literally, thousands!) of confessions, one is a bit groggy, tired and nervous. If the penitent can catch you at the lowest ebb, he may very possibly slip in just about anything, knowing that it will either pass unnoticed or find the confessor too exhausted to make the slightest comment or the gentlest reprimand.

That's the way I felt last Thursday. It was about 4:30 in the afternoon. I was worn out by the strain of a long day and looking forward to the Mass at 5:00, which would give me a breather of sorts and repair me for the evening confessions yet to come. I opened the tiny slide and, as is customary, greeted the penitent with: "*Ave Maria Purissima!*" (Hail, Immaculate Mary!) Normally, the penitent responds, "*Sin pecado concebida*" (Conceived without sin). But not this time! Here's the way it went:

"*Ave Maria Purissima!*"

"Huh?"

"*Ave Maria Purissima!*"

"Si."

"When was your last confession?"

"This is my last confession."

"No, I mean when did you go to confession last?"

"When the other priest was here."

"When was that?"

"When he heard my confession."

"I know that, but do you remember when that was?"

"No."

"Well, you've made your First Communion, haven't you?"

"When?"

"I don't know when but you did it, didn't you?"

"I did what?"

"You received Holy Communion."

"Yes."

"Did you go to confession for your First Communion?"

"Did I what?"

"Did you confess for your First Communion?"

"Yes."

"Have you gone to confession since then?"

"Since when?"

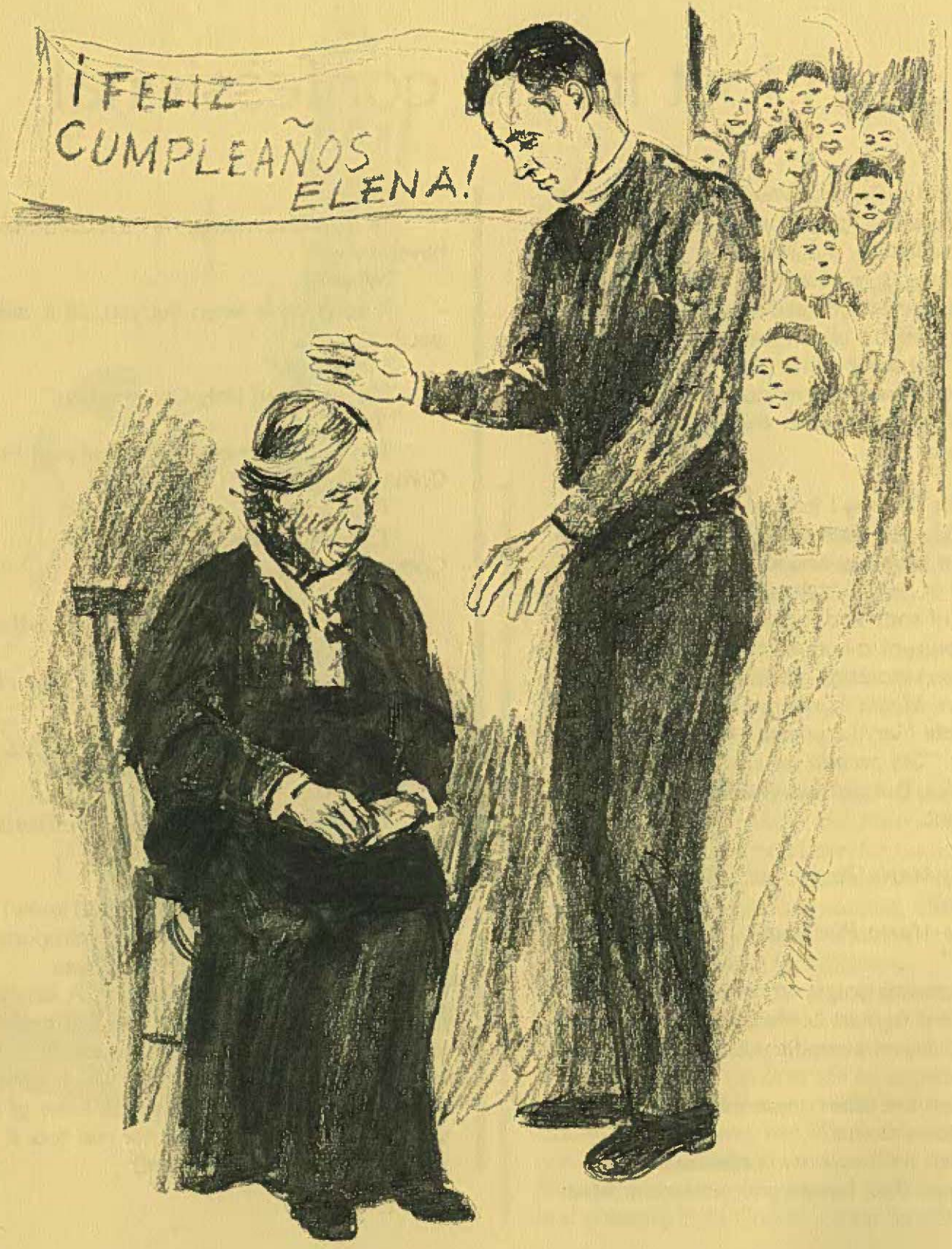
"Since you went to confession for your First Communion."

"No."

"Ah, well; then that was your last confession."

"No, that was my first confession. This is my last confession."

I was just about out of my mind! I know I was foolish to continue with such an unimportant and insignificant inquisition, but I was determined to win! It wasn't to be. A simple, humble little lad, uncomplicated and quite logical, beat me. And in the process he taught me a lesson in patience which I shall never forget. (Even though I took leave of my young penitent wishing that for me, too, it had been my last confession!)



Elena will remember all her life

Youth, we are told, is not entirely a time of life; it is a state of mind. If one's attitude is youthful, chronological winters are forever spring-like, and one may very well live to a ripe old age.

These thoughts on youth and how it is retained were particularly on my mind a few days ago as I celebrated a youthful 50-year birthday. They were given greater meaning and enrichment later on in the afternoon by a delightful experience.

I chose to commemorate the day by visiting a "young" Miss named Elena, a needy woman living in one of the small, dingy, one-room flats in the older sections of the city.

I had a very particular reason for choosing to share my birthday with Elena. Besides the fact that she is a special someone visited through our apostolate to the poor, the 27th of August is also her birthday — the only difference being that Elena began in 1877! She beat me into this world by 50 years.

I wasn't seeking consolation or encouragement by the comparison of Elena's 100 with my 50. Nevertheless, it was a great shot in the arm to witness the spirit, the life and bouncing vitality of this 100-year-old woman. It was like an assurance — at least, a certain promise — that with good health and the grace of God I still had a long way to go. If I could only capture some of the magic and mystique of Elena, that would definitely be a

very pleasant and rewarding walk.

About mid-morning, I arrived at Elena's doorway carrying my mass kit and a few extras for the celebration. A group of youngsters had already gathered to extend their love and best wishes to this diminutive, kindly-faced Matriarch of the barrio. After an exchange of greetings, I entered the room. Elena was sitting over in the corner with a child-like smile on her face. I went to her and we embraced and kissed, wishing each other a very "Happy Birthday"!

By this time, the small room was bulging with relatives and friends, tots and teenagers, all milling around the central figure of the day. Everyone was already in a festive mood and having a wonderful time — but no one showed it more than Elena. She was the center of attraction and attention, and she enjoyed it immensely. It was evident that I was definitely being upstaged — but it was worth it.

After 10 or 15 minutes, I began the Mass. During the service, Elena utterly amazed me by singing several liturgical pieces in Latin. Afterward, we all partook of a simple luncheon which the young girls had prepared. Between sandwiches and *Inca Cola*, Elena showed off with glee and unabashed pride, as she gave command performances of such traditional hymns as the "*Magnificat*," "*Salve Regina*," "*Panis Angelicus*," and several more. This young lady was also up-to-

date on many modern numbers and, refusing to be limited strictly to liturgical or to Latin, she belted out a few songs in rock and roll!

As we sat there conversing, Elena told me the history of her life. Well, not all of it. One hundred years is quite a bit to recall in a single conversation! The old woman couldn't thank me enough for having celebrated our birthday. It delighted her to think that I had offered Mass in her own humble home. In tones resonant with assurance and optimistically hopeful of the future, this 100-year-old matron exclaimed:

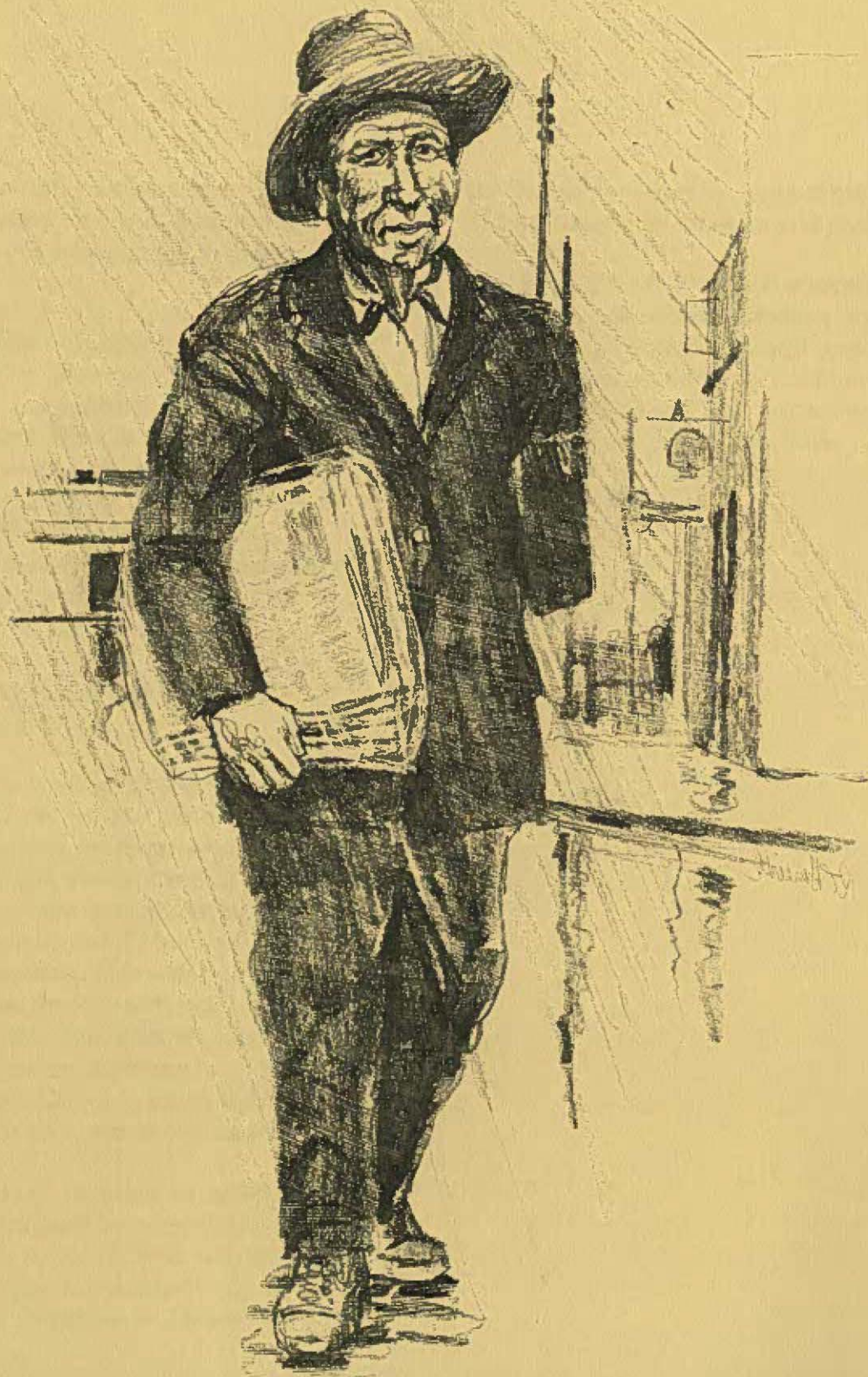
"Padre, this is something I'm going to remember all my life."

I couldn't help smiling. I knew that, barring some special miracle, "all my life" would not give her too much time to remember. Then, suddenly, the thought struck me that this century-old woman was actually saying something quite profound. Elena had synthesized the essence of life with her promise. She was expressing the love with which she had received this day and, after all, love really never dies; rather, it passes to a richer, more beautiful state. Certainly, Elena would remember this in a very special way all her life.

As I gathered up my mass kit and headed for home, I found myself wondering how often I myself look to the morrow with the same confidence, joy and enthusiasm, as my dear friend, Elena. I suppose — I know! —

that her secret lies in her state of mind, in the gift of love which she receives and gives to others.

Even though Elena will scarcely be around for many more celebrations, the day the two of us got together to add up to 150 will always be something very fresh and beautiful, something rich and alive, something we both will remember all our lives.



Juan Manuel, dean of newscarriers

He was soaked to the skin! Those baggy, faded, blue trousers of his clung unrelentingly to his squatty legs; his ageless little straw hat (I'm sure he wears it to bed) drooped soggily over his placid forehead, dripping water down on his worn-out tennis shoes. Juan Manuel was standing there in the hall of our parish complex like a forlorn little boy — but he was smiling. He had just come, half running, through the muddy streets around the compound to find shelter from one of those strong, torrential rains which favor us here in Arequipa during the months from December to March.

"Buenas tardes, Padre!" he said as he caught sight of me coming down from our third floor, garret-like rectory above the church. "How's it going?"

"Good afternoon, Juan; how's it going with you? You look like you've just been dragged from the Rio Chili! Stay here and dry out, or you'll catch your death of cold."

Juan laughed; he then said something I didn't entirely catch. (Juan's "conversations" were often a bit hard to follow; they seemed to be made of $\frac{3}{4}$ speed and $\frac{1}{4}$ mumble.) He handed me the afternoon paper. It was bone dry! Not a drop of water on it. Juan always guards his precious cargo of print with the utmost care. It doesn't matter to him if he gets drenched as long as his newspapers are dry and intact.

Juan Manuel — short and pudgy and very genial — is not a young lad filled with all the vim and vitality of the greener years. He's 61. Several years ago he lost his left arm in an accident — which means, of course, that Juan Manuel must do quite a bit of uncanny juggling to carry his newspapers and distribute them without dropping the whole lot, and without permitting these summer rains to dampen his entire livelihood.

For almost 35 years now, this "Dean of Newscarriers" has been rising at 3 a.m. to receive the "dailies." In the afternoon he picks up another pack of 60 which comes from the capital city of Lima and starts out, once again, sauntering through the district with a rather bouncy, jaunty stride, nodding a friendly greeting to his many customers and friends.

Around the hour of 4:30 in the afternoon, Juan Manuel, tired and hungry, returns home to the poorer district of Miraflores, where he lives alone in one small room. He empties his pockets to count what's left from the results of a day's work — 35 soles. (About 75¢) He had already spent 3 soles for his breakfast and 12 soles on a very simple lunch. From the remaining 35 soles, he separates 10 for his dinner and puts aside 25 for personal expenses. Evidently, his personal needs are quite limited. From the time I've known him, Juan Manuel has worn the same faded, blue trousers with the patched spots and the inseparable straw hat, always inclined at a rakish angle.

Juan Manuel is a real gem of a man, always ready with a quick laugh, delightful to kid and sport around with. He's happy and makes life around him just that much more interesting and beautiful. This "Dean" is but one of some 350 newscarrriers in Arequipa — men, women and children of all ages, conditions and backgrounds. Products of every conceivable circumstance, they are identified by the urgent need they have to work, in their limited resources and often — surprisingly enough — in their lighthearted, pleasant manner.

One tends to take these people for granted. It's easy to be unmindful of their simple, humble life and of their many needs. And yet, what a great mission they fulfill! Certainly, I could do without my newspaper; it's really not all that essential to my life and work; but I wouldn't last very long without people like Juan Manuel. My whole routine here, in this "mission outpost," is surrounded by countless like him, everyone interestingly different. Through the days and weeks and months, I encounter them in a variety of places and circumstances. Though our meeting is transitory and my own influence or assistance limited, our friendship is nonetheless abiding. They are the center of my work; they stimulate and inspire my mission apostolate, giving it richness and continued renewal — people like my friend Juan Manuel, delivering his daily newspapers or merely standing over there against the wall, soaked to the skin!



"Someday, I'd like to be buried here,
precisely at this hour of five in the evening."

I was standing on the brow of the hill which
rises up but a few minutes away to the west

of the tiny pueblo of Paucarpata. Beside me was
a good friend of mine with whom I had so
often climbed these hills and wandered the
pathways within them. Curiously enough, Señor
Aguirre's first name was Jesús — so I felt I
was making my request to the right person.

Bury me here at five in the evening

Jesús and I had just passed among the tall, stately trees which seemed to form an honor guard before the cemetery gates; a slight breeze bent them gently forward and they bowed as we passed. In the quiet and solitude of the late afternoon, I seemed to hear their rustling in the breeze hum a plaintive monastic chant – a hymn, almost a divine lullaby, which created a deep, hopeful peace within my soul.

The view from the hill was magnificent! Before me lay the deep green, rich valley of Arequipa, majestically guarded by coneshaped Misti; the city's white, ash-stone buildings were amber-like in the declining sun — much like the eternal scene I viewed the evening I stood on the Mount of Olives and watched the sun set over the greyish-white city of Jerusalem.

Down among the fields, humble farmers began to wend their way home, impassively driving before them their small herds of cattle and sheep, silhouetted against a pinkish-blue sky sketched by the disappearing sun. All life, all creation seemed to be going home at this hour — but not without leaving the promise of a return on the morrow.

Is it any wonder, then, that as I stood there, pensively, I wanted to detail the time. I yearned to absorb, forever, the scene before me and I thought how beautiful, how significant it would be to “go home” at this hour — to join my spirit to the returning creation around me, sharing at its side the peace and joy of the

day's final consummation and the hopeful expectancy of tomorrow's sunrise.

All these things I tried, as best I could, to tell my companion Jesús, but I feared that he really wasn't getting it — more because of my faltering way of expressing myself than for his lack of any poetic sense.

Well, the days and months and even years passed on from that particular moment, until today, when I find myself on the eve of my departure from Arequipa. I must undertake a new mission assignment and I have no idea just when I shall return to this valley

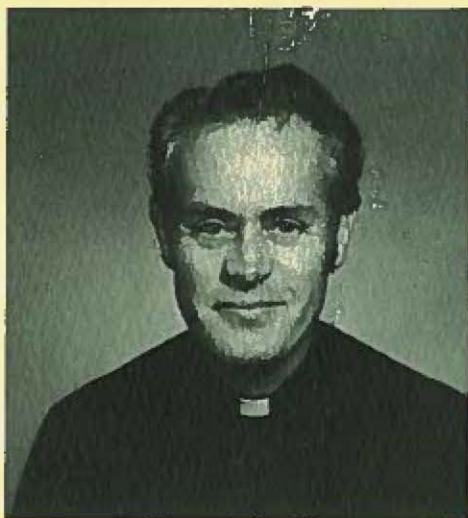
Many people were here today to see me, to wish me well, to give me an *abrazo*. In the evening Jesús came around. He was crying a little. (So was I.) We recalled our walks together, our friendship, our love for one another. As we bid goodbye he handed me a small package resembling, in size and shape, a child's bean bag.

“What's this?” I asked as I fingered the tiny bag.

“Padre, remember the day you spoke of your desire to be buried in Paucarpata? I've never forgotten that moment and I don't want you to forget it — or me — or our dear land and our people. This tiny bag contains a handful of dirt from the brow of the hill of Paucarpata, where someday — God willing — in dream or reality, you will be buried at five in the evening.”







Richard L. Clifford, M.M.

Rev. Richard L. Clifford, M.M., is a native of Anaconda, Montana. After receiving a B.A. degree from Carroll College (1948) in Helena, Montana, he entered Maryknoll and was ordained on June 13, 1953, at Maryknoll, New York. The following day, in St. Patrick's Cathedral, New York City, he received his formal assignment to Peru where he has spent more than 20 years of his missionary priesthood.

Father Clifford's apostolate in Peru has taken him from the Pacific coastline to the lofty Andean mountain range, or Altiplano, ancestral land of the once-proud Incas and present home of some six million Quechua and Aymara Indians.

Besides a pastoral ministry in the religious, social and educational fields, Father Clifford has extensive journalistic experience and has contributed to various publications in the U.S. and Peru. For several years he wrote a daily column in Spanish for "La Prensa," one of Peru's leading newspapers, in which he commented on social, religious and political topics.

Father Clifford profiles his mission work through this collection of stories about the simple people and ordinary circumstances in which is embodied that *human touch* forever present in the daily contact between a missionary and his people.

