


A Human Touch

By Richard L. Clifford, M.M.





*The cover painting by South American artist
Jaime Hurtado L., depicts a typical scene
in the Altiplano region
of the Andes Mountains.*

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A Human Touch

By Richard L. Clifford, M.M.

To all those united in mission.

PLEASE DO NOT TAKE FROM ROOM

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A story about people

Mission is many things. It is a transcultural exchange, a deep Christian experience, an expression and extension of the salvific message of the Gospel. But, above all, it is a story about people. It is an identification with all those who embody that personal element of life — so rich, so diversified, so valuable, so tremendously important.

To work for the betterment of humanity is to accept the challenge to love individual people. To be committed to social justice, universal peace, moral enrichment and personal liberation is to find a meaning and a message within the life of every single person who crosses the threshold of an ordinary day.

Mission is, therefore, *a human touch*, in whatever form, place, person or circumstance it may reach out to express itself. It is often simple, sometimes sad, occasionally humorous, always enlightening. When one has felt this touch and has learned to respond to its tender embrace, in love and understanding, then one has begun to experience a true sense of mission, in all its beauty and charm and incomparable value.

During the 25 years of my missionary apostolate I have been united in love to an infinite number of people, and my greatest experiences have been those moments when, through them, I have felt this human touch in my life. After many of these encounters, I have attempted to express in writing what such a meeting has meant to me — how it has

influenced and inspired me or caused me to smile with thanksgiving and joy.

A sampling of those unforgettable moments (I could not possibly include them all!) is contained in these stories. Through them I would like to share my experiences with you, that you might reflect and rejoice at my side. I trust their recounting will serve to deepen your own awareness of that rich blessing contained in the warmth of a human touch.

Richard L. Clifford, mhm

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Altiplano



It is early morning in Puno,
12,500 feet into the heavens.

The first hours of dawn gradually brighten,
and a resplendent sun rises slowly into the sky.
Now, soft lights dance over the waters
of calm, beautiful Lake Titicaca,
dotted with canoe-shaped balsa boats

The Altiplano at dawn

of sturdy Indian fishermen
who have been laboring half the night.

Beyond, in the pinkish horizon,
an outline of the majestic, snow-capped peaks
of Bolivia's Illimani . . .

Soon, the sun's rays lightly touch
the thatched roofs
of simple, adobe huts
scattered in the fields,
running up and down the hillside,
all along the shore
stretching to the border town of Desaguadero.

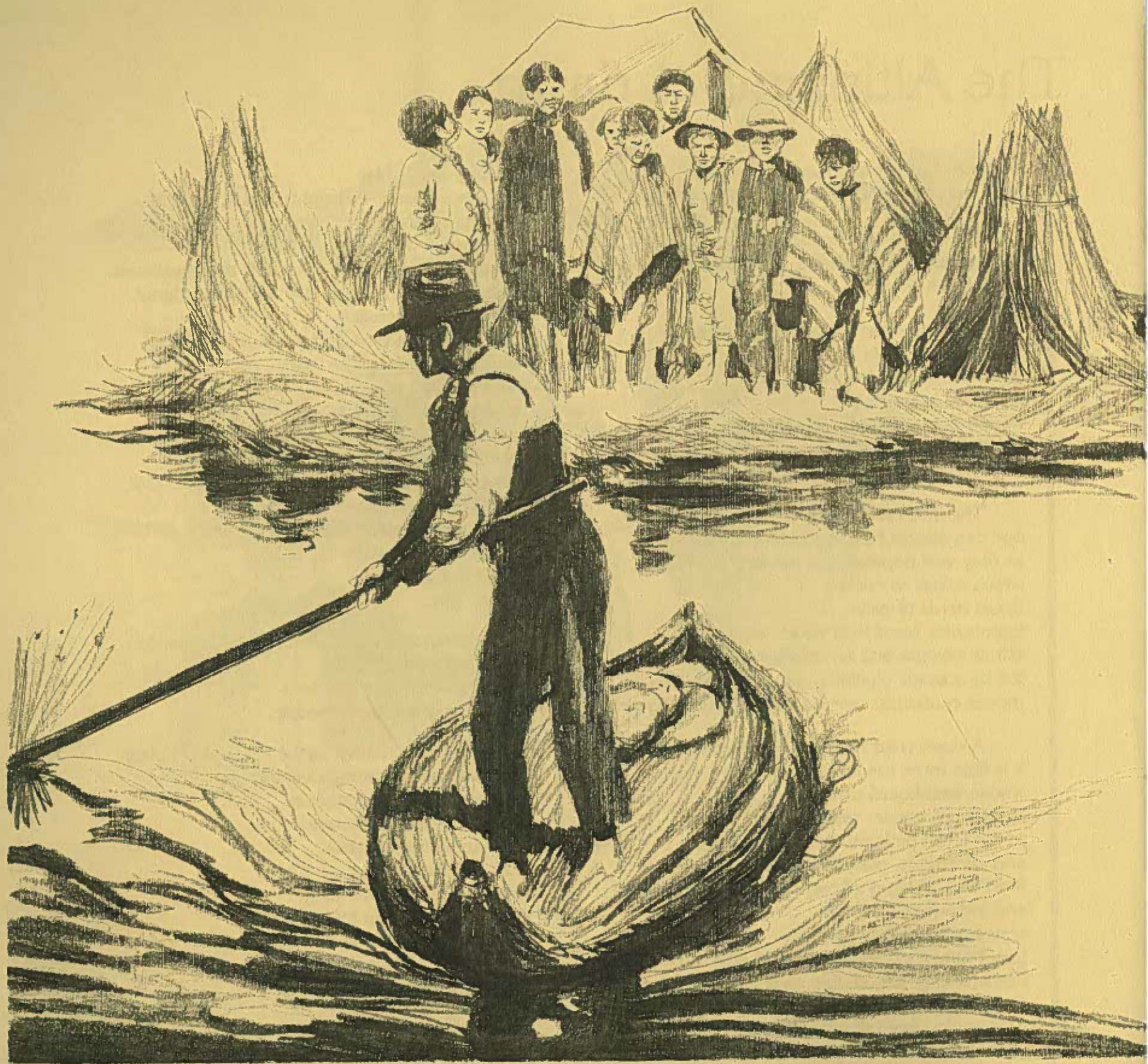
The fields are a yellowish-green;
one can almost hear a plaintive cry for water
as they wait hopefully for the seasonal rains
which refuse to come.
Small herds of cattle
impassively bend their heads to the dry,
scarce pasture and an unruly flock of sheep
led by a small, pig-tailed girl of 8 or 9 years,
moves cautiously over the rocky, hillside terrain.

A dusty road runs along the lake shore;
it is little more than a winding path
whose washboard surface
lends even greater rattle and noise
to the small pickups, rambling buses,
and enormous, overcrowded trucks
filled with all types of cargo
and Indians of every age,
squeezed so tightly together
they bounce up and down as a unit!
Perhaps they are off, this early morning,
to the opening of a new fair —
or returning from the closing of the last fiesta.

It grows lighter
and more figures and sights and sounds
are distinguishable:
half-running women,
following to keep some pace with their husbands,
jostling the infant slung over their shoulders . . .
a few valiant cyclists
challenging the dust and the holes . . .
Gradually, all along the road,
more Indians
strolling into the fields,
beginning the long march to the city market,
returning to their pueblos —
everyone impervious to the early-morning chill,
stoically set upon their purpose
with a characteristic eternal tranquility,
like the stately llamas
who move gingerly
at their side.

A panorama which offers endless reflection
and brings with it
a feeling of warmth and love
for this land and these people.

Here in this corner of the Peruvian Altiplano,
in a picturesque setting creating a backdrop
for a simple, hard existence
and a perennial challenge,
one cannot fail to sense
in all the depth of its meaning,
its tenderness and tenacity,
the sublime human touch of life
with a richness and charm which,
like the first brightness of this new day,
is full of promise —
and mystery!



Bread upon the waters

"*Caramba!* I'm sinking! Quick, someone grab my arm!"

I was in water up to the top of my boots — and slowly descending. A strong arm reached out to pull me back onto the boat and we moved farther inland toward more "solid" ground where we could dock without difficulty.

I was on the famous *Islas Flotantes* (Floating Islands) of Lake Titicaca, half an hour's ride from the shoreline city of Puno. Lying at an altitude of 12,500 feet into the Andes, Titicaca is the highest navigable lake in the world. It is a beautiful, ice-blue body of water whose 122 miles brim across Bolivia and Peru.

On the placid waters of Lake Titicaca, the Aymara Indians, in unsinkable canoe-shaped reed boats called *balsas* — made of lashed bundles of *titora* which grow along the water's edge — push out into the horizon to catch a good supply of delicious (and giant) trout. Bordering the lake are numerous mission stations and pueblos attended to by Maryknoll, and floating offshore are these soggy, spongy islands of matted *titora* thrown on the water, 6 or 7 feet deep. Here there are whole villages of Indians, called Urus, who live an isolated, bleak existence, living mainly on fish and water birds. They also eat the *titora*, pulling it up by the roots and chewing the blanched portion of the stem. A proud, noncommunicative people, the Urus were already living on these Floating Islands

when the first Aymara Indians settled around Lake Titicaca hundreds of years ago. The Urus know very little of modern civilization, less about Christianity.

I had only recently arrived in the Altiplano to begin my mission work and was anxious to visit these interesting people. The more experienced Padres advised me to bring along a good supply of bread, a delicacy the Urus seldom enjoy.

As we entered a lagoon and approached a cluster of huts, I could see we were touching the edge of one of the matted islands. I decided to be the first to jump ashore. As it was, I was almost the last one to leave! I had forgotten that the islands were actually floating, with the outer edges inundating underfoot like an air mattress. I literally "got my feet wet" as a missionary — and learned that it would probably take a few more years before I could walk on water!

Once ashore, we headed toward the reed huts of the natives. Most of them ignored or avoided us, some busying themselves with domestic chores and others merely hiding from sight. Suddenly, a group of small children spied my sack full of bread; they rushed toward me like *fanaticos* to a soccer match. I soon found myself being pushed back toward the thin edge where I was sinking a few moments before. I was nervous — terrified, in fact! Just then I caught sight of a tall, lanky Indian man impassively looking on, and I tried to make him understand that I would give

the bread to him and he, in turn, could distribute it to the children. So I tossed him the bag, not a little pleased to be relieved of what had suddenly become very heavy.

The stoic gentleman gave me a gracious nod of thanks, threw the bag over his shoulders and began walking toward the farther end of the island. The children ran after him. Once my intermediary had reached the edge, he grabbed a long, slender pole, pulled his own *balsa* toward him and got into the boat. Placing his precious cargo of bread on the bottom of the canoe, he calmly, smoothly pushed off toward another island. Apparently, he thought I had given the entire bag to him, personally, for his own family.

The poor children were confused, dumbfounded, tremendously saddened and disillusioned. "What about the bread?" "Why didn't we get some?" "Why had he given it all to him?" . . . The little ones rushed back to me, some crying, others shouting. What could I do? I tried vainly to appease them with a few pieces of hard candy. I then offered them a Holy Card. They looked at it in bewilderment and tore it up! It meant absolutely nothing to these Uru children. They didn't know anything about saints and devotion and the like. Besides, they wanted the bread!

There was no way out. I smiled weakly, patted a few on the head, shrugged my shoulders, and began visiting the rest of the Island people. All the while, I could feel those children following me with their eyes —

and their stomachs. I was restless, uneasy, anxious to leave.

After an eternal 20 minutes we climbed into our boat and began the return to Puno. As our craft slowly pulled away from the island, I began looking back over the water. In the light of the declining late afternoon sun, I could see the tiny figures of those bewildered children on the edge of their matted, floating island, silhouetted against the sky.

There, I said to myself, is one of my first graphic lessons of what mission is all about. It's a desire — an enthusiasm — to bring to the impoverished ones of the world the bread that sustains their bodies as well as the spiritual bread which nourishes their souls. Yet, for all of one's good will and efforts, such an ideal can often be thwarted by an inability to communicate properly and by a lack of cooperation and sharing. I couldn't make my Indian friend understand just what I wanted him to do. Yet, his action seemed to reflect all those whose systems and structures are unresponsive and unjust or whose philosophy of life is unconcerned in the face of the needs of others.

And one watches in anguish and defeat as they move quietly away, paddling placidly through the still waters — leaving the needy ones, bewildered and confused, standing on the shore.

Take my medicine

It is a common sight to see a man in a white coat and a stethoscope around his neck, standing over a patient in a hospital bed. The doctor is usually looking at the patient's chest, listening to his heart and lungs. This is a very important part of the doctor's job. He needs to know what is going on inside the patient's body. The doctor's job is to help the patient feel better and to keep them healthy. The doctor's job is to take care of the patient's health. The doctor's job is to help the patient live a longer and healthier life. The doctor's job is to take care of the patient's health. The doctor's job is to help the patient live a longer and healthier life.



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It was a rainy, cold morning in mid-April and I was in the Altiplano Parish of Ayaviri. A tiny pueblo 13,200 feet above sea level, Ayaviri lies midway on the railroad line between Puno and the ancient Inca capital of Cuzco. As part of my mission work here, I frequently visited the local jail where I would offer Mass and speak to the prisoners. Some 60 or 70 Indians, they were crowded together like cattle in rambling adobe quarters forming a quadrangle around a patio where they washed, recreated, conversed and, in general, lived out the greater portion of their day.

This particular morning I arose around 4:30. It had been raining hard all during the night and I was not overjoyed at the prospect of facing the wet onslaught. I could envision myself jumping over the thousand-and-one mud puddles, large and small, which would lie between our house and the jail. As I reluctantly stepped out into the dampness of the early dawn and began leapfrogging to the jail, I kept asking myself if this were not, actually, a bit of a waste of time. I could speak neither Quechua nor Aymara; I wondered if the prisoners

“Take my poncho”

even understood my Spanish! Surely they scarcely appreciated the fact that I was “making a sacrifice” (as I prided myself!) to offer Mass for them and to make myself available.

Reaching the jail, I peeked through the tiny, iron-grilled window of the rusty gate and hollered in an almost defiant, “*Buenos dias!*” It sounded more like a question than a greeting. A sleepy, disheveled guard soon appeared and after much rattling and turning of keys, he pushed open the gate and led me through a narrow corridor and out into the patio.

My eyes could see nothing but a thin film of mud everywhere. Immediately, I began searching, vainly, for the tiniest, leveled and dry spot where I might stand in order to offer Mass and speak to the prisoners. Finally, I decided upon a small corner which, although a bit slushy, was certainly the best I could hope for under the circumstances. Preparing for the services, I scanned this mute, seemingly indifferent crowd before me: poor, unfortunate, unkempt and ill-fed prisoners, semicrouched under their ponchos, shivering in the strong cold of an early Andean morning.

Suddenly, a very wizened Quechua man approached me; he was chewing a large wad of coca, a leaf containing cocaine and used by the Indians as a certain tranquilizer against hunger, pain and the cold.

“*Momentito, Tatai.*” (Just a minute, Padre.)

I thought he wanted to speak to me about getting him out or, perhaps, desired to go to confession. He touched me gently and I moved back to make room for him. Now, this old Indian grabbed at the poncho which, blanket-like, covered his short, dark-hued frame. Before I realized what he was doing I saw him spread his large poncho lengthwise over the mud and slush in front of me.

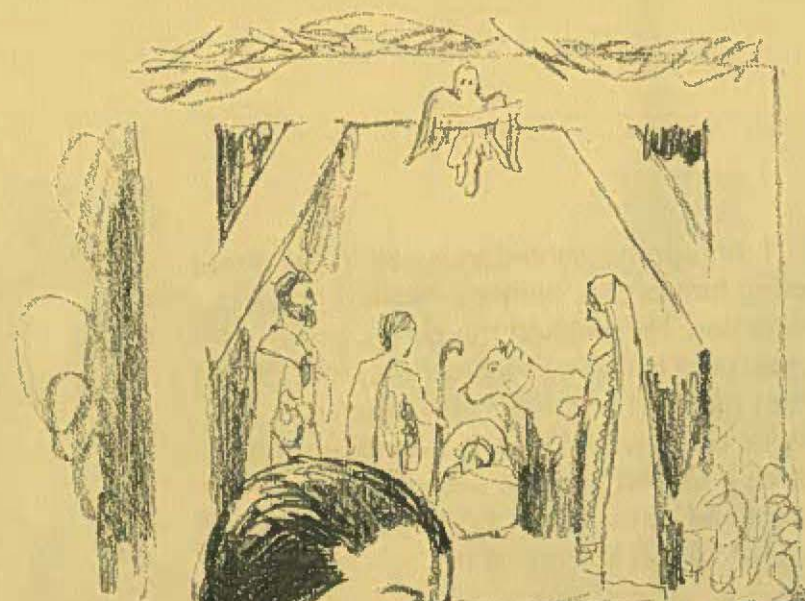
“*Alli está.* (There you are.) Stand on my poncho while you say Mass and you won’t get your feet wet.”

I signaled that I couldn’t do that; that it was cold and he needed his poncho.

“*Está bien.* (It’s all right.) We have nothing to offer you for what you do for us. Take my poncho.”

With but a thin, ragged shirt to cover him, my Indian friend retired to the farther end of the courtyard.

As I observed my humble benefactor shivering in the early-morning cold, bowing a reverent “amen” to the prayers of the Mass and listening attentively to my simple sermon, I knew that this poor Indian had suddenly put it all together for me. I was glad I was there. I knew that as a missionary it was where I should be at that moment in time. Standing on my friend’s poncho, I blessed the rain and the mud and the cold and the humble people of simple devotion and love.



Takes my pony

the pony is a very good one and I have had it for many years. It is a very good pony and I have had it for many years. It is a very good pony and I have had it for many years.



My unforgettable Andean Christmas

My first Christmas in the Peruvian Altiplano was an unforgettable event, a most rewarding experience. As the Feast approached, I was in a rather homesick mood. This was certainly not Christmas as I had known it. There was no winter snow or multi-colored, blinking lights; no bright decorations adorned the streets; nor could I hear the weakest carol emanating from any tiny shop. It was the beginning of summer in Puno, some 12,500 feet into the sky. Everything seemed dry and desolate.

About ten minutes away from our high school seminary of San Ambrosio where I was teaching, is an orphanage for young girls run by the Peruvian Sisters of Charity. The huge, grey building lies practically on the banks of Lake Titicaca. It borders a bumpy road which winds around the water's edge and continues upward and out to the small pueblos of Chucuito, Acora, Plateria, Ilave, Juli and eventually to Desaguadero on the Bolivian border. This first year in Puno I was a frequent visitor to the orphanage where I would offer Mass, mingle with the Sisters and young girls and often participate in their festivities.

But as Christmas approached I was hardly in the mood to join them in celebrations of any kind. I was feeling a bit sorry for myself and certainly little girls deprived of a home and loving family (for all the Sisters' marvelous care) would scarcely be much consolation. And my own nostalgic, pensive mood could be disastrous for them! Besides, the little ones would probably be wondering

what I had brought them for Christmas. I had nothing to pass out but a few pieces of hard candy.

As I headed toward the orphanage, the 10-minute walk seemed interminable and prolonged the anxiety I was feeling. Suddenly, I found myself in front of the large orphanage door. With reluctance and hesitation I gave a rather weak, unconvincing knock. Within a matter of seconds, the door was literally flung open and I was greeted by a smiling, joyful crowd of youngsters. They grabbed my arms and legs and almost in unison, shouted:

"Feliz Navidad! Aren't you happy it's Christmas?"

I nodded a gentle affirmative.

"We've prepared songs for the Feast. Come, sit here and listen."

Immediately, 50 or 60 little girls, 2 years old to 16, lined up in front of me. With evident delight and tremendous pride, they sang several numbers in Quechua, Aymara and Spanish.

"Did you like them?"

"Como No!" (You bet!)

By this time the spirit of Christmas was coming over me. The children led me — practically carried me! — to the chapel where I offered the *Misa de Gallo* or Midnight Mass. Once again, their melodious voices showed off weeks of practice with beautiful Christmas carols.

Following the service, the girls took me by the hand and we walked toward the community dining room.

"We have a surprise for you," they said as they invited me to a snack they had prepared. The little ones were particularly anxious — almost insistent— that I drink their homemade chocolate. It was not the greatest drink in the world and I definitely made a mistake by finishing it too quickly. I was immediately offered a second cup!

During all this time — from the moment of my arrival to that unforgettable chocolate — the dark, flashing eyes of the children seemed to be smiling constantly at me, wishing me happiness and peace. Never once did anyone speak about gifts or presents or even insinuate that I should have brought them something. The whole interest of my young hostesses was to make me feel at home, to convey to me the message of the Feast — the spirit of joy, happiness and love. It was a time to celebrate and rejoice because Love Itself had come to live with us and comfort us and bless us.

I bid goodbye to the youngsters and the Sisters in the wee hours of the morning and, through the dark, wended my way upward toward the school. Suddenly, I sensed a thrill of Christmas in the air; lights seemed to be blinking from every tiny window and carols were echoing in my ears. Was that a gentle snowfall spreading a white carpet before my path?

As I awakened to the early dawn and to new beauties, I gave thanks for those simple, homeless girls deprived of most things we consider important in life — indeed, necessary to our comfort and security — who had brought me "home" to the real spirit of Christmas.

Watch those trousers, Andre

The first time I saw Andre, he was a young man, a student at the University of Lima. He was a handsome fellow, with a friendly smile and a good sense of humor.

He was a student at the University of Lima, and he was a handsome fellow, with a friendly smile and a good sense of humor.

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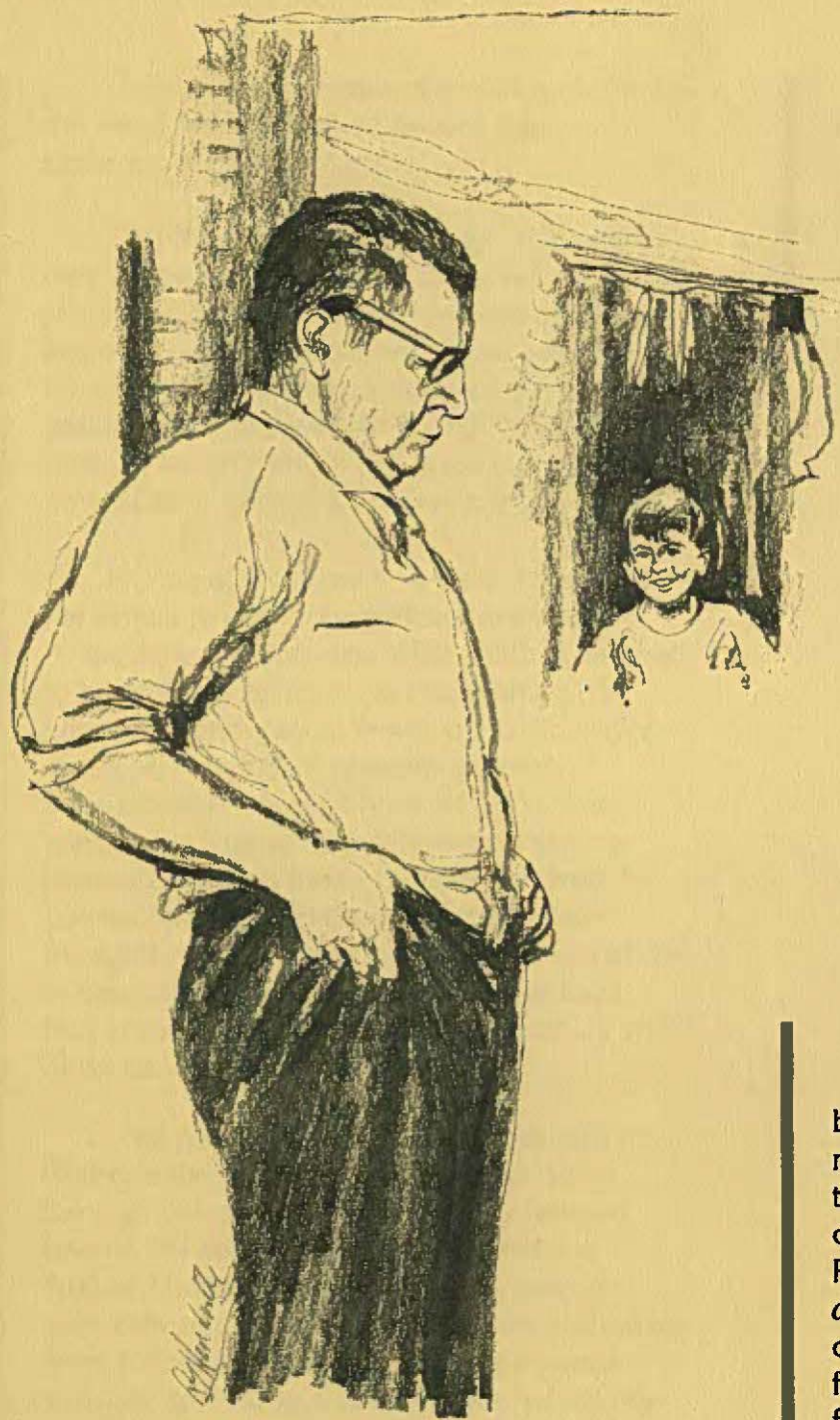
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I wasn't here very long in the city of Lima before I became quite familiar with the numerous *corralones* which are scattered throughout the various districts of this Peruvian capital. In fact, just in our parish of Santa Rosa itself there are at least 60 of them. Each *corralón* resembles a prolonged alleyway, off which are some 45 rooms containing 45 families. The entire complex has two faucets and one bathroom; no bathtub, shower,

Watch those trousers, Andrés!

kitchen sink or plumbing of any kind. A couple, married or otherwise, share the room with their children, sometimes as many as 8 or 10. Often a country cousin arrives for two weeks from the provinces and stays for three years.

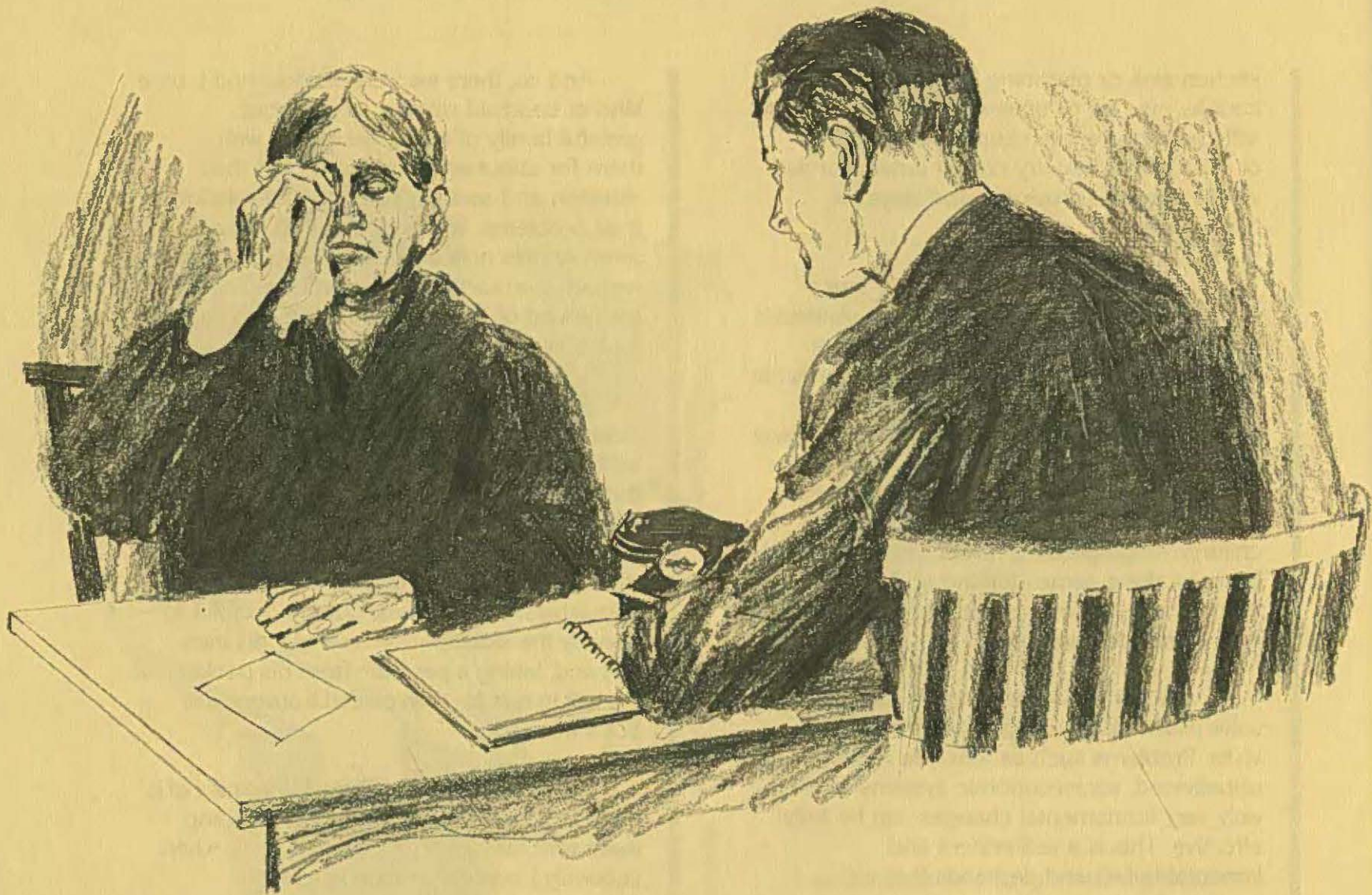
Last night, Andrés and I made one of our frequent visits to these *corralones*. Andrés is a chubby, dynamic individual whose love for the poor stems both from what he terms his "Christian mystique" as well as from his own personal experience with want in so many ways. The family we were visiting this particular evening was a close-knit group (physically and otherwise) of eight, with children ranging from 2 months to 15 years. We brought along some clothing and foodstuffs, as well as a couple of kerosene lamps and a few odds and ends.

We know, of course, that one does not really solve much with these sporadic, insufficient visits. Problems such as these lie rooted in unbalanced, socioeconomic systems and only very fundamental changes can be truly effective. This is a self-evident and lamentable fact and demands that we continually cooperate toward the realization of needed social changes. Meanwhile, however, we cannot just plan and discuss and map out the perfect solutions. A lot of people need some basic help today; they are hungry and in want. That in itself is reason enough to be concerned and to do something immediately until, hopefully, more effective measures can be found and applied.

And so, there we were, Andrés and I, on a kind of band-aid mission to this poor, grateful family of eight. We stayed with them for about an hour, discussing their situation and seeking some partial solution to their problems. We were about to leave when Andrés noticed that a youngster to whom we had given some clothing was standing at the far end of the darkened room with his arms folded across his midriff.

Andrés thought the young lad had suddenly developed stomach trouble and called him aside to see if he could be of some help. Once the boy drew nearer, it was apparent that the only ailment he had was his inability to keep up his new pants. They began almost at his shoulders and ended at the floor! My fat, impulsive friend, Andrés, quickly decided to remedy the situation. He removed his own belt and, taking a penknife from his pocket, cut the belt in two. He then placed it around the boy's trousers.

"*Ya está,*" he said. "This will take care of it." I was looking at the young fellow standing there with his newly-fastened trousers, when suddenly I heard everyone laughing. Turning around, I saw Andrés leaving the room — his own beltless pants were falling to the floor!



Ana was here again yesterday. As so many times before, she was crying — and once more for the same reason. Her son, René, was back in jail. Four times I have gone to speak on behalf of this young 25-year-old. The police have always been very patient and

understanding. This time, however, it appears that intercession would be useless. The amount allegedly stolen, together with his past record, has increased the gravity of the crime. Only a lengthy legal process can resolve this particular case.

“I hope you understand . . .”

Ana is a short, round-faced woman of about 65. A widow and mother of four, she attends daily Mass and is quite devoted to her rosary and several private devotions. I've never seen her without a small handkerchief in her hand and she is forever wiping her forehead and eyes. Despite a certain spiritual calmness about her, Ana cannot hide an unmistakable shadow of sadness — especially at times like yesterday when she came to explain:

“Please, Padre, I'm not excusing René, but I won't abandon him either. I've always been there when he needed me, at all times and in every way. Ever since he was a small child afflicted with meningitis, I've cried for him. People tell me that René is ungrateful, a delinquent, a son who doesn't merit his mother's love. Maybe they're right, but he's my son, I'm his mother and for me that's reason enough to love him.”

How often the extraordinary limits of a mother's compassion are humanly inexplicable! Who can understand a heart like that of Ana if one has not entered therein to listen quietly to its tender beat of sacrifice and love. Who can pass judgment on an attitude which seems to spoil or favor the undesirable inclinations of a woman's son without experiencing that sense of compassion which penetrates the very depths of her maternal instincts and sentiments. This man was formed in her, nurtured by her, carried in her arms, caressed, cared for and worried over; he is part of her very being, and always will be.

Sons like René are often a mystery to us. Especially if they have been blessed with a good home life, responsible parents and a fine education. Perhaps, as in the case of René, they are products of adverse circumstances and unhealthy surroundings, which, though scarcely an excuse, are somewhat of an explanation. Unable to find support in the corrective guidance of a strong father, and placed in a situation of extreme poverty, such unfortunate individuals often rebel against a sense of frustration and utter futility.

Police, society, law courts — these must consider cases like that of René without preference, prejudice or sentimentalism. But only a mother knows how to see beyond judgment and find therein a unique type of beauty, a dignity, a value, indeed, even an innocence hidden from the eyes of the indifferent. Only a mother like Ana, who came to me yesterday merely to explain rather than complain or intercede.

And when she had finished, we both remained for a moment in prolonged silence. Words wouldn't come to me, nor would they have been convincing. Sitting there before me, her eyes moistened and reddened with tears, Ana squeezed tightly the tiny handkerchief in her pudgy hand and merely pleaded softly, in the name of every mother who loves as deeply:

“Please, I hope you understand.”



We Americans often pride ourselves — sometimes with a bit of exaggeration and pomp — on our sense of organization, our ability to really put things in order. This is

especially true in a Latin American atmosphere, where one is prone to belittle whatever doesn't fit with our strict regimentation and perfect scheduling.

Victoria taught me a lesson

An American missionary is certainly not immune to this gringo infirmity. Fortunately, (that is, if he wants to stay around a while and do something effective) he begins to realize that he doesn't have all the answers, that his system is not always the best one and that the mere fact of crossing the Rio Grande has not conferred upon him a nasty infallibility. Gradually, he learns how to understand, appreciate and adapt, and through such a process there is a movement toward him from tolerance to acceptance to esteem.

I've made plenty of mistakes in my missionary apostolate before learning how to go a bit more slowly. Sometimes it has been a most painful experience. There are moments, however, when the situation is rather amusing and, reflecting back upon it, one can laugh at himself and at his great organizational stupidity.

One such incident happened to me a few weeks ago, during a mass wedding ceremony at which I officiated, sacramentally blessing the union of 24 couples who had been living together for several years. Of course, such a large number required a lot of *tramites* or paperwork, but being an efficient gringo, I soon had everything quite in order and proceeded to show how, with a genius for organization, such difficult situations can be handled with ease and rapidity. Nevertheless, during my organized activity I was somewhat nervous. This was my first experience with more than one couple before me — to say nothing of 24!

Well, I collected all the papers, lined up the partners and, quite satisfied with my planning and procedure, began with the first couple.

"Victoria, do you want to marry this man here at your side?"

"No, Padre."

I couldn't believe it! "But, Victoria, you want to get married now, don't you?"

She smiled approvingly. "Si, Padre."

"*Bien!* Now, once again. Do you want to marry this man here?"

Another hesitation. "No, Padre."

"*Caramba, Victoria! Que te pasa?* You can't change your mind. Well, you can if you want to, but it's a bit late — and quite confusing!"

The young woman was embarrassed, silent, eyes lowered to the floor. Finally, almost in a whisper and with a certain pleading voice, she said, "Padre, that's not the man I came with; you have us all mixed up. The man I want to marry is at the end. Please, Padre, can I marry him?"

She shattered my perfect planning! But it was better than going home with the wrong man.



I suppose I have performed thousands of blessings during my missionary priesthood — from statues and medals and holy cards to soccer uniforms, tiny shops, huge factories, adobe huts, wayside chapels, food, fields, animals and homes.

For the most part these blessings have all been simple ceremonies devoid of liturgical pomp or of anything one might consider worthy of special remembrance. That is, until a few nights ago. That evening something happened during the blessing which gave it an added significance for me.

I was in a rambling house with large, spacious rooms which a couple had recently renovated into a livable home. As I slowly moved from lighted room to lighted room,

“Why don't you bless the darkness?”

sprinkling holy water, reciting the customary prayers and making a sign of the cross, I was followed in my every movement and gesture by an eight-year-old child, enchanted and hypnotized with wide-eyed interest. Now, I chanced upon a darkened quarter which was, perhaps, a closet or storage room. I simply passed it by and proceeded to the next room. Suddenly, I felt a tug at my side.

“*Padrecito*,” my little friend said excitedly, “you blessed the light. Why don't you bless the darkness?”

It was merely the simple question of a small boy, an innocent observer asking something far beyond his own immediate understanding. I had no answer. I felt as though Wisdom Itself were questioning me through the lips of this young lad, and all that night I kept repeating to myself that child's question, “Why don't you bless the darkness?”

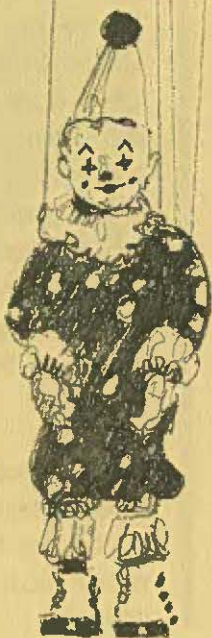
With much reason, little one, you ask me why I don't “bless the darkness.” As a matter of fact, that is what my life as a missionary is really all about: an attempt to bring light and hope, benediction and peace to those who grope in a darkness which yearns for compassion and understanding — or merely for a word of kindness and an alleviating hand.

Indeed, it is the commission of every missionary to walk as a light among the shadows of sadness and suffering and spiritual need; to

manifest in a special way, an attitude of effective concern toward all those stumbling through half-lit corridors of a religious uncertainty, or, surrounded and often submerged in a darkness of solitude and loneliness, of indifference or neglect, of injustice and discrimination, of disrespect or absolute abandonment. It is the particular vocation and privilege of a missionary to offer his own illumination to all those who are dedicated to the promotion of peace in the world — a peace which, as the fruit of justice, encourages and enforces respect for individual rights and assists in the free, harmonious development of a fully human and truly spiritual life.

Little boy, if only I could dispel the shadows with a simple benediction, a fervent prayer, a few drops of holy water, the sign of the cross, or an apostolic undertaking with immediate and universal results. Unfortunately, this type of darkness is both deep and abiding. It neither dispels rapidly nor diminishes easily. I know that in some places the shadows grow dimmer, the darkness less dense, and I give thanks to God for those whose dedicated spirit of uncompromising love strives to bring illumination and peace through their untiring efforts, their many personal sacrifices — even, at times, their very lives.

So you see, dear friend, the darkness has already been blessed and somewhere night continues to grow softer. But the shadows will never disappear entirely until Light Itself arrives.



César's gift of the spirit

About a month ago, a young man named César came to the parish offering to be of some service to the poor children. What had he to give? Money? Work? Clothing? Medicines? None of these things. His contribution was to be a gift of the spirit.

César is a law student at San Marcos, the oldest university in America, dating back to 1551. A very handsome fellow about 22 years old, he first came around one evening when we were giving a party for the poor children of the parish. After the fiesta, we went over to the offices and visited for more than two hours. Our discussion centered around the various needs of the parish and particularly the many impoverished youngsters in the area — a picture reflective of the Lima capital where 12,000 children from ages 9 to 15 walk the streets at night looking for work or just wandering, without a real home in which to find security and love.

"We are bombarded with social doctrine at the University and enter into all manner of heated debates," César remarked. "As you know, our universities here are like political centers where parties, platforms and philosophies are expounded. San Marcos is especially noted for this. Although there are relatively few strong Communist leaders out of a student body of 14,000, they make their voice heard and get their point across. Their enthusiasm and conviction, their zeal and drive are contagious and convincing. It's a shame there are not more spirited apostles of the Christian social order to counterbalance them!"

César and I analyzed the social ills of the world for quite awhile and gave some of our own "perfect solutions," but we always came back to the here and now of the parish, of those around us who are in need.

"Well, I certainly don't pretend to have many answers," my young companion said. "But I have something I can contribute and I think it's very important. We are always trying to assist these unfortunate ones by alleviating their material needs. However, we often forget about their spirit. They need something to help them forget, for a moment, at least; something to put laughter and lightheartedness into their dreary lives."

And so, César came around yesterday afternoon and offered his contribution to the poor children of the parish — a puppet show! What a delight to see him make those dolls walk and talk and sing and jump — yes, and even cry! But they cried with a sorrow that only added more gaiety and laughter to the evening. It was a thrill just to watch the youngsters having such a good time and to hear them laugh until tears came to their eyes. They were transported, transformed and, for one brief moment in time, there wasn't a care in the world!

Yes indeed, César and his puppets had truly contributed something very important and a whole auditorium of children was filled with the "lightheartedness" which he had promised to bring them. They were overjoyed with César's incomparable gift of the spirit.



“Can I keep the doll?”

A few days ago, we had the traditional Christmas party for the poor children of the parish. More than 500 youngsters, ranging from 6 to 17 years, participated in a variety of games and were having a ball as we distributed all sorts of gifts and goodies. Toward the end of the program, I took my place on the stage of our auditorium to assume the “important” role of *Maestro de Ceremonias* for our raffle of the bigger prizes.

Naturally, each prize winner was delighted with his good fortune. The raffle was just about finished when I drew the number of a lucky youngster by the name of Lucho. A lad of about 9, dressed in multi-stitched trousers and a well-worn shirt, Lucho literally bounded to the stage for his prize. He was already grabbing it before I realized that the doll I had in my hand was not exactly the best gift for a boy. But Lucho held onto the doll — rather, he imprisoned it! — with a determination which assured me he was not about to give it up.

There was universal laughter. Everyone was whistling and making fun of the tiny lad nervously clinging to his doll. I was amused myself but certainly wasn’t going to permit the youngster to suffer much more.

“*Un momento*. Give me the doll. We have a soccer ball left over in the box. I’ll trade you.”

This seemed like an easy, pleasant solution — but not to Lucho!

“Please, can I keep the doll?”

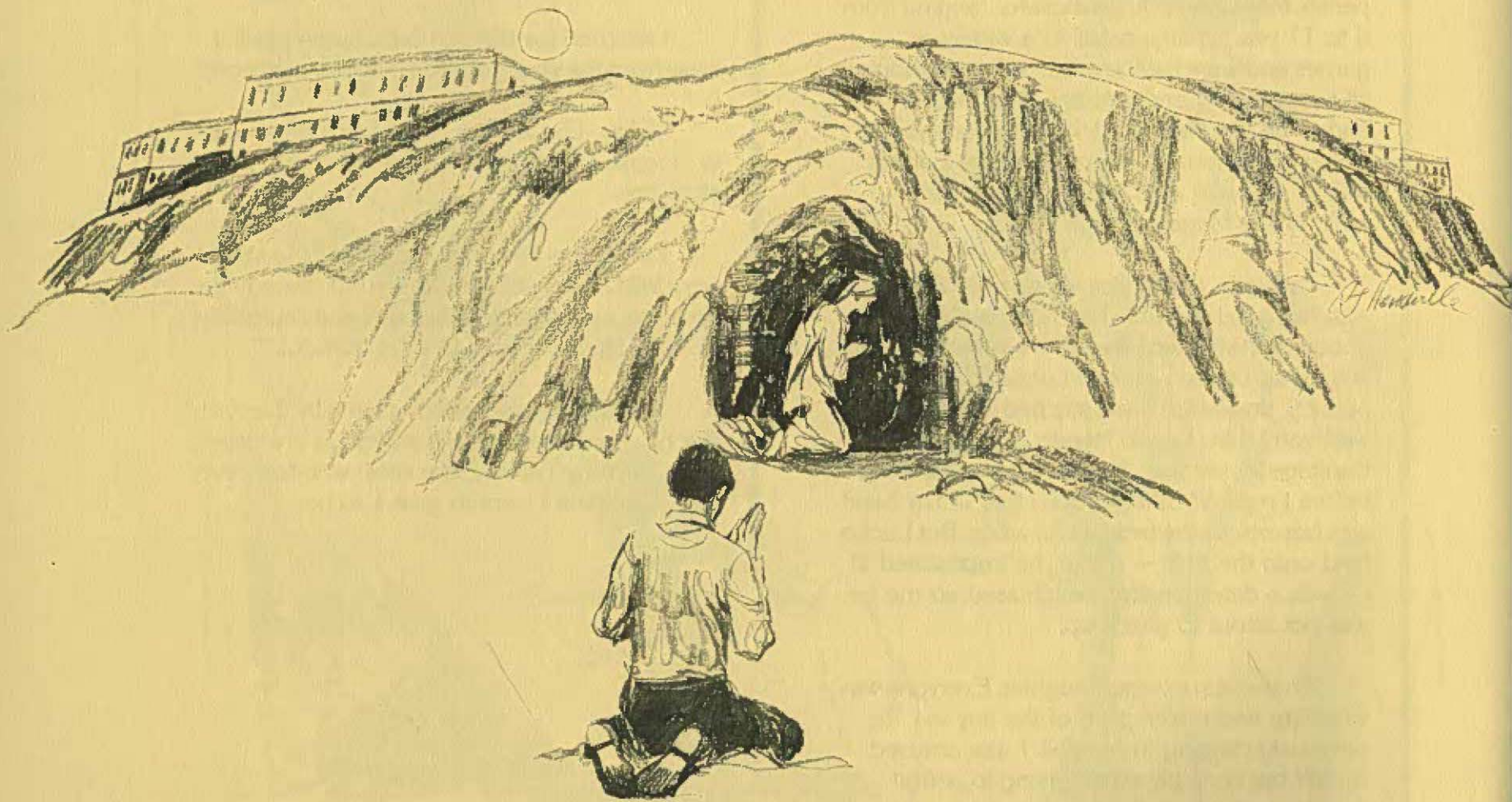
“But you don’t have to. Wouldn’t you rather have a soccer ball instead?”

I reached for the doll but couldn’t pull it away from the youngster’s tiny but powerful grip.

“Okay, Lucho, you can keep it if you want to,” I replied, thinking to myself, what an unusual attraction.

Lucho ran down the steps and the crowd went wild. I was still determined to remedy the situation, so I called the lad back and said softly: “Lucho, why do you want that doll?”

The little boy was nearly crying by this time. But he managed to reply, almost in a whisper: “Because I have a little sister who has never had a doll and I want to give it to her.”



I am writing these lines from the hell of *El Frontón*, Peru's Alcatraz-like prison on San Lorenzo Island in the Pacific. Sitting at a desk in the Inspector's office of this gloomy

penal colony, after several hours of ministerial work among the prisoners, I'm waiting for the boat which will carry me back to Lima, about half an hour's ride away.

The madonna of *El Frontón*

Above, in front of me, there is a blackboard on which are recorded the daily number of men who come and leave: 1,918 inmates are here right now. Outside, many of them are walking aimlessly about half-naked, undernourished, seemingly without interest of any kind, immunized against the suffocating smell of garbage and excrement and dead fish wafted across the Island by the winds of the sea.

Now, a bell is ringing the hour of lunch. From the open window of this office I can see the prisoners running with their small plates or cups to receive a nauseating mixture of beans, rice and noodles. Seated along the ocean's shore, in the middle of the soccer patio or upon the hill, everyone devours, with gusto, his frugal portion. Evidently, they have learned to discipline their palates and quiet their stomachs.

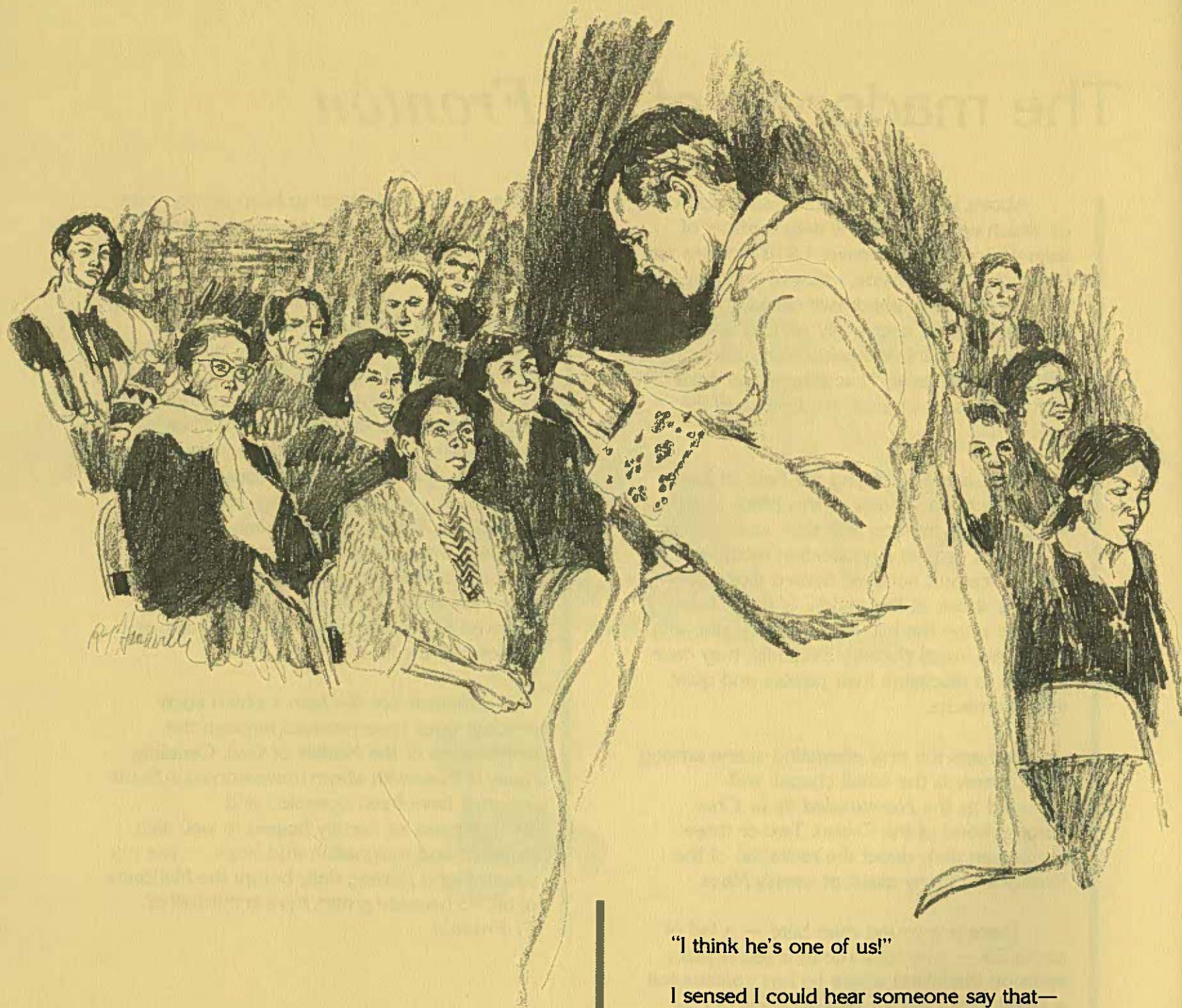
Perhaps the only alleviating scene among such misery is the small chapel, well-attended by the *Hermanidad de la Cruz* (Brotherhood of the Cross). Two or three gentlemen daily direct the recitation of the Rosary and many assist at weekly Mass.

There is a young man here — a lad of about 25 — who took me to a secret place apart on the Island where he has constructed a small grotto to Our Blessed Lady. As we stood there admiring his craftsmanship, he said softly, "Every day I come here to pray to the Virgin. I don't expect her to work a miracle for my release. I only ask her for sufficient

patience and resignation to keep up my spirit until my case is at least tried. I haven't even been proven guilty yet!"

Actually, I wasn't too surprised to discover that even in this hell there exists devotion to Our Blessed Lady. Homage to her is something reflected in the hearts and homes of thousands and thousands of devout people here in this Latin American culture which has always been so traditionally Marian. Some may look upon it as superstitious, superficial, impractical, exaggerated, misguided, without any real application to one's daily life. Be that as it may, this devotion to Mary has for centuries sustained these people in their faith, especially those who find themselves utterly deprived of ministerial attention or religious services of any kind.

Countless are the favors which such devoted ones have received through the intercession of the Mother of God. Certainly, many of those with whom I have worked in South America have been consoled and strengthened, or merely helped to wait with patience and resignation and hope — like my young friend praying daily before the Madonna of his homemade grotto, here in this hell of *El Frontón*.



"I think he's one of us!"

I sensed I could hear someone say that—and I wouldn't have blamed the patient one bit! I certainly was giving every sign of being somewhat irrational.

Inside a mental hospital

I was at Larco Herrera, the Peruvian mental hospital in Lima, and at this particular moment I was vesting for Mass. A large group of patients had assembled in the simple chapel of the huge institution and were patiently waiting for me to finish my antics and begin the services — but I just couldn't get organized!

Normally, I can vest for Mass in a matter of minutes; it's really an easy, uncomplicated procedure. But today in front of all those patients observing my every move, it was a real hassle, a frustrating challenge — and it seemed interminable.

Try as I might, I just couldn't find an alb that would fit me and I kept climbing into and out of those long, flowing white robes as though I were playing some sort of game. I could hear a few snickers and saw several smiles. The clock above me ticked away the minutes, timing me to see if I could break a record for the event. Nervously, I grabbed the last alb and began putting it on.

This time, I said to myself, I'm going to keep it on no matter how it feels or looks.

It was baggy (naturally!) but I tied it securely with the cincture — so tight, in fact, that I wondered if I'd ever get back out! Quickly, I hid the unsightly front with a mammoth chasuble. The day was saved . . . well, not entirely.

All went smoothly until the time for the homily. My audience was quiet and reasonably attentive and I thought I was doing fairly well. Suddenly, there was a groaning noise and a hefty woman fell unconscious into the aisle about three pews away from the alter steps.

"It's all right," the chaplain, Padre Martin, assured me. "Just continue as though nothing had happened."

Needless to say, it wasn't too easy to "continue as though nothing had happened," with this body lying in front of me surrounded by several patients and the hospital attendant. I surrendered and continued with the Mass. Afterwards, Padre Martin assured me that the lady was all right and that she was subject to these periodic seizures.

"Today, however, it was timed perfectly," he said jokingly. "I know how you tend to get carried away when you speak, so I arranged for Edith to have a 'fall out' in the middle of your talk. You can tell everyone that she just swooned when she heard you preach."

Following the services I visited the wards and met several of the patients and doctors. I found myself trying to enter into the secret world of these unfortunate ones, to sense the longing and frustration and loneliness they must feel. I reflected on our attitude toward the mentally ill. How frequently we are unsympathetic with their condition. And yet, this

too, is often but an illness, many times affecting very intelligent, hard-working individuals who have become too emotionally involved in their work, their preoccupations, their responsibilities, their loved ones, their own person.

These same individuals may even possess an understanding of life which actually surpasses the healthy person. This was brought home to me during one of the Sunday services when the patients were asked for their observations on the Gospel which had just been read to them. The particular passage spoke of Christ appearing to the Apostles, walking on the water. It reads:

Peter spoke up and said, "Lord, if it is really You, tell me to come to You across the water." "Come," He said. So Peter got out of the boat and began to walk on the water, moving toward Jesus. But when he perceived how strong the wind was, becoming frightened, he began to sink and cried out, "Lord, save me!" Jesus at once stretched out His hand and caught him. "How little faith you have!" He exclaimed. "Why did you falter?" (Matthew 14:28-31).

Following the reading, the patients were asked, "Would anyone like to comment on this Gospel passage?"

One of the women stood up and said:

"I think that this Gospel reflects our condition here. We are on a sea of suffering and

confusion. Like Peter, we ask Our Lord that we might walk on these waters, and Christ gives us the power to do so through the strength of our faith, our courage. But once we lose faith in Him, in ourselves and in our lives, then these waters can overcome us and gradually we sink into a state of despondency and despair."

If someone who is supposedly mentally ill can speak with such spiritual insight and wisdom, then certainly I shouldn't mind at all — in fact, I should be honored! — if, watching me climb in and out of those long, white albs, the patients at Larco Herrera were to declare, "I think he's one of us!"

The shoemaker down the block

It is a fact that the shoemaker
has been down the block
for many years and he has
been making shoes for
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A couple of blocks away from our mission compound of Santa Rosa, a humble shoemaker sits in his tiny, makeshift shop in the open air. Mingling his slight figure into a pile of shoes of every color and condition, style and design, he wields patiently, slowly and with a special tenderness, the few instruments of his craft. An interesting, lovable artisan, he lends a definite charm to the daily ambient where hundreds of people move in and out, hurriedly passing him by or thoughtfully exchanging a word of greeting.

Stopping by the other day, I took advantage of a free moment to have him sew a small tear in my oxfords. As I waited, I was fascinated by the countless shoes surrounding my shoemaker friend and wondered about the personal history each of these might well recount.

I could visualize in these shoes, all those people like this humble shoemaker with whom, as a missionary, I am united in a special way:

The shoemaker down the block

My little friend, Julio, over in the Childrens' Hospital who wouldn't let me get away yesterday without a promise ("Cross your heart!") to return on Saturday . . .

Serapio, the young blind student from the mountains, winning all sorts of scholastic honors at the Institute. "We blind ones have a saying," Serapio told me one evening, "that blindness is not a misfortune to lament, but rather a challenge to overcome." . . .

Ten-year-old Angel, always the first to launch his homemade "Gemini" into the Fall winds, carrying his youthful spirit far, far beyond to a world of dreams where his soul finds peace and floats in freedom and delight . . .

Antonina, the Italian lady around the corner, who gets all mixed up with Spanish but expresses herself so beautifully in a language of the heart . . .

The youngsters of our school who took up a collection last week and sent me the 36 *soles* (75¢) with a note that they were giving this "small token of love in order that there may be no more poor children in Peru." . . .

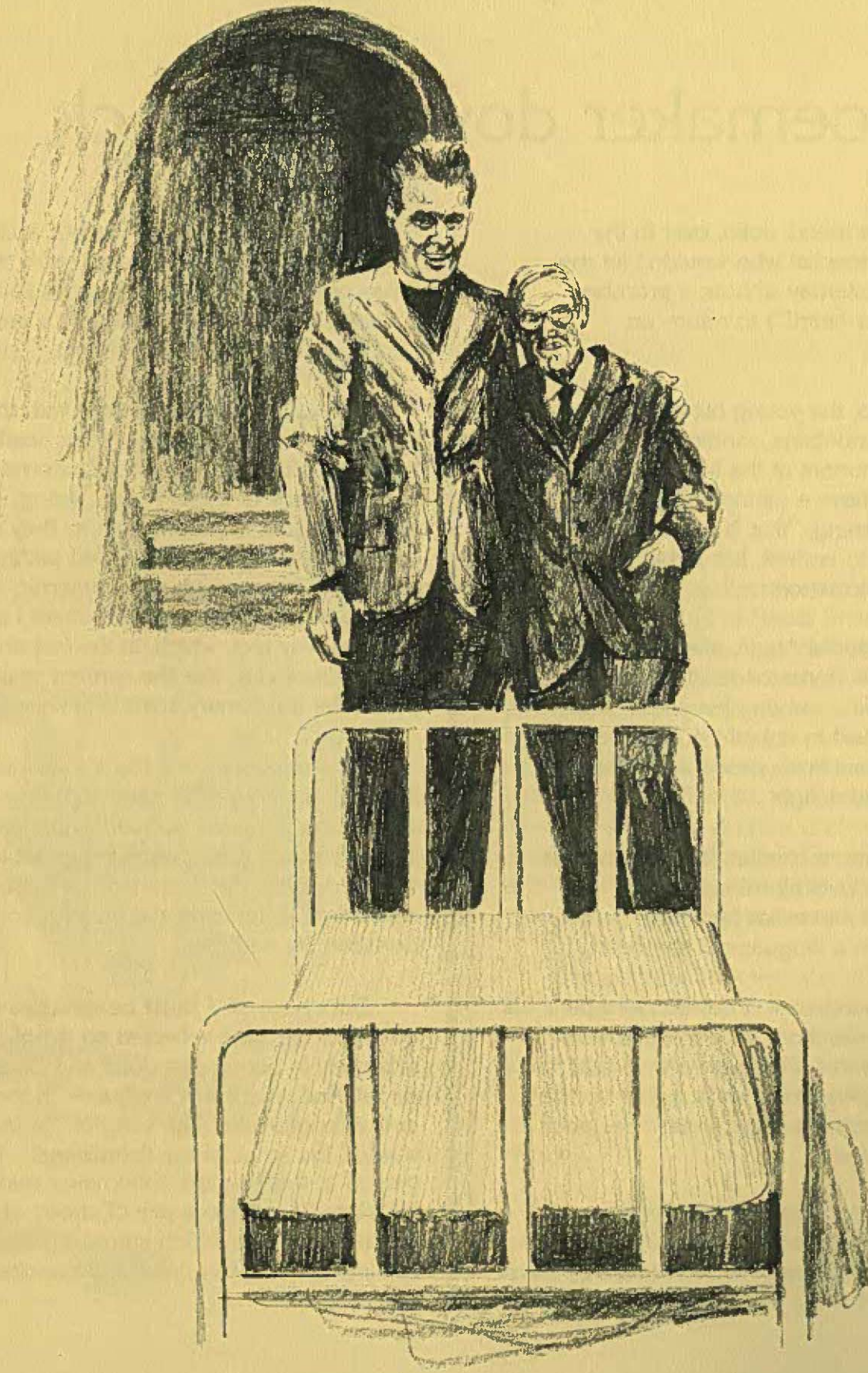
And two-year-old Carolina who before going to bed last night insisted on rubbing my forehead with her soft, tiny hand to give me a blessing.

Indeed, not only Carolina but each of these unforgettable ones bless me a thousand times over. It is more than my missionary vocation to be among them; it is a promise of happiness, fulfillment and reward.

I am committed to identify with these people, to interest myself in their needs, to appreciate their culture, their customs, their particular way of thinking and acting — to feel and suffer and hope and wait as they do. At times, I may seem to be carried swiftly forward with a zeal which is dynamic, restless and powerful, but the next moment I am dragging my feet, which, in the last analysis, are made of clay, like the earthen vessel in which the missionary spirit is enshrined.

As a missionary, my life is inexorably linked to all those who need someone to work with them, ever so gently and with love and solicitous care, toward the ennoblement of experiences, the deepening of faith, the expansion of horizons, the enrichment of Christian life and love.

But above all, I must be sensitive to the beauty of life itself, reflected so simply, so sublimely in people like Julio and Serapio, Angel, Antonina and Carolina — in the voice of the broom seller, the song of the fruit vendor, the smell of the fishmonger—in the person of this humble shoemaker mingling his slight figure into a pile of shoes which, like the human touch which surrounds him, is composed of "every color and condition, style and design."



The day Victor met Dolores

Well now, that's really something! What a beautiful way to meet one another! I'm continually amazed at the many little mysteries of life which are always unfolding themselves around here, but the incredible encounter of my two elderly friends, Victor and Dolores, is something special. These two people have never really known each other and yet, since yesterday, a very singular bond of love promises to unite them forever.

Victor is 67 years old. He has absolutely nothing and usually comes around merely to get a few *soles* for a meal. Poor fellow. His eyesight is so bad he can scarcely distinguish me through those thick, half-cracked (and always dirty!) glasses of his. But Victor is a very spirited guy and enjoys a hearty laugh — which is certainly more frequent than a good meal.

Dolores, on the other hand, has probably never wanted for a single thing in all her 95 years. She lives in a modest but well-furnished and neatly-kept home. Always surrounded with the affection of a closely-knit family, her final years have been made peaceful by the tender, loving care of her daughter and granddaughter. Perhaps the only thing Dolores shares in common with Victor is her near blindness — and the fact that she is as resigned and truly spiritual in her quiet, peaceful way as Victor is in his outgoing manner.

I've been visiting Dolores weekly for more than two years. Yesterday morning, I received an emergency call from her family and

arrived just in time to assist my friend as she calmly rendered her saintly soul into the hands of God. When I returned to the parish house, I found Victor waiting for me. He seemed surprisingly elated about something and began talking so fast I had to slow him down.

"Wait a minute, *por favor*. Let's go inside and you can tell me what it's all about." Victor followed me into the office. "Now, sit down there and go through it all again — slowly. And give me your glasses; they're filthy!"

As I began cleaning Victor's glasses, the excited gentleman informed me, gleefully, that a room was vacant at the Municipal Old Folks Home and he had been promised it. However, he had to bring his own bed that very day.

"That's great news, Victor, but, *caramba!* Where are we going to get a bed so quickly? I don't have that much money right now. Even if I did, we couldn't possibly purchase the bed and get out to the Home in such a short time."

I could see Victor's spirits drop. I think he recleaned his glasses with several good tears. We both sat there for a moment, in silence, trying to solve this particular problem. Suddenly, the phone rang.

"Padre Ricardo, this is Lucy. Do you have anyone who could use my Grandmother's bed and mattress? It's in excellent condition. We could certainly use it ourselves here in the house, but Grandma always said that when she

died she wanted her bed to go to some poor person who was not as fortunate as she; someone who scarcely knew the comfort of a peaceful sleep.”

“Lucy, your Grandmother is the quickest saint I ever knew. She’s already working miracles. I’ll be right over.”

Hiding my own excitement, I told Victor, “Just a minute; don’t go away. I’ve got to go out on a very important call but I’ll be right back.”

Victor really didn’t know just how important that call was until about 20 minutes later when I returned. I immediately went in to see my dejected friend and said proudly, “Victor, our problem is solved! Come out here and see what I have for you.”

Victor couldn’t believe it! He was almost bouncing like a child with excitement. I “stole” a couple of blankets and a sheet or two from the parish and, carrying the bed and mattress, we set out for the Old Folks Home. We were on our way to fulfill the “Last Will and Testament” of Dolores, and to bring peace, rest and contentment to Victor.

While Victor lives out his final months — or, God willing, even years — there at the Home, he’ll never know how that miraculous bed appeared so quickly. (I kept Dolores’ gift a secret). But, the poor old gentleman certainly will know some day when — after all his suffering and affliction has faded, his vision is

perfect and his broken glasses gone — he’ll enjoy a sight and a rest he has never experienced here below. And he’ll also discover the secret and solve the mystery of the miracle bed. I can see him already, thanking his unknown friend and benefactor, Dolores, as the two embrace one another. Yes, sir. That’s really something!

1. The first part of the paper discusses the importance of the study and the objectives of the research. It also provides a brief overview of the methodology used in the study.

2. The second part of the paper presents the results of the study. It includes a detailed description of the data collected and the analysis performed. The results are presented in a clear and concise manner, with appropriate use of tables and figures.

3. The third part of the paper discusses the implications of the study and the conclusions drawn from the results. It also provides a brief overview of the limitations of the study and the directions for future research.

4. The fourth part of the paper provides a summary of the findings and a final conclusion. It also includes a list of references and a list of figures and tables.

5. The fifth part of the paper is a list of references, which includes all the sources cited in the paper. The references are listed in a standard format, following the guidelines of the journal.

6. The sixth part of the paper is a list of figures and tables, which includes all the visual elements used in the paper. Each figure and table is accompanied by a brief description of its content.

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Celsa is dying. The thin thread of her enfeebled body is about to break; the suffering of her poor, humble life gradually diminishing; she has but a few borrowed moments left. I found her yesterday, at the back of a crowded *corralón* or alleyway. Her skeletal frame

worn thin by prolonged cancer, Celsa's agony seemed aggravated by a total absence of any personal care or serious attention.

Quietly, in this obscure, small, damp room, my poor friend lies covered with only a

A final rest for Celsa

threadbare sheet, both dirty and old. Alone, abandoned, motionless, she is incapable even of sipping the water I pour her from the tiny, cracked cup at her side. Slowly, patiently, almost falling from the side of the bed, Celsa is offering her soul to God. I take her body in my arms and place her in a more comfortable position.

Celsa's eyes half-open and she catches a blurred image of my figure. Recognizing me, her lips begin to move slowly, laboriously, in prayer. I reach for my oil stock and begin to give her the spiritual consolation of the final anointing and blessing:

Through this holy anointing may the Lord in his love and mercy help you with the grace of the Holy Spirit. May the Lord who frees you from sin save you and raise you up. Amen.

Celsa, in the name of God the Almighty Father who created you, in the name of Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, who suffered for you, in the name of the Holy Spirit, who was poured out upon you, go forth, faithful Christian.

May you live in peace this day, may your home be with God in Zion, with Mary the Virgin Mother of God, with Joseph, and all the angels and saints. Amen.

Death, suffering, agony, sorrow — all of these are a daily experience for me as a missionary; in fact, it is perhaps so common that I

lose my sensibility and, in my rush, my human sentiments fail to manifest that reverent solicitude and care, so valuable and so important in these last moments. But when there is added to this experience of affliction a picture of total abandonment — such as surrounded Celsa at that moment in a crowded, ill-smelling room — it is something truly impressive, deeply felt and not easily forgotten.

In a certain sense, we shall all die alone. The soul goes unaccompanied to an encounter with its Creator. Nevertheless, many of us will be humanly and spiritually consoled by the accompaniment of someone at our side, to encourage us, to strengthen us.

Thousands, however, like Celsa, pass from this life to the other, completely abandoned, entirely alone — in a passageway, a deserted park, a darkened room, perhaps at the corner of some out-of-the-way street. For these, as for Celsa, the echo of St. John's words in his apocalyptic vision of the Heavenly Jerusalem, resounds with a very special message of peace and tranquility.

“This is the dwelling place of God with man. He will wipe away the tears from their eyes; no longer shall there be death, nor mourning, nor sorrow, nor weeping of any kind for the former world has passed away.”

(Rev. 21:3-4)

