

Archdiocesan Mission of Cochabamba, Bolivia

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In the early 1960's, Latin American was faced with twenty countries and over 200 million people without sufficient clergy, religious, or trained catechists to meet their spiritual needs. Thus Pope John XXIII suggested that religious congregations and dioceses of the United States tithed ten percent of their members to Latin America. Archbishop James J. Byrne spoke several times to his priests about tithing priestly vocations. He promised that, for every ten priests ordained for the Archdiocese of Dubuque, a diocesan priest would be released for service in Latin America.

The Dubuque Archdiocesan mission came into being through two Dubuque priests already working in Bolivia. Father John Smith had been working with the Society of St. James since 1960 and Father Ray Herman as a missionary with Maryknoll since 1963. Through cooperation with Maryknoll, the Archdiocese of Dubuque, and the Archdiocese of Cochabamba in Bolivia, negotiations were made for the foundation of San Rafael Parish, named for the patron of the Archdiocese of Dubuque.

On July 15, 1965, Archbishop James J. Byrne of Dubuque and Archbishop Tarcisus Senner OFM of Cochabamba signed a contract establishing a new parish in Cochabamba. It was agreed that the Archdiocese of Dubuque would construct the buildings, support the project, and provide materials and personnel to run the parish. The Archdiocese of Dubuque took charge of the parish on January 1, 1966. Rev. Joseph Herard, Archdiocesan Director of the Propagation of the Faith, was the coordinator for the establishment of the parish.

Rev. Ardell Sodawasser was the first pastor of the new parish, and his assistant was Father Ray Herman. In 1966, Father Howard Miller joined the staff. Father Robert G. Winter arrived as another assistant in 1967. In 1968, Fathers Sodawasser, Miller, and Winter returned to the States from mission work, and Father Ray Herman became the pastor. Father John Smith, after eight years with the St. James Society in Bolivia, came to work in Cochabamba. In 1968, Father Leon Connolly arrived for a fruitful period of mission service lasting fourteen years.

Physical construction of the parish property continued during the next years. Donations from the archdiocese provided for the building of a catechetical center and parish chapel. A grade and high school were built and staffed. Later a daycare center and a rehabilitation center for persons with mental and physical handicaps were established.

In 1972, Father Leon Connolly became pastor of San Rafael. David Donovan began his ministry in Cochabamba in 1974 and remained until he was forced to leave Bolivia in the Revolution of 1980. In 1972, Father Ray Herman realized his longtime desire to work in the rural area of Bolivia with the peasant farmers, who were really the poorest and most oppressed people in the country. Father Herman visited the sixty communities attached to the pueblo of Morochata, trained catechists, and taught them many farming techniques. By remodeling an unused government hotel, he also set up a medical clinic and hospital.

On October 20, 1975, Father Herman returned to his parish house in Morochata after blessing the new hospital. While Father was sleeping, he was attacked and murdered. His alleged murderer was captured, but escaped jail and was never recaptured. The body of Father Ray Herman was returned to the Archdiocese of Dubuque, accompanied by Father Leon Connolly. Father Herman's legacy remains in Morochata, in San Rafael, and in all of Bolivia, and in the Father Ray Herman Peace and Justice Center at Loras College.

Throughout the years, other priests served as members of the pastoral team at the San Rafael Parish. These priests include Father Bernie Grady, Father Jim Miller, and Father L. Paul Ouder Kirk. Each has faithfully and courageously left his own special and definitive mark on the Bolivian mission. All of the priests who served in Cochabamba have become actively involved in Hispanic ministry in the Archdiocese of Dubuque.

After a visit to San Rafael in 1986 by Dubuque Archbishop Daniel W. Kucera, it was decided by the priest council that it was time to turn the parish over to the care of the Archdiocese of Cochabamba. On June 1, 1986, after two decades of dedicated mission work, the archdiocesan mission in Bolivia came to a close.

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