



# "A Shanty Song"

## The Missionary Journey of Father Martin Chambers

### The journey begins...

- Leaving home on July 8<sup>th</sup>.
- Loving family to support me.
- Lots of friendships built up over the years.
- Bishop Taylor and then Bishop Cunningham allowing me to take this 5 year appointment.
- Bound for South America.

## Leaving Home

Leaving home on July 8<sup>th</sup> was truly a hard thing to do. Over 15 years as a priest I had built up a lot of friendships and contacts in Stevenston, throughout Galloway Diocese and beyond, especially with HCPT. On top of that, I have a very close and loving family to support me and I was aware that leaving Scotland for the missions would be a wrench. On the flip side, however, I had been aware for many years of the

voice of God calling me to this kind of work. The opportunity came through the Missionary Society of St. James with Bishop Taylor and then Bishop Cunningham allowing me to take up this 5-year appointment.

Therefore it was with a load of anxiety and trepidation that I boarded the plane on July 8<sup>th</sup> bound for South America.

## Missionary Society of St. James

My first stop was to the Centre House of the St. James Society in downtown Boston, U.S.A. There I met up with the other new recruit to the Society, Fr. Allen Aganon, a priest from the Philippines who was also coming to the missions for the 5-year stint. In Boston we met the Director of the Society, Fr. Bob Thomas, who told us which country we had been assigned to work in: Allen was destined for Peru; and I would be

working in Ecuador. We were only in Boston for the weekend; the strangest experience of that period was the "Sending Mass" where myself and Allen were presented with our missionary crosses. The Mass was televised and took place at 7am on Sunday morning and there were only 6 people in the congregation. At the end of it all we had our Mission Crosses and were ready for the next step.

## Language School at Cochabamba, Bolivia

And so it was back to the school books and study time for the next 7 weeks as I took my place on the Spanish revision course on the Maryknoll Language School at Cochabamba, a busy city of some 750,000 people in the heart of Bolivia. I wasn't so much taken with the fact of having to study again but needs must and, in any case, it was good to meet up with other missionaries who were preparing in the same way

that I was. As is usual when a group of students get together, there was plenty of joking going on (yours truly was dishing it out and receiving plenty too) and we also had a good social life - Friday nights became the "night out". The way the system works at Cochabamba is that the students stay with Bolivian families and attend the School during the day. This was an excellent way of forcing us to practice the Spanish that we had learned in class. Moreover, the family I was staying with were very generous and kind and I had a great time being brought into

their family life - I was even brought in at the last minute to do a blessing at the daughter's wedding!

Although I had a very welcoming experience there, I was keen to get going with what I had really come down to South America for - the missionary life...

*"I wasn't so much taken with the fact of having to study again..."*

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*"... frogs, spiders and lizards that come around the house - an insight to life in the shanty..."*



*Typical straw housing in Ecuador*

## Arriving in Ecuador

I had thought that, when I arrived in Ecuador that the St. James' Co-ordinator for that country would take me around a few parishes in the first days and invite me to choose (that was the way they had worked in the past). But, no! I was met by Des Dalton, the Co-ordinator and Tom Oates, two priests with plenty of St. James' experience. And in a sacred moment at the Burger King of Guayaquil airport, I was asked to become Parish Priest of Nueva Prosperina, a shanty town on the poor outskirts of the sprawling city. Completely in the dark, I agreed - knowing that, if it didn't work out, I could move on somewhere else. Since there was no chapel house in Nueva Prosperina, I was to stay meantime with Tom Oates.

Arriving in the parish for the first time, I knew that this was home! It was what I expected and I knew that it was the

kind of place my family and friends back home expected that I was coming to. There are straw huts all around with families of up to 15 crammed into small houses. No running water means that water trucks arrive from 5am - their tooting of their horns means there is little need for an alarm clock. No telephone lines mean that mobile phones are not just the rage but a necessity for keeping in contact. On top of that, there is a very basic electricity system that every so often gets cut off - I'm getting used to walking around in the dark. Add to that the frogs, spiders and lizards that come around the house and you get a good idea of life in the shanty. Having said that, Tom Oates parish house where I am staying is extremely comfortable and he has made me very welcome. Thanks, Tom!



I have 7 chapels to attend to around the Parish of Nueva Prosperina so weekends are very tiring. The people are very enthusiastic to get involved and asking for people to make spontaneous prayers can often last for a full ten minutes as people fight to get their prayer heard. The singing is enthusiastic, we have Music Groups in some of the churches (in others I take my guitar) and everyone wants to join in - even although the singing is often way-off! What strikes me is that about half the congregation is made up of kids so I have to adjust the sermon accordingly, asking questions and getting them involved in the preaching as much as my Spanish allows!

## Parish Life



*The young people at a youth event. I'm the one in the middle!*

Another thing that is noteworthy is the catechism system that works in most parishes. For a predominantly Catholic country, it is a little strange that religious education is not allowed to be taught in schools so parishes become centres of religious education and catechism. In the parish we have two very-well organised catechism groups run mainly by young people (in their

20's). The catechism year runs parallel to the school year - April to January - so I am at the moment, gearing up for the big Confirmation and First Eucharist celebrations in December. I even had to construct an exam for the kids to see if they would be allowed to celebrate Confirmation and Eucharist - it was the system and, for the moment, went along with it. I am actually looking forward to the celebrations as they promise to be joyful days with the catechists organising most things - they turned up the other day wanting to paint the Church so I got stuck in too! The only thing about that particular day was that I immediately was going to celebrate Mass in another Church; so I celebrated Mass with shoes covered in white paint - what would my Mum say????



## Special Projects

Before leaving Scotland, Fr. Dominic Quinn (Motherwell Diocese) advised me to open up a bank account in case people at home wanted to donate to any special projects that I might undertake. Amazingly, by the time I was boarding the plane to come out, the total in the bank account stood at £5,000. This was increased by over £4,000 raised at the Seamill Hydro Ceilidh in September. And there have been other donations since - a boy's football team has donated their Christmas presents to Ecuador! I have been truly bowled over by the excited enthusiasm of people in Scotland wanting to support our poorer sisters and brothers. Having said that, there is much poverty all around, it would be easy to waste the money on false projects. This Charity Account (details later) is your money and I intend to use it as prudently as possible, responding to real needs within large projects as

and when they arise.

This money, of course, has allowed me to look around and respond to needs as they arise. The first project where I used the money was the Soup Kitchen. The Parish School had been running this project for about a year but had had to suspend it in the springtime for lack of funds. I saw this as a real opportunity. The Kitchen is now up and running again. It operates out of one of the straw huts in the Parish School. It feeds 100 kids each day, giving them soup, a main course and a drink; if they weren't fed in this way, they would go hungry and would be roaming the streets since their parents are out all day in the city looking for work. There are 2 ladies who run the Kitchen and their enthusiasm for the work is impressive. I have a meal there every so often - it is great food!



*Children enjoy themselves at the Food Kitchen!*



*Meet Alejandro*

## More Special Projects

A 2<sup>nd</sup> project where I have used the charity money is in the purchase of 6 guitars. Each Friday and Saturday evenings I run a guitar course mainly for the young people of the parish. When they saw that I played the guitar, they were so enthusiastic to learn and I thought that learning the guitar will be a real investment for their future social, parish and family life. I know that some of my friends back home will laugh at me "teaching guitar" since I am no expert, but I was always taught that the art of teaching was to stay one page ahead of the rest!



*The children in the cramped school*

would have been unjust simply to "throw" them off so we had to find and buy other places in the area for them to live.

Clearing the ground has vastly increased the area that we can build on, the work has already begun, and, by February, the first phase of the new-build will be complete.

A 3<sup>rd</sup> project where I have used the charity money was in preparing the land for the building of a new parish school. Basically the school has been operating out of cramped straw huts for the 2 years of its existence. They have been unable to build a proper school since 3 families had invaded the land at the back of the school. We needed to move the families off the land. However, it

Other projects will arise and I will continue to look out for ways of using the money. However, it has to be said that these projects would not have taken place had it not been for your generosity in helping the Guayaquil needy.

*"...I have used some of the charity money in preparing the land for the building of a new parish school."*





Ground for Church and house

# Building a Church and House

As yet I haven't been able to take up residence in the Parish where I have been posted. I do not have a house or proper Church (we are saying Mass in a make-shift hut). In itself, a house and Church are not the be-all-and-end-all of my work here, but to actually be resident in Nueva Prosperina will be a great advantage. We will need a large bag of cash for this project; if anyone knows of any special way, in which the money for this large project can be raised, please let me know!

## Newsletter & Donations

If you know of anyone who would wish to receive a copy of the newsletter, please let my sister Claire know.

If anyone would like to make a donation please make cheques payable to Fr. Martin Chambers and send to my sister Claire. Your help is much appreciated.

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## And Finally...

My life here has not been without funny incidents. I choose two - the rest can wait till I get home.

Early on, just after I had started driving, I was out and about in the Parish jeep and got lost in the city - naturally! Well, having been a good Scout, I thought I had my bearings and decided to do a quick U-turn. Unfortunately I didn't see the Policeman waiting for me. As he leaned into the car telling me what a grave error I had committed, I began to fear when he told me that it was \$70 (£50) fine and a further \$100 for not carrying my licence - I only had about \$30 with me. I knew that haggling or

"paying off" the police was always an option but I didn't want to introduce the idea too early in case I would incur a further fine. He stood there for about 15 minutes asking how I thought we could resolve this. "How would you resolve it in your country?" he asked. "Well, sometimes" I replied (making it up) "we pay an on-the-spot fine". Naturally being a good Ecuadorian cop he replied that that would be a good way of resolving the matter. He ended up \$30 richer and we ended up good friends --he asked about his daughter's Baptism and said we could go to see the local football team playing. I haven't seen him for dust!

The other incident occurred after a hectic Sunday Mass schedule - 5 Masses over rough terrain. By Sunday evening I am shattered. This particular Sunday I had taken my Mass kit out the car so that I could clean it but was getting on with other tasks around the house. In any case after about an hour I had to go out again in the car...at which point, I duly ran over my Mass kit. May it rest in pieces!

## Thank You!

Can I just end by saying how grateful I am for all your support. I do miss being at home among you all, family and friends. However, I hope that, through

e-mail contact and this newsletter, you also are able to share in this missionary journey that the Lord has asked us to undertake.



May God bless you and your families this Christmas and New Year!

Martin