

*The Road Less Traveled*  
*Reflections of a Spaniard on a Trip to Bolivia*

*The Richest City in the Country*

Our group, nine members from Saint Joseph's University, arrived in Santa Cruz after a long flight from Philadelphia, tired but eager to start our immersion in Bolivian culture. We stayed at a Jesuit retreat center on the outskirts of the city. There was such a big contrast between the comfortable homes we had left in the States and the Spartan accommodations, yet since we had been warned, we were thankful to have a very small private room with a cot, warm blankets, a table and a chair. Down the hall were the bathrooms with running water and some fickle warm water in the showers. So what if the sinks were out in the hallway and the water only trickled from the faucets, we weren't supposed to drink the water anyway—not even to rinse our mouths—it would make it easier to use the water bottles. We never figured out when the showers would be warm. We could see some tanks on top of the roof and assumed that the sunshine served as the heater. The first ones to shower, preferably in the afternoon, should be the lucky ones, right? But it wasn't always that way—just another excitement in our day.

The grounds were quite pretty, with some palms, grapefruit trees full of fruit and other trees we didn't recognize, almost a paradise to us. Despite the approaching winter, there were some plants in bloom and the grass was green. A cold front, which had settled in that part of the country, meant less mosquitoes. They call the chilly winds *surazos* because they come from the south, from the Patagonian pampas in Argentina. In the distance we could see the mountains of

the Cordillera Oriental and closer to us, the tops of some taller buildings. We liked sitting on the benches in the shade, waiting for the next activity or writing in our journals. For the time being, this was home to us weary travelers.

We did love the food, the soups in particular, and all the cooked vegetables and fruits. The desserts were tasty too, and soon we were used to the coca tea with each meal, highly recommended for the *soroche*, the altitude sickness, never mind that Santa Cruz is a mere four hundred meters above sea level. Thanks to the technologically savvy in the group we were able to connect the small computer in the office to the web, and we felt fortunate to have a couple of minutes to send greetings to our families.

According to my guide book, Santa Cruz is the richest city in the country, although we had seen lots of poor areas on our way from the Viru-Viru Airport. In fact, the roads were in disrepair, clogged with trucks, SUVs and buses making their way in the endless traffic circles, with people hanging out of the doors going to work. I saw an interesting and controversial Bolivian film last year (the racy title alone, *Sexual Dependency*, gives you an idea of the content), which took place in Santa Cruz, and I recognized some of the places where the young gathered, like the McDonald's and the Burger King. In some ways it could be any American city with plenty of places to have fun or get into trouble, only more chaotic and unpredictable. For example, unbeknown to our hosts, there was some very disturbing graffiti outside the very walls of our residence: "En caso de violación, relájese y disfrute", in case of rape, relax and enjoy it. Paradise lost.

We visited several schools sponsored by Fe y Alegría, our host institution. In preparation for our trip we had learned that Fe y Alegría is "a movement for integral popular education and

social development, whose activities are directed to the most impoverished and excluded sectors of the population.” We knew from our reading materials that it was funded in Venezuela in 1955 and that at present it serves over a million people a year in almost two thousand different centers. We were familiar with its philosophy of social and educational justice as well as liberation theology, or “the personalization of the new generations, deepening their consciousness of their own human dignity, promoting their free-self determination and their sense of community.” The commitment made by the Jesuits through funding and human resources was also well-known to us. But it was something else seeing these centers up close and personal. One of the first things we learned there is that a teacher makes less than \$100.00 a month, not nearly enough to live on even in such a poor country as Bolivia.

One school had programs in the afternoons for children with Down’s Syndrome and others with learning disabilities. We visited during parent-teacher conferences and most of the mothers (we saw very few fathers) brought their children and introduced them proudly to us. They had a kiln for their ceramics, sewing rooms, wood-working equipment and community gardens. The children had made arts and crafts projects as gifts for Mothers’ Day. The older students could even make furniture and sew their own clothes. The Santa Teresa nuns who showed us around told us that children like these would have been ostracized a few years ago. We laughed with them and remarked that even the children knew how to use the challenging Spanish subjunctive and could speak much more fluently than our bunch of *gringos*! By the end of the afternoon even the shyest ones wanted their pictures taken with us. They trusted us implicitly because their teachers told them that we were friends.

## Magical Realism

One unforgettable place we traveled to was ten hours away from Santa Cruz in the southeastern corner of Bolivia, close to its frontier with Paraguay. Parque Nacional Kaa-Iya del Gran Chaco almost sounded like Lion-Country Safari or some of the entertainment centers where I took my own children when they were little. We did see all kinds of animals, including familiar ones: cows, dogs, pigs, horses and some exotic ones as well: *guanacos* (a kind of llama), *antas* (a hippo-like animal but smaller), *chanchos salvajes* (a sort of wild boar). The problem was that the animals were all in the so-called road. In the 1930's the Chaco was the sight of a war for the boundaries with Paraguay. Now, situated in a national park, this is where many of the Guaraní indigenous people live on 800.000 hectares of land given to them by the government to farm.

We left very early in the morning to make it on time to Charagua, where we were expected for lunch at another Fe y Alegría school. The road leaving Santa Cruz was paved and peaceful, but it soon became a dirt road and a deserted place. Innocently, I thought at first that the road was under construction—heaven knows that it needed some repairs—in fact, we did not see another paved road until three days later, on our way back. Fortunately, the van was very comfortable and there was plenty of room for us, Javier, our guide, Rocky, the driver and his mysterious friend, Juan Carlos. I say this because we didn't know what his job was or why was he coming on the trip. With a false sense of security, we hoped he was a mechanic, since our van seemed to have something wrong with one of the tires. We even bought a special tool from a stand on the side of the road. Now, if people were selling tools, you know there was a chance we'd need them.

We were told repeatedly how lucky we were that it wasn't raining. It seems that the south winds are cold but don't bring rain. When it rained the roads were impassable.

"Well, it had rained a few days ago" said Javier, when we reached a spot where the river had washed out the road.

Before we could respond, the van made its way across the current, something that happened a few more times during the trip. After a while, we were used to it and continued our chatter unperturbed or sang the songs that Guy, another Spanish teacher in the group, had printed in Spanish for us. Our plans to write in our journals or read were not very realistic on this bumpy road. At one point we could see a taxi stuck in the mud. Three men were pushing it, but it wasn't moving. Javier stopped and immediately the men in our group joined forces and pushed the car free. Old-fashioned chivalry is still thriving in Bolivia, and now we were into the culture in one more way.

Just when we were feeling so proud of ourselves, we arrived at a construction area where a bridge was closed to traffic. We sat in silence as our guide rattled on in Spanish that there wasn't a problem, we would use the railroad bridge. At times like this there wasn't an advantage to understanding the language; I would rather not have known what we were up to. It helped that the train only ran three times a week, but it didn't help that the bridge was so high over the river Parapeií. Talk about altitude sickness! I can only compare this experience to getting into a car-wash, but instead of putting the vehicle in neutral, when our wheels were properly aligned, the driver floored the gas pedal. Lion-Country-Safari meets the white knuckle roller coaster.

By the time we arrived to Charagua, Sister Carmen Julia, a nun from Spain, was nervously waiting for us. She had prepared a veritable feast of soup, salad, vegetarian lasagna

and *creme caramel* for dessert. We were like children, giggling with the excitement of the eventful trip and also fearful since we knew it would only get more exciting. Buried in the park, Charagua is a cozy little town, the only one we'd see in three days. Sister Carmen Julia had some textiles for sale that were made by the indigenous people in the region. Each of them has a personal history that can be read in its design. The colors and dyes are bright and made from natural fruits and seeds. We bought some as gifts for our friends back home.

The end of May is close to the winter solstice in South America, so the days were short. Before we knew it, it was getting dark and we were a long way from Kopere, the first boarding school we were to visit. It was an *Arakuarendamí*, a place for learning, in the Guaraní language. Most of us fell asleep. When I woke up the van was surrounded by children, like bees around a beehive, screaming and smiling in the night. No dream we could ever have would have been more magical than seeing those young faces full of wonder and excitement staring at us through the windows. Once we were out of the van and Rocky had turned off the lights, we were in complete darkness, but somehow, the children could see us, and holding on to our hands they led us to the school yard. Javier rigged up a portable transformer and suddenly there was some miraculous light.

They had prepared an unbelievable *fiesta* for us. The children recited poems, sang songs, danced traditional indigenous dances, playing their own music. At one point, they put on animal masks, which they had constructed, and acted out the story of the *caporal de Potosí*, based on the harsh treatment of the slaves in the mines. Later they would lead us by the hand and soon we had joined them in a *cueca*, a big, frenetic circle of movement and laughter. We were smitten. The dinner of meat, *yuca* (a potato-like root) and rice was also served by the children. We took their

pictures with our Polaroid camera; some of them had never seen a photo of themselves and were in awe of their own faces. To them digital technology was not as special as instant gratification.

Some of the parents had made the trip to the school just to meet us. I spoke to Luis Alberto, who had come some thirty kilometers on horseback with his wife and baby. They had seven other children, six at this center. It is a big sacrifice to send the children to school. On one hand, they miss them terribly, on the other, they need them to work at home to get all the daily chores done. Without electricity or running water they often go a long distance to find water. Additionally, they have to look wood for the cooking fire, grow all their food and make most of their clothes. But they are aware that if their children don't go to school, they will never know another way of life. Hermelinda, one of their daughters, is fifteen and she wants to be a doctor or a nun.

“Why not be both?” I asked her.

She told me that in Izozog girls who do not attend school marry at twelve. Then their parents are relieved to have one mouth less to feed. I was amazed at the level of socialization of these children. Each of them seemed to have “adopted” one of us and in broken Spanish (their first language is Guaraní) they communicated with us. Saying good-bye, though, is the same in any language; we all cried.

### *Soy Evangélica*

The school where we stayed in Izozog was much larger and better equipped than Kopere. Some of us (much to the chagrin of the others) even had our own rooms and a private toilet

which worked a couple of hours a day. No one had electricity after nine p.m., which we found out upon our arrival, when we were given a candle and matches. Our visit was equally well-received here, although in a different way. For example, during breakfast the older students were butchering a large animal (was it a cow? I couldn't look) which would be our meals for the next two days.

Sister Benita, another wayward Spaniard, showed us the school grounds. The children had well-constructed rooms, playgrounds and even a small library, built with funds from Euskadi, the Basque government in Spain. One of their proudest accomplishments is the *chacro*, a community vegetable garden that the students maintain. They had planted all kinds of peppers, *yuca*, tomatoes, papaya, carrots, oranges, beets, sugar cane, corn. Given the semi-tropical nature of the land just about anything would grow. They had also designed an irrigation system. Marty, our food marketing expert, was avidly taking it all in, including some of the *ají* or chili peppers. The idea is that the students will go back to their communities and share their knowledge. We were surprised to find out that in this area of the country Catholics are a small minority. Most of the families are Evangelical, and there are also some Mennonites like those we had seen on the road from Santa Cruz.

“But we all respect each other,” Sister Benita assured us, “we don't have problems getting along.”

We met the students' leaders and the town elders and we spoke with some women representatives. In all their activities they showed a great deal of pride in their culture and traditions. We even learned a few words in Guaraní: *puama* (*buenos días*), *yasoropai* (*gracias*). Their English vocabulary was better than ours in Guaraní. We wondered how long this isolated



community could last. We heard that the World Bank already built a small airport not far from the school's land, and we feared that tourism could not be far behind (even if they'll have to build a better road before then). Linda mentioned the implicit irony that in case of a nuclear war the only survivors would be self-reliant, primitive groups like these.

The students had also planned a party for our last evening there that took place in the patio of the boys' dormitory. They had balloons, decorations, taped music, a few lights and a lot of style. Their costumes for some of the dances, which were familiar to us already, were sophisticated and elaborate with scary masks and matching outfits. Our dance in Kopere in the dark seemed even more innocent now. Amazingly, after the indigenous numbers were over, a "traditional" school dance broke out with *salsa* and *samba* sounds. In no time the boys were inviting everyone to the dance floor in a formal and reserved way. Cathy, the youngest member of our group, was in high demand. I noticed that Rocky (with his driving gloves off for a change) and his friend had joined us; they had cleaned up and smelled of after-shave. So that was it, Juan Carlos had come for the party! Some of the girls would not dance. Sister Benita explained that the most observant Evangelicals are not allowed to and the boys don't insist. I wished I had not been so self-conscious about dancing, and had joined in the festivities. The student leader was making the rounds and when he came to ask me to dance, I quickly replied that I was Evangelical, hiding my awkwardness:

"*Soy evangélica*" and he moved on to a friendlier dance partner.

*!Ay Dios Mío!*

Coming back to Santa Cruz we were quieter and reflective. It was hard to digest all we had seen. We felt tired from lack of sleep and hadn't had a shower in three days. Although we were ashamed to admit it, we missed the comforts of our simple residence, our home away from home. Perhaps because it was a Sunday, the road seemed busier and less menacing. A young woman, Debra, hitched a ride with us to Charagua. She was a doctor doing her year of service with the Guaraní people. She was proud of her work with them, but at the same time felt frustration with the lack of supplies and resources. On our way back two little girls flagged our van to get to school. They looked to be six and eight years old, but they were actually older, ten and twelve-children here are small for their age. They had Little Mermaid T-shirts on, and I wondered if they even knew the story. In fact, they both seemed to have lost their voices and were shy and quiet the entire ride, maybe because their Spanish was only rudimentary. We did see a smile on their faces when we offered them some candy and Oreos, which they immediately opened and ate in two parts. Maybe they knew more than we thought.

We couldn't believe how far they had to go to get to school, and sometimes they'd walk all the way. There is an innocence in these children which is very endearing. A situation like this would be impossible to imagine in the United States. At the same time, they are very vulnerable. In one school we have seen pictures of missing children and posters warning parents of kidnapping and illegal trade in human organs. Aside from all the children we visited in schools, we often saw students in uniforms going about in groups, but there weren't many children playing in the streets, as you often see in other Latin American countries. Being a child in

Bolivia seems to be a serious proposition; they either start working at a very early age or, if they are lucky, go to school, no matter how difficult it is to get there.

And there we were, full-fledged adults, dreading the crossing of the railroad bridge. In some ways it was harder coming back, because we knew what was waiting for us. Two or three times we thought we were approaching it, only to see the long dirt road ahead of us again. Going over it initially had been unexpected and sudden, but not this time around. By then we were teasing Rocky and clapping at each hurdle: a strayed cow, an overflowing creek, a mud slide. We often used humor to get us through the difficult days. There were moments of hilarity that only our group would appreciate. One of the nicest parts of a trip like this is the bonding that takes place. We really enjoyed each other's company and respected one another's weakness whether it was fear of snakes, wild dogs, mosquitoes, outhouses, or intestines in our soup.

I could never understand the Hispanic comic on TV's *Saturday Night Live* who screams *¡Ay Dios mío!* Why was it funny? I couldn't figure it out until we had to cross the bridge again. It became our password to the realm of the unpredictable aspects of this trip. When we arrived at the railroad bridge there were families wearing their Sunday best strolling about. Some people were fishing from the highest part of the bridge. Small children teetered dangerously from it, and we were afraid to cross it? Again, with Juan Carlos' help (he had earned his keep after all), Rocky made his way onto the railroad tracks and we passed over the bridge while some kids waved farewell to us.

*“¡Ay Dios mío, qué país!”* What an unbelievable country!

## *Lost in the Dump*

In my trusty travel guide it says that Cochabamba, due to its mild weather, is the city of eternal spring, where the swallows never leave and the flowers are always in bloom. It's higher and drier than Santa Cruz by some two thousand feet, so bit by bit we were getting acclimated to the altitude (and drinking more *coca* tea). *La casa de la juventud*, the youth center where we stayed, was certainly idyllic with a gorgeous courtyard full of palms, a view of the Andes' peaks and a flowing fountain in the middle. Our rooms were arranged in suites with private bathrooms (and warm water!) and a central room for meetings, where a *refrigerio* (a tasty snack) was waiting for us when we arrived. The chapel, so peaceful and quiet, constructed in natural woods, seemed more like an Eastern place of meditation. But, as we all know, every paradise has its glitch and the book also warns the intrepid traveler about the infamous dogs of Cochabamba. It seems that there are packs of wild animals that roam the city day and night looking for some tasty morsel.

Now I have to confess that I am the one who is afraid of dogs. My mother was bitten by one when she was pregnant with me, and I was born with this hang-up, probably from hearing about my mother's experience over and over. And sure enough, from our first night there I could hear loud barking and growling outside the walls of our residence. It sounded like the howling of wolves fighting among themselves. One morning, someone asked if we heard the shots at night. We guessed that some neighbors, tired of the noisy, mean dogs had shot at them. So much for the placid swallows!

One afternoon, on the way to a technical school on the other end of town, we took a turn

through what we thought was a short cut, but it turned out to be the city dump. At first we didn't even know that it was a dump, since so many roads are not paved in Bolivia. Then our van got stuck in a particularly bad spot and we quickly volunteered to push, since we knew from experience how it was done-we weren't a bunch of quick learners for nothing! But no, it wasn't necessary, there was simply too much weight in the van, so we just needed to get out and walk, and our driver would meet us on the other side. I guess we were a bunch of overfed Americans. As soon as we started walking, some skinny, big dogs appeared and moved in a determinate fashion toward us. John Jewel (and he is precious) was next to me and I confessed immediately.

“You are afraid of dogs, really? I had no idea.” he said.

The worst part was that, somehow, the dogs sensed my fear and took some morbid pleasure in coming closer and closer to us, looking at my ankles. Luckily, the van made it up the hill just in time and we climbed back into the comfort of the air-conditioning before being mauled alive.

I felt sad. Not only did I have to confess to a private foible, but the whole dump scene was depressing. The fact is that the dump didn't much look like one. It resembled any of the many roads we had traveled: difficult to get through, unpaved, unkempt, uneven. The saddest part was that this was a dump with hardly any trash. All of it had been picked over, carted away, taken out of there, used for something else and probably eaten too. What little bit was left had been fought over by the hungry dogs. Little wonder then that they spent the nights barking away, howling in desperation.

## Quechua Rock

Without a doubt, the most moving day of the trip for me was the one we spent in Tiraque, a small Aymará village, an hour away from Cochabamba. We left Lake Alalay and soon reached the *altiplano*, the highlands, where it was no longer spring. Strong, cold winds combined with the high altitude, made it feel like the approaching winter, which it was. Little Carlos and his wife, the caretakers of the residence, had packed us lunch. We joked saying that *los chanchitos van de excursion*, the little pigs go on a picnic (take it from me, it's funnier in Spanish). They were taking such good care of us, spoiling us really, and we knew they had planned some kind of a surprise for that evening, our last one there.

Our leader, Ann Marie, was very pleased when we arrived at the school, because the improvement was evident. Two years before, the boarding school didn't even exist and now there were several big new buildings and others under construction. It was so reassuring for us to hear that some kind of progress was indeed possible. Once again, a person from Spain—this time a young, lay woman, Isabel Pons—was the director of the school. Although she is a mathematician by training, she was explaining all about the greenhouses the students had built. Traditionally, due to the harsh climate in this region, the Aymará people have only grown corn, *quinua* (a grain used to make flour) and a few other grains. Now they are learning through their children that they can use greenhouses to grow all kinds of leafy vegetables, which improve their diets and make them self-sufficient. The students had planted spinach, kale, different types of lettuce, carrots, radishes, potatoes. The purpose of the Fe y Alegría schools is to teach them, in addition to academic subjects, life skills that can be shared later with their communities, while

preserving their traditions, culture and language.

Isabel is from Cataluña, a region in Spain very similar to Valencia, where I was born, and immediately we were speaking in Catalanian, our common regional language. She had been in Tiraque two years and had one more to serve. She missed her family terribly, although her parents came to visit last Christmas and a sister was about to come for a few weeks. I was deeply moved by the level of Isabel's commitment to the Bolivian people, and I wondered what it was like to live in such an isolated place, so far from her home. She confessed that she, too, often wondered what she was doing there. Many of her friends in Spain have gotten married and have started their own families. She felt that her life was on hold, but then she looked at the students and it all made sense.

The Aymará children are beautiful. The girls were dressed in traditional short *polleras* (skirts) made from velvet, in dark, rich colors: aubergine, navy, burgundy, topped with a white lace or embroidered blouse and a warm sweater over it. They comb their long, shiny, black hair in two thick braids which they pull to one side. Their faces, with a natural blush on their cheeks, gleam in the sun. The boys kept their distance from the girls, not only in the dorms but also in the dining room and during their games in the school yard. As expected, their rooms were messier than the girls', although, interestingly enough, the boys were the ones washing the dishes (I could sense Isabel's direction here). At lunch time all sang a sweet blessing, which our own Father George found very moving.

Both boys and girls were shy in front of the camera at first, until they witnessed the magic of Polaroid, and then we couldn't take enough pictures of them: with their best friends, with their siblings, with a favorite teacher, with Isabel, with big Carlos, our host, with one of us

*gringos...* and they'd cover their faces laughing. It was endless; we took pictures until we ran out of film. Since I didn't have a Polaroid camera, I walked around taking other photos. Some students were playing soccer or basketball, oblivious to the picture-taking pandemonium. The older ones stood in circles speaking Aymaran among themselves. It's strange, but we never could tell how old they were. The younger ones seemed small for their age, but the older ones, the girls in particular, looked mature for their years, almost like short women already. Although, despite the physical maturity, all were shy and seemed very naïve and vulnerable.

“*Son buenos chicos*” Isabel repeated proudly, telling us what good kids they all were.

Recess time was almost over and the previously camera-shy children were now in hysterics, still posing in different configurations. I was too sad to say good-bye, moved to tears and full of emotions that I haven't yet figured out completely. Was it A) Nostalgia for a more innocent time in my own country? (I do remember well the poor children in Franco's Spain). B) A desire to help these people like Isabel was doing? (Linda had mentioned that Isabel reminded her of me, a younger alter-ego). C) A sense of futility and frustration thinking that I couldn't make a difference? (How could I get away from my own responsibilities at home, where my own husband was battling cancer?) D) Pride in being a Spaniard like Isabel, or was it guilt somehow? Most likely it was E) All of the above.

That evening I was moved again during our reflection time. I was trying to explain my conflicting feelings to the group and what it is like to be a Spaniard in Latin America. Suddenly we were interrupted by Big Carlos and Little Carlos who announced our almost forgotten surprise. They led us in the dark to an area of the courtyard which we hadn't seen before, a sort of multi-purpose room, *un salón de actos*, with a stage, where six young women started singing and



playing Andean music. A long table with small candles, flowers, all kinds of snacks (even some wine!) and a chair for each of us were set up in front of the stage. Now it was Ann Marie's turn to cry, and the rest of us smiled with our mouths and eyes wide open. We knew they were planning a surprise, but we had no idea it would be such a professional event. The women wore white, tight pants with revealing red tops in different ethnic patterns; quite a contrast to the demure young girls in Tiraque. They played guitars, *charangos* (a small string instrument), *queñas* (flutes) and different types of indigenous instruments. They could sing in Quechua and Spanish, and they'd mixed traditional rhythms with rock beats. They were stunning! At one point I recognized the *cueca* that the children had performed for us in the schools and this time I didn't wait to be asked to dance. One by one, all of us, with our friends from Cochabamba, big, handsome Carlos included, held hands and joined the dancing around the room.

During the intermission we found out that the group's name is *Naira* (which means eyes in Quechua) and they've been playing together for several years. One of the women is an attorney, two have medical careers and the others are professionals as well. The attorney's mother is their agent and she was busy selling us their latest CD. I have listened to it many times since we got back; it is quite trendy. Some of the cuts, like *Chuntunquí* and *Taquirarí*, are strictly traditional, while others—*Bosa*, *Son cubano*, *Instrumental*—border on rock. It represents a mixture of indigenous traditions and contemporary traits that can be found in many aspects of Bolivian culture; it is a new form of *sincretismo*, if you will.

## *Touching the Heavens / Tocando el cielo*

La Paz is the most complex city we visited. In some ways it's a modern place, noisy and polluted, with tall buildings, frenetic traffic, a big airport. On the other hand, one can see many people—particularly the women—dressed in the ethnic manner (*polleras*, bowler hats, *ahuayos*, the carryall textiles across their backs), some beautiful *plazas* and official buildings all of which probably haven't changed much since colonial times. The international airport is up above La Paz, which is already over 3,500 meters in altitude (almost 12,000 feet, or four kilometers over sea level). This area, called El Alto, is a city in itself, with 700,000 inhabitants who have arrived from the countryside hoping to make it in the big city, but who had to settle in what is mostly an overcrowded slum. Suffice it to say that it's a city of contrasts.

On the road from the airport we stopped to see the view which is breathtaking. This is true of many places in Bolivia; from a distance things can be beautiful, but the closer one gets, the more evident the problems are. Panoramic views are often spectacular; close-ups can be very painful, when one can see the poverty from front-row seats. As we stood there watching La Paz, gleaming in the early morning sunshine and clinging to a huge canyon with the snow peaks of Mount Illimani in the background, we were awestruck. Chris, the only African-American in our group, stood with his arms wide-open to have his picture taken with this impressive background.

“Finally, a black Christ figure” he said.

How true. He remarked, that despite the overwhelming indigenous presence, all the Christ figures we had seen were white. In particular he was referring to the Cristo de la Concordia in Cochabamba. It is made from white limestone and reminiscent of the one in Río de Janeiro,

which also stood with its huge open arms, seemingly trying to protect the poor, the forlorn people of the Andes. Incidentally, there are several dark Madonnas in Bolivia like the beautiful Virgen de la Candelaria.

Having visited several schools in three major cities in the country, our main task in La Paz was to get acquainted with the central office of Fe y Alegría and to know its director, Father Enrique Oizumi, S. J. I have to confess that before this trip I had reservations about its purpose. “Faith and Happiness” in Spanish sounds too much like the concept I had heard growing up in Spain, that the poor will get to heaven by having suffered and accepted—happily, no less—their fate here on this earth. To me there was an implicit idea that religious beliefs were being used as an excuse to explain and accept their poverty. Not so; perhaps in name only (so fifties) is Fe y Alegría guilty of that sin. What we observed was a process of empowerment of the indigenous people, respect for their languages, cultures and traditions. They were given freedom of beliefs—remember the Evangelicals in the Guaraní territory— an acceptance of all people, no matter their faith or ethnicity. In other words, a very similar commitment to what the original Jesuits tried to do in their missions in Latin America in Colonial times, in contrast to their lay counterparts.

On the last evening of our trip, Father Enrique Ozumi invited us to his father’s house for a good-bye dinner. As I write this now, I realize how fitting it was. In many ways it was a culmination of everything we had learned in the physical and spiritual sense. His father, who had just passed away a few weeks before, lived in a truly spectacular penthouse. It has two floors overlooking the city, the top with two terraces, one open and the other glass-enclosed with a living floor underneath, also with panoramic views. If the view of La Paz is beautiful during the day, at night, with a clear sky and its southern constellation, it is like seeing the reflection of the

stars flickering on the side of the mountains. Each room is decorated in a different theme: there is a Colonial room full of antiques, a Japanese room with family pictures and porcelain collections that pay tribute to Father Enrique's heritage, a contemporary kitchen and the more formal dining room and parlor. The dinner was sumptuous: different kinds of melon served in the shape of a flower, kingfish for the main course, all prepared by an expert cook with Bolivian ingredients and Japanese aesthetics.

In some ways I was conflicted, because in the same day we had gone from the extreme poverty of El Alto, where we had visited a technical school, to the beauty and luxury of this penthouse. Here is where other members of the group helped to put one's ideas into perspective. When I shared my feelings with our own Father George, he explained that for him it was that much more meaningful, because Father Enrique had been able to set aside this comfort and wealth to dedicate his life to the poor, to live in the community no matter how much he was giving up in the process.

I had made plans for my husband to join me in La Paz at the end of our trip. When Father Enrique heard that he was arriving the following day, he offered—insisted, really—that we stay in his father's place, cook included. I turned down such a generous offer. It may seem silly now, but even for the few days I had left in Bolivia, I also wanted to be close to the people. My husband and I had a chance to visit some of the places that the group didn't see. On Sunday morning we visited the La Paz's Museum of Art when we saw the announcement of a concert in the central patio. Imagine our surprise that the orchestra playing was from El Alto. This time it wasn't a program of indigenous music, but mostly Bach and Mozart. Having seen the living conditions in that part of town, the celestial music played by these young people and some of

their teachers, all dressed in sophisticated black, was loaded with meaning to both of us. Just when you are so immersed in a third world situation and you think that you understand everything well, another surprise awaits you around the corner.

### *The Wayward Spaniards. In the Moment.*

Before the trip to Bolivia some of my friends and family asked me why I would want to go to a third world country instead of visiting Spain again or some other glamorous destination. In fact, that was also one of the questions I was asked during the selection process for this trip. In part it has to do with taking responsibility for one's historical past. It isn't a simple *mea culpa*, but in some small way when I travel in Latin America I want to witness and reflect on the contributions and the mistakes my country has made, because it makes me feel connected, assimilated into a historical continuum. In fact, of all the countries I have visited in Latin America, Bolivia has been one of the easiest, since in almost every school there was someone from Spain working for the indigenous people one way or another. I felt proud to share the same country of origin with them, but as a rule, it is not easy being a Spaniard in Latin America. I have a cousin who, when he encountered some hostility in his own travels, he'd answer defensively. It is not his ancestors who were responsible, he said, since he doesn't have any Latin American relatives; all his family lives in Spain. I don't share his smart-aleck explanation. I do believe, instead, that each of us has a chance to contribute; to be part of a new history (or is it only a story?) and make a difference in a unique way.

From my own experience, the Cubans, who are still suffering from the wrong-headed

policies of the United States government, are also the most generous of hosts. They would never mistake policy with people. When they heard my unmistakable accent, they quickly told me about this or that relative who came from Spain and when they found that in fact I lived in the States, they'd run to give me some letter or small parcel to bring to yet another family member, immediately sharing what little they have. Connections, rather than disconnections, matter the most to them.

After leaving Bolivia my husband and I traveled to Machu Picchu, in Perú, a place he had always wanted to visit and that had become even more pertinent, given his serious illness. My experience there was the exact opposite. Guide after guide pointed out the awful ways of the wayward Spaniards. Luckily I wasn't wearing any significant silver or gold or I may have been asked to give it back. Perhaps it has to do with the cruelty of the Colonial Period in that particular country, but I had never been so conflicted being a Spaniard. So much so, that I started saying for the first time in my life—although this is true since I have been a U.S. citizen for many years—that I was an American; now that tells you something! On a couple of occasions they insisted, puzzled, that my Spanish was excellent, how could I be an American? To which I responded that I'm a professor, which is also true.

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