

### XXXIII – *Ecuador*, Latin America

“Launch out into the deep...” Luke 5:4

Ecuador, which straddles the Equator on the Pacific coast of South America, is bounded on the north by Colombia and Peru on the south and east. It is the third smallest republic in South America with an area of about 105 000 square miles. Its capital is Quito (Population 550 000) and Guayaquil (Population 900 000), one of the principal cities as well as the country’s main port of entry by air or sea.

The country has distinct topographical regions: 1. The **Costa** (coastal plain), comprising a little more than a quarter of the republic’s total area, stretches from the Pacific Ocean to the Andes Mountains. This is a rich agricultural belt in which most of Ecuador’s tropical export crops are grown. 2. The **Sierra** (highlands), a plateau, covers another quarter of the country. The region lies between the two Andean chains, the Cordilleras which have a number of peaks reaching 16 000 feet above sea level. One of these, Cotopaxi, is the highest active volcano in the world. 3. The **Oriente** (eastern jungle), comprises about half the country. It contains the valleys of the upper reaches of the Amazon tributaries.

Ecuador is also among the least developed countries of the continent. Agriculture is the mainstay of the economy and employs about half the labour force. The pattern of land usage and ownership is typified by large underutilised holdings bordered by a fringe of very small plots. Recent efforts at land reform have altered the existing pattern only slightly and subsistence agriculture continues to predominate. Petroleum has given substantial stimulus to the economy in recent years. The principal manufactured product of Ecuador is the toquilla hat, better known as the Panama hat. The country has also considerable hydro-electric power potential which is beginning to be developed. The fishing grounds between Ecuador’s Galapagos Islands and the main land are among the richest in the world. However, Ecuador’s fishing industry is comparatively new and still in the process of development. Although the United States has long been Ecuador’s principal trading partner, relations between the countries has been troubled for some time because of differences over fishing rights.

The largest population group in Ecuador are the pure Indians and the ‘mestizos’ (Indian and European descendants). Persons of pure European descent comprise about 10% of the population and a sprinkling of Negroes and mulattoes is found, chiefly in the coastal area. However, the great majority of the Indians reside in the rural parts and speak Quechua, the original language of the Incas.

Most Ecuadorian Indians were converted to the Catholic religion during the years that followed the conquests of the Spaniards. In the 16<sup>th</sup> Century large numbers of missionaries were sent to the area from Spain. In 1767 the Jesuits, the most powerful of the religious orders there, were banished by the Spanish King Charles III, from all Spanish-held territories in America. An opposition to an official religion developed in Ecuador and, by 1889, a liberal movement resulted in a partial separation of Church from State. After 1904 properties of religious orders were confiscated and absolute freedom of religion was introduced and divorce permitted in Ecuador. The people are obliged to register births, deaths and marriages but, among the Indians, these obligations are often ignored. All educational instructions are under supervision of the Ministry of Public Instruction. There are five universities and four Colleges for the training of teachers and some limited teacher’s courses in seven other towns. Primary education is free and compulsory, but school enrolment has remained low, nonetheless.

Authority is vested in a President elected by popular vote for a period of four years. Justices of the Supreme and other High Courts are appointed by the national legislature. For centuries Ecuador has had a troubled political history with a rapid succession of Presidents, dictators and juntas.

The most Reverend Father General Aniceto Fernandes O.P. convened the first International congress of Dominican Missionaries in the Order’s 700 years of existence at the Convent of St Peter Martyr, just outside Madrid in September 1973. Two Sisters<sup>1</sup>, who represented our Congregation at this historic gathering, here met the tall, handsome Bishop Tomas Romero O.P.<sup>2</sup>, Vicar Apostolic of the newly-created

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<sup>1</sup> *The Prioress Provincial of Schlehdorf, Mother Emily Russ and Sister Mariette Gouws from South Africa*

<sup>2</sup> *Born in Ecuador of a Spanish father and a German mother.*

Vicariate of Puyo in Ecuador. The ecclesiastical territory is inhabited by some 24 000 Indians of the Auka tribe where civilisation has barely taken root. For the herculean task of evangelising them the Prelate had only half a dozen priests of the Order. The greater part of the Vicariate is located in the jungle where many of the outposts can be reached only on foot, by canoe or by small aircraft. His Lordship desperately needed Sisters to help him. He also pointed out that he had already approached other institutes of Sisters for assistance but, thus far, the quest had been fruitless. The Bishop's petition for helpers was immediately communicated to the Mother General in South Africa.

Although this call for help came at a time when our existing institutions were needing reinforcements very badly, the General Chapter of 1974 decided that even in these difficult times the Congregation should "launch out into the deep" and trust that God would supply our needs if we "cast our bread upon the waters..."

On 17<sup>th</sup> November 1975 Sisters Nieves Kastner, Nicol Bramlage, Maureen Mueller and Ingrid Krebs arrived at Puyo. The travellers had landed at Guayaquil harbour from the "Friesenstein" and had been met by Bishop Romero after their sea voyage of four weeks from Europe. They then proceeded to Quito. Sister Nives gave this account of their beginning in Ecuador: "... The four of us with the Bishop and Madre Maria, a Spanish nun, travelled by motor car from Quito to Puyo. It was a beautiful drive. The road was good until we reached Banos; but from there onwards we could only travel at a speed of 20 to 30 Km per hour. We also noticed that it was becoming warmer, for Puyo lies only 800 metres above sea level. On arrival the Spanish Sisters at Puyo invited us to luncheon.

"Our own house is much larger than we had expected. The building opposite ours has been leased to the Government for three years. There is housed a clinic as well as a dozen beds for in-patients. In the same building are three large rooms which are used for retreats and other courses. His Lordship is very interested in this kind of work and wants it to be part of our occupation as well. We will be expected to keep these rooms in order and to provide meals for those taking part in courses and, once we know more Spanish, we are to conduct some courses ourselves... It is well that we took plenty of bed linen with us from Schlehdorf. Indeed, we shall need everything we have in our trunks which are, however, in Guayaquil..."

"Sister Maureen spent a whole morning cleaning the gas stove which still refuses to function. Sister Ingrid has been helping one of the Spanish Sisters at the clinic opposite us and the dentist who comes to Puyo twice a week..."

"On the ground floor of our house is a large kitchen and our refectory but our conventual quarters are really on the first floor. There we have reserved the largest room for a chapel where His Lordship will celebrate Mass for us twice a week. On account of the scarcity of water in Puyo we can use only the bathrooms on the ground floor. We are expecting a tank to arrive which the Bishop has ordered for the storage of rainwater. Water for cleaning and washing we fetch in buckets from the river which is five minutes' walk from the house.

"The ground around the house, about a hectare in extent, also belongs to the Bishop. At present it is still a wilderness, but we shall be able to plant there all the vegetables we need. The plan for a well has been drawn but we must still dig it; that will be done 'marana', tomorrow! ..."

"It is quite a problem to dry laundry in this place for it rains twice a day and the rest of the time the air is warm and humid. However, this part of the world is very beautiful and, as you can guess, there is no winter season..."

"Christmas was celebrated according to the custom of Ecuador or, maybe, of Spain. Sisters Gottberta<sup>3</sup> and Nicolai went in search of a Christmas tree in the tropical forest. They returned with a green plant with large leaves, the branches of which were too weak to bear the candles. Beneath the tree we stacked the Christmas gifts Sister Emily had packed for us at Schlehdorf. As we had been invited to spend the evening with the Spanish Sisters who live nearby, we six had our own celebration at 4.30 in the afternoon.

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<sup>3</sup> Sisters Gottberta Gasper and Reginalda Richter followed our pioneers on board the "Holstenstein" about a month later.

The Sisters called for us at seven o'clock. After supper the ten of us practised the Carols to be sung during Matins. After the service we were invited to dance. It is apparently customary for these Sisters to dance from after Matins until morning. We preferred to go home and to bed!

“On St Stephen’s Day the Bishop took us to Pindo, about 2 Km out of Puyo. There Mass was said in a wooden hut. The new church is only half finished and building operation can be resumed only when enough money has accrued from the Sunday collections!

“Our ‘casa’ is now furnished. The fifteen cases arrived before Christmas. Two of the metal trunks had been broken into and several articles stolen. However, each one of us now has a bed, a wash-hand-stand and a wooden trunk in her room. The various chores have also been shared out: Sister Maureen has charge of the kitchen. She bakes bread and tries out new recipes with the tropical vegetables and fruits. Sister Nicol is trying to create a garden out of a wilderness. So far she has only one fowl which was received as a Christmas gift. We will get more hens as soon as our fence is up. Without it snakes would come in and eat the fowls. Sister Reginalda is our bursar, sacristan and seamstress. She cannot use the sewing machine at present because the wheel is broken and we only hope it can be repaired. Sisters Ingrid and Nieves have taken on the laundry with Sister Reginalda helping them until we are better equipped with running water, etc. Sister Gottberta will do the ironing. As the transformer is not yet connected we have only one small iron in use. In January Sisters Gottberta and Reginalda will go to Quito for a course in Spanish; Sister Maureen will spend a few weeks with the Spanish Sisters to acquire more Ecuadorian culinary skills; Sister Nieves is to go to Palora where two Ecuadorian Sisters have opened a new mission station...”

The following extract from Sister Reginalda’s letter is interesting: “The Bishop took Sisters Maureen, Esther<sup>4</sup> and myself in a jeep to visit a parish called Guadalupe, situated at some distance in the jungle. We had driven for about 45 minutes over a very bad road. Two catechists awaited us at a certain place from where we walked. Part of the path we traversed consisted of short logs lying across stones. As there was water on either side of the path we had to walk in single file. We passed a school next to which a church is being built. After an hour’s walk we reached the home of one catechist. In front of the house grew lemon and orange trees, mandarins and some sugar cane. From here the family accompanied us; and it took another hour to reach Guadalupe, along a very wet path.

“The village, comprised of small wooden houses, a school and a church, is in the heart of the jungle. The people, mostly women and children, welcomed us. The wooden church with a corrugated iron roof is furnished with benches and the Crib was decorated with fresh flowers. This arrested my attention because among the Indios the use of artificial flowers is conventional. Behind the altar are two small rooms where a visiting Sister or Priest can stay for the night. Outside the church His Lordship heard some people’s confessions while Sister Esther practised hymns with the rest of the congregation for the Mass that was to follow. (Bishop Romero is a true shepherd of his people; and for this reason too he wanted Sisters who could relieve him of the administrative duties so that he could have more time for pastoral work.)

“Just as we were ready to go home the rain came down in torrents. I was not worried about it knowing that it would soon stop. However, a second and a third deluge followed but it gradually eased off as we walked along. Our shoes were, of course, saturated but, as it was warm, it was not so bad. After a while we had to cross two rivers which were now quite deep. Our guide stepped into the water, took each of us by the hand and helped us across.

“The third river was 5 to 6 metres wide now and so deep that crossing it was no easy matter. One catechist walked up along the stream looking for an easier crossing. After half an hour he appeared on the opposite bank with a stout rope. This he threw across and a man on this side held it. The third man waded into the middle of the stream to hold the rope for us. How he remained on his feet in the strong current I do not know. We were instructed to hold the rope with both hands so as not to be swept away. In this manner we all crossed safely and fortunately there were no more rivers to traverse.

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<sup>4</sup> A Spanish Sister

“At his house the catechist invited us to join their midday meal. The two-storey wooden house was spotlessly clean and a white cloth covered the table. There were also four chairs which, I imagine, were the only chairs the family possessed. A feast was prepared for us. I could, however, not discern what kind of meat we were served – perhaps guinea-pig! ... I stopped thinking about it and concentrated on getting through my portion. After lunch we bade the kind family farewell and set off in our jeep. Although we were tired it had been a beautiful experience.”

The Sisters were later also assigned some of the “Caritas” work of the Vicariate. This entailed visiting the most indigent homes and ascertaining some of their needs. The Bishop receives gifts of clothing and canned provisions which are distributed to the many poor people. They are grateful and it is touching to receive small gifts like four eggs and a few bananas in return.

Several people have called lately to enquire when the Sisters will give their children religious instructions. Here the language problem is still the main obstacle.

During February 1976 the Sisters were very busy when the annual course was held at their centre in Puyo for training lay apostles to carry on the work of spreading the Word of God to outlying districts which the Priests can visit only rarely. The duty of such lay helpers is to prepare children for the reception of the Sacraments, to gather the people to Bible Services, to visit the sick and keep the Christian community together. Parents who, by their good Christian lives, witness to their Faith are accepted for these courses. They do this work for the Church voluntarily and without any remuneration. At the end of such a course they promise to serve the Church for one or two years in this special way besides doing their ordinary work to earn their living.

In a building behind the Dominican Church in Quito the Bishop has rented a small apartment where Sisters can stay when they are on business in the city or have to attend the language school to learn Spanish. Sister Gottberta remarked how surprised she was at the “rush and the amount of traffic in South America. It seems the right of way is given here to those who hoot the loudest and drive the fastest. Robots apparently serve only as decorations for no-one seems to observe them. It is surprising that there are not many more accidents...”

In July 1976 Sisters Gottberta and Nicolai took up residence at a Dispensario known as Canelos, far out in the jungle. They are accommodated in a part of a Primary School with a small hostel attached. Tuition is given by native lay teachers. Once a month a Priest visits Canelos which can be reached from Puyo only by a small aircraft and that only when the weather is favourable because the tiny landing strip that has been cleared in the jungle nearby is only a track of sand. Once a fortnight Sister Ingrid attends patients here in the primitive little clinic. The people in the area are very poor and cut off from civilisation. Since the arrival of Sisters Gottberta and Nicolai they have introduced various improvements at Canelos. For instance, each child in the little hostel has been provided with a blanket and a simple mattress. Previously they slept on the bare floor or on anything they could find, even old newspapers. Sister Nicolai, a trained agriculturist, teaches gardening to the children and the people in the vicinity in an attempt to give them an idea of the requirements of a balanced diet and some health education.

The Sisters are gradually extending the radius of their activities by ‘day visits’ of a nurse<sup>5</sup> to a few more isolated dispensaries where no doctor calls in the jungle: San Jacinto, Rio Chico, Sarayacu, Pacayacu and Santa Anna.

These Sisters at Canelos, like those at Forestal, have not the privilege of daily Mass, but are allowed to reserve the Blessed Sacrament in their chapel and to distribute Holy Communion to the Catholics who attend the Bible Services on Sundays when the Priest is not present at Canelos.

When Mother General Oblata visited our two missions in South America during her tour of visitation in 1976 she flew from Bolivia to Ecuador via Peru where she had the joy and privilege of visiting the graves of our three Dominican Saints, Rose de Flores, Martin de Porres and John Massias, at Lima. Doubtless Mother General prayed in that hallowed spot that the Church might again flourish in Latin America through the prayers of these seeds of Dominican sanctity buried at Lima.

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<sup>5</sup> *One of the nurses, Sister Nieves or Sister Reginalda from Puyo, visits these isolated dispensaries.*