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## Three Deaths in Bolivia

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## Three Deaths in Bolivia

*'They are doing the Lord's work. It shows in their faces.  
And now Chris and Mary and Geri are with Him'*

Gustavo Gutiérrez has written that being poor in Latin America is not merely a matter of suffering hunger and exploitation, low wages, lack of work, inadequate health care and substandard housing. Being poor is just as much "a way of feeling, of knowing, of reasoning, of loving, of suffering, of celebrating. The poor are a world to themselves, and committing oneself to them means entering—sometimes permanently—this world, living in it, making it not where one works but where one lives."

I first read these words and added them to my journal after visiting a team of priests and sisters working in the village of Charamoco, Bolivia, last summer. Both Father Gutiérrez's words and that visit came to me one recent morning when I received a clipping dated Jan. 21, 1983, in the mail: "Three American nuns drowned when their jeep overturned in raging waters of a rain-swollen river in a remote, mountainous region of Bolivia, officials of several religious orders said Monday. The dead nuns were identified as Sister Mary Mahoney, 42, of Sinsinawa, Wisc., a Dominican; Sister Gilchrist Conway, 41, of St. Mary of the Woods, Ind., a member of the Sisters of Providence; and Sister Geraldine McGinn, age unknown, of New York City, also a Dominican." The sisters had conducted the services in a distant priestless village and were returning to Charamoco the Saturday night they died.

Two of these sisters I had met at Charamoco. Their life and ministry made a deep impression on me. What follows is basically what I wrote in my journal.

Entering the world of the poor is what the pastoral team at Charamoco is attempting to do. A group of us from the Maryknoll language institute at Cochabamba accepted their invitation to visit them one Saturday early in July. Four members of the team welcomed us as we arrived, Jack Risley, O.P., Rita Keegan, M.M., Gilchrist (Chris) Con-

way, S.P., and Geri McGinn, O.P. Two other members of the team were away on vacation.

The team members have been officially appointed as pastors to the parish of Charamoco, situated in the Valley of Cochabamba in the campo or country about 30 kilometers from the city of Cochabamba. The country has a quiet beauty, the brown Andean foothills rising ruggedly into the bright blue sky, fields in the valley below in browns and greens and touches of red. The pueblo of Charamoco is very poor, consisting of adobe block mud huts with floors of packed earth and tile roofs that line a dusty washboard road winding in several miles from the highway. The town and green fields are crisscrossed by irrigation channels that predate the Incas, from whom the Quechua Indians of the pueblo are descended. Charamoco, with its 200 or so people, is only one of the 32 pueblos that constitute the parish. Its parishioners also include, along with the people of the pueblos, the campesinos who live with their flocks high in the surrounding mountains.

The community center for the team is a marvelous, light-filled adobe house built on a knoll overlooking the pueblo. The house has windows opening on three sides and a skylight, really a sheet of clear corrugated plastic in the corrugated tin roof, that casts natural light on a strongly carved cross and corpus against the background of an Indian weaving. The cross is central and establishes a tone in the simple house.

We spent some time in prayer, meditating on the mountains, valleys and fields, and on the God whose hand they revealed to the Indians long before Christianity came. Afterward we shared some of our own efforts to create community. After lunch and another hour in which the members of the team reflected with us on their experience in working with the Indians of the pueblo, we split up to see different sections of the town.

Some of us went with Sister Chris, a strong woman with beautiful silver-gray hair and blue eyes full of light. We first

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visited the church, a tiny structure of cracked and crumbling adobe over 100 years old. Several ancient pews faced an altar brightened with some flowers in tin cans. We said a prayer and took some pictures, then we left the little church to the silence of the warm afternoon.

Down the road we saw a group of men from the town repairing a ruined house. One was up to his knees in gray-black mud, kneading it with his feet like a monk treading grapes for wine. Others carried adobe bricks up a ladder, while still others aligned and set them to shape the walls. It was a community effort. They smiled and called out greetings as we passed.

Further down the road Sister Chris led us over a log stretched across the irrigation channel. Inside one of the adobe huts were three of her friends, Indian children caked with mud from the dirt floor on which they were playing but full of smiles for their friend. We shook their grimy little hands. Afterward I surreptitiously rubbed mine clean on my jeans and was embarrassed. In the hut was a single bed for this family of five, a simple table and a couple of benches piled with clothes. On the walls, pictures of the Sacred Heart and Mary, a poster for a political party and various household tools and utensils.

Chris and another of the sisters live in a similar hut farther down the road, plastered inside, divided into two small rooms—one for living, one for cooking and working—and screened against the vinchucas, insects common there, whose bite usually leads to death within 10 years from what has been called Chagas disease.

If living conditions are difficult, their work is more so. Their goal is to develop "comunidades eclesiales de base," (base ecclesial communities) in each of the pueblos of their parish. But it is a painstaking and long-term process, for it means helping the people come to a whole new awareness

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of what it means to form a church. Especially difficult is reversing a centuries-old experience of the hierarchical church in which all authority and initiative come from the top down, as well as challenging the passivity of the people, which is the inheritance of a culture of poverty and dependence.

The idea that they are the church does not come easily to the people. Nor is it always welcome. As Geri Cashman, a Dominican sister doing similar work in Cochabamba, points out, many people prefer the more traditional concept of the church with which they are familiar, a kind of spiritual gas station where they come to be serviced, to buy their sacraments and their Masses for the dead. They are not used to expressing themselves in front of others or to seeing the priests and nuns as brothers and sisters rather than as authority figures. But gradually they are learning to take a new kind of responsibility for their own communities and lives as they discover their own ministries and themselves as ministers.

The members of the pastoral team do not expect instant results. But they feel that they are making progress, living and working with the people. I was impressed with them, with the simplicity of their lives and their dedication to the people they serve and with the excitement they share in sensing that they are taking part in the shaping of a new church. They are happy in what they are doing, obviously at peace with themselves. They are doing the Lord's work. It shows in their faces.

And now Chris and Mary and Geri are with Him. ■

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