

# Summoned to Go Forth with Passion

---

Sister Mary Gerald McCloskey, D.C.  
and Contributors

Krohmalý's Printing, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

© **Daughters of Charity, Province of St. Louise**

All rights reserved

First edition, 2020

Requests for permission to reproduce material from this work should be sent to:

Permissions, Department of Communications

Daughters of Charity, Province of St. Louise

4330 Olive Street

St. Louis, Missouri 63108-2622

## ***Dedication***

*This book was developed and published to highlight the extraordinary “call to mission” life that all Daughters of Charity represent, and the collection of stories found here highlights in particular the journey of Sister Mary Gerald (Gerald) McCloskey, D.C., who spent over fifty years on mission in Cochabamba, Bolivia, embracing the charism of St. Vincent de Paul and St. Louise de Marillac to “serve the poor wherever they may be.” She grew to love this poor but vibrant country, and those whom she met along the way found in her a true friend, a champion of God’s love and staunch supporter of those she had come to serve. Sister Mary Gerald returned to the States in 2019 and began working on this book. By grace, Sister Mary Gerald’s longtime companion and colleague on mission in Bolivia for over twenty-five years, Sister Maritza Garcia, came to the U.S. in February 2020 to assist her friend with this project. Before completing her task, Sister Mary Gerald died on April 1, 2020, with Sister Maritza at her bedside. She had completed her mission on earth and is now resting in heaven with God whom she so faithfully served, and her parents, family, Daughters, and the people of Bolivia whom she so greatly loved.*

*It is difficult to summarize or even know the impact that Sr. Mary Gerald McCloskey had on the lives of the people she loved and served for decades in the remote Bolivian mountains and tropical rainforests located thousands of miles away from where she was born and raised. The below testimonial penned by Fernando Vargas, President of TIPNIS (Isiboro Sécore National Park and Indigenous Territory) captures the essence of her passion and contributions to the people she loved so dearly. Thus, it is easy to imagine that the greeting: “Well Done Thou Good and Faithful Servant” was rightly extended when she was welcomed by Our Lord into Heaven!*

*He wrote on Facebook: “The people of this territory, TIPNIS is in mourning. The Mother of the inhabitants of the TIPNIS has left. Sister Gerald gave her life for each of us. She gave us her love, her dedication, her spirit of goodness, her love of justice. She challenged us to fight defending our territory so that we could continue to exist as indigenous people. We were taught to confront great powerful politicians of the country to demand respect for our rights and our entire territory of TIPNIS.*

*Sister Geralda, you put your life out there fighting and protecting the rights of our people. You made the greatest of your dreams, the education of our children and young people to be agricultural technicians so that they are great in their lives. It seems that you left us but you have not left because your voice is heard in the distance, screaming freedom.”*

*Sister Maritza Garcia of the Province of Guatemala, by “following her star,” would serve alongside Sister Mary Gerald in the Beni, Bolivia for many years. Following Sister Mary Gerald’s death and with the pandemic travel ban in effect, Sister Maritza remained in the States and contributed greatly to translating and completing the project Sister Mary Gerald had begun. There was certainly no shortage of experiences and adventures that the two Daughters had to draw on for material in the making of this book. They shared with one another and those they served the joy, tragedy, loss, and love of living a life on mission. Sister Maritza has since returned to her country, and although she misses dearly her “Sister on Mission,” she cherishes in her heart the gift of “following one’s star” and finding faith in God that He knows best what she has been called to do and with whom she can do the greatest good.*

# Contents

- 6 Maps
- 8 Introductions
- 14 Stories from the Sisters
- 56 Memories from Sister Maritza Garcia, D.C.
- 75 Father Gregory Gay, C.M., Visits the Beni
- 79 A Personal Account: Faith Moves Mountains
- 80 Stories from the Sisters of the Central American Province
- 87 Poems by Sister Madeline Kavanagh, D.C.
- 89 Acknowledgments





## Introductions



### *Sister Mary Gerald (Gerald) McCloskey, D.C.*

Sister Mary Gerald was born in Baltimore, Maryland on July 14, 1934. Along with her parents (Marie and Gerald) and three brothers, she was part of a large and proudly Irish Catholic family. She attended a local parochial grade school (St. Dominic's) and a Daughters of Charity-run girls' high school (Seton High School). Although Sister's eldest brother Gerald was ten years older, she tried to exceed him whenever the opportunity presented itself...be it in swimming, hitting a baseball, or throwing a basketball. She had red hair and, at times, a fiery disposition to match. Her mom died when Sister was ten years old, and she became a nurturing support for her younger siblings, Joseph and Richard.

On September 8, 1953, Sister entered the Postulancy of the Daughters of Charity at St. Joseph's Provincial House in Emmitsburg, Maryland and thus began her life's journey to the service of God's poor. Her formal vocation date was December 31, 1953. She received her habit in January 1955 and made vows for the first time on February 2, 1959. After a period of initial formation, she was sent on her first mission and taught at a Catholic school in Washington, D.C., for five years. This was followed by a year's teaching assignment in Emmitsburg.

In 1961, Sister responded to a call to a "traditional" missionary life and was sent to Bolivia, South America. For the next fifty-six years she devoted her life and talents to the service of God's poor in this country. Initially, she taught in Elizabeth Seton School for girls, a primary and secondary school in Trinidad. She was then asked to help establish a mission high in the Altiplano region of the Andes Mountains near Lake Titicaca for the Aymara Indians. In the mid-1960s, she accepted a mission transfer to the remote jungle areas of the Amazon Basin. It is here that her love for, and dedication to, the Indigenous people of the region flourished and led to more than a half century of service to them. She became a skilled navigator along the many tributaries of the Amazon River. People living in the many communities along these rivers grew to love and anticipate visits from both the Sisters from her Community as well as the Pastoral team, which she helped establish to bring the Word and Spirit of Our Lord to them. Lest one think that the work of Sister Mary Gerald and her fellow missionaries was solely focused on traditional preaching and religious services, one need only read the following stories to gain a broader understanding of the meaning of "Missionary Spirit."

Pope Francis, in his encyclicals today, exhorts us to the same...to be ever more missionary in our ministries: "I prefer a church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been on the streets, rather than a church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security."



“Wherever we are, whatever our ministry, each one of us is missionary.” In the Assemblies, each Daughter is called to demonstrate a missionary boldness and to respond to the challenges of our times; each Assembly has reminded us that the heart of our vocation as Daughters of Charity is to be “missionary.” (*Reference to Daughters of Charity Constitution 25.*)

Sister Mary Gerald built schools and helped expand educational opportunities for both boys and girls throughout the region. She developed and secured funding for a government-approved technical program for young adults that provided agricultural, wood-crafting and mechanical training to enhance their ability to have a more secure future.

During St. John Paul II’s visit to Bolivia in 1988, Sister was delighted to join two members of the local Indian communities in presenting him with a special gift they had crafted for the Pontiff.



The team’s primary vessel for travel throughout the entire expansive area, a boat named *Siloé*, was equipped with a complete health suite and allowed for many basic needs to be met. In addition, volunteer members in the villages were trained to help support their community in preventing infections, assisting in childbirth and treating wounds. She provided “building expertise” for homes, bridges and roads. Often, she was the one driving the tractor.

To highlight just a few examples of her insightful skills: The tropical climate of the Amazon Basin rainforest essentially has two seasons – dry and rainy. Each one lasts about six months and when the rainy season arrives, rivers swell, overflow banks and can even wash away the nearby simple thatched-roofed homes. But if the houses are elevated on “stilts,” and living quarters located on the upper floor, their ability to survive during the rainy season is greatly enhanced. One of the stories included here, “Puerto Geralda,” provides yet another example of her creative input which always focused on making things better for the people. Sister Mary Gerald championed women’s rights at a time and within a culture where few existed. She helped develop religious leaders to assist in the numerous communities where formal celebrations and sacramental services were limited. She joined in marches to help the Indigenous population advocate for protection from government encroachment on the lands that had been their home for generations.

In 2017, Sister Mary Gerald and her colleague in Community for nearly twenty-seven years, Sister Maritza Garcia, made the difficult decision to return to their respective U.S. and Guatemala homelands and turn the people and projects they had nurtured for so many years over to other missionaries. Provincial leadership provided Sister Mary Gerald with an extended period of “Rest and Relaxation” to reacclimate to life back home in the States. She visited with family and helped support them through the deaths of a beloved great-niece, nephew and sister-in-law. Her eyes and ears seldom failed to miss a televised baseball, basketball, or football game and she quickly became adept in providing insightful critiques about individual player skills. She enjoyed visits to the beaches of Maryland and Delaware and relished the opportunity to walk along the shorelines regardless of the weather. While she

never refused any food that was offered or prepared for her, crab cakes, crab soup, steamed crabs, indeed anything “crabby” was a guaranteed hit! Bologna sandwiches were a favored lunch “delicacy,” and Klondike ice cream bars always a winner. She applied to resume her voting privileges and at age 84, amazed employees at the Maryland DMV when she aced both written and practical tests to get her driving license!

Visits to family back home in Baltimore were celebrated as truly special events. During her early years in Bolivia, these home visits were taken every five years. Later, shortened to two months every three years. Her sister-in-law Olive often referred to her during these visits as “Sister Mary Whirlwind!” So many family and friends to see, new babies to cuddle, sports to watch on TV (“Cheer, cheer for old Notre Dame”), presentations about life in the jungle to share with classes for her nieces and nephews and supplies to purchase. Not surprisingly, items like shoes, boots, protective clothing, sunscreen, insect repellent, small toys, and adult t-shirts/children’s clothes for the villagers were always included. However, she often relied upon her brothers to help select many less obvious purchases: fishing equipment, batteries, flashlights, pocketknives, and outboard motor parts. Once she even had a gift of an inflatable canoe to transport back to Bolivia! Fortunately, airline personnel looked favorably upon her and her jammed-packed duffel bags at check-in and never charged her for exceeding baggage weight limits.

Not ready to retire, Sister’s final mission to help the growing Spanish-speaking immigrant population in Hardeeville, South Carolina was of short duration. Unfortunately, a rapidly progressive cancer diagnosis necessitated her return to Baltimore in February 2020. By a wonderful stroke of fate, Sister Maritza had come to South Carolina in mid-February to assist with the development and translation of this collection of missionary stories. Sister Maritza was able to accompany Sister Mary Gerald back to Maryland and, in the eyes of the McCloskey family, became a true “Angel of Mercy” in helping her friend deal with the many physical and emotional health needs that developed. After valiantly battling the illness for almost seven weeks, Sister quietly passed away on April 1, 2020, back where her initial mission vocation began sixty-six years ago in Emmitsburg.

Sister Mary Gerald is survived by her brother Joe, two sisters-in-law, and numerous generations of loving nieces, nephews, and McCloskey cousins.



## *Sister Maritza Garcia, D.C.*

In January of 1976, Sister Maritza Garcia made the decision to begin “the greatest adventure of her life” – to follow God in the Company of the Daughters of Charity. No angels or voices called her; rather, a strong conviction that God would use her to “do what He wished her to do.” After a spiritual discernment during a retreat with other girls and a Daughter of Charity, Sister Maritza decided to enter the Community. Although she had not yet graduated from college (where she was preparing to become a teacher) and her parents, Angélico and Vicenta Girón Garcia, were reluctant to support this decision, Sister Maritza promised that if proved becoming a Daughter was not her vocation, she would know soon enough and return home to complete her studies.

Sister Maritza was accepted into the Community of the Daughters of Charity, and quickly prepared for a mission to Guatemala where she would be a postulant serving at Guatemala’s General Hospital. A Sister was assigned to accompany her in Formation; instructing her in the charism of the Community and aspects of community life. The Sister also instructed Sister Maritza on the care of male patients in the hospital.

Less than a month after Sister Maritza’s arrival, an earthquake struck, devastating the country and its people. It only took 49 seconds for the lives of millions to be changed forever. Sister Maritza remained in the Community for nine months, until she was transferred to another Community with not so much damage. She and her fellow postulants, or “band,” entered the Seminary together on January 6, 1977. In Seminary, Sister Maritza would deepen her faith and intimacy with Jesus Christ and delve into the rich history of the Company to which she now belonged.

Following a temporary mission to El Salvador, Sister Maritza moved to the Provincial House in Guatemala City in January 1979 to serve at Casa Central. Her ministry was teaching faith in education in the school, and she would also complete her studies and earn her college degree. In 1981, she was sent on a mission to San Pedro parish in Carchá, Alta Verapaz, Guatemala. It was here, she recalls years later, that “gave full meaning to her vocation as a Daughter of Charity.” The parish was entirely missionary and administered by Salesian priests. Sister Maritza learned the language of the ethnic Q’eqchi Indians, the largest group in the region.

The years on mission in Guatemala for Sister Maritza were also the most turbulent times within the country, with warring factions between those who embraced the ideologies of American capitalism (the army) and those who supported Soviet Union communism (the guerrilla army). Armed conflict, villages razed, houses burned, and entire families killed, gave proof to the dangers the missionaries constantly faced. There was a ban on all religious books, and the villagers buried them to keep them safe from their oppressors. Those who did escape, fled their homes and villages with nothing to claim of their former lives. While

they were welcomed and made to feel at home in Mexico, the refugees eventually forgot their language and their culture.

Sister Maritza traveled to the Provincial House in November 1983 to pronounce vows for the first time, one of the two left from her original “band.” She remained in Guatemala for two more years before being missioned to León de Nicaragua, where again two factions fought for control: the Sandinistas and the Contras. Life in Nicaragua was difficult, subsisting on only what the government assigned to them.

On November 2, 1990, Sister Maritza traveled to Paris to prepare for her future ministry as a missionary, leaving her family and those she loved behind to “follow her star.” While the Gulf War would prevent her from being allowed to take the *Mission Ad Gentes* course, she would still be given her mission land: the Beni, Bolivia. Later, she would claim to “have won the jackpot,” recognizing at once that “this was the place where God wanted me.” Arriving in the Beni on March 30, 1991, there were three Sisters waiting to greet her: Sister Mary Gerald (Gerald), from the United States; Sister Ana Mercedes from El Salvador, and Sister Ana Noemí from Mexico. Throughout her years in Bolivia, with Sister Mary Gerald and those with whom she shared this mission, Sister Maritza knew that her star had again pointed the way.

Not long after Sister Maritza’s arrival, several tragedies struck, first with the death of her father. She was called to leave the Beni and return home to Guatemala. The Sisters were waiting for her in Guatemala, and Sister Ana Rosa accompanied her to her village and to her grieving family. It was her family’s strength and the loving support of her Community that allowed her to return to the Beni and her newfound mission. Yet, once again, tragedy struck within her family, with the murder of her brother, Menaldo, and the ransacking of their family home. Sister Maritza’s world was shattered. She was again called home to Guatemala to share in the pain and sorrow with her family.

The pain of her loss, and her mother’s loss, never quite went away – even thirty years later. But these tragic events, she recalls, “marked the beginning of the twenty-seven years that I lived on a mission where I was so happy.” Bolivia became home, and her Sisters in Community became her supportive family. On February 17, 1993, four Sisters opened a new mission in San Lorenzo de Moxos, traveling by plane whose passengers included Sisters Gerald, Esmeralda, Fabiola, and Maritza. Sisters Gerald and Maritza shared “the most beautiful experiences,” traveling throughout the region to visit communities spread far and wide. Whether touring by carts or mounted on horseback, each day brought joy.

Sister Gerald and Sister Maritza parted ways briefly when Sister Gerald returned to EPARU in Trinidad and Sister Maritza was sent to Cochabamba. But a short few years later, in 1996, Sister Maritza was also missioned to EPARU. The two Sisters and their companions were ambitious in their goals for the people and the projects far-sighted and far-reaching. As Sister Maritza says, “These years were the golden times, the years of abundant life.”

In 2006, they opened the Kateri Institute of Technology in the Isiboro Sécure National Park Indigenous Territory (TIPNIS) and built a boarding school that would change the lives and

opportunities for the young people, both men and women, in the far-reaching and rural communities. The young could be provided with a quality education.

On November 9, 2017, Sister Maritza set off on another path, leaving behind her heart in the Beni as she returned at age sixty-two and forty years vocation to her original Province of Central America. Her gratitude to those whose lives she shared in the mission and the adventures of a lifetime in the wondrous South American country knows no bounds when giving thanks. Her gratitude to her Sisters, especially to Sister Geralda, who guided her always, who helped her to heal, and who taught her that *anything* and *everything* was possible.

On January 25, 2018, Sister Maritza joined the Province of Central America once again. It was indeed different from the days when she returned home for a visit with her family or a short stay at the Provincial House. Her heart remained in the Beni, and it felt broken. When the Visitatrix, Sister Maria Elena, asked Sister Maritza to assist in the Seminary, the healing process began. She felt blessed and at peace; each Seminarian, a gift from God.

Another mission in October 14, 2019, took Sister Maritza to Honduras where the different tribes live in villages and hamlets on the banks of the Patuca River. It lacks roads, so she felt at home. Accompanied by her brothers, Sister Maritza arrived in Wampusirpi where her three Sisters in Community were waiting. It offers many ways in which she can help, fulfilling as before her call to serve.

In February 2020, Sister Maritza was asked to go to South Carolina to assist Sister Mary Gerald with the writing of this book. Sister Mary Gerald's health deteriorated rapidly, and by the end of March, Sister Maritza accompanied her to Emmitsburg. Five days later, she said goodbye to her dearest Sister, missionary companion, teacher, and loving friend.

Sister Maritza returned to Guatemala City on September 25, 2020, having been prevented from traveling back home because of COVID-19. The borders remain closed, so she cannot travel to Honduras where she had been missioned to serve before coming to the United States. It was a return journey but one that she has followed throughout her days: beginning as a young girl, accepting the call of God and entering Community, and returning home, today, as a woman on a new mission. Her heart is open because her star will guide her, and her Sisters in Community will be waiting there to welcome her home.

# *el Altiplano*

## **Learning the Language**

When I applied to join the missions, I did not speak the Spanish language. I knew that initially I was going to spend a lot of time studying. I completed the training curriculum and about six months later, I was sent to one of the missions to teach at their school. Of course, even when preparing my classes with great diligence, I had a long way to go before I could speak Spanish fluently.

In our mission, all the Sisters were from the United States, except one who was from Puerto Rico. Naturally she spoke the language perfectly. This Sister was our salvation and we all turned to her with our language difficulties.

Our school was located on the corner of the main plaza in a small Indian village and our dorm was on the second floor, precisely over the corner of the plaza. The streets had covered walkways due to the rainy season and they allowed people to walk along these “corridors” and be protected from the rain.

On Friday nights, after their work was over, the men gathered on the corner under our bedroom window to drink. Many nights, while I was trying to sleep, I listened to their conversations and tried to learn their language, even though I did not know its meaning. Needless to say, not all the words or phrases I heard were destined to become part of my vocabulary!

One Saturday morning, I went to the language-savvy Sister and asked her what was the meaning of several very special and new words that I had learned. I am afraid she became scandalized and quickly asked where I had learned those words. She was quite surprised when I responded “I was not trying to learn them. I simply heard them repeated many times last night while I was trying to sleep in my bed.”

*Sister Mary Gerald McCloskey*

## **Make Friends with Both Sides**

Three Daughters of Charity opened a mission high up in the Andes Mountains that operated without a pastor. This parish was made up of many Indian communities, along with a mine and corresponding camp. The miners had many superstitions – one of which was that if a woman entered the mine, it would bring bad luck and there would be an accident with fatalities.

One day we had a visit from a group of miners. They asked us to go into the mine the following day to bless it as the type of soil that made up the mine was dangerous and caused many cave-ins. We questioned the invitation, alluding to the superstition that it was dangerous for women to enter the premises. But we were assured that since it was a blessing, we could enter. The following day, after gathering requisite protective gear – helmets, lanterns, boots, and

heavy coats – we began our visit. The mine was cold, wet, dark, and in general a dreary, almost frightening place. We trekked through many levels of tunnels blessing all the terrain. Many miners participated in the prayers and thanked us profusely for this gift of ministry.

As we passed from one tunnel to another, each one deeper than the last, I noticed every so often, there was a sort of altar dug into the walls. After a time, I asked the miners what these little “shrines” were, and although a little embarrassed or chagrined, they explained that they were altars to the *TIO* (devil). Needless to say, we were a little disconcerted by this admission although we had heard of the practice.

The following Sunday, after the Celebration of the Word, we had baptisms. Among the babies to be baptized were several children of mining couples. In the baptismal ritual, there are several questions asked of the parents and godparents, one of which is “Do you renounce Satan and all his works?”, to which all replied that they did.

I told them that I had visited the mine several days before and had found many altars to the devil. There was a pause, and one of the men gave me this explanation: “Sister, we are devoted Catholics. We try to be good people and live the way that the church teaches us. But we endure a hard life... our health suffers, we become “old” at a young age, and our lives are shortened because of the accidents. We love our faith and pray to our Lord for His protection. We want our children to be baptized and become Catholics too. But our lives are full of many risks and so, just to be safe and sure, we have to be on good terms with *both* sides!”

*Sister Mary Gerald McCloskey*

## **A Very Important Pill**

The Daughters of Charity maintained a mission on the high plateau in the Andes Mountains of Bolivia, referred to in Spanish as *el Altiplano*. The mission itself was situated on the shores of Lake Titicaca, the highest navigable lake in the world. Although the climate was very cold and breathing a little labored because of the extremely high altitude, the scenery was breathtaking: the immense plain surrounded by snowcapped mountains and its magnificent turquoise jewel, the lake, that dominated the dry arid land and converted it into a sight to behold and remember as a once-in-a-lifetime gift.

The parish where our sisters ministered had no priest, and because of its distance from the city, its fifty-two communities lacked many essential services so vital to the people. One day our Sister Nurse had to travel to the city for supplies, a journey that at times required several days to complete. In her absence, a commission of people from one of the communities came to ask our help for a young woman, who was in labor with her first baby. Two of us, both non-nurses, went with them to a small Aymara Indian village not far from the parish center.

When we arrived, we learned that a few weeks before, a young mother had died in childbirth and confidence in the village midwife had diminished. We distinctly perceived a great deal of anxiety and concern among the people. We visited the patient and even with our

limited knowledge of childbirth, it seemed that everything was proceeding normally. Once the approaching daylight arrived, we promised to return. If the birth was still pending, we agreed to take the woman to another pueblo where there was a small hospital with a doctor. As we were leaving, the young father-to-be asked us if there was something we could give his wife to help her. In an effort to be seen as supportive, we both decided that a vitamin pill could not hurt and, perhaps, might even help a little.

Once the sun came up, we returned to the village and saw a large happy group in front of the house. The beaming husband and father came to tell us that he had a beautiful, healthy son. His wife was recovering just fine, and he was very grateful. As we turned to leave, we found ourselves surrounded by a rather large group of pregnant women, all asking us for the “childbirth pill” to have available when their time came for delivery. We immediately realized that we were in trouble!

First, the medicine we had provided was simply a routine vitamin; and, second, we were more than confident that our Sister Nurse was not going to be very happy with our decision when she returned. And, so, it happened! Sister spent several months bombarded by women, some even traveling from great distances, who came looking for our “special pill.”

Sister eventually forgave us for the good intentions that we had demonstrated. But ever after, when required to travel, she never failed to remind us that there was no such thing as a “childbirth pill.”

*Sister Mary Gerald McCloskey*

## **A Different Kind of Marriage**

The Daughters of Charity of the Province of Bolivia had a mission in the *Altiplano Boliviano* on the shores of majestic Lake Titicaca, located 12,000 feet above sea level. Here they oversaw a parish of about thirty-two communities made up of Aymara Indians, and included a tin mine and its nearby mining camp. This mine was an especially dangerous one because it was composed of a type of soil that easily caused cave-ins. No matter whether these events occurred during the day or night, the miners sounded a siren that could be heard for miles. Such frequent accidents almost always resulted in the death of miners.

One night, or rather early one morning, we heard the siren and knew that a tragedy had occurred. Around 8:30, a truck arrived carrying about fifteen people from the mine, among them the widow of a young man who had been killed during the night. Apparently, the couple lived in the mining camp, had three little children but unfortunately, they were never married. This circumstance was the reason for the current visit.

After offering our condolences to the widow and other relatives, the man’s “wife,” Seferina, asked me to marry her to her husband. At first it startled me as I thought I had made a mistake and Seferina was not the widow. But it was soon made clear that she was indeed the widow and wanted to marry her now-deceased husband.



She told me that they had wanted to get married but were waiting for relatives to visit them from another camp and that, for a variety of reasons, they could never make the trip for a wedding ceremony. I quickly realized that this was going to be a prolonged visit and tried to make everyone comfortable as I began to explain the reason why this was simply not possible. Any marriage requires that both parties, the bride and the groom, had to be alive at the ceremony. Of course, they protested explaining that the deceased miner was in total agreement before he died. They continued to state the best man and the bridesmaid would arrive soon for the funeral and that the wedding ceremony could precede the burial.

Again, I tried to explain that a marriage had to be between two LIVE partners, but each time was interrupted with a new reason as to why and how this marriage could take place. “I will wear white for the marriage and change into black for the funeral,” stated the widow. Similar back and forth exchanges continued until the early afternoon. By this time, I was running out of explanations and would have loved to marry them, to console the family and put an end to the ongoing conversation that was wearing everyone down.

I had permission from the bishop to perform marriages, but I was certain that he would not be happy with this one. Since I did not know what else to say, I took a moment for prayer and asked the Holy Spirit for guidance. Despite not turning to Him at the beginning, which I should have done, He definitely helped me out.

I asked the name of the deceased and they told me, “Cirilo.” I explained that we could bring the coffin to the church where the widow, dressed in white as planned, could stand next to it. There, surrounded by the family and friends in attendance, she could take her husband’s hand. I would then ask her, “Seferina, do you take Cirilo as your lawful husband?” And she quickly replied, “and I will say that I do.” Then I will turn to the coffin and ask Cirilo, “Cirilo, do you take Seferina as your lawful and loving wife?” A few seconds later, the best man said: “Sister is right. Cirilo won’t be able to answer, and the marriage won’t be legal.” Following another pause, one after the other agreed that without the “groom’s” expressed consent, there could not be a marriage.

So, finally after five hours, we arranged the time for the funeral. Everyone expressed their gratitude to me and filed out back to the truck. Then I went to our little chapel and, as on so many occasions before, profoundly thanked the Holy Spirit for enlightening me in a difficult situation and helping me to avoid hurting suffering people more than they already hurt.

*Sister Mary Gerald McCloskey*

## **A Simple Lesson**

Matias was a little guy but strong, agile and sharp. He was the spiritual leader in one of the many small communities at the foothills of Valle Grande and, in one sentence, he taught me an unforgettable lesson. We were finishing up a weekend training session for the *Animadores* (Spiritual Leaders) and I, with a heavy heart, announced that soon I would be leaving for a new mission we were establishing in the jungles of Chapare.

After a heavy silence, Pablo and some of the others expressed their sadness on hearing the news... Not Matias, he was angry and let me know about it in no uncertain words: "It takes us so long to help you come to understand us and just when you do, they take you away!!!"

That was the lesson and fortunately, it came early on in my missionary experience. I was not there to do for *them* but to learn so that together we could do for *others*.

*Sister Mary Gerald McCloskey*

## ***The Amazon Basin***

### **God the Father and Mother**

The Bolivian Amazon Rainforest in the Beni is crossed by many rivers, some large, others small, but they are all very important. Indigenous communities build their homes around these rivers. Rivers are people's lives; they have enough food there: fish, fruits, healthy air, and good, rich soil that produces everything they sow.

The earth as a good MOTHER gives them security, receives them when they are born, accompanies them, takes them by the hand, welcomes them and envelops them when they die. They live happily in perfect communion with heaven and earth.

The difficult thing is that every time there are great floods, after each flood there is a lot of pain. The houses need to be rebuilt, the fields sown again. The people must start over again to continue their lives.

I had a hard time understanding why people, despite the floods that leave them in extreme poverty, are still so happy and continue to love and repeatedly start over again without complaining, assuming everything they experience as normal.

Soon I came to understand that this is the way to relate to Mother Earth. She is provident. She has her time, she will never abandon us. Every man, every woman is the child of Her



womb. Each person sleeps every night in the lap of Mother Earth and when each awakens, each one feels God's breath in the cool breeze.

They are children and they are called to take care of the earth and keep its balance. It needs to recover from the damage that we humans do to it anywhere in the world. Mother Earth is suffering. So, the people are patient; they wait for the rhythm of the times. They rejoice when they sow, they enjoy what they reap, and they share what joy they have, what they can collect from what they sow.

And so, they live joyfully in their territory, loving the land, suffering with it when it suffers the consequences of nature's imbalances. They suffer, enjoy and wait for the land that is Mother, Sister, and Friend to recover.

They live in perfect communion, in the embrace of mother to son and of son to mother. And in that daily embrace, they find God Himself who trembles as Father, Son and Spirit ... and they are all in perfect communion with a singing bird, with the river that gives life wherever it passes, and which is a source of food for all who are creatures of God and made in God's likeness.

*Sister Maritza Garcia*

## **Adventure on the River**

Our mission work in the Bolivian Amazon often involved traveling on one of the tributaries of the Amazon River aboard our boat, the *Siloé*. This craft was specially adapted for extended missionary trips throughout the region. It consisted of a clinic area for consultation, small cabins for the Sisters and boat pilots, a kitchen/dining room, and a separate room for meetings and Community prayer.

On one occasion while motoring on the Isiboro River, Sister Geralda and several of the crew came upon a group of Indians paddling their canoe towards our boat. Three women, a young volunteer, an elderly man, and the Captain volunteered to stay on the *Siloé*. The rest of us hurried to try and help those in the canoe to climb aboard our boat. While working to complete this process, the chain on the rudder broke and we quickly became adrift in swift currents pushing us backward towards the Mamoré River.

We now needed to tie the boat to any tree on the shore when we passed near it. Our young volunteer and Captain hurried to launch one of our canoes



and began paddling rapidly with the tip of the boat's rope in hand while the women worked to simultaneously unwind the rope that was tied to the boat. At first there appeared to be a successful outcome when the initial part of the rope was tied to a tree. However, when the rope was completely unwound, it was not possible to complete the knot's final step. We continued to be carried by the currents. Eventually, a last-minute attempt proved to be successful and the boat and its passengers were safe. However, this journey was an unforgettable "comic film" adventure for all involved!

*Sister Ana Mercedes Francia*

## A Special Fishing Day



Periodically during the year, our Sisters provide three days of religious formation in one of the many local villages. During this period, several religious leaders and their families gather in order to continue their training.

On one of these occasions, the encounter took place in the middle of the jungle where seven families had joined together for three days of study. The Sisters prepared essential supplies and brought the community what they thought was sufficient food to last throughout.

After two wonderful joyous days of sharing, the food supply was completely depleted. Obviously, this caused a problem for the continuation of the encounter and it was decided to suspend the meeting. The seven religious leaders gathered and informed me that in an effort to continue and finish the third day of the encounter, they were going fishing.

Their efforts continued throughout the night, and early the next morning they returned with seven huge fish – enough for each one of the families to continue another day, as well as to provide “leftovers” for the canoe trip back to their communities.

I was particularly struck by the **WONDER** in the faces of these men as they said: “Sister, this is from God! We didn’t catch six fish or eight fish, but exactly the seven that we needed and in the size that we needed.” Thus, this formation ended with a valuable lesson that helped deepen and enrich their faith experience. For those in attendance clearly saw how small things, everyday things, and so many unexplainable things could be immediately related to the presence of God in their lives.



*Sister Mary Gerald McCloskey*

## An Unusual Adoption

On one of our boat trips we visited a Yuracaré Indian village located in the Amazon Basin. Alina, the local health “promoter” we had come to visit, noted she was deeply concerned and solicited our help with a problem that she did not know how to handle. There was a woman in the village who suffered from a severe mental disability and lived alone. Alina told us that many times after a party celebration where there was drinking, this woman was abused and became pregnant. This concerned her but even more so, was the fact that a few days after giving birth to a beautiful healthy baby, the infant would die. This had occurred on several occasions, and Alina felt that the poor woman couldn’t cope with the situation and, with her limitations, didn’t understand how to provide necessary care. The end result was that she smothered the babies.

We visited the woman’s hut and, sure enough, she was pregnant again. We spent quite a bit of time with her. We told her that we wanted her to give her baby to us and to please keep it until we visited the next time. She seemed to understand this request and Alina agreed to visit regularly and remind her of the promise to us. We then had a meeting with the whole community and asked them to protect the woman from future abuses which they happily agreed to do.

One day, several months later, we were traveling on the same river to visit villages “up stream.” While passing Alina’s community, we noticed a canoe coming out to meet us. We stopped the boat, and, to our surprise, there was the woman keeping her promise. She had the newly born baby boy wrapped in dirty rags and simply handed him to us before paddling her canoe back to the community.

While we were surprised and delighted with this situation, we were simultaneously chagrined as we had nothing on board to meet our new “care challenge.” We had no baby bottles, clothes or diapers. We set about dividing up the needs and everyone went to work. Our primary priority was nourishment. First, we found a small empty plastic medicine bottle which we quickly sterilized. We cut a finger from a sterile unused glove that the nurse used for treatment and put a tiny hole in it. We wrapped it around the medicine bottle and it became a lifesaving instrument. We used this glove for a nipple and, although not recommended for small babies, added some



diluted powder milk to our makeshift bottle. Thus, we began the first feeding. The little fellow was VERY hungry!

Next, we noted that a bath and a clean diaper were a major priority. Everyone on the team donated a polo shirt and we modified them to become clothes and diapers. We had a night schedule for turns to get up and give him his bottle or change him when he cried. He quickly became the center of our attention and was equally quick to become very spoiled! Needless to say, we loved him dearly!

At meal time, conversation around the table was a sharing of ideas that focused mainly on where to find him a good home. We remembered a young couple in one of the villages that we were going to visit on this trip who had been married for several years and as yet had no children. This circumstance, for our Indians, is a definite stigma. We decided to approach this couple to see if they would like to have our little charge as their son. When we reached the village, they not only wanted him, but much to our delight, the love and yearning they manifested almost brought us to tears. We gave them all our makeshift equipment and promised to send additional and better supplies in the near future.

I am happy to share that this once skinny, scrawny, dirty, precious baby is now a strapping handsome, intelligent young man who is deeply loved by both his parents and his community!

*Sister Mary Gerald McCloskey*

## How to Inebriate a Snake



The Amazon Basin is a massive area located within the boundaries of several South American countries, including Bolivia. As the largest tropical rainforest in the world, it is subjected to frequent floods. Some are small in scale while others are disastrous. One rainy season, we had the mother of all floods! Our house had water in it up to our knees. Because it was built on stilts, we were able to continue to reside there by living on the second floor. Although we were nice and dry, it soon became clear that we would have to share this “dryness” with other creatures who also wanted to flee the water and rest in a nice safe place.

The flood lasted for two-and-a-half months and during that time we had many visitors: Mice, spiders, rats, lizards, scorpions, roaches, many, many ants, and of course, snakes. In all, we killed eight snakes of the poisonous variety who aimed to make themselves “comfortable” in our home. When the waters finally receded, the silt on the first

floor was very deep and a major cleaning process was needed. Little by little things were beginning to look normal again.

One of our Sisters filled a tub with water and soap and started scrubbing a nylon bag that was filled with mud. Suddenly, out swam a *yoperojobobo* (Bolivian lancehead), one of the most poisonous snakes in the jungle. Sister dropped the brush and bag and jumped back while the snake sought freedom by climbing a plastic water pipe and wrapping itself around it.

We got our machete but soon realized that if we used it on the snake, we would damage the pipe. As we stood around trying to decide what to do, Sister, who is very creative, went to the storage area and brought back a can of insect spray used for controlling small bugs. She then began to liberally spray the snake right in front of his nose. Little by little we could see him relaxing, apparently falling asleep. He eventually fell from the pipe and was no longer a danger. We swept him out the door and, much to our amusement, although he couldn't maintain a straight line, he slithered away into the jungle.

*Sister Mary Gerald McCloskey*

## **One Mass, Two Homilies**

On a relatively long river trip, our Sisters were accompanied by a priest, a very unusual experience due to their limited numbers in the region. This trip was rather extensive as we visited a number of villages that were quite distant from the river and required long walks through the jungle to reach them.

Father shared with me his concern that through most of his life, his ministries were primarily focused on teaching in universities and giving spiritual direction. Thus, he was worried that in the Indian villages, his homilies would be too theological, too dense, and not reach the people with a message they could understand. The goal, he said, would be to make his homily as simple as possible.

When we reached the village, the religious leader had prepared an "altar" under a tree, and as night was falling, we set up a small generator with one lightbulb. Villagers gathered, and Mass began with the beautiful singing of our people who love music and participate fully. The children had found a little baby wild pig in the jungle, which they brought back to the village and were raising as a pet. As Mass progressed, this little pig decided to come from under the small table-altar and began to enjoy a good scratch on the leather boots Father was wearing. After receiving several gentle kicks from Father, a child picked up the little pig and carried him away.

The mosquitoes surrounded us, and Father was covered so completely that his face and hands appeared black. The religious leader brought a ceramic bowl with dry grass, set it on fire, and put it under the table. The smoke did the trick and the mosquitoes disappeared. One problem was solved while another began to develop. Father started to choke and cough as the smoke engulfed him, and he required a glass of water in order to continue.

Once recovered, Father began to deliver a homily which must be acknowledged was very beautiful but also very “deep.” As he finished, our religious leader stood and said to the people, “what Father wanted to say was this,” and proceeded to give another homily, this one closer to the spiritual level of the people.

By this time, night was falling, and we started the generator for light. The custom is to put a pan of water on the ground under the lightbulb. This process helps reflect the light and the bugs, mosquitoes included, fall into the pan of water and die. By the end of Mass, the pan was so full of bugs that you couldn’t see the water. Around the pan, the frogs formed a perfect circle and with their long tongues swooping out, they feasted on the bugs as they fell.

As we made our way back to the river and the boat, I thanked Father for coming with us and explained how infrequently the people were blessed to enjoy such a special opportunity. I informed him that I really admired his patience especially during Mass. He responded, “In my whole life, I have never been so distracted as I was during this celebration... It was fascinating.”

*Sister Mary Gerald McCloskey*

## **In Danger of Death**

During many of our apostolic trips on the rivers and tributaries of the Amazon, we have enjoyed collaboration with priests who accompanied us throughout our trips and celebrated the different sacraments according to the occasion.

On one of our trips, we were accompanied by two Jesuit priests, Father Enrique and another priest, who suffered from headaches. They planned to travel to a community via a small auxiliary boat and were joined aboard by a local motorcyclist returning to his community.





The rest of the team divided up the scheduled visits to different communities. After the visits were completed, all except the priests had returned to the boat. Later that night, the missing travelers arrived all wet saying that they had overturned in the middle of the Mamoré River. We did not want to believe them and were horrified to think that they could have drowned. We were shocked when they showed us their chests, which were burned by gasoline.

It happened that the sick priest had the idea of standing up while the boat was in full motion. He did not obey when he was asked to sit down. He seemed to be disturbed and his erect position caused the boat to become unbalanced and it overturned. The current, which is very strong in that river, dragged them with force. Fortunately, they managed to catch hold of the overturned side of the boat.

The biker jumped into action and was able to siphon the gasoline into the river so that the gasoline tank floated, and the priests were able to lean against it. However, the heat of the sun enflamed the gasoline and the priests were burned over their upper bodies.

The strong current in the river prevented them from letting go and swimming towards the shore. Thank God, another boat passed by, managed to see them, and rescued them. They transported them to a nearby village where the boat was repaired. After filling the gas tank, everyone returned to the *Siloé* where the priests' burns were treated. It could have been such a tragedy. God was definitely watching out for them!

After a short time, the sick priest who was experiencing headaches returned to Spain. He was diagnosed with a brain tumor and died shortly after his visit with us. We continue to remember him in our prayers.

*Sister Ana Mercedes Francia*

## **A Very Valiant Woman**

As was our mission, we visited many, many Indian communities along the rivers in the tropics and each visit was a joy for us. But there was one particular stop for us that was not a village but rather a small farm about a day's journey by canoe from the closest neighbor. This was the home of an elderly Indian woman whose name was "Mama Candida." And she has a truly special place in our hearts.

Mama Candida was a widow who never had any children. She lived alone and tended her farm which had every conceivable plant that can be found in the jungle. All of us Sisters looked forward to these visits almost as if we were visiting our own families. Her life by any standard of measure was extremely difficult. She lived in a small "lean-to," consisting



of a thatched roof with no walls. This “dwelling” was completely exposed to the elements and any unwanted visitors, be they two-legged, four-legged or crawlers. The roof needed replacing as it leaked abundantly.

Her water for cooking, drinking or irrigating her little farm came from the river. In the dry season, as the river water level dropped, she had to climb down a very steep riverbank, fill her bucket and climb back up, repeating this effort many times in the day. She had a small dugout canoe that she used mostly for fishing, which provided her basic food supply along with what she grew.

On one of our visits she shared with us that when her husband died, she buried him and that same night a jaguar came and tried to dig him up. She faced the most feared South American jungle animal with her husband’s shotgun and ran him off.

This precious little old lady told us that she did not have a last name, she did not have a birthday or know how old she was. She could not remember where she was born or grew up, only the name of the river. She was given to her husband as his wife when she was very young. She had no relatives that she knew of, but occasionally had a visit from members of the nearest community with whom she shared the same Indian language. These “neighbors” had invited her to their village many times, but she always thanked them and refused, preferring to live independently.

On our visits, we always took her supplies and these “transactions” went something like this: “Do you need anything?” “I need matches!” We would then bring her a package of matches from the boat and she would say, “go cut yourself a pineapple.” “Anything else?” we queried. “Do you have salt?” And as we gave her the packages of salt, she would say, “go pick some papayas.” This back and forth would continue until she had all that we brought for her. She would take nothing unless she gave us something in return.

One time we brought her a radio with batteries. She gave us in return an abundance of dried fish. On another visit, she said “the radio doesn’t talk.” So, we renewed the batteries and out of curiosity asked her what she listened to on the radio. She told us “it tells me when the boat comes.” Every trip we put on the radio what river we planned to travel, and which communities were scheduled for a visit. Mama Candida, with her limited Spanish, found the radio frequency and followed our journeys.

We were concerned about the condition of her hut and we shared this need with the children at our home situated on the same river about a day and a half of travel upstream from her farm. There was an enthusiastic response that they could go and rebuild her a sturdy hut in two days. This was arranged, and although the children were quite young, ages seven to fourteen, the couple in charge of the home assured us that between all, it could be done.

Much to our delight, on our next visit, we found a beautiful bamboo hut with a new thatched roof and bamboo door. They had even built her a bamboo bed and a separate little thatched roof for her kitchen. They had carved thirty-two steps in the riverbank and installed a railing to ease her going for water. Her joy was contagious! She showed us around with a certain pride, and when we asked her who had done all this work, she informed us that she now had many, many grandchildren!

There are so many stories about this marvelous woman. She has taught us so much. Her life was by any standard a difficult one, yet she met the challenges with dignity and believed in her own worth. We talked to her frequently about God and she responded that yes, she believed in God but did not know much about Him. She affirmed that she knew that God



had sent us to her and her “grandchildren” too. This valiant woman eked out a living in circumstances that would have crushed many others. She could easily have given up or been bitter about her lot in life. Yet she faced each day and its challenges with serenity, courage and, in her own way, a truly deep faith.

*Sister Mary Gerald McCloskey*

## **A Really Cool Horse**

After a three-day visit to one of our Indian villages in the jungle, four of us were heading to the river to meet our boat and continue the journey to visit several of our other villages. Since the distance between them was several kilometers each, the people encouraged us to go by horseback. As we waited for the horses to be saddled, I was informed that the horse that I would ride had an “addiction” ... he really loved to cool off in the creek after a long trip through the hot and steamy jungle. However, I was told not to worry about this fact and advised that by lifting the reins high and keeping his head up, he would behave himself.



All went well as we trekked through the thick jungle foliage. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for our arrival at the creek. I was the last in line and even though the creek bed was very deep, the others had journeyed across without incident. As we, the horse and I, started to follow, I dutifully lifted the reins and held his head up. However, when we neared the deepest part of the water, my “addicted” friend could simply not resist any longer. To the delight of my friends on the opposite shore, he slowly rolled over onto his side, blew a very deep sigh of pure contentment and enjoyed a most refreshingly cool dip!

Although my travel companions were thoroughly relishing the scene as it played out, I quickly learned to share the enjoyment of our unexpected brief immersion. In the end, I must admit his “addiction” was a most pleasant experience even though the rest of the journey was a long drying out process for both of us.

*Sister Mary Gerald McCloskey*

## **An Amphibious Cart**

Sometimes travel in the jungle comes in many forms – by canoe on the rivers, on horseback (or on other animals) as you travel inland, and if not too far, by just plain walking. But, many times, especially if you have lots of items to carry, it can be in an ox cart. This mode is always an interesting exercise as it involves a cart with big wooden hand-carved wheels drawn by a pair of two oxen. This means of travel is always very bumpy. There are no springs to cushion the jolts and sometimes you have to deal with runaway oxen who, quite often, take you where you do not wish to go. But most of the time, it is a slow, systematic journey with very solid animals that have tremendous strength and can travel extremely long distances simply by plodding along for days.



These journeys are usually delightful, and you can really see and enjoy the most marvelous manifestation of nature: lush vegetation, beautiful tropical flowers, colorful birds of every description singing their beautiful songs, vibrantly colorful butterflies, and chattering monkeys that occasionally, because of their innate curiosity, peek at us through the branches. All told, the jungle reveals a unique environment that enables one to feel the love of our God Who has given us so much natural beauty and wonder!

But the part of the journey that always stands out is the sound of the wooden wheels. As they go around, there is a high-pitched screeching sound that can be heard miles away. At first it is bothersome, but as the hours pass by, it can even lull you to sleep.

Suddenly, on one such journey, I was startled as the sound of the wheels stopped. I sat up and found that they were not moving around at all. In fact, they were very completely still because we were FLOATING! We had entered a large swamp and the oxen were swimming and pulling us through deep water.

As I looked about I noticed a very large alligator who was swimming beside us and he seemed to have an avid interest in our presence. I looked at the *Carretonero* (cart driver) who was taking us to the village, and he said very quietly, “Don’t move Sister... and be very

quiet.” His only movement was to pick up his rifle. We continued on like this for about fifty minutes until we reached dry land on the opposite shore. Once there, the wooden wheels again picked up their “music,” while our floating “escort” thankfully stayed behind in the swamp, thus enabling us to safely complete our journey.

*Sister Mary Gerald McCloskey*

## Without Hands

One day we three Sisters had a visit from one of the villagers who lived along a very distant river. He came to tell us that a small boy, about eight years old, had suffered a serious accident and that his father would not let anyone see him. The child’s family lived a short distance from the village and when he stopped coming to school, the teacher tried to visit and investigate the reason for his absence. The boy’s father refused to allow the teacher to see his student.

The people in the village began to worry as the father had a reputation for resorting to violence on more than one occasion. So, they formed a commission to travel to the city and asked us to go and try to determine what had happened to the boy. We prepared for the three-day trip by boat as quickly as possible and made our way to the boy’s hut. What we found there was appalling beyond belief!



This family had planted a large field of sugar cane and they were now cutting it to grind and make sugar and syrup. The apparatus for the grinding is made with two large trunks of a hardwood tree that had been rounded and perfectly matched so the sugar cane passing between them would be crushed and they could collect the juice. A horse tied to an attachment which turns the trunks is the “motor” which rotates the rounded wood and crushes the sugar cane. The horse trots around in a circle and the people take turns feeding the plant into the machine.

One horrible day, the little eight-year-old boy, Pablito, took his turn and was busy feeding the sugar cane in between the two round grinding pillars. As he worked, he became

distracted and one hand got caught between the grinders. In pain and frightened, he attempted to use his other hand to try to pull out the injured one, but it also became caught. Halting the grinder's movement takes time as someone has to stop the horse and until that could be done, Pablito's left hand was crushed up to the elbow and his right hand was completely crushed except for the little finger. The father was furious and went to get his gun to shoot the child. His reasoning was, "a man in the jungle can't live, or make a living without his hands." In an effort to free him from the grinding machine before the father returned with a gun, Pablito's sister used a machete to cut off his arm and what was left of his crushed hand.

Thus, began a month of agony for the child. The father put him in the field in hopes that by being exposed to the scorching sun all day, Pablito would get tetanus and die. When this did not happen, he put him in a dark room and left him. His mother secretly gave him food and water. He had no treatment whatsoever and both limbs became terribly infected.

When we first arrived, the father would not let us see the child. I insisted and threatened, and at last he responded that "yes", we could see him. But if we did, we would have to take him with us. When they brought Pablito out, the sight and odor were overwhelming! Our lay nurse had to be helped to a seat and given water. I spoke to the child and told him that we wanted to take him with us to the city to get help and asked if he would go with us. He was extremely weak, and I think still in shock. But he put what was left of his arms around me and responded, "Please take me with you."

We quickly grabbed a piece of notebook paper and wrote an authorization to take the child for treatment which the father and mother signed with their thumbprints. As we were leaving, the father said to us: "Remember, you can take him, but don't bring him back!" During our return to the city on the boat, we cleaned the terrible infection as best we could and started him on antibiotics. He was in a great deal of pain with a high fever. We all almost cried when Pablito blamed himself saying "Papa was angry with me because my blood ruined the sugar cane juice!"

We sent the little boy to a bigger city where another group of our Sisters lived. There he got intense medical treatment and began the long, long process of rehabilitation. Eventually he was sent to Brazil, and then onto Canada for additional treatment. The doctors built a finger on the part of the hand that was left. In rehabilitation, he learned to use the little finger on his right hand along with the newly rebuilt digit and marvelously began to take care of himself - to comb his hair, to brush his teeth, and little by little, so much more. Eventually he returned to live with us at our formation center, went to school, and became a good student. He is now living independently and has a job in an office handling documents.

This is a harsh story, difficult for us to understand. The logic of our Indians is much different from our way of thinking. But the father had no money, no access to the city, no hope of medical assistance. He knew that the natural medicines available to his people could not possibly cure the terrible condition affecting his son. Many, many times I have asked myself, what options did he truly have? And how many others in our world today face the same or similar dilemmas as Pablito's father?

*Sister Mary Gerald McCloskey*

## The Machete

Years ago, in the middle of the jungle, we Sisters visited a small village on the Feast of All Souls. This is a major feast of the people and it is accompanied by many traditions and customs that have been passed down through multiple generations. One of these traditions is to go to the cemetery and pray a *responso*, a special prayer of the Church for the dead. So off we went to the humble little cemetery and, much to my surprise, these *resposos* were supposed to be individually offered at each grave.

As I went around visiting and blessing each site, I noticed that many of them belonged to babies and this concerned me. When we finished the Celebration of the Word and the Blessings, I spoke to the chief of the village and inquired if indeed they had a relatively high mortality rate in the newborn babies. He, along with others in attendance, answered “YES” in chorus and stated that all had died the same way of “spasms” within eight to ten days after birth. They interpreted this as a sign that God was not pleased with them. I inquired who was the midwife in the village and they indicated the thatched hut where she lived.

In the afternoon, we went to visit her and found a deeply concerned, very kind and generous woman. We asked her to share with us how she went about the delivery of the babies and she told us a great deal of detail. The discussion was lengthy, and we learned many beautiful customs of the people that interested us. One of them clearly stood out in her narrative.

She told us that when she cut the umbilical cord, she used a machete. This practice was based on the belief this would ensure that the next baby born to the mother would be guaranteed to be a boy. We asked to see the machete that she used, and we were told that her husband had it in the fields harvesting sugar cane!

Needless to say, we immediately suspected that the babies were dying of tetanus due to the use of a less-than-sterile instrument. As chance would have it, we had a brand-new machete on our boat that had never been used. In a meeting with the whole community, we presented this new machete to the midwife and explained that it could never be used for any other purpose than post childbirth. We counseled her that before and after each delivery she attended, it should be boiled for an hour.

I am afraid that she and all in the village looked on this instrument as some sort of magical solution to their problem, even though we explained in great detail what may have caused the spasms and infant deaths. Additionally, we informed them the sterilization process could remedy the problem. We carefully insisted that the deaths were not a sign from God that He was displeased with them. Rather, He loved each one very dearly and would never send them such pain and suffering as punishment. Prior to our leaving, they immediately pointed out the woman in the village who would be the next to give birth and they eagerly began the “count down” to the awaited day.

We continued our travels up the river to visit other villages and promised the people that we would stop by when we came back down on our way to town. And this we did about three weeks later only to find a beaming midwife, a very happy couple with a beautiful healthy baby in their arms, and a joyous community no longer burdened with the belief that God

was not pleased with them. Rather, on the contrary, they began to recognize that He loved them dearly!

*Sister Mary Gerald McCloskey*

## **A Visit in the Dry Season**

On the occasion of a visit from one of our newly-arrived missionaries, Sister asked to accompany me to a village a little distance from the river. Plans called for us to have a meeting in the evening and to spend the night in the village before returning to our boat the next day. We were to sleep in the little school which consisted of a bamboo hut with a thatched roof and dirt floor. The people gave us an animal hide for cover. We arranged our sleeping bags and mosquito netting and settled down for the night. I was almost asleep when Sister said that it was raining over her head. She complained that there was a leak in the leaves of the roof and drops of water were falling on her. This surprised me a great deal as it was the dry season. When I explained this to her, she assured me that it was raining. So, we got up, moved our “beds” away from the “leak” and settled down for some much-needed rest.

In the morning, as we left our little “dormitory” school, we observed that everything outside was not only dry, but very dry. As I was pointing out to Sister that it had not rained, along strolled the village teacher. My new Sister missionary asked him if it hadn’t rained during the night and he replied: “No, Sister, this is the dry season. It won’t rain again for another six months.” Sister became a little upset and protested: “It certainly did rain last night. I felt the drops on my face!” To which the teacher smilingly answered: “Oh Sister, that wasn’t rain. It was the bats urinating!”

*Sister Mary Gerald McCloskey*

## **I Cannot Rest for a Whole Year**

Farming in the jungle is a real challenge: tropical heat, sun beating down, clearing land by hand, mosquitoes, a great variety of insects especially ants, and fire ants at that. In an effort to ease such burdens in one Indian village, our Sisters suggested that the families form a small faith-based community in order to work together. Everyone in the group would concentrate on the same farm until it was ready to plant and then move on to another and so on. They quickly found they could make progress and farm more land in less time by using this approach. Each morning, before beginning their daily labors, they joined in prayer asking Our Lord’s blessing and protection on and during their work.

A member of the group, suffering from failing health, excused himself from the communal activities for a few days to go into the city and see a doctor. Upon returning, he met with his neighbors and told them he was withdrawing from the community efforts along with the reason why it was necessary to do so. After doing some tests, the doctor had informed him that he had tuberculosis, registered him for treatment and advised him that he could not



work for a year. His recovery depended on a regime of rest, a special diet and following the treatment with exactitude. He further explained that he had seven children and there was no way he could stop working for a few days, let alone for an entire year! He needed to try and simply provide, as best he could, for his own family.

Without a doubt, his news and subsequent decision deeply affected everyone. The villagers met that same night and the fruits of the meeting were that they pledged to ensure their friend had his year of rest. They agreed to help him follow the doctor's instructions and promised that the group would complete his farming obligations for the whole year.

Several days later, we visited the community and heard the story. Some members had initially opposed assuming responsibility for the family in need. They argued that all of them were poor and they had much hard work ahead of them. They felt that, by making this decision, they risked not being able to finish their own work.

Others disagreed. They felt that they had an obligation to lend a hand. They argued that if their friend did not follow the doctor's instructions, he would only get worse and become totally incapacitated or perhaps even die. They felt that it was better to assist the family now than to risk losing the father, thereby leaving his family of nine who would need even more help and possibly even total care in the future. They had no insurance, no support from anyone. Their only possible assistance had to come from the community. The logic was, if it happened to this family, it could happen to any of them.

Finally, they turned to the Gospels and were able to come together and agree on the final assistance plan. So many phrases served as reminders: *Who is my neighbor? What you do to these my little ones, you do to Me, I was sick...* and others. We spoke to the man who just a short time before had no hope. "I didn't know where to turn," he acknowledged and, with tears streaming down his face, shared his immense gratitude to God and his neighbors.

What an incredible example of living the Gospel his community provides each of us!

*Sister Mary Gerald McCloskey*

## **A Startled Alligator**

One Holy Saturday night, a group of five missionaries traveled by dugout canoe to celebrate the Easter Vigil in a small Indian village in the jungle. The ceremonies were long and beautiful and emphasized the many traditions of the people. The readings were delivered in the Indian language and coupled with the rich liturgy of that night, along with the dancing and festivities which followed, we were there until about two o'clock in the morning. Our sendoff was spectacular, as the whole community came to the river's edge to see us off singing *Pascua Aleluya!* (Easter Hallelujah!)

The "pilot" of the big boat to which we were returning was standing in the canoe and poling us through the shallow water. The night was extraordinary: a full Easter moon, the reflection of the stars in the water, and the *sicuanas* (a beautiful white, aquatic flower that only blooms

at night) surrounded us as we quietly moved along. The only sounds were the chatter of the night birds and the rippling of the water.



Everyone was tired but joyful, deeply moved by the profound FAITH of the people that we had just shared. Each of us was enjoying the peace of the evening that lent itself so marvelously to our quiet, prayerful reflection. Easter is an important feast for our people. The Resurrection of our Lord offers them the promise of everything new: a new beginning, new hope, new efforts, new strength and purpose to overcome their daily challenges – poverty, hunger, lack of medicine, lack of opportunities for the education of their children, injustices, discrimination... so much that is negative in their lives. But with the Resurrection of our Lord comes a joyful hope that as He overcame death, with His help, they, too, can overcome the many “deaths” in their own lives.

While sailing, we rounded a curve where the river narrowed. Suddenly, we were face-to-face with a very large alligator located about a foot away from the canoe. As we started to glide by, I was most grateful he was also enjoying the peaceful night and appeared to be sound asleep. But for some reason, which to this day we cannot explain, our pilot who was propelling us along, reached out with his long pole and tapped the alligator on his snout. Needless to say, he awakened immediately and whipped his tail against the canoe which rocked it sharply.

The pilot softly said, “We all better begin to paddle fast.” Not surprisingly, our peaceful reflection ended quickly and as we repeatedly looked back to make sure we were not being followed, we all began a very fervent prayer for “new life,” or even just to hang onto the old one!

*Sister Mary Gerald McCloskey*

### **Encounter with a Very Large Snake**



After a long, weary day spent vaccinating villagers and attending to the sick in a large community about a two-hour walk from the river and our boat, we finally began our journey home. The sun was beginning to set as we walked single file through the jungle. Suddenly, the pilot of our boat saw a very large anaconda crossing the path in front of us. He anchored the tail of this

snake with his boot so that all of us could gather around and observe. It was very impressive to see the efforts of the snake to free itself as it tried to reach the jungle and escape. The rippling muscles of its body clearly revealed a tremendous capacity as a “crushing machine.” Finally, the pilot lifted his boot and the anaconda disappeared into the thick foliage on the side of the path and we alertly continued our trek back to the boat.

I was the tallest and maybe the strongest of the Sisters, so usually I carried the heaviest knapsack. But as we continued our walk, one of the Sisters, who was carrying a live chicken which had been given to us by the community, approached me and offered to have us exchange the chicken for the knapsack. As we proceeded along, it occurred to me that this “switch” was a little unusual, so I asked her, “Why?” She smiled a bit sheepishly and responded: “Just recently I read somewhere that one of the favorite meals of these snakes is chicken!”

*Sister Mary Gerald McCloskey*

## A Dilemma

The jungle in Bolivia is immense and, although blessed with a wealth of rich, natural beauty, it presents many difficulties to its inhabitants: *Transportation* – there are limited roads available for travel; *Distances* – it is very sparsely populated and very spread out; and *Expenses* – travel by river is very costly and challenging due to seasonal weather differences. The Church, too, is significantly impacted by these factors. The many scattered villages are difficult to access and consequently, for many years, have limited opportunities for visits from a priest. Thus, in an effort to bring the Word of God and His blessings to the people, the Rural Pastoral Team planned “popular missions.”

The first step consisted of forming and preparing a team of lay missionaries. Ten of our religious leaders, all volunteers, all Indians from the area, gathered for a formation encounter and mission development. Five villages located close together were selected to each host a mission. Two missionaries were assigned to each community and helped the members plan for the ten-day mission itself. The primary objective of the programs was to help renew the faith of the people. The mission was structured in such a way so as not to interfere with the daily work schedules and family meal preparations of the villagers.

Each day had a specific theme. One for the Blessed Mother included morning and evening prayers devoted to her, along with a procession carrying her statue holding



the rosary. Another day was focused on the Word of God, and each encounter highlighted a story from the Bible. Another reflected on the Church's teaching about death and culminated with a visit to the local cemetery and blessing of each grave. There were days dedicated to discussions and prayers regarding the family, children and so on. The local Religious Animator asked the Sisters to prepare the content that he felt was necessary for his people. During the ten days together, the missionaries celebrated the Eucharist (First Communion), baptisms, confirmations, and the sacrament of reconciliation.

After the five missions were completed, everyone gathered in a central village for a final two-day celebration filled with special activities. A priest or often the local bishop would join the Sisters and share these days with them. A bull from a nearby ranch was purchased and slaughtered. Due to the jungle heat and lack of refrigeration, the meat was dried for consumption. The villagers brought rice, yucca, and plantains; enough to feed, on occasion, between 300-500 men, women, and children.

These two days were divided between celebrating the Eucharist, the administration of the sacraments, morning and evening prayer, and of course, entertainment. Many competitions were held, including canoe races on the river, talent shows, and races with babies crawling to their mothers. Small prizes were awarded to the winners in each category. In the evenings, each village presented a number to entertain the group and many individuals performed or told stories. All-in-all, these missions were delightful, joyous occasions and happily anticipated by everyone. But with the number of communities to serve, several years often passed before it could be repeated.

The custom for marriage in the jungle was necessarily difficult as there were no priests or civil authorities available to officiate except in the city, and getting there required many days of travel on the rivers. Consequently, the "engaged" couple simply informed the community of their intentions and, at times, had an exchange of promises. A celebration was then held in which the community recognized their intention to form a new home in the village.



On one occasion, the bishop was away traveling, and an elderly priest took his place. He was truly kind and enjoyed the two days of faith, fun and sharing with the people. But at the same time, he was very firm with requirements for the sacrament of matrimony. The problem was that confessions were heard on the first day of the mission and marriage took place on the second day.

One evening, as everyone was preparing to settle down to sleep, accommodating their mats and mosquito netting, a young couple with two little ones asked to talk with us, the

two Sisters. They explained that in confession, Father had told them that the “husband and wife” could not sleep together until after the marriage was celebrated the next day. We just looked at each other as we knew what was coming next. We waited, and sure enough the husband explained: “Sisters, we have only one mosquito netting and everyone knows that it is impossible to sleep in the jungle without one for protection. With the snakes, scorpions, frogs, bats, and so many insects, it is dangerous and impossible to rest. And all of us who are getting married tomorrow have the same problem.”

Our dilemma was that we knew the teaching of the Church in this regard, but we also knew that the young husband was right too. It is impossible to sleep in the jungle without a mosquito netting. While we sympathized with them, we could not go against the priest. We proceeded to ask the couple what they thought should be done? The husband responded: “Anyway, we have been “married” for five years and have two children who will sleep with us. All we want tomorrow is the Lord’s blessing on our marriage and family.” We smiled and said nothing. The young man turned to leave and said, “Thanks, Sisters. I’ll go tell the others.”

A good example, that sometimes in life, there is a simple solution to a “dilemma.”

*Sister Mary Gerald McCloskey*

## **A Very Black Feather**

On one occasion, several of us Sisters were taking a priest to visit an Indian village which was located along one of the rivers in the Amazon Basin. This little village was about a two-hour walk from the river through the jungle and required us to pass through another village on the way there. After we left the boat and before we came to the first village, one of our Sisters began to have a nosebleed. We tried unsuccessfully to stop the bleeding and as we came to the first village, the women suggested we leave Sister there with them and they would cure her. Everyone was in agreement with this arrangement, except maybe the priest who was not familiar with various practices in the jungle.

After comfortably settling Sister in a hammock, we prepared to continue our trek. Father continued to be concerned about the situation. He pulled me aside and asked how I could leave Sister there alone, especially when she was still bleeding. I explained to the priest that we had nothing with us to help Sister as everything was on the boat, and that our people had a deep knowledge of many natural medicines and remedies for common ailments. I stated I had every confidence that she was in good hands and that they would stop the bleeding. And so, we continued on with our schedule.

After completing our beautifully planned visit, we began our return to the boat and, of course, passed by the village to retrieve our Sister who was waiting for us. She greeted everyone with a warm smile and told us that she was ready for the return trip to the river. She shared how much she had enjoyed the day with the people. The women also shared how much they enjoyed the day with our Sister and begged us to return soon.

Before we left, Father gave all the villagers his blessing and when he finished, he asked the women how they had cured the nosebleed. One of the women explained that they try to always have in the village several chickens with black feathers. They pull out one of the largest black feathers. They then burn it and hold the smoke under the nosebleed so that it penetrates the nostrils. She told us that the feather must be black in order to succeed. She assured the priest that it “works every time!”

After the long day, everyone was tired, and as we walked along I noticed how pensive Father appeared to be. Finally, he turned to me and asked: “Do you believe it was the feather?”

*Sister Mary Gerald McCloskey*

## **A Family in Anguish**

In a remote village in the Amazon jungle, the mother of an Indian family returned home after visiting a doctor in a nearby town bearing sad news for her family. She had been told that she needed a heart transplant which, for many reasons, was impossible to schedule, especially because the cost was far beyond their imagination or ability to pay.

In an effort to obtain needed funds for the operation, her oldest daughter decided to travel to the city and look for work. She felt very fortunate in finding the possibility to sign a contract for a position in the United States, which guaranteed a very substantial salary. In addition, she was given an “advance” which she sent home to her family. She informed them she would be back in about two years and urged them not to worry about her. But, she was never heard from again!

Her father and brother went to the city to try and trace her whereabouts. Although they found friends who knew some of what had happened, they could never find the owner of the “contract.” However, they did find others who had suffered the same experience – the loss of a loved one who had supposedly traveled to the U.S. for a wonderful job opportunity and simply seemed to vanish from the face of the earth.

Family life and relationships represent very sacred values for the Indian people. What happened to this young girl was a tragedy not only for her family but for her entire village as well. To not know what happened to her, where she was, if she was suffering, would she ever return, how to find her, how to find news of her, would they ever see her again – all these questions caused untold anguish for everyone involved...an anguish that never went away.

*Sister Mary Gerald McCloskey*

## **A Tire with a Will of Its Own**

Cars and trucks in the tropics are prone to significant damage due to the excessive heat and humidity. This situation is made worse by the lack of good roads or just the fact there are areas that have no road at all. Travel throughout the region often requires traversing

thick grasslands, crossing creeks, getting caught in the mud and many other factors that are detrimental to the good upkeep of a vehicle. The result is that even relatively new models age very quickly.

One day while returning from a visit to a village, I was driving on a dirt road that was lined on both sides with water-filled ditches. I was alone, enjoying the peace and beautiful scenery when I looked to my left and saw a tire rolling past me. My first thought was that the poor person behind had lost a tire. I also realized it would eventually roll into the ditch that was filled with water and thus be extremely difficult to find. So, I kept my eye on it and tried to identify the spot where it vanished.

I turned to see what had happened to the other vehicle and, much to my surprise, found the road empty. Slowly, it began to dawn on me that the tire that passed me had to be mine! I rolled to a gradual stop and got out to examine our pick-up truck. Sure enough, it was missing the back left rear tire. Thankfully, I knew approximately where the tire had disappeared into the water.

After locating the errant wheel, I began tugging, pulling, sweating, sliding, talking to myself and offering fervent prayers. Finally, I was able to roll the wheel back a considerable distance to the truck. I jacked the truck up but to my dismay, found that all but one of the nuts had broken off. I walked back along the road looking for one of the nuts to go with the one bolt that was still on the wheel.

By the grace of God, I did find it but realized only one would not hold the wheel in place and even if it did, it was too dangerous to drive with it. I settled down to rest for a while before starting the long hike to get help.

To my utter amazement, after walking a kilometer or so, a lone figure driving an old truck appeared heading towards me from the opposite direction. After explaining what had happened, this Indian “rescuer” drove me back to my truck. He examined what I had done and tightened the nut even more. He believed the tire would hold with just the one nut, but cautioned me to drive very, very slowly. This I did and after many hours of inching along, I reached help.



It was an unforgettable experience and one that helped me to understand the complete dependence we have on our Lord in many circumstances of our lives. It also helped me to understand the next time I saw a tire whizzing past me on the road, not to look in the rear-view mirror to see whose it was. Rather, I needed to accept that I faced a long process ahead and to begin to earnestly pray for help!

*Sister Mary Gerald McCloskey*

## Looking for a Wife

In the Vicariate of Beni, Bolivia, the Sisters prepared a Catechist formation program for the people. The Catechists came to the mission center where they stayed for a week. They took short courses which focused on different themes involving both religious and human formation.

One Catechist named Stanislaus was frequently asked to speak to reinforce what the Sister was teaching. His remarks always seemed to concentrate on the destruction of the world as described in the Book of Revelations. Because of this persistent habit, his companions nicknamed him “Apocalypse.”

Our Sister Nurse, Ana N., was a young, kind and friendly member of our formation team. One day Tanis, as he was called, showed up at our Provincial House and asked to speak to the Superior. We later learned the objective for his visit was to ask for Sister Ana’s hand in marriage! Needless to say, our Superior, Sister Geralda, had to quickly develop and present a special “catechesis” lesson that detailed the meaning of a Sister’s consecrated life. The content hopefully helped him understand why it was not possible for Sister Ana to accept his marriage proposal.

*Sister Ana Mercedes Francia*

## Under the Horse’s Belly

Once we gathered all the team together and prepared to visit one of the distant communities. Travel by horse was required to reach this mission. In addition, many essential items had to be transported. Each team member prepared different materials according to their ministry. For example, the Sister Nurse carried several boxes and bags of medications and medical supplies. I always prepared for activities that would be fun for both the children and adults. The latter required me to include a small power generator and other devices such as a portable microphone that were needed for planned movie presentations.



All of us departed together with our backpacks and saddle bags fully loaded. Upon arrival, we had to pass through a number of *talanqueras*, or rustic gates, that were divisions of the paddocks. Since I was the smallest and lightest of the team members, it was my responsibility to dismount and then get back on my horse several times as I opened and closed the gates until everyone had passed through the area.



Somehow, during this “up/down” process, my horse’s saddle loosened, and before I knew what had happened, I was hanging underneath the belly of the horse! My boots were locked in the stirrups and I could not free myself from this precarious position. Because of the heavy objects which they were carrying, it was difficult for my companions to quickly dismount and rescue me. I think it is safe to say that both the horse and rider were VERY scared. I began to offer fervent prayers that the horse would not begin to run or try to dislodge me from underneath his body. Finally, my traveling companions were able to dismount and hold the horse still so that I could be freed safely.

Looking back, I thank God that the horse was quite docile and did not bolt and drag me along. It was an experience that I can now talk about, even laugh about. Overall, I have wonderful memories of this and other missionary adventures. Nonetheless, I strongly suggest that one always remains seated securely on a horse’s back!

*Sister Maritza Garcia*

## **Expert Rider**

Among the numerous mission priorities was making regular visits to the communities located along the banks of many rivers in the Amazon Basin. During one of those times, we were approaching the Easter season. It was our turn to celebrate this special feast in one of the most beautiful places we were blessed to visit; a community on the Chimimita River.

The trip was always full of adventures. Some men from the community came to the port where the *Siloé* was docked. We were picked up there and given horses to make the two-hour journey to reach the community, where everyone was anxiously waiting for us and the start of the Easter Vigil.

The Easter Vigil, a celebration of the Resurrection of Jesus, began at nine o’clock that evening, lasting until one in the morning. We shared our faith with one another and enjoyed being together. It was always a party for those of us from the Rural Pastoral Team, as well as for the people of the communities. I could truly perceive a special and sincere relationship.

At the end of the celebration, long beyond midnight, we had to return to our boat. The men prepared the horses for our departure and we began to leave. The last person in line was Sister Geralda. I waited a few steps away watching her. She had barely begun heading off when her horse clearly became frightened by something. He began to rear back on his hind legs and suddenly he would lurch to stand only on his front legs. This game continued as he “bucked” up and down like a bronco!

I was yelling at Sister Geralda to just hold on and praying aloud for her not to be thrown off. We all did the same thing and eventually the horse calmed down. Everyone witnessing this event had truly been scared. However, Sister’s skill as a rider during this episode was simply amazing and the horse had definitely met his match. He simply could not get her off his back!!

We have had so many stories and experiences that in the moment were difficult and challenging. But upon reflection, we have been blessed to enjoy many happy years sharing mission activities together with the communities along the rivers.

*Sister Maritza Garcia*

## **A Spectacular Fall**

On one occasion, we were visiting a large community that was located along the banks of a river. We docked our boat in the only place where there was an available space. A few meters away, a large religious group was gathered with everything necessary to perform a spectacular baptism ceremony outside their church, including loudspeakers.

All the members of our team were walking in a hurry on the beach. In my rush to reach them, I started my typical run, but the board used for descent from the boat was quite inclined and began to move in reaction to the vibrations of my feet. This response slowed me down a bit. I felt so insecure that I started to scream as I could not stop my momentum. I was practically jumping involuntarily, following its rhythm, jumping and screaming with more and more intensity. Everything in the environment around me had become silent: the minister's voice, the people singing, applauding.... everything and everyone stopped to follow my actions. When I couldn't keep my balance anymore, I fell onto the hot sand.

My team members came to help me while all those who were at the baptism ceremony, the pastor and all the people, had their eyes focused solely on me. How embarrassing!! I returned to the boat with the nurse, who quickly cleaned my wounds and applied bandages to my skinned knees and elbows. We have always remembered this episode and the parishioners from the other church, who at first, thought it was an intentional disruption of the baptism of their new members.

*Sister Maritza Garcia*

## **Watching “Tarzan”**

On one occasion, we visited one of our most distant communities where it was difficult to travel with our entire team. In addition to all the usual planned activities such as health care, catechesis and organization of the community, we took what was necessary to present a film to the children and members of the village.

This presentation was a great novelty. Late at night they all entered the small chapel where “Tarzan” was to be shown. Everyone was freshly bathed and dressed in their best clothes. They made themselves comfortable on the benches that had been prepared for them. Once the movie began, adults and children were attentive in such complete silence that not even the noise of the waving blankets scaring away the terrible mosquitoes and animals that always attack at night managed to distract them.



After the film was over, all commented how happy they were, and we ended this special event by serving cookies and sweets. Then, we started to disassemble the cable and the huge screen. We perceived that the children were engaged in a huge discussion in their language. They did not understand how a moment ago there was a lot of action on that screen cloth, and now, there was nothing to be seen! Where was the huge tiger? And what happened to all those people who spoke, moved and faced dangers on that curtain? Over and over again, they carefully examined the curtain.

I observed them pretending indifference in order to enjoy an innocence so pure and a capacity for wonder that resulted in them being lost in places where other children know everything and have everything.

Then they began to relax and talk about the jaguars they know in their community whom they fear very much. After all their inquisitive chatter settled down, they dedicated themselves to enjoying their sweets and cookies.

*Sister Maritza Garcia*

## **An Ingenious Couple**

On the banks of the Isiboro River lived an elderly couple. They had successfully finished raising their family and their children had moved away to reside in different places. The couple had loved the land where they lived since their youth and now enjoyed a farm with cattle and all kinds of domestic animals for their own subsistence.

Soon that region was invaded by jaguars, who are the largest of South America's big cats. Livestock and other domestic animals are no match against the deadly nocturnal attacks by these aggressive jungle animals. Such was the fate of the farm animals belonging to Don Heriberto and Dona Juana. Each day they would lose one of their animals. However, when

these ferocious animals ate the two dogs that provided the couple with some measure of security, they decided to develop a strategy to win the battle against the jaguars.

Most of the older people in the area felt powerless to face the jaguars (in this place they are often called tigers because of their markings). They could not risk encountering them because they feared being attacked and killed. But this ingenious couple began to develop a plan to deal with these predators. They had a clever idea to find strategies to hunt them themselves and for several days they worked to build a strong mat-like platform in a tree where they could be protected. From here, they could watch at night without taking a lot of risk.

Thus, a good idea was born. They started hauling wood and within a few days, they finished building a sturdy platform in the top of a tree near the location the jaguar had recently hunted a calf. They also planned to put some meat on the ground below their safe fortress as bait.

That afternoon they headed off to put their plan into action. After placing the bait, they climbed up to their tree “deck” and prepared to settle down for the night with their essential supplies: a strong reflector light, a thermos filled with coffee, a good mosquito net, and a rifle.

Late that night, they heard the sound of leaves and sticks breaking on the ground. While Dona Juana shone the bright reflector light directly at the jaguar, her husband grabbed his weapon and fired a lethal shot at the invader! And that is the process they used to eliminate the predators that were creating havoc on their farm.

I have always liked this story because I realize that the ingenuity of man knows no bounds. This elderly couple was able to fight off a threat that few others living in the jungle were willing to face!

*Sister Maritza Garcia*

## **Missionaries**

One of the important works of the Pastoral Team (EPARU) is to train and accompany the Animators of the Faith in the communities in the field. From this group of Animators arises a dedicated special group who stand out as missionaries.

Those chosen are usually men because of the great distances this activity requires them to cover, and they are often gone from their home village for extended periods of time. Such travel could put the women in danger, who serve best by maintaining the home and caring for the children.

When these men are summoned to go on a mission, they must first prepare everything in their home so that their family can live while they are doing their ministerial work in the communities where they are sent. Before departing, they try to leave enough food such as rice, cassava, banana, *charque* (dry meat), and fish for their family.



In addition, each missionary receives a small stipend from the Vicariate of the Beni to help the family cope during their absence. I always admired the generosity of the missionary, as well as the commitment of the family staying behind. In reality, the whole family was missionary!

The missionaries gladly go where they are sent. Trusting in God, they usually travel in pairs like the Apostles and head to the communities with the mission plan to accomplish in hand. One is hard pressed to imagine how much good these men have sown in the hearts of their brethren, how much light these simple men, like the Apostles, have brought to the communities they visited. It is almost beyond belief what this team has been able to accomplish. Using the simple and basic training received at EPARU and building upon their first and second grades of primary education, they have been able to read from the Bible and learn from the Gospels of Jesus.

How much I learned from these men and women of faith! I learned from the stories about the communities that received them. I learned from their reports upon returning from each mission... happy about accomplishments achieved and community problems resolved. Because of their efforts, the Family of God among the Indigenous people has been expanded.

Seeing everything from afar, I realize now that I lived that part of my life in Heaven and the Promised Land. I just want to thank you, Lord, for all the blessings You have given and for everything I learned from so many men and women who were open to Your love and grace.

*Sister Maritza Garcia*

## You Give Them to Eat

The jungle is usually located below sea level. Consequently, it is prone to frequent flooding. These floods affect the people in many ways. Their huts are made of bamboo with thatched roofs and during the six-month rainy season, they build *chapapas*, or false floors, that can be raised as the water levels rise. All their humble possessions – clothes, tools, kitchen utensils, and food – are kept on this *chapapa*. Here they cook, eat, sleep and mind the children so they do not fall off. Vigilance is especially needed when the babies are beginning to crawl.

These floods can last for several months and the people can suffer numerous serious health consequences: respiratory issues, coughs, fevers, skin problems, and very severe foot infections due to walking in contaminated water for long periods of time. In addition, they experience many losses. Sometimes their houses collapse and may even float down a river. Their animals die of starvation and their crops wither. But the worst suffering comes after the waters recede as they have nothing left except the seed needed to plant the next crop that they very carefully preserved after the harvest. During a particularly bad flood year, this seed is often difficult to preserve as the shortage of food becomes greater as the flood season continues.



On one occasion while visiting a village after the flood, when the ground had finally dried and planting resumed, a man told me during this period his family had to consume their precious seed because they had nothing else to eat. They knew the risk but had no choice as they had small children and everyone in the family had lost weight. They feared the epidemics that generally followed the floods and now the family had NO seed available to prepare for the coming season.

He told me that one day a neighbor came to visit and asked why he was not planting like the rest of the villagers. When he confessed that they had eaten the seed during the flood, the neighbor said he had suspected as much because their family was the largest in the community. The neighbor had carried a sack with him and handed it to the man saying: “All of the families have shared a portion of their seed in this sack so that you can have a harvest like the rest of us.”

The man told me he protested because he knew each family would now have less for themselves. But the neighbor insisted and responded: “We held a meeting, and everyone was consulted. All, without exception, offered to share a part of their precious seed with your family.”

The Religious Animator or leader expressed his joy that despite so much need, all were willing to share. Others responded that God would provide, and the Gospel of the loaves and fishes was mentioned. The people noted the Bible story that when a multitude gathered with Jesus, the people suffered hunger and the disciples wanted to go and buy food. Our Lord told his disciples: “Give them something to eat.” When the little they had available was distributed, He miraculously multiplied the loaves and fishes so that not only was there enough for everyone to eat, they had an abundance left over. The leader of this small village concluded by telling his neighbor: “He will do the same for us...our harvest will be blessed and abundant.” And so it was! (Matthew:14, 16)

*Sister Mary Gerald McCloskey*

## **A Surprise Ending**

Educational resources and opportunities are extremely limited throughout the entire jungle region. In an effort to improve this situation, our Sisters built a boarding home near the confluence of three rivers for the children of villages who didn't have a school. Or if one did exist, the school itself only had three grades.

The custom at that time was the children repeated third grade several years until they got bored and stopped studying. However, on one of the nearby rivers, there was a large village that had a school with eight grades and this is where our home was established.

One day, two of us left our boat and were walking through the jungle carrying a knapsack with books and materials for the children living at the home. We were accompanied by a representative from a foundation that had given us a grant to build the facility. His job was to take pictures to send with the final institutional report showing how their funds had been used. As we walked along, it began to rain. We came to a small river that we had to cross in order to reach the home. The people left a canoe for such crossings, but always an old canoe, as the newer ones they kept for travel on the big rivers.

Since the available canoe was designed to carry only two people, we told the photographer that we would come back and make a second crossing to get him, but as we were shoving off, evidently our companion thought there was enough room to accommodate him. In an

effort to save us the trouble of a return trip, he jumped from the riverbank into the canoe with us. His momentum and weight gave a stronger push than expected away from the riverbank and we began to sink. He was able to return safely to shore, but we Sisters had to start swimming to the other side. My companion was carrying the knapsack and I was concerned that the weight would impede her progress or pull her under. So, I told her to hang on to me and I could help her but emphasized, “Hold on tight and don’t let go.”

When we neared the opposite bank, as I was taller, my feet touched bottom first and I started my upward climb. However, my smaller companion was still swimming and clutching my pants. Since my pants did not have a belt but rather an elastic waistband, the inevitable happened: As I went up, the pants went down! I shouted for her to please stop holding on, to which she replied: “But, you told me not to let go!”

Needless to say, our photographer took many pictures of the whole adventure but unfortunately for me, most of the “camera clicks” concentrated on the finale! Thankfully, after sharing some light-hearted laughter together, he graciously agreed to erase all documentation of this “soggy” episode!

*Sister Mary Gerald McCloskey*

## **Our Land – The Ninth March**



The ninth march was a protest made by our Indians to defend the territory to which they had a legal land title. This title gave them sole ownership of their land with the right to make all decisions that concerned the common good of its inhabitants. Many meetings involving the participation of every territory village, and even more meetings with the authorities who had insisted that a road be built through the center of their land, were held. Having no other available legal option, it was unanimously decided, as a last recourse for solutions, to undertake a march to the capital of the country.



All the previous marches had been successful, thanks to the support of popular national and international opinion. However, this time, they would face dangers of a different sort because the current government was very unsympathetic and had much to lose. Their political base urgently needed a road that would permit the cocaine growers to extend the boundaries of their plantations. A building contractor from a neighboring country had a legal document granting him the right to proceed with the construction of the road. Those in control simply could not permit this march to take place!

As always, the march began in the city and wound its way northward to the capital of the country. While the number of initial participants was relatively small, as they passed through the villages and small towns, the numbers grew. After about one month's travel, word filtered down



to them that there was a concentration of police and loyalists to the government (cocaine growers), waiting for them in a place that did not permit a change of route. They decided to rest and take a vote to determine what options they had and what the majority wished to do.

Their primary concern was that there were women, children and even babies on the march. A delegation was sent to a nearby cattle ranch to call us Sisters by radio and ask that we come and pray with them and be present for the decision-making. We promptly accepted the request and after a two-day journey by jeep, we reached the marchers.

The meetings lasted two days and everyone had the opportunity to offer an opinion. It was a beautiful experience and provided those present with many important lessons: how to dialogue effectively, how to listen patiently, how to remain open to the expressed opinions.

The concern of the men led them to ask the women not to continue the march due to the dangers they knew were ahead. The women responded very firmly that they, too, had an obligation to protect their land. What seemed to help with the final decision was the argument that if they lost the land, their way of life would necessarily change forever. Their small villages where they truly lived community life in solidarity with one another, observing traditions that had been handed down from father to son for many generations, would be lost. They would no longer be able to sustain their economy by farming, fishing, hunting and gathering.

Their land would be destroyed by the chemicals and petroleum that would seep into their streams, creeks and rivers. The trees would be destroyed by the lumber companies, and drug trafficking would ruin every phase of their lives, especially for the young. Undesirable people who lacked appreciation for the Indian way of life would settle along the roads. Bars and canteens would begin to dot the landscape. People would decimate the land via unchecked development and, most importantly, respect and recognition for the Indians' authority would be lost forever. In reality, a true invasion was on the horizon!

In between planning sessions, periods of rest alternated with ones of prayer. It broke our hearts to hear these prayers, begging God to hear them, to guide them, to protect them. Finally, the decision was made to continue the march and face whatever awaited their arrival. However, they maintained a firm conviction that there would be absolutely NO violence, at least not on their part.



The next morning, after prayers, the marchers again set out. We three Sisters accompanied them. As we walked along with the tropical sun beating down upon us, the Indians sang hymns and songs of their culture. After several hours, we could see in the distance, a blockade comprised of policemen in full riot gear: helmets, masks, bullet-proof vests, machine guns, and more.

Behind them were government supporters armed with dynamite which they began to explode. Despite their palpable fear, the Indians continued onward. As we drew closer, the explosions were more frequent and louder. At one point, there was a very loud explosion that shook the earth – the children drew close to their parents, the songs stopped, and the pace slowed. All of a sudden, a man close to me shouted, “Hey, it sounds like it is going to rain!” Everyone laughed, and the march continued. The Indian leaders went ahead to talk to the blockaders, but were told that they could not pass and needed to return to their

own territory. They responded that they would make camp and stay until the blockade was removed no matter how long it took.

Between the blockaders and the Indians' camp was a little stream with clear running water. The marchers began to head to the stream to fill receptacles to drink, to cook and to bathe after the hot and dusty march. However, they were forced to turn away by the government personnel. In the area, there were some cattle ranches and the ranchers were admonished not to give water to the marchers. However, during the night, they sent ox carts filled with water barrels for those gathered in the camp. The families settled in, knowing that the wait would certainly be lengthy before they could pass. The Indian leaders came to us, thanked us for our presence and support and asked us to return to our mission home as they expected that this pause in the march would last a VERY long time. Despite clear misgivings, we complied with their request.

Every day we listened to the national news and heard that the march was stopped, and the road still blocked. After about two weeks, a sudden change occurred. On a Sunday evening, while the men were playing a game of soccer and the women were preparing the evening meal which was eaten in common once a day, they were attacked by the police with tear gas. The leaders were arrested and beaten, tied up and thrown into trucks. Many of the women suffered a similar fate. The terrified children ran off into the jungle where they spent three days and three nights wandering about, frightened and lost, plagued by mosquitoes and suffering from thirst, fear and hunger. The older children tried to find and unite the little ones. Upon hearing what happened, the ranchers sent out their employees to search for them and bring them back to the safety of the ranches.

The men and women who had been beaten were now tied, thrown into the backs of trucks and driven to an unknown destination. We learned later that they were taken to a hidden grass airfield to be flown to parts unknown. A plane landed and, as the police began to load the prisoners onto the plane, out of the surrounding jungle appeared Indians from another tribe. Upon learning what was happening, they had hurried to the airfield and lay down across the dirt runway thereby prohibiting the plane from taking off! As their numbers far exceeded those of the police and fearful that violence was in the making, the raid was abruptly called off and the prisoners were freed! Much later, when they were able to come together, they again spent time in prayer and dialogue and unanimously decided to bravely continue the march.

This experience is filled with thoughts, actions, values, morals, and even faith for us to ponder today: the essential importance of the person, the deep respect for one another, the solidarity with community members, the need to listen to one another, the requirement to sacrifice for what is right, the importance of the common good when there is much at stake, the absolute rejection of violence, the necessity for prayer especially at times of great decisions, the imperative to sometimes take risks, the ability to dialogue, the benefit of mutual support even among different points of view, the ability to clarify priorities, and much more. Ultimately the process used by these proud, strong, faith-filled, unsophisticated people reveals we can truly learn a great deal from those, who many times, might be relegated to a substandard status!

*Sister Mary Gerald McCloskey*

## A Great Light Illuminated

Our mission spanned an immense territory, along the road to Santa Cruz, to Loreto and many other cities, as well as to the rivers Mamoré, Isiboro, Sécore, Ichoa, Imose, Plantota, and Chimimita and other rivers. The educational opportunities in the small rural communities were a serious concern for us. Parents were aware of the value of education and made any sacrifice for their children to complete at least the first three grades of primary education.



The state had a school with these three grades in the most populated communities. In communities that did not have a school, parents sent their children to relatives, godparents or friends living in communities which did have a school to provide lodging and some attention to the little ones. Of course, the father of the family had to contribute food for their children. This was good. However, many problems arose from this: some of the boys were hard to control away from their parents, some who housed these children abused them, and most of the girls weren't given this opportunity. Most young women fifteen and older did not know how to read or write. Mothers taught girls the skills to take care of their future families in the home, and this was the only education they received.

In the 1990s, a program for the Promotion of Women began by opening a training center at EPARU. The main objective of this center was to fully promote young women. The idea was greatly accepted and embraced by the people. Soon an adult education program, Faith and Joy Radio Institute (IRFA), was initiated as well. This educational program was broadcast over Radio Santa



Cruz. Students were instructed over the radio. (We would call this distance learning. During the COVID-19 pandemic, children in the U.S. have had a similar experience). At its beginning, more students studied over the radio program than they did in all the schools of Trinidad. Any adult or youth could receive a primary education, legally recognized by

the Ministry of Education through this excellent program. Soon men and women of all ages embraced this system of study. It became well known throughout the Beni where illiteracy was very high.

In time, parents requested that the program for the children be expanded for the older children. A team began brainstorming and planning. Participants included the EPARU team, the government of the Beni, and a group of parents. The first boarding school in that area was opened in the Camiaco community, on the Mamoré River where the Ministry of Education already had a complete primary school. This program motivated other communities as well, so now a similar program exists in the community of San Pablo on the Isiboro River. Boys and girls outdid each other under the guidance and supervision of the instructors of EPARU. As the children grew, they wanted further study, so the idea of an expanded education system arose where the students could train as bachelor-technicians in the discipline in which the people of the area dominate, which is agriculture. The Sisters, the Rural Pastoral Team, and EPARU worked jointly with the Indigenous leaders of the National Sécure Park (TIPNIS) to design this program.

Toño Puertas, a young Spanish volunteer and a wonderful friend of the Sisters, organized a group of people in his country who called themselves *Ta Busy* (Heartbeats). They dedicated themselves to raising money in Spain to buy a large property that was for sale and conducive to opening a technological education institute. Parents and community authorities worked with enthusiasm.

The previous year, the floods in the region left many trees dead, so the necessary approvals of both the Indigenous people and the authorities of the territory were given permission to take advantage of the situation and remove the dead trees.



All the communities organized and began to work with great enthusiasm, some removing wood, others building the houses or buildings that would become the kitchen, dining room, bedrooms for girls and boys, houses for teachers, classrooms, as well as corrals for cattle, birds and pigs, etc. This stage took an entire year.

In the meantime, arrangements were being made with the Ministry of Education to approve the educational project, which was extremely innovative for this area. The students would start their baccalaureate studies and become licensed for entry-, middle-, and superior-level agricultural technicians if they qualified. When trained, they could work with plants and planting processes as well as work with animals and fish of all kinds.



The Ministry of Education agreed to pay the salaries of the teachers in both the secondary and technical schools. Finally, all programs were approved. Then steps were taken to ensure that the Beni government would provide meals for the students, teachers and those in charge of the boarding school, which made the program affordable with other types of funding.

Finally, in 2003, the boarding school was opened for the youth of TIPNIS, along with

Indigenous youth from other regions as well. In addition, teachers and caregivers would also live at the school and form one big family.

The Kateri Institute has twice won important awards and recognitions at national competitions from Bolivia’s technological institutes. It won first prize for caring for bees, as well as for breeding buffalo in these national competitions.

Today this program is a great light that definitively illuminates this immense territory. The wonderful inhabitants of TIPNIS look on this project with great pride. They see it as the hope for future generations of their territory.

*Sister Maritza Garcia*

## **PUERTO GERALDA**

I think miracles happen every day, and this is one of them. It involved the construction of a road that had to be opened as urgently as possible. The Indigenous people of the Amazon Basin relied upon their trust in Divine Providence to accomplish a common project with practically no budget and only an old tractor and rudimentary tools such as machetes and axes. They were used to solving problems and often seemed capable of making bread out of stones. Thus, there is little surprise that when the good men along the banks of the Mamoré, Isiboro, Sécura, Ichoa, Plantota, and Imose rivers united in faith and joined with some local ranchers and farmers to undertake this important initiative, a miracle could occur!

The project under contemplation involved the opening up of a new “highway” to the Mamoré River, which would solve the problem of travel in the area. This major waterway was capriciously changing its route through the territory. The effect of these changes was to move the highway that led to its port far away from where one actually boarded the boats to travel to the riverside communities.

Whether arriving with products or returning to the communities, river travel in the area had greatly increased in cost and had become more challenging. To use vehicles for transport, it was necessary to hire ground transportation and crossing the river by boat or canoe caused destabilization. Indeed, all navigation for the entire rural population suffered.



So, this is how a great idea arose. We began to dream of making a “highway” – a road that would reach the Mamoré River and become the new port. We began to explore the dense jungle where the rainforests and all the vegetation seemed to trap us. Two Sisters accompanied members of the Rural Pastoral Team and some specialists from the region during this initial evaluation. As we walked along, we found tracks of the jaguars and poisonous snakes that make their home in this remote region.

The idea spread and people from the riverside communities began to arrive to participate in the “highway” project. As in the Gospel of the five loaves and the two fishes, so too, with a single tractor and instruments that each person contributed, we toiled for many days, week and months – advancing our route by 100 meters, then by half a kilometer and so on until the “highway” reached the Mamoré River. This project ultimately involved a total of 13 kilometers... a true miracle by anyone’s definition!

When the road finally met the great Mamoré River, a small sign was made with the name PUERTO LA BRECHA. *La Brecha* means gap, hole, or breach in Spanish. The next day the sign disappeared and in its place was a sign that said: PUERTO GERALDA in honor of the Sister who coordinated the efforts of the Rural Pastoral Team of the Apostolic Vicariate of the Beni throughout this project. Several attempts were made by Sister to have the sign



with her name on it taken down; but, each time it was removed, on her return, the sign PUERTO GERALDA was back up again.

Today the community that developed near the port is quite populated with its own school, small stores and other services. Now all sailors in canoes and large boats dock every day in Puerto Geralda. It has become an essential port for all El Beni navigation!

*Sister Maritza Garcia*

## ***Memories from Sister Maritza***

### **Vocation Story—An Adventure that Hasn't Ended**

I will now tell the story of my vocation. It was January of 1976 when I decided to start the greatest adventure of my life! I wanted to answer a call that I understood to be what God wanted me to do, to follow Him in the Company of the Daughters of Charity. There were no angels or voices calling me, but a strong conviction, which prompted me to choose a very different life, something that would make sense to God. God would use me to do what He wished me to do.

I made a spiritual discernment during a retreat with other girls. A Sister accompanied us. I decided to enter the Daughters of Charity before finishing my studies in college, where I was preparing to become a teacher. My parents did not support my decision, but I promised that if that wasn't for me, I'd soon know and would return home. As it was the beginning of the year, I could then resume my studies in the fall.

I introduced myself to the Community of the Daughters of Charity and was accepted. I had a short time in the month of January to prepare and then to start postulancy with other girls. At the end of January, we left. I was assigned to the General Hospital of Guatemala, to begin my experience as a postulant in the Company of the Daughters of Charity.

There was an assigned Sister who accompanied me in my formation. She instructed me in the charism of the Community, and the various aspects of our Community life. She also instructed me on how to accompany the patients in the men's ward of the hospital. I shaved them, chatted with them, helped them to eat, prayed both for and with them, and provided them with small services.

On February 4, 1976, at 3:01.43 a.m., in a matter of seconds, much of Guatemala was left on the ground. Its buildings, churches and many houses collapsed or became uninhabitable. A terrible earthquake of 7.5 on the Richter scale had shaken part of the country and within 49 seconds, 23,000 people were killed, 76,000 people were injured, and 1 million became homeless.



I woke up feeling lost, confused, and the earth was shaking heavily. Everything was dark, because the first thing that happens when there is an earthquake of that magnitude is that the electricity goes off. I ran to the door that I had closed before I went to bed and could not find it. When it became daylight, I realized that a small wardrobe where I kept my belongings had wheels; and when the earth shook below us, the wardrobe rolled and blocked the door. I felt a sense of suffocation, caused by the fine dust that spread over everything.



I felt relief when I heard the voice of the Sister Servant or Superior of the house call me. I could see the reflection of the light of her quite powerful flashlight and then I realized that there was a hole in the wall near my bed.

I remember the dogs barking and howling and the bells were ringing spontaneously in a disorderly fashion. In the area where we lived there are many churches – Guadalupe, San Francisco, Santa Clara, and Casa Central, and a few meters from the Sisters' house, was the hospital chapel, called the Lord of Mercy. All the bells rang for a long time.

The Sisters' house where I was living was on the same grounds as the great General Hospital. All the Sisters went to their wards, and this was dangerous because there were still aftershocks. Patients and staff were seriously injured because many walls and ceilings had collapsed. They were frightened, but they were all alive!

Soon sirens rang, people screamed. It was chaos and more and more patients began to arrive from the surrounding area: children, women and men, some in critical condition. All the injured were carried by private citizens or by firefighters and were greeted in the courtyards and parking lots of the hospital. Only lanterns and some candles provided visibility.

Dawn came and some of the patients who had arrived that morning died. The Sister who was forming me asked me to help a nurse deliver the bodies of the dead. As she sensed my insecurity, she told me to fill out necessary paperwork with a close relative. She handed me a notebook and I started my work.

At around nine o'clock in the morning, someone brought us coffee and bread, and at one in the afternoon, a student doctor shared an orange with me. No one thought to eat. Everyone was just running and helping wherever you could. People were desperately looking for their relatives. It was total chaos.

My dear brother came to find me during that chaos, to propose that I return home. He told me that our family was all together in my parents' house, which is in the country, and

that when everything calmed down, I could come back. I don't know why, but I felt it was necessary that I stay; it seemed to me that I was an indispensable piece for recovery. I felt that was the place where God sent me. I thanked my brother greatly and promised him I would call him if I thought there was a need to go home.

Night came and together all the Sisters and I slept in makeshift tents, which had been placed in our community yard's rose garden. We stayed there for two nights. On the third night we went to sleep outside the Sisters' Central House on the basketball courts. There we had Red Cross tents. As the tremors calmed down, we felt safe enough to use the bedrooms in the Central House.

In time, we were able to move the entire hospital to an industrial park. That was another immense experience. Young men from the army transported all the furniture and equipment from the hospital in their large trucks. They also transported the patients.

We traveled by minibus from the hospital at six-thirty each morning to work at the industrial park facility. I had to return to the Central House at noon to have lunch. When I arrived there, I joined an adorable elderly Sister from my Community for lunch and after lunch read to her. At four-thirty, the rest of the Sisters would return from their shifts. I lived like this for nine months. Then I was sent to another Community where the earthquake did not do as much damage.

Here I continued formation with my fellow applicants. Of the thirteen women who had entered the Community together, only seven remained. I dare say that the reason for their departure was their desire to return home after the difficult experiences caused by the earthquake. Our remaining "band" entered the Seminary together on January 6, 1977.

*Sister Maritza Garcia*

## **Vocation Story—The Seminary**

The time in the Seminary passed quite quickly. There I was able to deepen my faith and motivation and enjoy time for prayer. The Directress of the Seminary was incredibly understanding. She was a beloved Sister who had mentored me as a child, and we have always had a very beautiful relationship.

I admit that I had some problems, especially because I was distracted and restless. My Seminary Directress, whom I love very much, was patient with me. I remember that one day I was going up the steps towards the Seminary. In my usual fashion, I quickly climbed up the stairs two at a time and did not realize that she had appeared behind me until she asked me to stop. She called to me: "Come down the stairs," then she said, "go up again," and repeated this several times. Then she stared at me and said, "You looked like the fawn (gazelle) in the 'Song of Songs'." Even today we both remember that moment and those words.

Another thing I remember is that, in an interview, she asked me if I liked swimming and I said yes. "Very well," she told me, "go every night to the pool and swim for at least fifteen or twenty minutes." She gave me a key to the pool area. And she said, "Take Sister Maria Elena (my Seminary companion) with you." And so, I swam every night while Sister Maria Elena knitted under a lantern. The truth was that I enjoyed every night during the warm weather, but when the cold weather arrived in Guatemala, I no longer enjoyed swimming as before, but I kept going to the pool. Finally, someone went to the Directress and asked her how long I should continue this process at night, because it was very cold. She narrowed her eyes and said to me, "My God, are you still swimming? Don't go anymore." I thanked God for not having caught pneumonia.

Another of my "unfortunate" anecdotes involved a change of housekeeping duties. I very carefully gave the Sister who would replace me the necessary supplies and instructions. In them, I informed her that every night she should examine the taps to the water pipes on the second floor, because there were days when the water did not rise, and the Sisters left the taps open. Then, at night, the water used to fall fluidly and sometimes overflowed. That is precisely what happened, and everything was flooded in the Seminary. The Directress's bedroom was flooded the worst and water even leaked to the downstairs offices.

I was called to bear the burden of guilt for not instructing the Sister properly about her new duty. Logically I stoutly defended myself, arguing that I had provided adequate direction and I was now very busy with my new responsibility. It can be noted that all the formation on Humility, Charity, and other virtues had passed over my head.

Another small incident occurred when I was on duty in the dining room. In the kitchen, I was passed a small flat plate with a boiled egg. I crossed the large dining room in my usual hurried manner of walking. Just when I arrived in front of the Sister to whom I was carrying the egg, by magic it had disappeared! I realized from the smile on the Sisters' faces that I had to look for it under the table.

I enjoyed Saturdays very much as we did apostolic works on that day, and I became involved with two cases. My Directress always gave me time to visit a family that had a child whose name was Luisito. Although he lived to be six years old, his status was like a three-month-old. Luisito had a little sister who was eight and a four-year-old brother, both of whom had no limitations. I admired that family as they showered Luisito with love and everyone helped take care of him. During my visits, the family waited for me to pray and share my faith with them. I remember that after leaving the Seminary, I sometimes visited them. That is how I found out that Luisito had gone to Heaven.

Without fail, I also visited two women who lived alone in a tin house under the bridge. The oldest had been a teacher in private schools and never had insurance. They survived by selling recyclable material from the garbage dump. The daughter looked almost as deteriorated as the mother. She had a major disability and could not express herself. Their small four-square-meter hut was full of cans, cardboard, and many cats. A strong odor could be smelled even from a distance. In the back of the hut stood an improvised bed buried under a sea of clutter.

One of my initiatives was to renew the mattress. Upon soliciting my Sisters to help, we took three large sacks of unused black stockings and some thick bed covers which were ideal to make a good mattress. It looked so fine that it seemed to have been made by professionals!

Saturday arrived, and it was the day to carry the mattress to the two women. I got two broomsticks and secured them together very well. I motivated and convinced my Sisters to help me carry the now-famous mattress. Everything went well until reaching the stairs. Our Directress came to investigate what was causing the noise and discovered us with the mattress that she knew nothing about. Later, after explaining about the project, it soon became clear to me that I should consult and request authorization for any future endeavor. We carried the famous mattress as in a procession until we reached the bridge. Needless to say, we attracted much attention from everyone we passed along the way!

In general, I have beautiful memories of the time in the Seminary: the rich formation where I learned to cherish intimacy with Jesus and the companionship with my Sisters, to enjoy the liturgy and spiritual readings, to delve into the history of our Founders, Saints Louise de Marillac and Vincente de Paúl, and that of our Vincentian Saints and Blesseds, to learn about the experiences of our first Sisters and the history of the Company.

*Sister Maritza Garcia*

## **Following My Star**

On September 27, 1978, I was sent on Mission to Ahuachapán, El Salvador. This was a temporary mission as I would be replacing a Sister who needed medical treatment. I was first sent to a children's center that housed young boys and girls, especially those whose mothers worked at the nearby market. This Center was a work of the Ladies of AIC (Ladies of Charity). It reminded me of the works of our early Sisters during our Founders' time. The Center had a staff which provided everything necessary for the care of the children.

Each day, I arrived at the Center after celebrating the Eucharist at six-thirty in the morning and returning to Community at six o'clock that evening. Although I loved it, this mission only lasted from October to December. Yet, it was enough time for me to love the kids and give them a place in my heart. Early in January in 1979, I moved to the Provincial House where I was to receive a new mission. I was assigned to Casa Central where I would provide faith in education in the school and complete my college degree.

Then in 1981, I was sent on a mission which gave full meaning to my vocation as a Daughter of Charity. It was in the parish "San Pedro" in Carchá, Alta Verapaz, Guatemala. Totally missionary, the parish was administered by Salesian priests. Most of the priests served a large rural territory within the parish. The largest section of the region belonged to the ethnic Q'eqchi Indians and I had to learn their language. We lived modestly in a neighborhood, in a small rented house, paid for by the parish. We were four Sisters. Two Sisters were in charge of the typical activities for women, children and the elderly that take place in an urban parish. They also provided support for various cultural activities.

Sister Estela Castro, whom I admired so much, and I dedicated ourselves to the rural area of the parish. She formed health promoters for the farthest communities and during her visits, she attended long lines of patients. I dedicated myself to the formation and accompaniment of the ministers of the Word in the rural communities. These ministers sustained the faith and animated the villages in these rural areas. On Saturdays and Sundays, I accompanied the youth groups and acolytes of the parish. I found it incredible what we were able to accomplish with these young people who enjoyed serving those most in need in the parish. They were also involved in the animation of the Eucharistic celebrations that were broadcast on the radio. Through Radio Tezulutlan, the voice of the diocese, special programs for young people were also broadcast. This voice of the diocese had an incredible audience.

Unfortunately, at that time in Guatemala, we were in the toughest years of the thirty-six-year internal armed conflict between two powers: United States capitalism, defended by the country's army, and communism of the Soviet Union, defended by the Guerrilla Army of the Poor. The guerrillas had their camps in the mountains and from there, deployed all their offensives in favor of liberation. The guerrillas entered the communities for several reasons: to buy supplies, to report what they did for the good of the peoples, or to seek sympathy. This "army," when learning information through informants, retaliated against the whole community. The villages were mercilessly razed; men, women and children taken or killed; houses burned. Some communities were attacked during the Sunday celebrations and people were tortured and martyred.

During those years, we studied the documents of the Church, *Medellin and Puebla*, with the people. The Latin American Bible was read in the vernacular each day in the homes and celebrations of the communities. We also sang the songs of the Church in the vernacular. People were forbidden to sing the "Magnificat." All religious books were forbidden, and the Indians buried them to hide them from their oppressors.

The communities that were able to escape left at a moment's notice. Each family or group of families fled with almost nothing. They climbed hills and mountains and trekked through endless jungles. They fled day after day, week after week, lost among the tangle of vegetation, defending themselves from wild animals and enduring inclement weather. There are so many sad stories of children, women, and elderly men who died of starvation or from illnesses en route and their bodies were simply left along the road. They faced an Exodus with no hope of reaching the Promised Land. They had left their homes, their community, their land which had fed them, and which kept the remains of their ancestors, traveling to a place far away from all that they loved. Their goal now was to save their lives. At last they arrived in Mexico where they were welcomed. They joined thousands of refugees from different places and languages, living in camps, and learning to live and share as brothers and sisters. The children forgot their language and their culture.

It was no longer safe for us to visit communities. We had terrible experiences because the army had set up checkpoints on the roads. Any movement was suspicious. The communities were empty. There was desolation and a lot of suffering everywhere. Under these circumstances, I traveled to the Provincial House on November 27, 1983, to join Sister Maria Elena in pronouncing our vows for the first time. We were the only two from our initial band who had persevered in responding to God's call. We continued for a while longer on mission in

Guatemala, doing what we could through those difficult years

In 1985, I was sent to León de Nicaragua. I was very happy there. The Sisters with whom I shared my life left a deep impression on me. Again, war was in the atmosphere and the air we breathed. But in the midst of that, we maintained school activities. The Sandinistas were in control but were constantly engaged in attacks against the Contras. We could hear the bomb detonations near our home. In the mountains, the clashes continued, and many were wounded and/or died.

I worked at a school for children who had been left orphaned by the war. We had more than one thousand students and a home for girls of all ages. All of them had been sent by the government and the majority had sad stories of loss of close family members in the war.

Here I suffered an experience that marked my life. The Sister in charge of the girls at the Home organized a walk to the sea during a free day from school. Sister Maria Elena and I offered to accompany her as there were about seventy girls involved. I took care of the group of little ones. Using small pieces of driftwood, we gathered along the shoreline, we made simple drawings in the sand. The children delighted in having the waves wet our feet and erase the drawings. The two Sisters with the group of middle-aged and older girls were in the water, apparently in no danger.

I was trying to keep the little girls under control up on the sand. A group of older girls in the house where we stayed had prepared a big pot of boiling soup, which they left to come down to enjoy the sea. Upon arrival, they saw that some of the girls were struggling in the water. They ran to me shouting “The girls are drowning...” I turned around to see... “My God!” The group was struggling. I only saw some heads floating and then disappearing! They were scattered all over the water.

I asked in fervent prayer for a miracle. I also directed two of the young women to take the group of little ones back to the house. The Lord answered my prayer immediately. A young man, both serene and strong, appeared out of nowhere. He went into the sea and brought the girls to the shore. We dragged them to the beach. It was chaos! The two Sisters who were with the girls in the water and one of the girls were in serious condition.

We attempted to resuscitate them. The two Sisters started to display signs of life, but the thirteen-year-old girl was not responding. The young man told me there was nothing more we could do, but I kept trying to resuscitate her. When I looked up to thank him for his help, he was gone. I asked the girls who were with me if they knew what happened to him, but no one saw him leave. That day I’m sure I saw Jesus face to face, and not only did I see Him, all the girls saw Him as well. Soon we realized that another one of the girls was missing. Her body was later found by fishermen.

When some other Sisters and lifeguards arrived, the girls and Sisters were taken to the hospital. I then became the manager of the Home for girls, as the Sister in charge; one of those who had been resuscitated, had to have specialized care in another country. The entire group of us were definitely impacted by what had happened and yet we all managed to move on.

Life in Nicaragua was difficult. Food was scarce! We could only have what the government assigned to us and often that was minimal and, at times, nothing at all. Everything was acquired with a government-issued card and there was great scarcity as a result of the war. We were organized and controlled by the Sandinista Defense Committee (CDS). Everyone needed money. There was nothing to buy. Clothes, shoes, everything was controlled and had to be approved by the government. There was never enough. During that time, I had become a “mother” and an experienced Sister.

Afterwards, I lived with happy and fond memories of my time with these children. I still have contact with some of my little ones, who today are women with cute families of their own. In the midst of the immense chaos we created things – food, clothes, even joy out of nothing. To this day, I wonder how we survived and enjoyed what little we had. I still remember one small episode. The girls were returning from school. One of their companions had received a gift of chewing gum sent by family members in another country. After chewing it, she had thrown it in the trash. Some of the other girls picked it out of the trash and kept chewing it. They also shared it with some of their friends.

My heart was still with the girls, but I knew it was to last for just a short time. I was already taking steps toward my future ministry. I had requested to offer myself as a missionary, and so, I gradually began to distance myself from the girls as I prepared to go to Paris for the *Missions Ad Gentes* program. This is the name given to the Daughters of Charity program in Paris for Sisters who volunteer to serve in foreign countries.

In 1989, while waiting to hear if my request would be accepted, I was assigned to a very nice mission, in Boaco, Nicaragua. My responsibilities there involved a fairly comprehensive project with a focus on healthcare, parish life and accompaniment of the communities of the rural area. During that period, I also traveled home to Guatemala to celebrate my parents’ fiftieth wedding anniversary party on August 4th.

Finally, on November 2, 1990, I traveled to Paris to prepare for my future mission of service. That day, the Sisters and all my family accompanied me to the airport in Guatemala to say farewell. Among tears and broken hearts, we said our goodbyes. We are close-knit as a family and they have supported me as I followed my star to every new location. Wherever I have been sent, they have taken their time to visit me, even in Nicaragua. That day at the airport my dad was the last to say good-bye. From the bottom of his heart he said, “Don’t cry little girl, you’re going to follow your ideals. We’re going to see each other again.”

I departed heartbroken, but happy, trying to follow my star. In the Company of the Daughters of Charity, the day we enter the Seminary is the date we consider our vocation day and my date is January 6. In the Church’s calendar at that time, the Feast of the Epiphany was always celebrated on January 6. The word *Epiphany* means *Manifestation*, a phenomenon by which something important is revealed. When Jesus was born, the Kings of the East set out after seeing the star and followed it. The star took them right to where Jesus was. And so I went, following my star, crossing the immense ocean blue as blue as the heavens.

I arrived at such an unknown place to participate in the *Mission Ad Gentes* program for formation as a missionary. It was night, when in my country it was day. But there was a charm and a sense of wonder to arrive at the place which is the cradle of the Company of the Daughters of Charity, the Chapel of the Apparitions of the Virgin to St. Catherine Labouré, and where the relics of our Founders are located. I considered this as sacred ground, a holy place, which housed the Daughters of Charity archives. There was the promise that I would soon attend a Vincentian course that was part of the program. These sessions provide a wealth of information on our Community, its history and the understanding of our vocation as Daughters of Charity. Unfortunately, the course was canceled due to the Gulf War.

So, we who were being prepared to go to mission lands were immediately assigned. Sister María José Pascual and I were sent to Bolivia. I have always said that I won the jackpot!

After an endless journey, we arrived in La Paz where it was terribly cold. The Sisters greeted us at the airport there. We could hardly breathe due to the altitude.

We had to take a special tea made from coca leaves and *sororchi*, which has a medicinal quality. We finally arrived at the house of the Sisters in the Altiplano. This is a region high in the Andes Mountains.

We attempted to sleep, but the altitude and the cold made it difficult to do so and when we did awake, we had headaches caused by fatigue and the altitude itself. The next afternoon we went to the Provincial House in Cochabamba. There awaiting us were our beloved Sisters Mary Rafaela Collazo and Liliana Alleilo, our Visitatrix. There we also felt the effects of the altitude, but not as much as in La Paz. But we did seem to walk as if in the air. We went to the house for the feast of our Foundress, St. Louise, and it was an unforgettable celebration. From my very first contact with the Sisters in both La Paz and Cochabamba, I felt incredible sisterly warmth, and I knew that this was the place God wanted for me.

We stayed there about two weeks, getting to know the Sisters. We also took a course with a priest who was an expert on the cultures of Bolivia. Soon we were given our destinations. Sister Mary José went back to La Paz and I was to be sent to the Beni (one of the wettest regions in Bolivia consisting almost completely of pampas and jungle). I knew almost immediately that I was going to be very happy and fulfilled there. I remember that the Sisters called to welcome me, and I felt such a great desire to join them.

Sister Rafaela took us to a big market to buy what we would need in our new missions. For Sister María José, everything was winter clothes; while for me, it was mainly clothes for the tropical climate: pants, long-sleeved shirts, waterproof boots, a powerful flashlight, hat, backpack, repellent, sunblock and some things for the cold. She explained to me that when God made the Beni, He gave it an abundance of everything.





Overall, the Beni has a humid tropical climate. But it also experiences a phenomenon created by extremely cold winds known as *surazos*. These winds are intense and unbearably cold, chilling people to the bone! There are also all kinds of bugs in abundance, such as *tabanos* (horseflies), mosquitoes, tartans, and ticks.



On March 30, 1991, I went to my mission. We flew on a large aircraft belonging to Lloyd Aéreo Boliviano. Landing in the blessed land of the Great Moxos Trinidad, Beni, my three Sisters were waiting for me: Geralda, from the U.S., Ana Mercedes from El Salvador, and Ana Noemí from Mexico. At that time, the Sisters still lived in the Paititi neighborhood. Later we moved on to the wooden house inside the EPARU facilities.

The next day we went to the port to get to know our second home where I would spend much of my life, sailing aboard the *Siloé*. I began to meet my lay brothers and Sisters, who made up the Rural Pastoral Team. From that moment on, I knew I'd gotten to where the star led me, the star which had pointed the way that God had mapped out. At certain times, the star guided me, rested on me and would place a gift in my hands. Early in my missionary journey, I understood none of this. But in due course, I would come to understand.

Soon we set sail from the port bound for the Vicariate of Pando. Here I met Monsignor Luis Morgan Casey, bishop of the Vicariate of Pando. There was another Rural Pastoral Team aboard, similar to ours, in the Vicariate of Beni. The bishop had organized a meeting of formation and an exchange of experiences. The journey was long, taking about three or four days of sailing. As we traveled together, we outlined the activities to be carried out on the rivers and made an agenda highlighting those in which I would be involved. I was in heaven, for everything corresponded with my interests and desires for missionary action. I would be in charge of the formation of the Catechists from rural communities, prepare materials for the animation of communities, train Animators, and do follow-up visits together with the team coordinator.

The next day, in the middle of the morning, the Sister Servant called to tell me my dad died on April 23, and that my family could not reach me. She told me that I should travel back to Guatemala as my family was waiting for me. Monsignor Casey lent us money for my trip. He was also able to get me out in a military helicopter to La Paz that same afternoon. From La Paz, I went by taxi to the airport where the Sisters waited for me with a blue habit and my ticket. Because I had departed the Beni hastily, I was still dressed in my work pants. During my trip home I had some unusual connections, flying from La Paz to Brazil, from Brazil to Peru, from Peru to Panama, from Panama to Mexico, and finally from Mexico to Guatemala. In Guatemala, the Sisters were there waiting for me.

I will never forget Sister Ana Rosa who accompanied me to my village where they had kept vigil with my dad for three nights. My home was full of people, because my father and my family are very dear and well-recognized in the region. My sister told me that people accompanied them both day and night.

How much I appreciate to this day everything my family and my community of Daughters of Charity did for me so that I could say goodbye to my father and how they supported me in my grieving. I stayed with Mom for fifteen days and then returned to my mission in the Beni, this time making more comfortable connections. I went enthusiastically to join the mission, visited communities along the rivers, and convened Catechists from communities in both the road and river areas.

On June 15, 1991, we were at the Trinidad airport saying farewell to Sisters going on retreat. Suddenly my Sister Servant's name was called over the loudspeaker.

She talked on the phone and then said: "Let's go home, we have something urgent." As she was one of the Sisters going on retreat, we retrieved her suitcase and returned home. During the 20-minute drive from the airport, I sensed some tension. When we arrived, we went to the chapel and my Sister Servant shared with me the news that my brother, the second child in our family, had been murdered! I felt my world crumble.

My relationship with each of my three brothers and my one sister has been extremely close, but I had a special relationship with this brother. He had great hopes for my future. He bought me things I enjoyed when he started working, He kept me regularly informed about our entire family. I fell to my knees in the small chapel and exclaimed: "My God... why... Jesus, why?"

The Sisters hugged me and comforted me. I still strongly feel the pain of a wound that hasn't healed since that day, June 15, 1991. My Community supported me tremendously. The Visitatrix asked Sister Maria José, the Sister with whom I was in Paris and a good friend, to spend a few days in my Community in the Beni. I felt like Job, who was blessed abundantly and then had to give up everything with a bleeding heart.

It was two weeks later that my family's house, my mother's home, was attacked by a group of either guerrillas or thieves. We were never sure which group it was. The truth is that they stole as much as they could, but by some miracle, no one lost their lives even though weapons were fired, and much violence occurred. My sister-in-law either passed out or collapsed during the experience. Everyone believed she was hurt but fortunately that was not the case.

I was willing to stay there under the star and remain in the Beni. But the Visitatrix insisted that I must go to Guatemala and spend another fifteen days with my mother, which I did. I remember the day of my departure. Before I went to the airport, one of the Sisters in my Community came to my room. To her surprise, I had only packed my backpack and she saw that I was leaving the rest of my belongings behind. She told the Sister Servant: "She is coming back. She has left everything in her room."

The encounter with my family was an incredibly healing experience. My mother was devastated. She always told us even after many years, that my father's death was extremely difficult for her because he handled everything, but she was able to move on. After my brother's death, she never got over it. It was a great relief and a time of healing to return to my family, to be with them, and share our grief together over the recent death of my father, the tragic murder of my brother and the violent theft in our family home.

Even today, after thirty years, I still shed many tears, but I understand these tragic events marked the beginning of the twenty-seven years that I lived on a mission where I was so happy. A place where every day I felt like the transformed water of the gospel story, The Wedding at Cana. It was only ordinary water, but God made me WINE in abundance. From the soil of my sadness, sprouted the joy of my heart. From my smallness, He made enough wine for me and for the people of that beloved place where I served.

I was home on that mission as if all my life I had lived there. I had valuable experiences there which followed my experiences among the Q'eqchi Indians, the experience with the girls of Nicaragua, and the conviction of a special call in my home Province.

I immediately got to know places and soon I could travel alone. I admired every Sister in my Community. They grounded me, and everything was favorable for our apostolic work. The bishops supported us, the infrastructure, logistics and a team composed of simple people enabled us to cover a large area on the Mamoré, Isiboro, Sécure, Ichoa, Imose, and Chimimita rivers plus the upper areas near the highway. Together, we could move mountains!

On February 17, 1993, we opened a new mission in San Lorenzo de Moxos. This mission could only be reached by plane. Four of us were sent: Sisters Geralda, Esmeralda, Fabiola and me. The leaders of that parish were the Jesuit priests, but they lived in St. Ignatius of Moxos, quite far from our parish. They came two or three times a year to visit our Community during the occasional trips they made to the farthest communities of their extended parish. The priests traveled by plane to our parish to have the Eucharistic celebration. At times, the people would bring consecrated hosts for us to use for Communion.



We took care of everything: training of Faith Animators and Catechists, supporting women's promotion, building a boarding school for children from the communities, teaching catechesis in schools, and visiting the various communities in our area. Here I had the most beautiful experiences with Sister Geralda, visiting the communities, crossing the immense marshes, touring the pampas in carts drawn by oxen, or mounted on horseback for hours until reaching the communities. I was so happy in that place of deep faith, because that group of Indigenous Moxeños Trinitarians still carry out the many customs of the Jesuits.

Sister Geralda was asked to return to EPARU and in February 1995, I was sent to Cochabamba, to accompany young applicants to the Community. That experience enriched my life. I feel very fulfilled when I can share my missionary experience and I find that when I do share it, some of the young women feel called to a similar life.

In 1996 I returned to EPARU with renewed strength and enthusiasm, happy because I knew the terrain I was walking. I dedicated myself with heart and soul and all my strength to:

- Training of pastoral agents of the area delegated to EPARU.
- The popular missions to the many villages along the rivers.
- Animation of the rural communities.
- Educational and spiritual formation radio programs.
- Housing for the children so that they could attend school in the community of Camiaco Rio Mamoré and San Pablo Rio Isiboro.

These were the years EPARU had led a number of large projects:

- Well drilling in communities without fresh water.
- Support Indigenous people in their struggles to maintain their own territory.
- Provide scholarships to Indigenous young people who would later become teachers at the Kateri Institute of Technology.
- Women's promotion.
- Adult education by radio.
- Promotion of, and support to, rice and sugarcane producers and their markets.



I called those years “golden times.” Years of abundant life! Nothing was impossible for our team. We all relied on one another to support each project. Each task depended on contributions from every member of the team. We carried out all of them, even during the major floods that occurred in our rainy seasons.

Throughout those periods, we used our boats, trucks and other forms of transportation for weeks and months, bringing humanitarian aid to the affected.

In 2006 we opened the Kateri Institute of Technology in the Isiboro Sécure National Park Indigenous Territory (TIPNIS). Here we built a boarding school that would change the lives and opportunities for our young people, both men and women, in our far-reaching and rural communities. In this Institute, young people could receive a quality education recognized by the Ministry of Education. The training enabled the students to perform and excel in the fields of woodcraft, agriculture, technology, and mechanics.

The purchase of the famous Tropic Diffuser Radio was another dream fulfilled. The radio was installed in the EPARU facilities and became a valuable communication and evangelization tool for the communities located in the immense Amazonian territory of the Beni.

And so I lived, illuminated by the star which showed me the way. Here God’s light guided me for twenty-seven happy years. I found His presence in the faces of so many brothers and sisters who embraced me and I, them.

As the Kings of the East returned by another star in the time of Jesus’ birth, I also took another route on November 9, 2017. Crossing the sea of my own tears, and away from the footsteps and traces of my many steps in the Beni, at sixty-two years of age and forty years of vocation, I returned to my Province to start over.

I say thank you to Monsignor Julio María Elías, Monsignor Roberto Bordi, every Sister of Bolivia, and especially those with whom I have shared my life in the missions of this beautiful South American country. Thanks to every member of the Rural Pastoral Teams who accompanied me to live the greatest adventure of my life. I keep them all in my heart. Thanks to every brother and sister of the communities that welcomed me in their hearts and homes, to each Animator, Missionary, Catechist, to each according to a variety of ministries, to every institution that trusted us, supported and financed our projects and still continue to do so. My gratitude is endless!

And thank you Sisters Ana Mercedes Francia, Ana Noemí Gutiérrez, Angelica Velázquez, Mirtha, Lila, Zenobia, Isela, Josefina, and Juanita. Geralda, special thanks to YOU because you have been guiding me throughout all this time. YOU made it all possible, with your great



ability to organize and to manage, but especially because of your immense love for the underprivileged. YOU made my missionary vocation full. Thank you because with you everything was possible. YOU who believed in me so much! YOU gave me the space of an immense sky to fly without limits. YOU healed my wings when they were broken, and YOU taught me to fly against the current.

On January 25, 2018, I joined my Province of Central America again. Everything was strange to me, even though every three years when I returned to Guatemala to visit my family, I always spent a few days in the Provincial House. Returning to stay for good was different and I realized that I had a broken heart, which, of course, was logical because the Beni had been home to me for so many years.

I felt foreign in my own land. I did not know many Sisters and they did not know me. There were many Sisters with whom I had had a close relationship, but they had already gone to Heaven. Others were quite elderly or had become sick.

At the beginning of the new year, I met with our Visitatrix, Sister Maria Elena, to receive my new mission. Sister was the only remaining member of the band of Sisters with whom I entered. We had been “soul sisters” together when we were young. She asked me to assist in the Seminary.

I did not imagine the good that blessed place would be for me. The atmosphere of peace, silence, creative liturgies, the opportunity to pray together more frequently, and the preparation of my classes brought me closer to Jesus. It was an opportunity of heaven. Every group of Seminary Sisters was for me a gift from God. It was just what I needed to heal my heart from the great pain of leaving my missionary experience in Bolivia and integrating back into the Province.

Sister Amadita and Sister Narci understood I was in transition and they helped me become acclimated. I felt fulfilled. I discovered from the simplicity of my missionary life that I had much to give and share because of those experiences. The Sisters of the Seminary inadvertently enriched me much more. Their youth, their capacity for wonder and open-mindedness, their constant desire to serve and be faithful to the charism, their creativity which I could observe when they were doing apostolic works enriched me. The experience with them helped me manage my grieving because I wept every day. I thank God for allowing me to share in that time with the thirteen Sisters of the different ethnic groups. I pray every day for each of them. I have faith and trust that they will live their vocation in fidelity and embrace both the blessings and challenges of religious life.

On October 14, 2019, I was sent to Wampusirpi, Honduras, in the department of *Gracias a Dios*. Its inhabitants belong to different ethnic groups: Miskitos, Tawahkas, Pech and Ladinos. People reside in villages and hamlets on the banks of the Patuca River. They are engaged in agriculture and artisanal fishing. It lacks roads, so transport is either by air or navigation of the river. I feel at home.

My brothers accompanied me on the long journey from Guatemala to Ceiba, where we stayed overnight and then I sent my brothers on their journey back to Guatemala. From Ceiba, I

traveled by various means of transport and finally on a small plane to Puerto Lempira where the Sisters of that Community awaited me. That same day I took another small plane to Wampusirpi where my star stopped again over the house where the three Sisters of my new Community – Sister Lira, Sister Geraldina, and Sister Arely – were waiting. I have lived only a short time in Wampusirpi. I discover that I have a huge field in which I can serve. I have had wonderful experiences in the few trips I have made. I find similarity to my previous mission experiences in Bolivia.

In mid-February 2020, Sister Catherine Mary Norris, Visitatrix of the Province of St. Louise in the United States, asked my Visitatrix if I could go to South Carolina to assist Sister Mary Gerald with the stories she was writing and collecting for this book. Upon arrival, it was evident that Gerald was not well. She went to the doctor who ordered some scans and tests. Following a preliminary diagnose of metastatic breast cancer, I accompanied her to Baltimore to stay at the Sisters’ residence on the St. Agnes Hospital campus where she began treatment at the end of February. Her health declined rapidly amidst the challenges of COVID-19. At the end of March, I accompanied her to Emmitsburg, Maryland. Five days later, I was at her bedside when she was welcomed into Heaven by her loving Lord and her deceased family members.



When I return home to Guatemala after post-Coronavirus travel is safer, my heart is open to start over!

*Sister Maritza Garcia*

## Always on the Way

What I liked most about belonging to the EPARU is that we were always on the way. I felt very close to the mission of Jesus – always on the road, never alone; always surrounded by so many people, people who loved to hear my stories about God and I delighted in hearing stories about their lives. Scripture tells us wherever Our Lord went, people waited with confidence, with love, with joy... no matter what time of day it was. They waited and everything they had or planned to do, faded into the background.



Our mission meetings could take place anywhere: in the chapel or the town hall; in the school or under a cozy tree that provided shade and breezes. Whatever location was selected, the people were there - peacefully happy, listening, participating in the meetings. Many times, these gatherings could be long because activities or celebrations were organized, projects were carried out, an issue or problem that the community was concerned about was evaluated or simply dealt with; sometimes there were important suggestions from the team, a project that was being initiated. Then health care assessments and catechesis for children and youth were offered. There was always a variety of activities that the people loved.

When we were there, it seemed that time in each community stopped; that there was nothing more important than enjoying a truly familial relationship in which we could listen and learn from one another. These visits reminded me of when Jesus walked among the villages or people simply followed Him to where He was going.

How many miracles came out of our meetings – of planning and seeking solutions together, of finding the best way for everyone to have a better life, of striving to provide good for the entire community, or simply forgiving and starting again? So, when it was time to leave, hopefully a part of us stayed in the hearts of the people; we knew that they remained in the hearts of each one of us along the way. They, like everyone, had their own responsibilities, important things to do. But when it came to a mission visit, it was as if God Himself came to visit and they had to listen.



And so we were always on the road: crossing rivers by boat or canoe, stomping narrow jungle trails leaving footprints in the mud, riding a docile or rambunctious horse, sailing through the clouds in a small airplane over the jungle and grasslands... simply trying to meet the needs of the people.

Today I see everything from a distance. I have to say, “Thank you Lord for the gift of these people who have taught me so much...especially that what matters most, is listening to what comes from You.”

*Sister Maritza Garcia*

## **Gratitude for My Missionary Experience**

When there were floods along the rivers, the EPARU has large boats that were used to transport all kinds of humanitarian aid to help the affected communities. These rivers enabled us to bring much-needed encouragement, accompaniment, or follow-up to assure the smooth



running of projects. These rivers and our boats also made it possible to celebrate liturgical feasts such as Easter and Christmas, as well as others. The ministry of our “popular missions” also was possible. I always discovered the manifestation of God through everything that surrounded me. During the trips that lasted several weeks, we would tour the communities of the various rivers, traveling in one of the big boats, which are like houses. They are big enough to meet our daily needs, allowing us to transport food, work materials and supplies to subsist on as members of EPARU.

During our stay, we met with the presence of God in every moment, in every community prayer while living on the boat. From sunrise to sunset and even while we slept, everything spoke to us of God: the dolphins rocking the boat, a jaguar howling from the jungle, the frogs singing and the fireflies with their magical little glow lighting up the darkness, the suffocating heat, the breeze of the cool afternoons as well as the intense cold of the south wind which can only be felt in the Beni.

I felt embraced by the love of God on these trips, wrapped in the presence of God in the rapport we had with our team as we traveled along in our boat; in the exuberant nature of the Amazon; in each encounter with our sisters and brothers in the small communities.

I tried to be attentive, to observe and open my heart to listen to the voice of God through what surrounded me. It could be a bird that sang or soared, the turbulent river that continued to run without stopping, the rows of turtles on the tangle of twigs and weeds along the rivers, the lizards basking in the sun on the beaches, the herons and ducks that squawked and flew away scared, the capybaras that flocked along the banks of the rivers, and the dolphins that danced in and out of the waters, making a wonderful spectacle.

As we approached each community, the children, after listening for the sound of the ship’s engine, rushed joyfully to the port to receive us. I delighted in the excitement these children showed when receiving a pacifier or a small candy or a cookie we shared with them. I received so much joy from the small ones. They had such happiness in their wonderful world.



And again, and again I heard the Words of Jesus “I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven.” (Matthew 18.4)

I can say life along the rivers is also a world full of so many challenges, of struggle, where you must deal with floods and live with all kinds of pests, small insects. I have to say that some insects are terribly harmful. We had to be vigilant, shaking them off as they can cause the skin to itch and leave hives and discomfort. Perhaps these inconveniences are the price one pays for living in such a paradise.

Some of these insects attack you. Each variety has its own way to make your life miserable: mosquitoes, horseflies, marigids and gnats. The *japutados*, which are tiny red insects the size of the point of a needle, are particularly bothersome and cause great discomfort. They get into such places as one’s navel or behind one’s ears.

I discovered that in the midst of the hard life living in the jungle, there is joy, there is a charm. Each man, each woman feels connected to the earth and assumes a mission of seeking and creating the material and spiritual conditions to live well and to have a harmonious life with all of nature. These people are caretakers of this paradise, this part of the world that God has placed in their hands.

There is a charm, a balance that moves from discomfort, lack and suffering, to great peace, joy, and harmony, a feeling of being embraced by God; the Creator God who has entrusted the beauty of this land in which they live. God invites them to be co-creators and caretakers of its beauty.

I found God in everything. I found Him in children, I found Him in insects, in the large number of butterflies of various colors and sizes. I found Him in water, I found Him in flowers and fruits. I found Him in the bad weather of the environment. I found Him especially in the joy of people, my sisters and brothers who are happy with what they have and where they live. I found God in every corner of their small houses with a *motacú* leaf roof, *chuchio* walls, and a dirt floor. In a corner of these houses a beautifully colored loom usually sits, where the artist hands of women sketch a striped hammock or a shirt that will serve for the ceremonial events. In this same small space, there is always a delicately arranged altar. Frequently a domestic animal prowls or sings. Even a little parrot might dare to speak and is often very funny. These are the simple homes where they live. We have had the happiness of being welcomed into their space.

We were always received with open arms. I will never forget the delicious *chivé* (yucca) or the sweet *chichi* (maize), the wonderful grapefruits and oranges, the mouthwatering prepared meat of *anta* or *jochi*; the fried piranhas, the *surubí* and the *pacú* in *chapapa*, all dishes prepared for us by these welcoming families.

Everything that this land provides is a great wealth to the families and they are happy to be able to share it. That is why I understand they so carefully take care of the land, conserve and protect it. That is why I understand the nine marches or walks from their lands to the city of La Paz to peacefully speak in protest to the government for encroaching on their territory. The communities of this immense territory have suffered much to protect their land and take

care of it as their ancestors have done before them. Everything spoke to me of God while living there. My life was like being immersed in a Sanctuary, which I will always treasure. I also perceive that I have grown so much. After living in those places, I am not the same. The passage of my brothers with whom I have shared over these years of missionary experience have left great traces and deep experiences of God in me. I can be more contemplative. I find God in everything that surrounds me. I can feel in this experience the embrace of God. I can be more human, I can be more Sister, I can be immensely happy with who I am and what I have.

I have also left something of myself. I have had so many experiences for which I thank God, and each of my sisters and brothers from the communities of their rivers that I traveled for so many years. Thank you for so many dreams lived together, for so many shared experiences. When I am sad, I remember them. When I close my eyes, I see those landscapes. I see myself walking along the narrow paths in the jungle, walking the pampas on horseback, or gliding along in a canoe. I visualize the times when, during the floods, in order to get the canoe back into the river, we used *singas* (long poles) in the water-filled pampas to help us work the canoe back into the deeper water of the river. I see myself sitting in the carts pulled by the oxen or walking to the many villages or communities and so many memories come to me. I say repeatedly.... Thank you, Lord, for everything I have lived, everything I have shared. Thank you for all the experiences I have lived together with these wonderful people.

*Sister Maritza Garcia*

## ***Father Gregory Gay, C.M., Visits the Beni***

### **From Rome to the Amazon Jungles**

On two occasions, I visited the mission of the Daughters of Charity in the Beni, Bolivia as Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission. I spent my time with them during Holy Week. As I have the missionary spirit myself, I enjoyed being with the people in the fields, somehow experiencing their discomforts, sufferings and their poverty. This opportunity to leave the General Curia in Rome gave me a respite to visit the missionary territories of the Vincentian Fathers and the Daughters of Charity.

In the Beni, I'd never seen so many "stilts" (a form of mosquito found in this area which sucks the blood of the person they bite) and other bugs in my life in one place. I keep them in mind to this day when I see on my legs and arms the evidence that I was nourishment for them. My skin must have had a special appeal!

Not only were they on our boat, but also in the small chapels and the villages. During liturgies, everyone attempted to scare off the bugs so that we could focus on the Eucharist. I was very amazed at the people. They were most attentive. It seemed that they were accustomed to the annoyance of these small creatures and this did not interfere with their love for the celebration of the Eucharist.

I have several comments, perhaps anecdotes, that I remember from the first time I went to visit on the rivers, with the same team: Simon; Hipólito; Roberto; Doña Angelica, a great cook; Fatima, an excellent nurse; and Sisters Geralda and Maritza.



One of the goals a missionary community has is to promote community formation among people. In order to do this among the people, we have to model this among ourselves. Something beautiful that I experienced during the journey, was the experience of faith and community among everyone on the *Siloé*. Everyone – the pilots, the cook, the nurse and Sisters – energetically expressed their spirituality together. We formed a beautiful community through the hours of being together on the boat sailing upriver and downstream. We prayed together in community. I remember the times we celebrated the Eucharist in the cabin of the ship, so that the pilots could participate in the Eucharist.

That experience of sharing the Word of God in the cabin of the ship was beautiful. That scene made me think of Christ who leads our Church to this day. He is the main pilot of our Church with all of us continuing His work and collaborating in everything. The Church is alive, dynamic and is constantly changing. It is shaken by the waves and receives the breezes of the wind just like we experienced the waves and breezes on that cool afternoon while celebrating the Eucharist.

I really liked the opportunity in the mornings and evenings to pray Lauds (Morning Prayer) and Vespers (Evening Prayer) with the sisters. We joined the whole Church with prayers as we do in our communities, quite simple and far from the reality we were living.

One thing that significantly struck me was to get to the Kateri Institute. I did not expect to find something so massive in the middle of the jungle. There we celebrated the Eucharist twice with the young people of the school. It was incredible to see in the middle of the forest and pampas, a college that was so developed with so many young men and women. They actively participated in the Eucharist, singing their own songs, while actively involved in their everyday life as students.

We continued our missionary journey along the Isiboro River and then to the Ichoa River, visiting different communities in the region. The simple people with such a deep faith were at this time experiencing tension and political difficulties. The government was trying to divide the Christian communities, favoring those who agreed with them to the disadvantage of the others. We encouraged the people to keep to their principles of fidelity to the Church and Christian community values and to continue to protect their territory.

Another experience, I recall is when we went to celebrate Holy Saturday in a community where we had to go in a *lanchita*, (a boat) and sailed, paddling for several hours. The waters that had flooded the pampas were then lowering their level and I recall Sister Geralda standing

in the boat in front of me, with the paddle in her hand. As she grabbed the paddle tightly she said, “Father Gregory, this is how it is done.” She then pushed the paddle hard into the bottom, and the boat slid forward and moved on. Then she taught me how it was done. I also remember returning in the *lanchita* after having celebrated the liturgy, which had been well planned and prepared by the people. The people had prepared and shared a meal with us at the end of the liturgy. With joy in our hearts after this beautiful experience, we were returning after midnight. It was indescribably beautiful, as it should be at Easter: a full moon, the half-lit landscape along with the thousands of sounds of nocturnal birds, crickets singing and thousands of fireflies illuminating the area around us providing a backdrop for us to reflect on the beautiful experience we had just had with these simple faith-filled people.

As we traveled, I also recall well that Simon became playful with me. He said, “Look ahead, Father. See those lights, when we get there I’ll show you what it is.” Simon recognized that the lights were the eyes of an alligator which light up at night. When we arrived, Simon focused on the alligator. He took the oar and hit the alligator on the forehead. The brave lizard opened and closed his mouth but also began to defend itself. We were not in a particularly small boat, but the motion of the alligator endangered the boat. As the alligator moved on and the boat stabilized, Simon said, “Father just know one thing! This was the baby, and the mother will come looking for us! Now just know, she paddles stronger and faster!” This was truly a scary experience but an impressive one.

Getting more serious, I recall celebrating the Eucharist in the Sisters’ House in the Kateri Institute, talking with the Sisters on the boat. Or, when returning to Trinidad, celebrating with another community of Sisters who attend a nursing home. These Sisters perform other works of the Apostolic Vicariate of the Beni, and it gave me great joy and pride to see how very committed the faith-filled Daughters of Charity were to live and share the Vincentian charism.

I was saddened to hear that in the days before Christmas they had great problems, when the government did not let the boats leave to do their missionary work. During this time, the Indigenous people were marching to protect their land and the government was sure that the Sisters, members of the Catholic Church, were promoting and supporting the people in advocating for their rights. Some time later, the government sank the two boats, the *Siloé* and the *St. Vincent*. It was the belief of the Sisters that the government was responsible with the intention of stopping the team from influencing the people. But in addition to stopping the EPARU team from influencing the people, they were also depriving the people of the opportunity to be animated in Gospel values and the spiritual support of the team. Months later, after repairs, the boats were sailing again.

The Sisters shared with me all the events and services that had evolved over time by the Sisters as a province, as a team. I enjoyed the simple, cheerful life of the Sisters. I can say that the Daughters of Charity are great missionaries!

I have already told you about the wonderful landscapes which are part of my memories with the Sisters, but what I keep most in my heart are the rich spiritual experiences with the ship’s crew and sharing my faith with the people of the communities. I received from them the living testimony of their faith in everyday life in their small communities.

On these trips, I admired Sister Geralda. She was not a young woman at the time. She was eighty years old, but strong and enterprising. She had a great love for people and an unconditional dedication to the mission.

I feel a holy pride in knowing that Sister Geralda, who was so committed to the poor in the peripheries of Bolivia, was a countrywoman of mine, not only because she was from the United States, but because, just like me, she was from Baltimore, Maryland.

*Father Gregory Gay, C.M.*

## **The Beni, Bolivia**

The mission entrusted to the Rural Pastoral Team covers a large area, within the Apostolic Vicariate of Beni.

As a team we always try to meet the needs of the brothers of that enormous territory; but the most difficult thing was to approach the people of the communities, to the specific action of the priestly ministry, due to the territorial extension and difficulties of access and the reduced number of priests, in the vicariate. So we organized the popular missions by zones, where the bishop and some priest came to make the closing of the mission; and there the people could receive the sacraments; and during the times of Lent, Easter, and Christmas and patron saint festivals of the communities, on some occasions we were accompanied by the Father Director of the Sisters and sometimes the Bishop, or some priest of the Vicariate.

Something that I greatly admired was that Father Gregorio Gay, while Superior General of the Fathers of the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity, came more than once to tour with the Rural Pastoral Team and visit, celebrate and administer the sacraments to the brothers in that area; doing the whole tour by boat, by canoe, learning to use the singa to push the canoe through the yomomos and pampas of grasslands flooded by rainwater, walking along the narrow paths in the jungle to reach the communities and share with all simplicity and love, taking care of their problems and needs, blessing their homes and making the liturgy and every ceremony of the sacraments alive, the brothers were happy and times later they kept asking us about him.

Like every missionary, he was tremendously welcomed by the intense heat and the rains, as well as insects of all kinds that attacked him without mercy, despite bathing him in repellent. It is difficult to describe their red skin, full of bites from mosquitoes and other insects typical of those places, and the allergy and fever they caused.

And moved by the faith of the people and their spiritual needs, in those far away places he worried so that in some way they could have the priestly presence; and at the request of the Bishops of Beni, he began the efforts to establish a small international missionary community of Priests of the Congregation of the Mission, who now live in a wooden house on the banks of the Isiboro River, within the National Park Indigenous Territory Isiboro Sécure, and from there they move to visit what they can cover.

In this way, the missionary spirit of Saint Vincent de Paul and Saint Louise de Marillac, through The Daughters of Charity and the priests of the Congregation of the Mission, travel through the jungles and rivers of that extensive area of the Apostolic Vicariate of Beni Bolivia.

*Sister Maritza Garcia*

## **A Personal Account: Faith Moves Mountains**

I am Valeria Gisel León Ortiz. I study at the Kateri Institute in the Isiboro Sécure National Park Indigenous Territory, the Beni Bolivia.

I want to share an experience that made me understand that my life hangs on a thread, that God sustains us. On April 5, 2020, we were working in the fish farming module. A friend and I went ahead of the rest of the group because we love swimming in the fish pond. I was experienced swimming in shallow places. That afternoon I suddenly found myself in the deepest area of the pond. When I did not touch the bottom, I became afraid and [began] a fight for my life. Everything went silent, and I remember seeing a man in bright white and my godmother, who had passed away. During this time, I found myself in peace and silence; then, I don't remember anything.



Everything that I am going to relate from now on, is what my colleagues, teachers, managers and Sister Zenobia told me later. They took me to the shore, lifeless, to try to resuscitate me but they said I had no signs of life. The teachers attempted mouth-to-mouth breathing, massage and anything else they could think of. Thirty to forty minutes passed; nobody knows the exact amount of time.

Sister Zenobia called the Sisters in Trinidad. Sister Fabiola, a nurse, gave instructions over the phone. The teachers tried their own techniques as well as Sister's instructions and kept on trying to bring me back. I did not respond.

The Sisters, both in Trinidad and Kateri, together with the students, began to ask Sister Geralda who had died five days earlier in the United States and who, in life, loved us so much at the Kateri Institute to intercede to Jesus to respond. While the teachers and caregivers continued to work on me, to everyone's surprise, I suddenly began to show signs of life.

I was told that the Sisters from Trinidad were planning to hire a plane to take me to Trinidad because I did not respond. Professor Jorge Jare from the Institute went to prepare the motor and canoe to take me to my parents since the Institute is quite far from our homes and our communities. While we study at the Institute, we also live there during the academic period.

After everything happened, the first thing I did was thank God, thank Sister Geralda for interceding for me, and thank all the professors, managers, Sisters and colleagues who did not give up on me. My commitment is to study and work hard to be a good girl, prepare

to be a good woman in life and take advantage of my time at school to prepare myself as best as possible for the future so that I can fulfill my parents' dream, my own dream and Sister Geralda's dream. Sister had many visions and hopes for us young people in rural communities. She fought so that we had opportunities. I thank my colleagues, my teachers, the Sisters and managers, who even when they saw that I was not returning to life, continued fighting for me until they managed to resuscitate me. How grateful I am and committed I am to be the best I can be.

*Valeria Gisel León Ortiz*

## ***Stories from Sisters of the Central American Province***

***Experiences in their own countries of Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, or Bolivia. Several contributed stories in the earlier portion of this booklet.***

### **Street Children—My “Guardian Angels”**



Some years ago, my mission life resulted in an assignment to Bolivia and my first adventure there began upon arrival in Cochabamba. No one was waiting for me at the airport. As passengers gathered their belongings and departed the area, I found myself almost totally alone. Suddenly, many street children began to appear, most of them shoeshine boys. They surrounded me and asked where I was going. They offered to get me Bolivian money to make a phone call.

Despite warnings from passers-by not to trust them, not to listen to them, I gave them a small sum of currency which they converted into 16,000 Bolivian pesos.

We used this money to attempt to place a call to the Provincial House, but no one answered. The children then found a taxi for me and helped load my suitcases. Despite a refusal to accept payment for their “services,” I did distribute the surplus change among them and headed off with the taxi driver for parts unknown.

Upon safe arrival at my appointed destination, the Sisters explained that the group was, most surely, from the “Amanecer” program that Sister Estefania had developed to help the street children. I had been in good hands from the very beginning because they identified me with the Sisters and simply demonstrated lessons learned by serving as my “guardian angels!”

*Sister Ana Mercedes Francia*



## Arriving Is What Matters

Upon arriving at a new mission, the Sisters asked me to stay behind in the residence with another Sister for a few days so that she would have some company while they continued with their scheduled mission activities. I kept busy getting unpacked and settled in my new home. The house was typical of Sisters' houses with a chapel, dining room, kitchen, bedrooms, etc. While the two of us were alone, I visited families in our local village and in some of the neighboring ones. Later, when the other Sisters returned, I also went to villages quite far away.

Finally, the day arrived for me to make my first trip to a distant secluded place to attend to the spiritual and health needs of the people in the area. Everything was going as planned. Another Sister and I got up early to go out in the jeep to meet some guides in a designated place. The previous night it had rained torrentially in the area. But as we had no electricity or a radio, we were unaware of the heavy rains.

After traveling about two hours by jeep, we found the road blocked by a huge boulder and several men were waiting for us there. We had to continue on foot because the heavy rain had caused landslides. The interesting thing was that the men had brought horses for us. They did not want us to have to walk in the mud and get our feet wet and dirty. We were struck by their thoughtful detail and consideration for us.

However, since neither one of us knew how to ride a horse, our first challenge was how to mount them. The feel of the horse's hair was also not something we expected or were accustomed to. My companion told me she would go first, and said, "Follow me." She climbed a rock and half jumped and then fell on top of the horse. She instructed me to do the same. After looking at her, I calculated the distance to the horse. I commanded myself forward but when I went to make the jump, I felt a hand from behind push me. I immediately experienced my first fright as I landed on the horse.

The second fright was when one of the men took the reins to lead my horse. That left me with nothing to hold onto but the hair around the horse's neck. Soon the hair began to fall out and was accumulating between my fingers. My heart began to beat quite rapidly. After walking like this for some time with the other Sister behind, she said, "Move up on the horse's back because you are sitting on the tail and you will fall." I then moved forward on the horse.

We wanted to get to the village as soon as we could. What a joy it was to finally see the houses of the village and to be on firm land at last. But, at age 40, I did not expect the dizziness nor the curved legs from sitting on the horse for such a long time. We had a brief rest and then spent the rest of the afternoon tending the sick and visiting the people of the village. We then returned to the house. All in all, this harrowing journey was worth any discomfort we had experienced and was simply the first of many likely yet to come.

*Sister Ana Mercedes Francia*

## **God Calls Who He Wants, When He Wants, How He Wants**

After my First Communion, I began to have a sense that someday I would be a religious. I did not know how it could happen because I always studied in public schools and had no contact with any religious. But my devotion to Jesus, the Eucharist, and to the Virgin Mary were very much instilled in me. Every Sunday after Mass, I asked the Lord and Mary Most Holy to guide my steps.

When I was studying at the Teachers' College, some Spanish missionaries came to give us talks. They told us a lot about what missionary life was like and I began to dream that I would become a religious missionary. But I still did not know how to accomplish it.

After graduation, I worked in the rural area. I loved country life and really enjoyed teaching and riding horses. But I had to pursue my dream. I asked for a transfer and went to work closer to the capital, La Paz. There I found out they offered scholarships to study various subjects with teachers who were experts in their fields. I chose to apply in two fields, mathematics and physics, both of which I liked and were easier for me. To my surprise and delight, I won a scholarship!

While studying in La Paz, the teachers had to live in a hostel for young ladies. While there, I met the owner's daughter who had been a postulant with the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul. Unfortunately, she became ill and had to withdraw from the Community. But she spoke to us very joyfully about her experience living with the Sisters. She lent me several pamphlets and magazines that told about the life and works of the Sisters in Central America. Based on what I read and information I obtained about life in Community, I thought that it was what God was asking of me: to serve His neediest people wherever I went.

Ana Maria, who was the instrument that God chose to guide me on the path, introduced me to a Sister who helped me initiate the process which needed to be followed for acceptance in the Congregation. The first thing I had to do was write a letter expressing my wishes to be admitted to the Community, my motivations and some information about my personal life. I completed the letter, sent it and then waited for an answer.

Meanwhile, as a recent graduate, I looked for a job and started teaching at a religious school far from the capital. I had a full schedule and often had to teach night classes at the Institute due to a shortage of teachers in the area.

It happened that the Sister who was guiding me was transferred to Guatemala, which is the headquarters of the Congregation in Central America. She was named Provincial Secretary and I lost all contact with her. Almost six months lapsed, and I had not received any reply to my letter.

In my country, it is customary to celebrate the month of May by attending daily Mass or praying the rosary to ask for a special grace or intention. I followed these customs and told the Virgin that, if during the month of May, I did not receive a response from the Sisters, I would interpret this as religious life not being meant for me and I would forget the matter.

Two days before the end of the month, I received an urgent telegram saying I was accepted and that I should present myself as soon as possible.

Later I found out what had happened: My letter was found unopened at the bottom of the outgoing Secretary's file. When the new Secretary found it and realized it was my letter of intent, she hurried to reply. The Virgin Mary responded to my request, and I thank God that my dream came true!

It seems that God calls who He wants, when He wants, and how He wants.

However, something important remained to be solved. I needed Divine intervention to find a replacement who could take over a full schedule and finish teaching the remaining half-year of classes. Thank God, a former colleague agreed to leave his official position and replace me at the private school where I taught. Thus, I was able to leave calmly and answer the call of the Lord.

*Sister Ana Mercedes Francia*

## **Availability**

When the Daughters of Charity offer themselves to "*Mission Ad Gentes*" (Mission to the Nations, the name given to Sisters who feel called to foreign missionary work), they generally must go to the Motherhouse in Paris, France, to receive immediate preparation for their mission assignment. Normally the leadership team asks if there is any preference where a Sister would like to go.

In response to such a query, I answered that I would be happy to go where there was a need. I think they initially had in mind to send me to Africa because I was studying French at the French Alliance. However, around this time, there was a meeting of Visitatrixes from all the countries where there are Daughters of Charity. A visiting Sister from Mexico asked that two Sisters be assigned to come there and help the Guatemalan refugees who had fled the internal war in their country. Numerous Indigenous people were being massacred there, among them were many of the Q'eqchi ethnicity, whose language I knew a little because I had worked among them.

A Columbian Sister and I were selected to go to Mexico and work with the refugees. During this same time, there was also a war against the guerrillas in Colombia and El Salvador (my home country). Consequently, the authorities would not allow us to enter the camp. Sisters themselves would be permitted so long as they were Mexican. An "exchange" decision was made to have us replace two Sisters in their missions and have those from Mexico accompany the refugees.

After a year or so, our Mexican Sisters were kidnapped in the refugee camp, put on a helicopter and repeatedly questioned to find out if they had any connection to the Guatemalan guerrillas. They were kept blindfolded so that they could not identify the kidnappers.

According to the Sisters, they were continually threatened with being pushed out of the helicopters. Finally, the “investigators” became convinced that the Sisters did not know anything about the conflict and early one morning, they were released.

Upon hearing this news, our superiors in Paris asked that the two volunteer Sisters who had gone to Mexico immediately leave the country. A short time later, we were assigned to Bolivia.

*Sister Ana Mercedes Francia*

## **Assistance to Refugees in Honduras**

### ***Mission Ad Gentes***

The Daughters of Charity of Central America have a mission on the Atlantic coast of Honduras for the Miskito, an Indigenous ethnic group. When I was sent to this mission, it was the time of civil war in Nicaragua between the Sandinista Marxist government and the *Contras* who were seeking to overthrow those in power. Many people on the border took refuge in Honduras. These refugees were living in various camps and cared for by United Nations Refugee Organization (UNHRC). We visited a camp near a river, but it was dangerously located very close to the strife-torn neighboring border. UNHRC did not want the people to be there and asked them to move deeper into the country to be near other camps. But the Miskitos did not want to leave the river area, in part because the *Contra* combatants clandestinely came to that camp to rest during the night.

UNHRC punished the people by not sending food. The Sisters often had to beg and fight a little with the warehouse managers to have them provide needed foodstuffs. When they gave us any, we took the food back that same night because the children were already fainting from hunger. It was impressive to see the people eat almost anything, even boiled wheat served without salt!

We were also concerned about the fact that the refugees had little to keep them occupied, so we looked for as many things we could possibly find to assist the people. This included necessary items for our most prepared youth to use to teach the children. Such improvised “schools” helped them to learn a bit as well as kept them busy and happy. There were many pregnant women in the camps and they had nothing to occupy their time except to wait for their babies to arrive. We gave them sewing classes to prepare clothes for their children. In the end, they were very happy, excited, and grateful.

While on this mission, I received word, through the UNHRC offices, that I had been accepted to go to Paris for the *Mission Ad Gentes* program. To leave my current assignment, I had to travel in a large Hercules transport plane that carried weapons and soldiers. Another young girl and I were the only females aboard. The seats were like hammocks, and we could see the control panel the pilot used to fly the plane. In a short time, we arrived in San Pedro Sula, one of Honduras’s main transfer hubs, to get another plane to Guatemala to get to my final destination – the Provincial House in Guatemala, to prepare to leave for Paris.

*Sister Ana Mercedes Francia*

## **Malnutrition and Death**

In the mission community among the Q'eqchies in Guatemala, there was a Sister Nurse who operated a nutritional center for malnourished children. She also visited the villages and trained *promotors* to assist the people in establishing basic health practices. One day while walking through town, the Sister was approached by an extremely pale, malnourished woman who was obviously dying. She asked Sister to please send help for her children who had been left behind in her village. They had been closeted alone for three days and had very little food. After managing to provide essential details about the place's location, the woman collapsed in the middle of the street and died in the arms of the Sister.

Upon hearing of this situation, two Sisters immediately left and traveled partly by vehicle and partly on foot to reach the village that had been described. Upon arrival, they found three children locked up alone without any food. The Sisters quickly gathered the children together for departure. The hour was late, and it had started to storm. Soon everything surrounding them was dark and the road was muddy. But thanks to the lightning flashes that illuminated the paths along which they walked, the Sisters were able to reach their vehicle. All returned safely to the nutritional center where the children were treated and saved from certain death from their terrible malnutrition.

*Sister Ana Mercedes Francia*

## **Hunger and Thirst for the Word of God**

In our mission among the Q'eqchies, we developed special courses for the women. This program required that we obtain permission from their spouses, because, at that time, only the men were allowed to receive such training. We presented the women with several options for course content and sought their input as to what would be most helpful for them to study. I was impressed when, without much hesitation or thought, they said that they wanted to learn about "The Word of God."

After finishing one of our courses, we started back to the town. In order to do this, we had to go through another village where we would have lunch at the house of one of our volunteer women. As we moved along, I got ahead of the group and did not realize that I was taking a different path.

After a long walk, I realized that my group did not appear and that the landscape was unknown to me. However, the view itself was very beautiful – a stream of crystal-clear water ran along the side of the road and on either side, were mountains with a lot of vegetation and wildflowers. There were no people or houses and I realized that I was completely lost in that Paradise.

Back then I still did not know how to speak Q'eqchi, although I did know some basic words. Suddenly I saw a little house on a hill and climbed the stairs to get help and babble a few words the people could understand. In the countryside, all the people know each other. It was enough for me to mention the name of the family of our volunteer and they understood

where I wanted to go. They directed one of their children to guide me to my destination. By the time we arrived, the others had almost finished their lunch.

*Sister Ana Mercedes Francia*

## **Saved by A Miracle**

We were called to work in a parish run by Salesian priests to help the Q'eqchi Indigenous people. The priests and our work were primarily focused on the evangelization of women in the mountainous areas of Guatemala. On one occasion, a woman and I traveled as a small team to visit a village that could only be reached by horseback. The path was stony, full of large rocks, with a steep slope that descended to the river. We then had to cross a bridge to reach the village itself. Among the team members was a young volunteer who said she knew how to ride a horse. But during the steep descent on the trail, the horse stumbled, and both fell to the ground. Thank God, the rocks prevented them from plunging into the water.

I asked one of the priests for a coin to vigorously rub on the woman's bruised forehead. It was now about 3:00 in the afternoon. We were tired, scared and had not eaten anything. I began to feel light-headed. I reached out to notify the priests that I was getting dizzy. They lowered me from my horse. Then they gave me some of the consecrated wine to drink and as a result, I was able to regain strength and continue the journey.

*Sister Ana Mercedes Francia*

## **Slippery Bridge**

The working method that we had in the rural areas was through strategic "Centers" or central sites that were selected where people from nearby villages could meet. On one occasion, several members of our team including Sisters, young female volunteers, Catechists and a priest were walking towards a community center. The Sisters and volunteers planned to stay at the Center to hold a workshop for the women while the priest and Catechists visited nearby villages to gather the men and their local Catechists for additional training.

In that region of Guatemala, it rained constantly so the roads were very wet, and we had to wear boots all the time. I got a little ahead of the group and had come to a "bridge" consisting of an extremely long pine tree trunk that was located on a precipice. In the background, you could see a stream bed.

I reached the "bridge" first and began to cross it with some speed. When I was about halfway across, I slipped. My "guardian angel" helped me ride the trunk as if I were on a horse and, at one point, I was even able to stand up as I continued towards the opposite side.

My companions were indeed paralyzed with fear and a little angry with me for the scare I had given them. Thank God the mission activities were completed without another similar event!

*Sister Ana Mercedes Francia*

## *Poems*

Reflections from Sister Madeline Kavanagh, D.C.,  
who served in the Cook Islands of the Pacific

### **LOCK THE DOORS**

Release the shekels  
Pull down the barriers  
And set me free!  
I share your lifeblood and  
longing to be  
And wear the badge of humanity  
Set me free to BE Who I am  
As I am and we both will better be

### **PATIENCE**

I thought I knew the look of patience  
until I met BJ whose pretzel-like body hosts a steel-backed spirit.  
Watching him painstakingly direct, cajole, push whatever finger, knuckle or wrist is  
available to press one of the large keyboard keys to make one letter, move one space or  
change one error brought to mind my impatience with the slightest delay or mishap  
in my electronic ventures....  
in this way, little by little I'm privileged to share with him the adventure  
of learning to read and write...especially significant considering BJ's inability to speak.

### **CHILD OF GRACE**

Child of grace lost in dysfunctional muck  
And community myopia  
A true paschal lamb  
Unblemished at the sacrificial altar  
Stifled potential  
Prophetic message drowning  
In the sea of ignorance and fear  
Gift of love  
Forgive our unloving

## **SHOOTS OF IMPERFECTION**

Break out your shoots of imperfection!  
surrender to truth's light  
Stand tall as you witness to the depth and breadth  
of unconditional love.

## **PARADISE WITH A TWIST**

Far from the frenzy of everything fast  
insulated from the relentless rendition of the latest news  
Isolated from trends of the times along with scarcity of information  
.... resources .... contacts .... and life-giving stimulation  
A child longs for the embrace of parents  
lost to the world of work, an ocean away  
While those burdened with years languish for the loving support of children  
propelled into another world  
In search of survival  
Meanwhile those left behind try drowning their isolation  
In the tentacles of addiction  
Even paradise needs cultivation.

## **SHIFTING**

To shift from providing for  
to walking with  
brings to light  
that I am lame and  
reminds my companions  
we are the same.



## *Acknowledgments*

### **Contributors**

Sister Mary Gerald McCloskey, D.C.

Sister Maritza Garcia, D.C.

Sister Madeline Kavanagh, D.C.

Reverend Gregory Gay, C.M.

Valerie Gisel León Ortiz

Fernando Vargas, President of TIPNIS (Isiboro Sécure National Park and  
Indigenous Territory)

### **Translators**

Sister Maritza Garcia, D.C.

Nichol Ruiz

Vanessa Mateo

Marta Becce

### **Editors**

Sister Claire Debes, D.C.

Mary Denise McCloskey, R.N.

Mary Ellen McFadden, R.N., M.L.A.