



# BOLIVIA

## Learning While Doing

Father Francis MacNutt, a midwestern Dominican friar, provided the first spark for the Catholic Charismatic movement in several Latin American countries. Notably he preached the initial Life in the Spirit retreats with a team of Catholics and Protestants, men and women. His impetus for starting the movement was felt in the following countries: Bolivia and Peru, 1970; the Dominican Republic, 1971; Guatemala, Mexico, and Costa Rica, 1972; and Colombia and Chile, 1972.<sup>1</sup>

A radically different paradigm in any field, such as medicine or theology, can be challenging for people to accept. This was especially evident in Bolivia. MacNutt, who proposed the new paradigm of the Charismatic Renewal, recalled many years later the resistance he encountered while giving several dozen retreats in Latin America in the 1970s: “My main theme for retreats was usually the Holy Spirit—especially as shown in healing. Most of these Catholic missionaries were strongly identified with the poor and were working for greater social justice. Initially they were prejudiced against what I was saying because they associated my themes with those emphasized by some North American televangelists who stressed the ‘health and wealth’ gospel. It always took several days to convince the missionaries that I was not preaching a gospel that is too comfortable to be real. But many of them eventually put the double emphasis of the baptism of the Spirit and social justice together in one vision.”<sup>2</sup>

He believed that “particularly in Bolivia, several missionaries understood the vision of combining the message of the Church’s preferential option for the poor, together with the need of the power of the Spirit.”<sup>3</sup>

He had in mind especially work that was going on in Santa Cruz, where a few Dominican missionaries were forming Christian base communities (CEBs) among the numerous poor.

MacNutt and his preaching companions gave the first Charismatic retreat in Bolivia in May 1970. They followed with two more retreats in English, attended almost exclusively by Catholic missionaries, with a few Bolivians and a handful of Protestants. After Francis MacNutt left Bolivia, the persons who experienced the baptism of the Spirit (not all did) at his retreats carried his emphasis on the power of the Spirit to Spanish-speaking persons in the ministries where they were working. This was especially true of the Dominican priests and sisters, who knew MacNutt from their earlier days in the central United States and were later working in the Santa Cruz area.

In the early 1970s, Santa Cruz was a dusty provincial capital that was becoming a sprawling city without the oppressive presence (at that time) of Bolivia's superheated political parties in the many barrios, the slum neighborhoods. In the rapid urban spread over the empty grasslands, the city found itself with four new rings, encirclements of tens of thousands of new migrants. The Catholic Church had no adequate way to give them pastoral care. As elsewhere in Latin America, grass-roots Christian communities, with their Bible study and communal prayer, arose to meet this need. Parishes in their traditional form were ineffectual organizational units for meeting the spiritual demands of Catholics.<sup>4</sup>

A great many Latin American Catholics, even in the late twentieth century, had little understanding of their faith. Many of the requests of ordinary Catholics for ritualistic services, such as baptism and the sacrament of marriage, were without much theological meaning. For some Catholics, rituals were clearly a matter of magic and superstition. They had almost no education in the faith. Even among those who had a more educated attitude, questions arose about a service station approach: one that had Catholics coming to a *patrón* who dispensed favors and services. Further questions were raised by Vatican Council II about conferring sacraments on those who had almost no instruction. Indeed, many came to believe that the emphasis on performing ecclesiastical rites without strong instruction was the curse of the Latin American church.

Major changes were called for: reduction in scale, instruction in depth, a sense of belonging with a community, new ministries, and the emergence

of lay leaders. Some observers felt that the church had no choice in the 1960s but to create grass-roots communities. Father Ralph Rogawski and Sister Helen Raycraft, both Dominicans, were among those who shared this dissatisfaction. A few years before the Charismatic renewal was introduced to Bolivia, they approached their priest-friends from LaCrosse, Wisconsin, who headed the parish called Santa Cruz on the first ring of the outskirts of the city of Santa Cruz. They proposed a plan to these pastors for assisting them in pastoral care.

The parish was considered one of the most active in the city, with a packed church for Sunday liturgies. However, the parish only drew to Sunday Masses about 5 percent of the thirty thousand persons within the parish's boundaries. A small community of Dominican priests and brothers rented a house within the parish but at some distance from the church and a mile from the Dominican sisters, who also rented a house away from the parish center. From these points on the margins of the parish they promoted credit unions and cooperatives, organized clinics, and fostered neighborhood committees for health, electricity, burial, and garbage collection. A host of other projects grew up to include youth clubs, soccer teams, and employment agencies.

But while the Dominicans had a spiritual, interior life, the people they worked with often did not. The priests and sisters became acutely aware of this deficiency and conducted an evangelization retreat at one of the neighborhood districts, which contained some five thousand inhabitants. Several dozen people attended the retreat, which extended over ten evenings. The retreat sparked the desire among the participants to continue on as a community in their efforts to understand and practice their faith. This was a crucial moment, a life-changing event. From those attending the evening retreat meetings, a Christian base community (*comunidad eclesial de base*—CEB) was formed. This innovation of a small faith community spread to many other neighborhoods.

The CEBs were later used as vehicles for the spread of Charismatic renewal. Key aspects of this work included reliance on the Holy Spirit as a source of unity among fragmented lives and families and as a source of *healing*. Father Rogawski and Sister Raycraft attended Francis MacNutt's retreat and incorporated his ideas into their own retreats for the grass-roots communities. Through MacNutt's mentorship they felt they were recovering the primitive Christian understanding of healing that had been deemphasized through the centuries.

At Santa Cruz, by early 1974, the Dominican missionaries had established twenty-three prayer groups in the barrios and four at La Mansión, the latter to be described later. At Cochabamba Father Patrick Rearden, who was also one of MacNutt's disciples, and Rearden's associates turned the Dominican pastoral center in the heart of the city into a Charismatic center for prayer groups and for training teachers in evangelization. Padre Rearden concentrated on providing some ten Life in the Spirit seminars a year. He utilized these as the first step toward bringing Catholics into the Charismatic movement. The work in healing led him and new entrants into the movement to establish a rehabilitation house for drug addicts. This rehabilitation work continued to be supported in large part by Charismatic participants in Cochabamba. Rearden also helped initiate the movement in Peru. After Rearden returned permanently to the United States in the 2000s, the movement dwindled in Cochabamba.

Rogawski, Raycraft, and team members felt that lay leadership in their barrios had matured enough for them to leave Bolivia to foster the movement in Colombia and elsewhere. Both Rearden and Rogawski would join the revived tradition of itinerant preaching that characterizes the Charismatic renewal and would spend long years on the road.

The movement also spread in the early 1970s to two parishes in La Paz and one in Tarija. The Charismatic movement received a great boost in interest in 1973 when Julio César Ruibal, a nineteen-year-old Bolivian Protestant Pentecostal, took the country by storm with massive rallies and many reported healings. While studying in the United States, he had become a disciple of Kathryn Kuhlman, the famed woman Pentecostal healer and preacher.<sup>5</sup> He incorporated her flamboyant preaching style, conducting rallies in stadiums and drawing maximum media coverage.<sup>6</sup> In such an isolated country as Bolivia this brought new attention to both Pentecostalism and the Catholic counterpart to Pentecostalism, the Charismatic movement. The main region that benefitted from this massive media attention was Santa Cruz, where a Charismatic center called La Mansión was created. The center is described here to focus on special issues that arose in Catholicism in adopting the Charismatic renewal.

### **La Mansión in Santa Cruz, Bolivia: Doing While Learning**

In Bolivia, Cris Geraets, a Dominican missionary, wrote many articles and preached on the movement. He was conscious of making sense for