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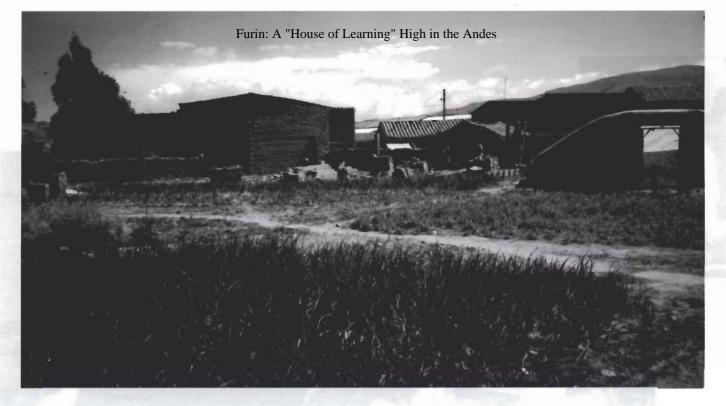
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A 'House of Learning' High in the Andes

When Jesuits interact with diverse cultures a new culture comes forth

By Terrance L. Furin

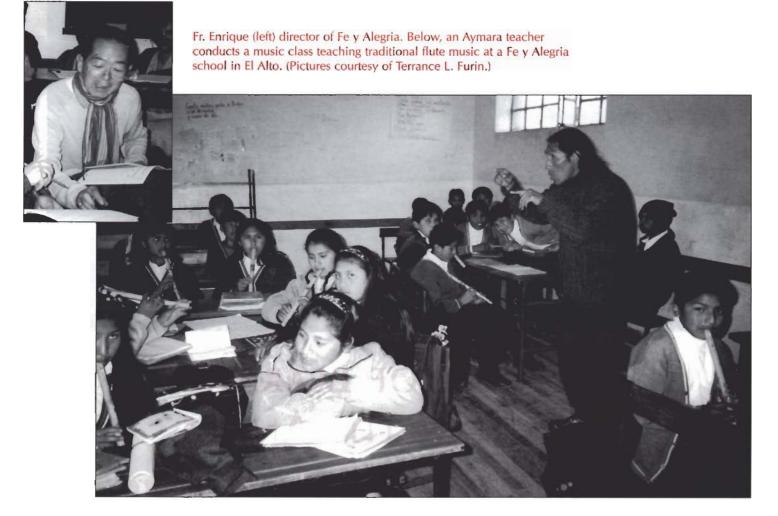
Yachay Wasi: Building Community Where the Road Ends

rocky, dry creek bed to reach the *Rodeo Yachay Wasi*. Located on a high Andean plain surrounded by snow-capped mountains, it holds dreams for elementary-aged students who would otherwise have no place to go to school. *Yachay Wasi* is Quechua for "house of learning," and it means both house and place of learning. Often having to walk more than ten miles one way, students live at the schools during the week and return to their families on weekends These elementary and secondary schools serve some of the indigenous Aymara, Quechua, and Guaranis who comprise approximately 50 percent of

Bolivia's population of eight million and are run by an organization known as *Fe y Alegria*, which means Faith and Joy.

In addition to *Yachay Wasi* located high in the Andes and deep in the rainforests, *Fe y Alegria*, works with the Bolivian government and operates schools in the poorest sections of the major cities of La Paz, Cochabamba, and Santa Cruz. Going beyond teaching basic Spanish language and math skills, these *Fe y Alegria* schools build upon indigenous language, art, and music in attempts to transform society by helping to make people economically productive and aware of social justice values. For example, vocational skills and productive farming methods are taught alongside concepts of gender equity in a culture that favors males.

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Fe y Alegria insists that in families consisting of both boys and girls if a boy attends school his sister must also be welcome.

Students of all ages in these schools are exceptionally eager to learn and appear to be highly respectful of each other. It is one of the attributes that apparently grows from a strong commitment these schools have in developing the importance of "community" as opposed to a global commercialism that stresses individual competition and a "cult of self."

The strong sense of community permeating the environment of *Fe y Alegria* schools was evident at the *Tata Estaban Yachay Wasi*. Here approximately 160 high school students literally run the school. In addition to attending classes, each student has daily chores that include cleaning communal bathrooms, preparing and serving meals, and maintaining school buildings. We saw a similar pattern in other elementary and secondary *Yachay Wasi* located in remote areas of the *altiplano* as well as in the tropical yungas of Bolivia.

A Professional Seminar and a Pedagogy of Community

n the 2003 summer three members of the Saint Joseph's education department presented an intensive seminar (eight hours per day for ten days) for a group of *Fe y Alegria* administrators who serve as consultants to training principals and teachers across Bolivia. The seminar focused on strategic planning, curriculum development, and leadership. It consisted of individual and group analyses of common readings, case studies, role-playing activities, and development of group projects. In addition, we worked with participants in creating presentations utilizing the Internet and computer technology.

We were impressed with the communal attitude and work ethic that participants brought to the seminar. It was obvious from the beginning that the usual North American emphasis on individual competition and achievement was not the norm with this group. Leadership flowed effortlessly from person to person with no individual domination. Participants used breaks and worked late into the evenings reading

cooperatively in groups or raising questions about materials prior to seminar sessions. Cooperation was especially strong during group presentations and projects. Every presentation and many sessions ended with applause that expressed genuine feelings of appreciation and friendship.

This cooperative spirit carried over into activities apart from the seminar. We lived together in simple quarters sharing communal bathrooms and taking meals in common dining facilities. Participants took upon themselves preparation for chapel services each afternoon that included music, group singing, and spiritual reflections. As we had no TV or radio, participants planned entertainment each evening that consisted of social games, singing, and dancing.

The setting for the seminar was a school that had formerly been used to board promising students of indigent miners from Potosi. It currently is a day school for approximately 175 students from Cochabamba. Students are heavily involved in running the school, and between classes they clean the communal bathrooms, sweep walkways, do land-scape work, and run the small office. In addition to these chores they earn money for the school by preparing meals and renting out the former sleeping facilities to organizations such as *Fe y Alegria*.

One evening students from the school provided musical entertainment for us. Dressed in colorful Aymara and Quechua clothing, students, proudly aware of their indigenous cultures, led us through traditional dances while playing *quenas* and *zampoñas* to the beat of large and small drums. The swirl of colors, sounds, and circling bodies produced an intoxication that bonded strangers and gave emphasis to the concept of community that permeates this school.

Our seminar experiences in Bolivia produced a dialogue that made it clear that we were working within a culture that challenged our own assumptions regarding individualistic, competitive learning and taught us what I shall call a pedagogy of community. This pedagogy:

- Is based on a philosophy that recognizes the uniqueness of each person within the community;
- · Celebrates individual and cultural differences;
- · Promotes a community of cultural synthesis;
- · Is democratic:
- Encourages the development of shared leadership responsibilities;
- Utilizes ongoing dialogue to identify a unifying, living mission;
- Manifests a unifying ethical and moral philosophy that guides individual and group actions.

Fueling this pedagogy of community is a spiritual cohesiveness based upon social justice that has grown from the inculturation between the Jesuits and the indigenous people of Bolivia.

Inculturation

Mission

he opening scenes of the 1986 movie *The Mission* capture the deep emotion of the human drama that unfolded between the Guaranis and the Jesuits in a South American rainforest in 1750. Set in a rich, luxuriant landscape near the Iguazu Falls, we see halfnaked Fr. Julian strapped to a cross and wearing a crown of thorns thrown into the river by several Guaranis. Barely conscious, he is carried through crashing rapids to the falls where he is hurtled several hundred feet to his death.

Determined that missions known as *reducciones* be established above the falls, Fr. Gabriel (played by Jeremy Irons) prays over Fr. Julian's rock-grave and then begins a treacherous ascent to the plateau above the falls. The power of his bare feet digging and slipping up the craggy cliff, water pounding his body, creates an indelible moment in movie history. Driven by deep religious conviction he reaches the summit, ventures inland, and sits on a stream-side rock near a place where he has spotted a large lizard presumably hung from a tree by natives. Beneath the steamy gray/green umbrella of the rainforest he takes a wooden oboe from his backpack and begins to play a simple melody that echoes deep- throated birds yet speaks of man.

Soon natives appear. They quietly and curiously circle him bewildered by the strange sounds. Suddenly one of them approaches him, grabs the oboe, breaks it in-two, and runs into the forest. The others remain. One retrieves the oboe from the stream-bed and tries to repair it. Others come close, gently touch him, and lead him away. Thus continued the Jesuit mission to connect spiritually with different cultures and bring Christian education to distant. places.

In 1604 King Philip III of Spain granted the Jesuits control over a vast region of present day Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay in exchange for a promise of regular tributes. This action protected the area from the harsh enslavement of natives that Spanish and Portuguese *encominedas* were practicing throughout South America. Thirty reduction missions were eventually established by the Jesuits among the

Guarani, plus an additional nine known as Chiquitos and Taruma among various indigenous people in Bolivia and Western Paraguay.

Early Christian communistic principles were practiced. Members worked on mission property and shared in profits derived from the manufacture of products such as handicrafts, watches, and musical instruments. Judicial systems were established as well as schools, hospitals, and other public services. Serious trouble began for these missions in 1750 when King Ferdinand VI of Spain ceded part of the Jesuit territory to the Portuguese who wanted to profit from the native work. A series of "Guarani" wars ended in 1756 with a Portuguese victory that led to the expulsion of the Jesuits in 1767.

Missions Today

hese missions provide an excellent illustration of Jesuit practices of inculturation in which encounters between Jesuits and diverse people led to the creation of unique cultures. Current examples of inculturation can be seen throughout Bolivia in the churches and schools run by *Fe y Alegria*, as well as Jesuit "people's masses" practiced throughout the country. As a result of such inculturation, *Fe y Alegria* manifests the elements of a unique culture, a Pedagogy of Community, that is dedicated to principles of social justice through education. *Fe y Alegria* celebrates both cultural and individual differences. It promotes a democratic, culturally synthesized community that encourages the development of shared leadership. It utilizes

ongoing dialogue to identify a living mission that manifests a unified ethical and moral philosophy.

The collaboration between Saint Joseph University's department of education and Fe y Alegria can strengthen and help define further a Pedagogy of Community. This collaboration is built upon the principles specified by the former Superior General of the Society of Jesus, Pedro Arrupe, when he stated in 1973 that "...our prime educational objective must be to form men-and-women-for-others; men and women who cannot even conceive of love of God which does not include love for the least of their neighbors; men and women completely convinced that love of God which does not issue in justice for others is a farce." Current Jesuit Superior General Peter-Hans Kolvenbach affirmed these principles in 2000 at Santa Clara University when he stated in reference to Arrupe's speech that "...'men and women for others,' really helped the educational institutions of the Society to ask serious questions that led to their transformation."

Transformation occurred for our Saint Joseph's delegation because of our cultural encounter with Bolivia's *Yachay Wasi* and other *Fe y Alegria* schools. It was a transformation caused by our looking differently at our own educational philosophies and practices. Such transformations are not limited to Jesuit schools. The challenges facing all educators today are especially daunting as we operate in a culture that does not value a pedagogy of community but rather encourages a "cult of self" arrogance based upon individual competitiveness, material acquisition, and global domination. All of us can, indeed, learn much from Bolivia.



Students at a Fe y Alegria school in Cochabamba.