FRIENDS
THE MISSIONARY SOCIETY OF ST JAMES THE APOSTLE
April 2023

Peru's Struggle For Justice and Equality...

Dear Friends,

Since December 2022 Peru has featured a lot in international media reports. Many of you have been inquiring about our priests working on mission down there. I am happy to report that all are well. I have asked Fr. Joe McCarthy, one of our veteran missioners with more than 50 years experience living and working in Peru to give some context to all that is happening there at the moment:

I worked in Peru with the St. James Society full-time from 1967 until 2018 and now, in retirement, I continue to spend several months there each year. I loved every minute of my time there as a missionary. A speaker at one of our Annual General Meetings commented, "When you come to work in Peru, one thing is certain - the Peruvians will steal your heart, and you will never get it back." This is so true.

Peru is a land of striking contrasts: natural beauty, a diverse population of people, various cultures and many natural resources. It is also a land of conflict, oppression and persecution, whose roots stem from the time the country was colonized over 500 years ago. The country is highly centralized and inequality is rife. Lima, the capital is where most of the decision making takes place, but Lima is not Peru. It is probably the only country in the world where the last 5 presidents wound up in jail, found guilty of either human rights abuses or corruption. At times it may seem that the country is devoid of opportunity.

In early December, former president Pedro Castillo, who was elected in 2021, was forced out of office after he attempted to temporarily suspend congress in an effort to avoid impeachment for "moral incapacity" – a charge stemming from multiple corruption allegations. He tried to leave the country but failed. He is now in prison in Lima, awaiting trial for an attempted coup along with corruption charges. Prior to becoming President, Pedro Castillo was the leader of a teacher's union in a poor rural part of Peru. The people were hoping that urgent problems afflicting the poor both in the high Andes and in coastal shanty towns would be addressed. Issues such as racism, inequality, destructive mining practices, deforestation of the Amazon region, abject poverty, and educational reform are just some of the urgent issues that needed to be addressed in Peru. The hopes of the rural community rested on the first indigenous President. Unfortunately, he did not measure up to their expectations. Pedro Castillo has been replaced by the Vice-President Dina Boluarte, his former running mate, a "campesina" (peasant farmer) and a member of his own party. The majority of the people throughout the country, however, have refused to accept Ms. Boularte as their president.

The people are calling for new elections both for president and members of the Congress. They are also calling for a new Peruvian constitution. As a result, protests have broken out across the country since December 2022 and still continue. These protests and demonstrations have led to roads being blocked and have also intermittently closed several airports in the tourist cities of Cusco and Arequipa in Southern Peru. Tourism has dropped off significantly with the closure of Machu Picchu for more than a month. Violence has broken out during some of the most persistent demonstrations in the south of the country and, to date, 60 people have lost their lives amid accusations that the police and army used excessive force. The people vary in ages between 14 – 62 years of age. One policeman lost his life. The single deadliest day of violence saw 17 deaths in the southern city of Juliaca, Puno. Demonstrators say they will not rest until President Boluarte steps down and early elections are called.

The Peruvian Episcopal Conference issued a statement in January which drew criticism from the protestors, who felt the bishops did not understand the situation on the ground nor "feel their pain." Cardinal Pedro Barreto and Archbishop Carlos Castillo were perceived as being on the side of the new Government.

President Boluarte misquoted Cardinal Barreto but unfortunately Cardinal Barreto did not come out and challenge her and correct her misquote. The Archbishop of Lima, Carlos Castillo, was photographed alongside President Boluarte which implied his support of her. He was also criticized by many for remaining silent when the armed forces invaded his Alma Mater, San Marcos University in Lima, where protestors from the south of country were staying. The police arrested 200 people from the university, mainly young students. The National Human Rights Coordinator has said that female students who were arrested were stripped naked and sexually mistreated while in captivity. Due to pressure from Human Rights organizations all but one of the protestors were released the following day. The result, sadly, is that the majority of the people feel that the bishops have lost their independent voice, which was previously well respected and well received by the Peruvian people.

The Apostolic Nuncio Paolo Rocco Gualtieri, Dean of the Diplomatic Corps in Peru, spoke in January during the Formal Greeting between the Diplomatic Corps and the new president. Archbishop Gualtieri highlighted inequality as the primary cause of the protests that lay at the heart of the crisis that has erupted in Peru. He also stated that "a privileged sector of society pretends to enjoy all that the world offers, as if the poor did not exist. This, at some point has consequences… Ignoring the existence and the rights of others, sooner or later, provokes some form of unexpected violence, such as what we are witnessing these days." He also condemned acts of violence from either side. Gualtieri commented further and warned of the need to address the causes that generate violence, in order to neutralize it, by always making the force of law prevail, but never the law of force.

President Boluarte has been very economical with the truth in her press conferences. Without any evidence, she brands the protesters - the vast majority of whom are rural people and students - as "terrorists," and "communists", "violent subversives" and even as "pro Sendero Luminoso," (Shining Path terrorists).

On February 28, the UN High Commission for Human Rights, based in Geneva, sent a document to the Peruvian authorities which enumerated the long list of denunciations about killings, disappearances and arbitrary detentions, demanding urgent clarification. According to the Peruvian Institute of Statistics, 77% of the population disapproves of President Boluarte (69% in Lima and 86% in the regions of Southern Andes), while only 6% of Peruvians approve of the Congress. The people's problems are not being solved," said Óscar Cáceres, Mayor of Juliaca.

President Boluarte was once again called into question on March 6, when six soldiers drowned in the Llave River in Puno, having been ordered to cross the river on foot by their platoon leader. According to a statement from the Ministry of Defense, the soldiers crossed the river because they were under attack by people hurling rocks at them. However, this was proven untrue by surviving soldiers who said they were, in fact, ordered by their commander to cross the river. In contrast to the negative statement released about them in the media, the local protestors actually helped haul the soldiers' corpses from the river and they also tried to resuscitate any possible survivors.

The centuries of exclusion, racism and inequality in Peru must be addressed. Truth telling and vigilance to ensure that human rights and dignity are preserved and protected must be implemented if democracy is to prevail. Peruvian people are resilient and, in the past, have proven that they can find a way out of situations which appear to have no way out. We in the international community need to support the people of Peru in their quest for justice both by our prayers as well as reading and listening to credible sources when we follow what is happening in the country. While the situation is complex and difficult, we can never lose hope that a more just and equal Peru is possible.

With Every Good Wish in Christ,

Rev. David Costello, Director

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