



FRIENDS

The Missionary Society of St. James the Apostle

February 2024



We Received More than We Gave...

Dear Friends,

In this issue we hear from alumnus, Fr. Patrick Cleary, of the Diocese of East Anglia, England. Fr. Pat served with the Society for nearly ten years, in Bolivia and later, in Boston. He received his Mission Cross in 1991 from Bernard Cardinal Law. Fr. Pat is a regular participant in Peru each year at the Annual General Meeting of the Society of St. James. *Fr. Pat reflects:*

Although the terrorist threat had receded by the time I joined the Society of St. James in 1990, the memory of it was fresh in the minds of the members, particularly for those of us who worked in Peru. The terrorists were Maoists whose belief was that the perfect society would emerge from the total destruction of the former

Diocesan priests serving the poorest of the poor in Latin America since 1958.

'corrupt' one. Although I can not think of a single episode in human history where this was the case, this fact didn't dampen their enthusiasm. The members of the society, some of whose names were on a *death list*, were seen as the enemy not principally because they were priests, but because they were considered to be foreigners propping up the government by giving assistance to the poor, thereby stalling the revolution which the Maoists craved. Two recently canonized Polish Franciscan missionaries, Brother Miguel and Zbigniew were killed in 1991 in Peru, by Shining Path Terrorists. It's interesting that the terrorism largely stopped when the leader, Abimael Guzman, was arrested and the police took his computer which in those early days of domestic computers, didn't have the sophisticated security settings and passwords with which we are so familiar today. So the list of his coworkers was easily discovered on the computer, enabling the police to arrest them all. After I joined the Society, I went to Bolivia to learn Spanish and after three months at language school, I was assigned to the parish of Our Lady of Fatima in Santa Cruz, Bolivia. The Pastor was Fr. Roger Clarke and the other assistant priest was Fr. Jim Coleman from Portland, Oregon. We met up again in Lima last year and this photo shows the team nearly 30 years later. The bonds we missionary priests formed, from our days working in South America, far from home in another culture, are long-lasting and truly unique. Many of us are blessed to attend the annual reunion and spend time together!



Fr. Pat Cleary, Fr. Roger Clarke, Fr. Jim Coleman

*E*ven in an exciting new venture, like joining the Society of St James, life eventually settles down to mostly repetition and routine, peppered with experiences one can not imagine happening in one's home diocese. I would like to relate one such incident even at the risk of being a bit preachy (I am a priest after all and that's part of what I do!) In Santa Cruz, Bolivia in the early 1990s, there was an outbreak of Cholera and many poor people were dying since the price of medicines was beyond their means. In one single day, I had seven families come to the parish house looking for Baptism for their babies who were gravely ill with Cholera. Some had died before even arriving at the parish. After Baptizing one boy I asked the family to take him to the hospital in town, which the German government had established to offer free treatment for cholera victims. The boy died enroute to the hospital. So, the next day, I went to their home (a one room shack) to celebrate the funeral. I discovered that the boy's birth had not been registered so there was no need for a death certificate. His grave was dug on the edge of the jungle. After the service and burial, I could see that the mother was very sick so I got her and her husband into the car and I started driving to the local hospital in the city. The only comment from her husband, in this grave situation, was to ask whether the hospital would charge him for his wife's care. I realized in that moment, that for the world's poor, life was livable on a day by day basis; there were no safety nets, and no health care or insurance for moments of tragedy or extreme need. This poor woman died on the way to the hospital. Earlier that same day, another mother back in the parish had told me, '*maybe my child will die and God will give me a healthy one next time*'. These are words I could never have expected to hear.





If our names were to be written just once in our lifetime, the Baptism register is probably the best location for it! Jesus said that the first would be last and the last would be first. That boy I buried was not counted amongst the *known* number of Bolivians born in the year of his birth. He was not included in the number of those who died that year; nor was his death counted in the Cholera epidemic statistics that year. However, he counted with God and I can't think of a better place to be counted, than with God. Sermon over! After five years in Bolivia, I moved to Boston, MA and assisted Fr. Gabe Troy (then Superior General for the Society) in the Boston office with a number of responsibilities including the coordination of our Mission Appeals throughout the U.S. In 1998 we were invited to Cuba for Pope John-Paul II's visit there. What an



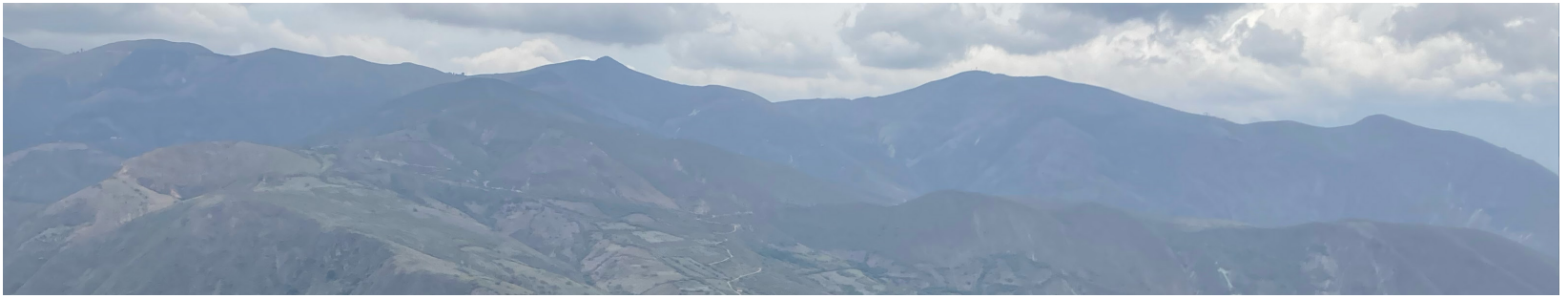
Fr. Gabe Troy and Fr. Pat Cleary



experience that was! Fr. Gabe and I arrived dressed in alb and stole, for the Papal Mass in the plaza de la Revolucion in Havana. We entered the plaza very near the temporary papal altar to make our way past the bishops, to join the priests. A steward stopped us to explain that many more bishops had arrived than anticipated so they were making a new front row where we should sit. We didn't disillusion him by explaining we were *not* bishops; so we sat in the new front row! A few moments later Fidel Castro and his cohorts arrived for what was probably his first Mass since the early 1950s. He sat five

seats from us. At the kiss of peace, despite my thoughts arising from his mis-treatment of church members over several decades, I shook his hand. After the Papal Mass we stood behind the papal altar and joined about 25 Cuban priests who were watching Pope John Paul II take off his vestments, in a trailer. When the Pope came down the steps, he saw these priests and he made a fist and shook it decisively in the air. The priest standing beside me commented, *'he's telling us to be strong'*. What an amazing communicator this Pope was, wordlessly giving us that message from such a distance. The Cardinal Archbishop of Havana, His Eminence, Cardinal Jaime Lucas Ortega y Alamino concelebrated the Mass. I wondered how he felt sitting beside the Pope who had recently made him a cardinal while simultaneously sitting very near to Castro, the man who sent him for hard labour in prison in the 1960s! The priest who returns to his home diocese after being

on mission, returns with an improved ability to communicate and connect with people from other cultures and certainly with increased humility and compassion. In the rural English parish where I am, Portuguese or Polish might be more practical but the Spanish language and my experience in South America still continues to help my ministry. The lifelong fraternity I share with my fellow missionaries is another positive gift. A few years ago a prominent English Bishop gave talks on St. Mark's Gospel at the annual alumni



gathering in Lima. At a social hour after supper one evening, this Bishop said to me, 'I wish I could replicate the fraternity which you have here in the Society of St James, back in my diocese in England'. I explained that the fraternity we have in the Society is forged from the deep bonds we formed, living in a foreign country, challenged with all the difficulties and beauties of another culture, a foreign language, and especially of feeling *vulnerable*. In England, we are not vulnerable enough; we priests have all we need and often live quite self-sufficient lives. Living far from home, I am certain that during the times of the terrorists in Peru, to use an example, the members of the Society very much needed the support of their fellow priests in dangerous situations. If the next parish to yours was fifteen miles away and a good place for refuge in times of threat, it was vital that members supported and helped each other in their mutual vulnerability. Another great lesson I learned in South America was hospitality. St Benedict insisted that in every monastery there should be a guest house. I sometime think that in a goal-driven society, from which the church is not immune, hospitality is the first casualty. When I recently chaired a meeting of local priests in my diocese, a priest arrived an hour late. This would have irritated me prior to my St James experience. However, thanks to the patience and understanding I received on missions, I am much more understanding. I welcomed him with a chair at the table and a cup of coffee while getting him up to speed. The hospitality and patience I learned while on missions has thankfully continued to influence my current ministry. When I was younger and heard seasoned missionaries say that they "received much more than they gave", I honestly was skeptical; however, it did not take long for me to agree with these same priests! Having been on mission I can honestly say they were right on the mark. We all received so much more than we gave, in return! May God continue to bless the Missionary Society of St. James and all who support it. -- Fr. Pat Cleary



Fr. Derek and Fr. Pat at an alumni gathering

With Every Good Wish in Christ,

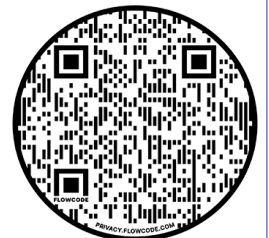
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