



Serving the Evangelizing Mission of the Church

by Bart Hisgen

Comboni Lay Missionary

St. Daniel Comboni described mission in a striking way. Mission, he wrote, is the way followers of Jesus “make common cause” with the “poorest and most abandoned” (Fr. John Taneburgo, MCCJ, *Saint Daniel Comboni: Traits of Missionary Spirituality*, icla.claret.org/weeks/week2004/confere/nces/taneburgo.doc).

In 2007 my wife, Cynthia, and I relocated our family to a neighborhood near Trujillo, Peru. We walked the streets, we struck up conversations with people who wanted to talk, and we listened. We listened as our neighbors told countless stories of struggle. We smiled with them as they brought out pictures of their brothers, aunts, sons, and grandchildren. We felt excitement with them as they spoke of their hopes. Invariably, food was offered. Hours passed. After such encounters we were greeted not as the “foreigners,” but as “neighbors.” We began living the words of St. Daniel Comboni in our own lives: “Ask questions, sit back, and listen” (see Ordinary Time A, www.bakhitaradio.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=177&Itemid=98; see also *Catechism of the*

Catholic Church [CCC], 2nd ed. [Washington DC: Libreria Editrice Vaticana–United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2000], no. 852).

Prior to moving to Peru, we were about as normal a family as any other: weekend soccer games, school events, and a modest house with room for the kids to play. Over the course of time, Cynthia and I developed friendships with committed Christians. These relationships led us into a deeper commitment within our parish, ongoing family service projects, and, eventually, overseas mission.

What struck us throughout these experiences were the people we encountered in the United States: the musician organizing choirs with homeless women, those committed to community gardening projects, and a retired electrician maintaining an aging Catholic Worker house. These average people showed us that we could make a difference even if we were not able to provide a quick fix. God calls us out of our everyday lives, and we respond (see Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelization in the Modern World* [*Evangelii Nuntiandi*], no. 70,

www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi_en.html).

We were stunned that Saturday when we arrived in Trujillo, Peru. After our primary contact, Fr. Maximo, escorted us to the pastoral center where we would be living, he took us on a quick tour of the area and informed us that he would return to celebrate Mass the following day. The neighborhood, built on top of thirty-five feet of desert sand, looked as though it had just been bombed. Large families with children lived in what resembled a huge refugee camp. Packs of dogs roamed the streets. Houses were made of plastic sheets with thatch roofs. From our window we could see, and smell, the city landfill. An airplane had transported us from the comforts of middle-class America to another planet.

The next morning, some young adults knocked on our door to greet us and welcome us to the neighborhood. One of the young women, Fabiola, was especially eager to hear us speak Spanish. She brought us to the chapel where we were going to celebrate Mass. Minutes later Fr. Maximo appeared, urging everyone to get on their feet and start singing. The group jumped into the song at the chorus. Old ladies clapped and swayed, pushing their plastic chairs aside. I will never forget the words of the first song: "It doesn't matter what neighborhood you come from/ after Calvary I am yours. / If your heart is like mine, / give me your hand, my brother, and we will be together."

"The Lord be with you," proclaimed Fr. Maximo, hands extended. As I made up my mind to receive the Blessed Sacrament from Fabiola, it struck me that God's presence was every bit as

real among my new neighbors as it was in the most stunning cathedrals in the world (see *General Directory for Catechesis* [Washington, DC: Libreria Editrice Vaticana–United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1998], no. 253).

Those who offer themselves to the mission draw their energy and inspiration from those with whom they serve. In other words, God does not come along with us like a tagged suitcase. For Christians the Holy Spirit is always and already active, a warm air current animating everything and everyone at every moment (see Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 11, in *Vatican Council II: Volume 1: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery [Northport, NY: Costello Publishing, 1996]; *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, no. 75). Mission is an intentional way of expressing our heart's desire to share life together in new languages, cultures, and ways of understanding what God is doing in our world (see CCC, no. 852).

With some financial assistance, Cynthia and I were able to start a community school for neighborhood children. I spent a week walking door-to-door looking for students. This is how I met Laura, a thirteen-year-old girl who lives with her family in a squatter community outside Trujillo. Affectionately, everyone calls her "Lauralita," or little Laura.

Lauralita's father suffers from a debilitating spine condition and is unable to walk. Her family was forced to sell their small farm to move closer to medical facilities. Because they are from a rural area, no one in the family could read or write. Her mother sells vegetables in the market while Lauralita stays with her father in their makeshift

home. When I went to the place where Lauralita's family lived, I was invited in. After explaining my intentions, her parents agreed to allow their daughter to attend the school.

My plan was to begin classes the following Monday morning at 9 o'clock sharp. Lauralita and the whole group of neighborhood kids were waiting for me outside the door at 6:45 a.m. I invited everyone in and began reading picture books. I initiated a reading program beginning with the alphabet. Several weeks later everyone graduated to syllables. Weeks later the kids were able to read whole words.

One day Lauralita waited for me after class. She wanted to know if she could take some books and our multiplication flash cards home over the weekend. "Of course," I said with a stern look so I seemed serious, "but you have to study with your parents every day." She grabbed a Curious George book and a book by Dr. Seuss.

The following Monday Lauralita's mother arrived at the school at 6:30 a.m. With a lump in her throat, she put her hands in my hands and recounted how Lauralita had read the books to the family numerous times over the weekend. Lauralita tapped her foot on the ground, a sly grin stretching across her face. Lauralita's mother continued, "We like that story about the red and blue fishes very much," referring to Dr. Seuss's literary masterpiece *One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish*. However, she said that they were having trouble with the multiplication tables, and no one could remember anything after eight times six. Lauralita's mother touched her daughter's shoulder. "This one is teaching us everything she is learning in this school."

Tears filled my eyes when I heard these words. I felt the arc of the universe bending in Lauralita's favor, drawing me in, fusing us together.

Many of the really poor people I know are not looking for some sort of happiness drug to help them escape their grinding poverty. More than optimism, really poor people keep going through the power of a deeper, yeastlike rhythm that rises, slowly, to the cadence "one fish, two fish, red fish, blue fish." My Peruvian neighbors taught me the name of this force. It is called dignity (see *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 31).

I remember the first time I saw our neighbor Doña Julia walking around the neighborhood with a basket of leaves and grasses. Being nosy, I accompanied her. She informed me that she was bringing herbal medicines to sick people in the neighborhood. Hours passed as we walked from house to house. Doña Julia listened to the ailments, updates, and celebrations of people whose names I neglected to learn.

As if she were throwing together a well-known recipe, Doña Julia prepared odd-smelling teas and began massaging the arms, legs, or head of the sick person. "Often," she explained, "what we need to do is increase the circulation around your body." While her hosts relaxed with their eyes closed, Doña Julia hummed a church tune. Conversation ceased, the patient drew deep breaths while Doña Julia kept at it.

In that moment I recognized how good Doña Julia was at her vocation. These gifts were not second nature. They were, rather, as natural as a beating heart. A mobile library, Doña Julia carries the life stories of every

person in our community. She offers her gifts, expecting nothing in return.

Oppressed people have learned to care for one another without a surplus of money. I later realized what I had witnessed through Doña Julia: a pure gift. I had a front row seat to humanity caring for itself—Doña Julia style.

Through mission we learn to accept the gift of life from others, we learn to view the world through their eyes, and we pray in their language and have our hopes raised through their compassion. The Holy Spirit opens a space in our hearts, and our neighbors move in, stories and all (see *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, no. 75). If you and I believe that God wants to move among us as the Word

become flesh, I think that evangelization means opening ourselves to people like Loralita and Doña Julia. It is they who can teach us about dignity, that small light we are called to celebrate, defend, and enkindle. For our part, you and I have to be willing to take those first steps out of our comfort zones into the world trusting, all the while, that Fr. Maximo was right when he said, “The Lord be with you.”

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