

Dutch Augustinian missionaries in Bolivia

The 15th century of the death of St. Augustine in 1303 seemed to be the right occasion to fulfill a long-cherished desire of the Dutch Augustinians to partake in the apostolate of the missions. This the province could do only with great sacrifice, because it was but 35 years since it had gained its independence.

In choosing a mission territory the Province would have preferred a vicariate or prefecture in the Dutch colonies of the East Indies ¹⁾ but in September 1929 the Father provincial, Dr. Servus Makaay, met in Paris the Most Rev. August Sieffert C. SS. R., bishop of La Paz in Bolivia, who was travelling in Europe looking for priests to help him in his vast diocese, where an acute shortage of clergy was threatening Catholic life with slow but certain death. This meeting started the negotiations which led to the eventual foundation of the mission in 1930 ²⁾.

The Augustinians had been working in the Vice-Royalty of Peru, which comprised present Peru and Bolivia. The four principal cities of Bolivia: La Paz, Sucre, Cochabamba, and Potosí, had their Augustinian church and monastery, located at the principal plazas of the towns. The famous Indian shrine of Our Lady at Copacabana had been in the hands of the Augustinians. The wars of indepen-

¹⁾ In 1929 negotiations were begun with different missionary Orders, to obtain a territory on the island of Java or the smaller neighboring island of Madura, but they did not lead to satisfactory results.

²⁾ The Definitory of the Dutch province approved the plans on March 26, 1930. Within two weeks followed the approval of the Most Rev. Prior General E. Esteban (Letter to the province by Father Makaay on April 9, 1930 in the archives of the vice province to which we shall refer as AVP. The access to these archives was made possible through the kindness of the present commissary provincial, Father Marcus Meyer).





dence around 1800 expelled all these friars, who had always been faithful subjects of the Spanish Crown. Churches and monasteries were confiscated; some of the churches were transferred to the Franciscans or seculars ³⁾).

On October 8th, 1930, the first group of four missionaries departed from Holland: two priests and two lay brothers, led by the superior Fr. Chrysostomus W. Van Dyk. They arrived in La Paz on November 15th of the same year. Fr. Van Dyk, a man of great and energetic personality, had been undoubtedly the best-known Augustinian in Holland. He was the founder of the National Eucharistic League, which he had organized in order to promote the new decrees of the Holy Pope Pius X with respect to frequent Communion and the devotion to the Blessed Sacrament. He was secretary for the organization of the International Eucharistic Congress of Amsterdam in 1924; he was one of the country's foremost speakers and preachers, and thus it caused considerable surprise when he volunteered to be the first Augustinian missionary in Bolivia.

Once in Bolivia, however, Fr. Van Dyk was seriously disappointed. For a man who had been used to preaching to large crowds of people and packed churches, to seeing thousands of men, women and children receive Holy Communion, it was utterly disconcerting to observe the unfortunate condition of the Church in Bolivia, with its empty and filthy churches, without priests. The people were living in superstition and unbelief. This was too much for a man of his temperament and activity, and on Dec. 30th of the same year he wrote to his superiors in Holland that it would be an endless task for the Dutch Province to spend men and effort on such a hopeless situation ⁴⁾. He directed his group to leave Bolivia — January 15th, 1931, and return to Holland. During their journey, however, word came from Fr. Provincial that under no circumstances should Fr. Van Dyk go back to Holland. Thus he went to the German confreres at Racine, Wisconsin, U. S. A., until in the spring of 1933 the Most Rev. Father Clement Fuhl, General of the Order

³⁾ It does not seem to be within the purpose of this article to describe the history of the Augustinians in the Spanish colonial empire. We must refer to the existing literature on the subject.

⁴⁾ Copy of letter in AVP. — His description of Bolivian conditions is definitely too dark and pessimistic. With the letter he sent a telegram that they were leaving the country. His decision to leave before an answer of the Provincial had reached Bolivia was unfortunate.

invited him over to Italy to be pastor of the Shrine of Our Lady of Good Counsel at Genazzano and international director of the Pious Union. But as his health suffered much in that country, he was soon permitted to go back to the United States, where he worked in St. Rita's Parish in Chicago, until his death, March 25th, 1939.

Fr. Van Dyk's memory is greatly honored in his province, although his effort to establish the Bolivian mission failed. It taught the province that such an enterprise would not be as easy as had been anticipated during the time of preparation and first enthusiasm. Fr. Van Dyk's failure put the whole project to a severe test. Who was going to accomplish what such an eminent and energetic organizer had not been able to achieve? Finally, one of the most prominent men of the Province made himself available. Father Thomas H. Van der Vloodt, S. T. M., a man already in his sixties, fervently asked permission to be sent. At that time, Fr. Van der Vloodt was pastor of the newly founded parish of St. Thomas of Villanova at Nijmegen, located in a very poor section of the town, with a population mostly of unskilled factory workers. This parish probably provided the best preparation for Bolivia to be found in Holland; yet, it was certainly most unusual for a man of his age to leave his native country, where he had served the Order as a master of novices, professor of theology and finally as a pastor for more than 30 years. The administration of the Province, however, did not think it should refuse the generous offer of this zealous priest, who seemed to know what he wanted. Fr. Provincial consented, January 28th, 1931⁵⁾, and Fr. Thomas departed on February 25th. On his journey he was joined by Brother Frederick Van Grinsvens, one of the original group, who had waited for him at the Dutch island of Curaçao in the West Indies. The other two members of the original group had chosen to go back to Holland, with the full consent of Fr. Provincial.

Thus, for the second time, the Bolivian mission was started. After arriving in La Paz on Easter Sunday, April 5th, 1931, the two missionaries stayed in that city with bishop Sieffert in order to investigate existing conditions and to see what type of work should be accepted. On December 23rd of the same year they set out for the territory of South Yungas, located about 50 miles East of

⁵⁾ Many details of Fr. Thomas' history we have taken from his diary in AVP.

La Paz. This is a section of moderately high mountains, with steep and narrow valleys, through which rivers flowing from the highlands find a path to the Amazon lowlands. The climate in the scattered small villages at altitudes of 5,000-6,000 feet is semi-tropical, and the people make a living raising coffee, oranges, bananas and especially coca for densely populated La Paz and the Andean. This area, covering roughly 1500 sq. miles was the Augustinian mission field.

Fr. Van der Vloodt found conditions extremely bad. In the chief town of Chulumani (pop. 2000) there was one old and sickly priest; the other villages had not seen a priest for many years. Fr. Thomas made his headquarters at the village of Chirca, from where he started to make long journeys on mule-back throughout the territory, along narrow paths through the mountains, wading through rivers, in order to get some idea of what had to be done. The situation was almost desperate. People calling themselves Catholics had forsaken the practice of their religion; churches were in a dilapidated condition with weeds growing in them. At the present time it seems unbelievable that Fr. Thomas did not give up immediately or look for easier work, but there seems to have been an unconquerable force and energy within the soul of this man, which drove him to stay and begin this seemingly hopeless task of bringing back the people of the Yungas to the Church. He wrote to his superiors in Holland saying that there were definite possibilities in this mission, and asked for help. This help arrived in the persons of Fr. Lamberto Gielen and Brother Juan Swinkels, early 1932, and Fr. Ireneo Otsen with Brother Pedro Coolen in 1933. With the latter two also came Fr. Provincial Makaay to perform the first Visitation, October 1933. Completely exhausted, Fr. Thomas died at Chulumani on February 16th, 1934⁹⁾. Ours is not the task to judge his work and his merits, but the fact remains, that whatever the Dutch Augustinians have been able to do in Bolivia during the past 25 years, is due basically to the undaunted and indefatigable perseverance of the 60-year old pioneer Fr. Thomas Van der Vloodt.

The two principal towns of South Yungas were entrusted to

⁹⁾ On the last page of his diary we read, not without a great deal of respect for this remarkable Augustinian: « 1934, 23 Jan. God's Will be done in everything, and aways, and everywhere. For the poor mission of Bolivia great sacrifices shall have to be made. En ego quia vocasti me ».

our care in 1932: in March 1932 bishop Sieffert appointed Fr. Lamberto Gielen pastor of Irupana, and on December 13th of the same year Fr. Thomas received his appointment as pastor at Chulumani, after the native pastor had resigned because of old age and ill health. From these centers the fathers and brothers undertake numerous journeys to attend to the people in the many small villages, Indian communities and the mines of the area ⁷⁾. The transportation

⁷⁾ The houses at Irupana and Chulumani received their canonical foundation from the Most Rev. Father General Pasquini on June 21st, 1938 (Rescr. Congr. de Relig. 4360/38 of June 14th, 1938). With respect to the parishes, there exists a contract between the bishop of La Paz and the Augustinian Order, signed by bishop Sieffert and Fr. Makaay, Nov. 9th, 1933, whereby the bishop entrusts to the Augustinians the care of all parishes in the provinces of South Yungas and Inquisivi (which lies just East of S. Yungas) for an indefinite time. Among other regulations, it is stated that if in the future the bishop wants to cancel the contract, he shall give 6 months' notice, similarly if the Augustinians wish to retire, they also promise to give 6 month's notice (copy in AVP).

A decree of the S. Congr. Concilii, dated April 5th, 1943, assigns the parish at Chulumani to the Order « ad nutum Sanctae Sedis », and the other parishes in South Yungas (Irupana, Laza-Ocobaya, Chirca-Villa Aspiazu, and Yanacachi) « ad nutum Ordinarii ». In 1954 a preliminary contract was signed by the Archbishop of La Paz, Most Rev. Abel I. Antezana, the provincial Fr. A. H. Van der Weijden, and the commissary provincial Fr. M. H. Meyer, in order to obtain a new decree whereby these parishes also would come to us « ad nutum Sanctae Sedis ».

On December 24th, 1939, work was begun in the province of Inquisivi, already mentioned in the contract with bishop Sieffert. A community was set up in the town of Quime, from where this vast territory was to be taken care of. Under the direction of Fr. Mateo Suiker a new monastery was built at Quime. However, in 1947, during the visitation of Fr. Provincial Sebastianus Van Nuenen negotiations were begun on a new division of territories. A *prelatura nullius* was to be formed, comprising Inquisivi with a few other provinces. The prelature was first offered to the Augustinians, who declared they could not accept it, as this would mean that Yungas had to be abandoned, and the *prelatura* itself was already too vast for our small number of men. Thus the prelature was given to the Spanish Passionists (Constitutio Apostolica « Quod Christianae plebis regimini » of December 25th, 1949). As a result of this the Inquisivi province was turned over to these Passionist fathers on May 16th, 1951, and the monastery at Quime sold to them. The house at Quime had never received a canonical foundation.

At the request of the archbishop of La Paz, the Hollandish Augustinians have been taking care of the parish of Coroico, which comprises almost all of the province of North Yungas, since February 1951. This work however, which continues up to this date, is still being considered temporary, so that no attempts have been made to obtain canonical foundation and other rights.

problem, always a major one, has partly been solved by the acquisition of a jeep and another will be acquired soon.

The results of 25 years of hard work can be summed up by stating, that all churches in their care are in good condition, people have learned to respect their priests, hardly anyone dies without the Sacraments, numerous marriages have been validated, there is a group of faithful Catholic families in each village, and many thousands have made their first Communion ⁸⁾.

Work will always be hard in these regions, where one encounters an apathy in religious matters, where people do not seem to care to surpass a certain level of religious traditions, where they are willing to go to church on certain local feast days and to participate in processions on various occasions, but where it is most difficult to convince them that a truly Christian life comprises more than just that. This is long-term mission work.

⁸⁾ « With respect to the apostolic work in these districts, new problems have » developed by the revolutions of the past ten years. Up to a few years ago, the » Indian population did hardly count within the social and economic structure of » the country. All authority and influence rested with a small group of whites and » mestizos. Recently, this situation has changed profoundly. The present govern- » ment, through its Agrarian Reform of 1953, has tried to put an end to the » system of large ownership, by allotting the land to the Indians. The original » owners are now allowed to keep only a small property. Whereas the Indians » formerly had to work two or three days a week on the land of the big owner, » without pay, but in exchange for a small piece of ground which they could » cultivate for their own use, today this labor is to be rewarded. In this new » system there is much which, at first sight, seems more attractive than it is in » reality. For one thing, production has decreased enormously, and it is very well » possible that many, in the end, will be poorer than they used to be. In spite » of this, the Indian population has acquired a great deal of self-respect, which » can never be undone again, not only among the peasants but also among the » numerous miners. All these people, who used to have even their private affairs » taken care of by « compadres » (a form of small-time lawyers) in town, today » want to take care of themselves, and unite in trade unions. As the majority of » them are illiterate, naturally the most active elements will obtain the greatest » influence. Shall these be the Catholics or the Communists? At this moment, » both parties seems to have equal chances. It was a great joy to me, to observe » that our missionaries pay the fullest attention to this situation. They are earnestly » trying to obtain a sufficient number of lay catechists and labor leaders, especially » in the small Indian communities. Unfortunately, our confreres themselves are » seriously handicapped by their as yet insufficient knowledge of the Indian native » languages. Improvement on this point would undoubtedly be of the highest im- » portance » (From a report on the visitation in Bolivia, letter to the Dutch province by Fr. Provincial Van der Weijden, September 4th, 1954).

Shortly after the establishment of the Yungas mission it became clear ⁹⁾ that the Augustinians should also settle in one of the larger cities of Bolivia ¹⁰⁾ in order to have a foothold for arriving missionaries, a procuration center for the benefit of those inland, and a point of contact with Church and State authorities. This would also add to the prestige of the Augustinians, who would have remained practically unknown if they had confined themselves to the remote territories of Yungas.

La Paz seemed the natural site for such an establishment, and during World War II this led to the foundation of a parish in this city. The foundation was complicated by the fact that within the parish territory there was a very popular shrine with a miraculous statue of our Lord « *Nuestro Señor del Gran Poder* » (Our Lord of Great Power) ¹¹⁾. Today, on the main street of Chijini, an almost completely Indian borough of La Paz, you will find a beautiful new church with parish hall, and in the back of this a 15-room monastery, which serves as rectory as well as headquarters of the Fr. Commissary Provincial. A parish of an estimated 40 to 50,000 people is being cared for by a community of 7 fathers and 2 brothers ¹²⁾. Here literally thousands of Baptisms are administered every year, hundreds of marriages are blessed, and, aided by a faithful group of catechists, the fathers teach religion in 11 public schools of the area. Hundreds of families are being visited, and every Friday Indians from all over come into the church to adore their beloved « *Señor del Gran Poder* ».

Within this parish there live more people than in all of Yungas, and except for transportation, problems are similar and even greater. A city, growing far too fast for its capacity to absorb newcomers, soon becomes a breeding place for poverty, discontent and Communism. There is no decent housing, light, water or sewerage in the outskirt sections where thousands are entering every year,

⁹⁾ Fr. Thomas Van der Vloodt already writes about this possibility to Fr. Provincial Makaay in the fall of 1932.

¹⁰⁾ The provincial chapter in Holland, of 1938 gave order to prepare the foundation of a house with church in La Paz.

¹¹⁾ AVP contain a large number of documents on the subject.

¹²⁾ A decree of the S. Congr. Concilii assigns the parish to the Order « *ad nutum Sanctae Sedis* » (May 22th, 1943). The monastery was canonically erected by the Most Rev. Father General Eberhard on Oct. 25th, 1954 (Rescr. S. Congr. de Relig. 10266/54, Oct. 19th, 1954).

looking for a job which they thought would be an easier way to make money than to work on the land. These problems are known in many big cities the world over; they are accentuated in a country which is perhaps the poorest in the Western Hemisphere, and which has been afflicted by political and economic instability. The help of foreign priests and religious are vitally needed for there are few native clergymen, and the majority of them are old.

The third and youngest branch of Augustinian labor in Bolivia is one which could not possibly be missed in any full-grown community within the Order. It is the apostolate of teaching, which the Order undertook through the erection of a secondary school in Cochabamba, the second largest city in Bolivia (pop. 100,000)¹³. There are two ways of conducting a school in this country. One could start out from the assumption that since in Bolivia the educational and economic level is among the lowest in the New World, a simple little school would suffice; whatever would be taught, would be good enough, as anything at all is always better than nothing. Such schools could have been started in any place at all in Bolivia. With more than 75 % illiteracy, this should not have been difficult. Actually, many such schools exist, and many more are needed. However, the superiors of the Dutch province of the Order have chosen to set up a school which in many respects surpasses ordinary Bolivian standards. Many years of careful preparation have gone into this project¹⁴), which shows great promise in its beginnings, although this very preparation has placed a serious responsibility on those who are assigned to accomplish this work. « Colegio San Agustín », the first Catholic institution of its kind in Bolivia, is different from other secondary schools in the country in that it primarily stresses scientific and technical subjects, as well

¹³) On July 25th, 1950, the Most Rev. Berthold Buehl OFM, apostolic administrator of the diocese of Cochabamba approved the foundation of such a school. This approval was confirmed by the Most Rev. Tarcisio Senner OFM, bishop of Cochabamba, on June 4th, 1954 (AVP). The canonical foundation was granted by the Most Rev. Fr. General Eberhard on Oct. 25th, 1954 (Rescript. S. Congr. de Re. 10266/54, Oct. 19th, 1954).

¹⁴) In 1949, the provincial chapter in Holland sent Frs. Marcos Meyer and Andrés Van Meegeren to Cochabamba to prepare the foundation of the school, whereas three young fathers were sent to Villanova University, O. S. A. to obtain engineering degrees; a few years later some more young priests were assigned to Villanova University for the same purpose. In January 1955 the school was actually begun.

as the study of the English language, which has become more and more important in Bolivia.

Besides providing a good Catholic education for its pupils, the purpose of this school has been conceived as adding a certain form of prestige to the Church in Bolivia, by showing that the Church is willing to make sacrifices toward the technical development of the country, which is now being undertaken by various international organizations, such as Point Four and UNESCO. In Bolivia, as well as anywhere else, a certain degree of economic welfare is indispensable for a sound development of Catholic family life. This school will, furthermore, try to maintain at least as high a level of education as that of some influential Protestant schools, and to provide the type of modern education many Bolivian parents are apparently demanding for their children. It has been an unfortunate source of difficulty to the Catholic Church in Bolivia, that many people send their children to Protestant schools, which make a good impression due to the considerable financial aid they receive from their mother churches in North America. It has been said that these Protestant institutions were the only places where one could learn sciences, engineering and English in preparation for further studies abroad. These schools have been educating a large number of people who very often did not become Protestants, but whose outlook on religious matters is one of complete indifference and one-sided criticism of the faults of the Church in South America. It has become necessary, in all of South America, to show that being a good Catholic does not necessarily include being behind the time, and it is exactly this point which « Colegio San Agustín » is trying to emphasize in its ways and methods.

It is clear, that such an ambitious project should cost a large amount of money. That it has been possible, is due to an unusual form of cooperation between the Dutch and the two North American provinces of the Order.

The Americans obtained ten priests from the Dutch province to relieve a temporary shortage of teachers in their various high schools and colleges. With their salaries, the Dutch province was able to finance the construction of a monastery and a workshop at Cochabamba, and funds are available for the construction of the main school building, which will be begun within a short time. Thus, without any outside help or donation, « Colegio San Agustín »

could be realized, and will be able to maintain a standard which can match anything Bolivia is showing today.

The most recent foundation ¹⁵⁾ was established in the parish of St. Joseph in the city of Camagüey, Cuba, which is affiliated to the Bolivian vice-province. The Dutch province accepted this parish at the special request of the late Fr. Dougherty, provincial at Villanova. Four fathers are working at Camagüey at the present time.

In February 1951, the Bolivian mission was elevated to the rank of Vice-Province under the protection of St. Thomas of Villanova, patron Saint of the pioneer-missioner Fr. Van der Vloodt ¹⁶⁾. Its first commissary-provincial, Fr. Emilio De Rooy, who had been vicar-provincial since 1943, was forced to resign in November 1952, because of ill health ¹⁷⁾. It was a hard sacrifice for Fr. De Rooy to make, when he was told to stay in Holland, having worked 14 years in Bolivia as an example of unselfish priestly zeal. Today, December 1955, the Vice-Province consists of 28 priests (22 in Bolivia, 4 in Camagüey, 2 teaching with the North-American provinces), and 9 lay brothers (all in Bolivia). This small force is now trying to accomplish the vast work entrusted to its care. It is greatly inspired by the example of four eminent Augustinians who sacrificed their lives for the Bolivian missions. First of all should be mentioned the Most Rev. Father Clement Fuhl, who, being Prior General of the Order, decided to go to Bolivia to perform the Sacred Visitation in 1935. In spite of ill health and advice to the contrary, he demonstrated his keen interest in the young mission by undertaking the arduous journey from the Pacific Coast (port of Arica, Chile), across the 15,000 feet high Andes to La Paz. This was too much for his weakened constitution: a few days after his arrival in La Paz he died a saintly death on March 31st, 1935. His mortal remains

¹⁵⁾ Correspondence between the superiors of the Order and the Most Rev. Carlos Riu, bishop of Camagüey, in AVP. The fathers arrived in Camagüey in February 1955. Canonical foundation was granted by the Most Rev. Father General Eberhard on March 8th, 1955 (Indultum Apost. March 4th, 1955).

¹⁶⁾ The Congregatio intermedia at Culemborg, Holland, February 1st, 1951, made the decision, which was approved by the Most Rev. Father General Hickey on February 15th, 1951 (AVP).

¹⁷⁾ The Definitory in Holland accepted his resignation on November 6th, 1952, and appointed on the same day the present commissary provincial, Very Rev. Father Marcus Meyer STD.

were transferred to Germany in the summer of 1953. — Besides Fr. Clement Fuhl and Fr. Thomas Van der Vloodt, the Augustinians in Bolivia will always remember two young priests, who in their ardent apostolic zeal perhaps took too little care of themselves, seeing so numerous a flock without shepherds: Fr. Edmund Van Beek, who died at Chulumani on February 8th, 1938, at the age of 27, after 1 year and 4 months of work in Bolivia, and Fr. Marcelino Mes, who also died at Chulumani, on January 13th, 1948, at the age of 36, after 1 year and 8 months of missionary labor.

« Great sacrifices shall have to be made », Fr. Thomas wrote on the last page of his diary. They have been made and will have to be made if the work begun is to bear much fruit.

William SAELMAN, O. S. A.

La Paz,
December 9th, 1955.
