

Columban Sisters in Chile

Sr Ita McElwain

As a Columban Sister, I love being here in Chile and feel privileged to be part of this vibrant local Church. Our Sisters are located in different regions of the country.

In the first region, our Sisters have responsibility for one of the Basic Ecclesial Communities, Our Lady of Fatima, a part of Holy Spirit parish in the city of Iquique.

In the interior of the region, Sr Mary McGuinness is one of the coordinators of the Andean Pastoral Team. This team has responsibility for the pastoral care of the numerous small villages and communities in the foothills and high plateaus of the Andes bordering on Bolivia. Basically the team caters to the needs of the people in these areas, especially prior to the local feasts of any given village.

The team consists of lay people, a few priests and several Sisters. Before a fiesta, the team visits the village. They help prepare the liturgy and give instruction for those preparing for Baptism and First Communion as well as for those who wish to receive the Sacraments when the priest visits at the time of the fiesta.

In Santiago we have two houses, one of which we use as our Centre House. This centre caters to our own needs of hospitality, study, formation, vocation, promotion and mission animation. We do some pastoral work from this base, especially retreat work, spiritual direction and counselling, facilitation of the local health groups as well as being good neighbours for the people of our Basic Ecclesial Community.

Our other house is in Renca, in a parish established eight years ago, called *Maria Misionera* (Mary, the Missionary). It is a highly populated area of young families. We work in cooperation with the Columban Fathers in different pastoral activities: family catechetics, youth ministry, apostolate of the sick and elderly, groups for the prevention and rehabilitation of persons suffering from alcoholism and drug addiction.

The problem of chemical dependency has assumed alarming proportions in recent years and is working havoc in the lives of numerous families and youths. It is surely one of the great evils of our times and affects all levels of society, rich and poor alike. However, the effects are much more evident among the poor and there is very little actually being done at government level. Prevention and education programmes offer the best hope for a long-term solution.

In the South - the ninth region of Chile known as the Araucania - we have a small mission in the town of Loncoche, started in 1993. Our Sisters are engaged in Christian community formation with all that entails and with an outreach to the Mapuche, an indigenous people.

During the last 10 years we started Vocations Promotion and Mission Animation programmes in an effort to awaken the Chilean Church and the people to their responsibility for the mission of the Church. Little by little this is happening. In the Pastoral Orientation for the Chilean Church for the years 1996-2000, the Bishops' Conference has for the first time mentioned the need to promote mission and foster missionary vocations.

Our first Chilean member made her profession of vows in Santiago on March 25, 1996. There are several young women in our aspirant programme so we are hopeful that in the years to come many young Chileans will take up the challenge to dedicate their

lives to God as Columban Missionary Sisters.

There are vast areas of Chile where the Church is planted but because of the lack of priests and religious, long periods of time elapse between pastoral visits. This is particularly true in the South of Chile. There, because the winters are very severe and the summer season is short, a very limited



Sr Carmen Maldonado says hello to young friends in Santiago.



Sr Cecilia Cuizon (front left) gets her picture taken with a Basic Christian Community in Iquique.

space of time is available for pastoral work. This gave rise to the custom of doing summer missions in the largely abandoned areas of the South and in the islands off the coast.

Every summer, teams of missionaries, religious and lay, offer their services to the local parishes of the southern and northern dioceses. These teams come from the Christian communities of the larger city parishes.

In the Parish of San Columbano, we had trained many excellent lay men and women as catechists and as coordinators of the Christian communities for doing mission work in their local areas. When a friend in the South invited us to do a mission in her parish in Loncoche in the region of the Araucania, we felt that for our trained and committed lay people this would be a great opportunity to go forth from the security of their own local Christian communities and share their faith with their less fortunate brothers and sisters.

Prior to departing we held several meetings to prepare our hearts and minds for going forth. We reflected on Scripture texts, especially Matthew 10 on the mission of the 12, and encouraged one another to have a generous, trusting spirit in God's care and love for us. We also roleplayed how we would do pastoral visitation, and tried to learn what we could about the people and places we were going to visit, their customs and religious practices.

We raised funds for the travel expenses and for the resources we would need during the mission. We held raffles, sold calendars and religious goods and tried to get the local community to help in sending us on our summer mission. The people responded generously and we raised more than \$500.

We also incorporated in the mission group those who couldn't go but helped by selling tickets. These became part of our Columban lay collaborators. Being part of the mission group was a very maturing experience for our lay

Catholics and their faith became strong and vibrant.

For 12 or 13 years we have worked consistently with various rural Christian communities. Since 1992 we have done summer missions in several rural communities of the parish of the Immaculate Conception of Loncoche. One team did a mission on the Island of Leitec near the large Island of Chiloe.

In the summer of 1995 we did a mission in Til Til, a large populous sector, North of Santiago. In this summer mission we were able to include several young people, the children of the adult members of the mission team. These youngsters had for years accompanied their parents in the various activities of their local Christian communities.

We decided to give them the opportunity to work with the children and youth of the Til Til area, while their parents worked with the adults. They loved it. Gathering groups of small children in the afternoon, they taught them prayers, songs and hymns, showed them how to colour Gospel scenes and played games with them. It was an unforgettable experience for the local children.

Some of the older teenagers, like Daisy and Marisol, joined the young adults in working with the local youth. They planned discussion groups, Bible reflections and other activities suitable for the older members of the youth groups. The young people said that they felt these youthful missionaries understood them and their problems and they experienced another vision of the Church - something alive and real, not just a bunch of do's and don'ts.

On the last night of the mission we held a session between



Sr Virgie Mozo takes a break from her mission to the Mapuches near Lake Budi.

the young people and their parents. For many, it was the first time they had really communicated with one another. They felt listened to and understood. The parents for their part committed themselves to take more interest in their sons and daughters, in their lives and activities.

Finally we lit a bonfire and gathered around it with singing accompanied by guitars, dancing followed by prayer and sharing of food. That night they experienced Christian community.

As for Marisol and Daisy, I have known them for several years. Both are involved in their local parishes, working voluntarily as junior catechists, taking time out from study or work to teach the young children the basic catechism in preparation for First Communion. Marisol does Confirmation preparation with the young adults and is very capable indeed. They are impressive young people and both have a deep love for the Lord and are full of zeal for the mission.

Like many young people they are struggling to finish their schooling and perhaps enter third-level studies. The local Christian communities in Santiago are blessed to have such committed young people who give generously of their time and talents. We hope that someday missionary vocations will arise among these young people. They have so much faith and love to offer those who do not yet know God. ■

Sr Ita McElwain is the Area Coordinator of the Columban Sisters in Chile.



The author, Sr Ita McElwain (right) has a consoling word with a woman in Puente Alto.



Srs Silvia Sherwood and Colette Coleman have makeshift accommodation where they get a nice rest in the village in the Andes.

REMEMBER THE MISSIONS IN YOUR WILL

We cannot take our earthly possessions with us, but we can so dispose of them that our good works will continue after we are gone. A bequest to help missionaries bring God's saving message to non-Christians is a practical way of showing our love for Christ. Why not speak to your lawyer about it?

FORM OF WILL

I give devise and bequeath to the Superior for the time being of St Columban's Mission Society (see below for local address) the sum of

\$ for the use of the said Society.

AUSTRALIA

St Columban's Mission Society
69 Woodland Street, Essendon Vic 3040
Postal address:
PO Box 752, Niddrie D.C. Vic 3042
Tel: (03) 9379 3544

NEW ZEALAND

St Columban's Mission Society
P.O. Box 30-017, Lower Hutt 6315
Tel: (04) 567 7216