



UNRAVELING A BOLIVIAN 'YARN'

By Justus Wirth, OFM

I was surprised and delighted to read **Fred Link's** sharing about his visit with **Clement Comesky** of Holy Name Province in the Jan. 22 newsletter and his memories of our time in Bolivia in the early 1980s. It set my mind wandering off in so many meaningful and delightful directions.

I just love and never cease to be amazed how "stories of our lives," like balls of yarn, keep growing and growing into a bigger and bigger ball that becomes something like the epic genres of Sacred Scripture – those Bible stories that were exaggerated to make a point (all, of course, with the Holy Spirit still hovering softly overhead).

What ain't yarn: Clem and I did meet more than once along dirt roads as I was returning from visiting one or more of our communities – and halfway home I would spot Clem, as he was so fondly called, coming along in the opposite direction on his way to visit another of our 50-plus rural farming communities.

About the yarn: It was my horse and not a mule that Clem taught me to saddle. I can't remember a backpack, but I did have two saddlebags. It was my faithful horse, **Moro**, and not a walking stick that accompanied me to so many rural family farm communities. However, I must say that I like Clem's memory of walking stick, backpack and a mule.

Justy became my "gringo" name even before I finished language school. The people called me "Padre Justo" – the Spanish for Justus. I still remember meeting our Franciscan bishop **Tom Manning** (HNP) of the Prelature of Coroico and his saying to me, "'Justo.' That's a strong name here." I liked that!

And walking – yes, I loved to walk. I was



From his ministry in Bolivia: Justus Wirth riding to a rural farm community on his faithful horse, Moro.

FROM JEFF

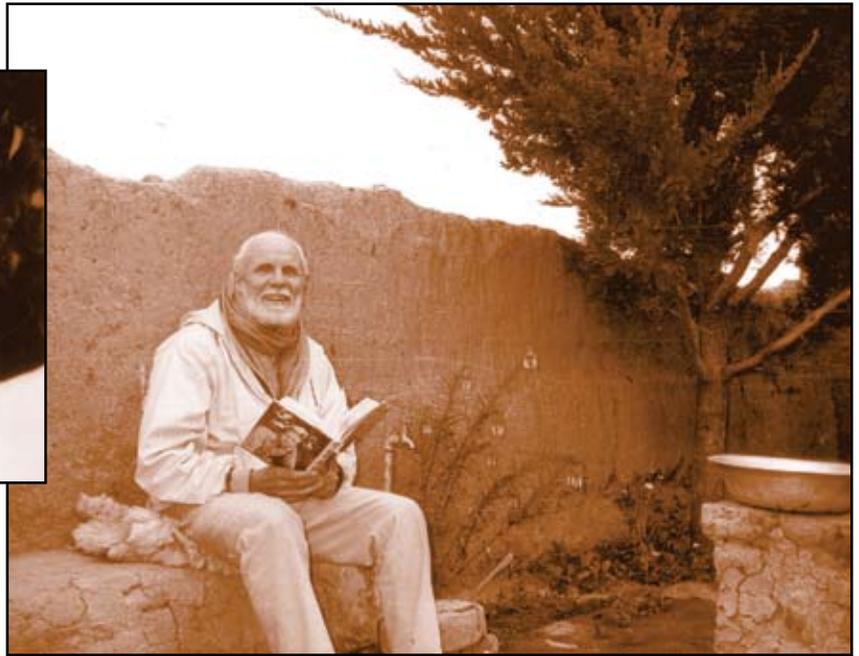
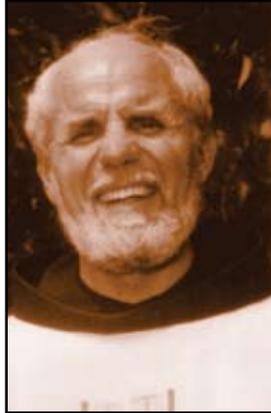
I was too late for the Mardi Gras celebrations, and I missed the hoopla surrounding the Saints' Super Bowl victory, but I still got to enjoy the energy and Southern hospitality of the Louisiana friars during this past week's visitation.

St. Mary of the Angels Parish is growing again under the leadership of Joe Rigali, Mark Gehret, and Phil Robinette. The community is rewriting its mission statement and developing a strategic plan that involves turning the old school into a community center which will house a Head Start program and possibly Catholic Charities offices. Newly arrived Paul Walsman continues preaching for Food for the Poor. Robert Seay drove over to St. Mary's from Lafayette during my visit to lead a revival and healing service at St. Mary's. In true Olympic spirit, Juniper Crouch has adapted his roller skates and is taking ice skating lessons. (He used to compete on the roller skates!) In Alexandria, Duane Stenzel leads a dedicated staff at Radio Maria; he himself has several radio programs and is always on the lookout for those who might like to venture into that form of evangelization. Giovanni Reid and Clete Riederer serve the very poor in Shreveport at the Christian Service Program, where they feed 280 people a day! Andre McGrath continues to pastor at nearby Our Lady of the Blessed Sacrament Parish.

The weather was unusually cold and the celebrations were over, but it was heartwarming and energizing to see the good work of our Louisiana brothers. Laissez les bon temps rouler!

– Jeff Scheeler, OFM

enthralled at prayer, walking amid those hillsides with valleys, and at times a small pond, and if I was lucky, coming upon a beautiful crane or striking, long-legged white bird feeding in the marshes of that body of water. Three to five hours was the average distance to go. Sometimes communities were seven hours away and required equal time walking and atop my horse. Either way – walking or horseback – the beauty was so special. I discovered wooded hillsides with a coffee grove here and there, their bartering crop to get needed sugar, kerosene, batteries and whatever on visits to the Apolo town traders. At times, the beauty was so spirit-filling that I would pray that big corporations – Holiday Inn, Hyatt and Hilton – would never discover this rural area for building hotels!



Justus Wirth waiting outside a catechist's home in Bolivia.

About those two-day visits: I always had a paperback in a saddlebag for reading, as I would sit outside the catechist's home for hours, maybe as he rounded up the families. I would talk as the families gathered, and soon after we would be singing songs of praise and thanksgiving to God. I would always work in a talk on forgiveness, since as with all peoples, tensions and divisions arose.

I would have a healing service on the second day in the late morning. Everyone had a real ailment – a back problem, stomach problem, or their head seemed to be spinning in circles. I probably anointed a thousand or two in Apolo and our surrounding communities. Bolivia is where I came to believe in healing and also that the name of Jesus has power to heal. I would pray as **Peter** prayed for the cripple begging alms in Acts, "In the name of **Jesus Christ of Nazareth**, be healed." Toward the end of the second day we would celebrate the Eucharist, often with a baptism or wedding.

Apolo is also where at a large regional gathering on Trinity Sunday I had 57 baptisms – a record for me. I can still see that large circle on that beautiful day. Thank God, the bishops of Bolivia had approved a shorter Peruvian rite of baptism.

Those were the happiest years of my life – going out for eight days to visit four farming communities, led by a catechist to each respective community for a two-day visit. I would live and eat with the "cat" – as catechists were fondly named – and his family.

I have never felt such freedom, nothing but my

Mass kit and the oils in one saddlebag and a change of underclothing, along with a few Bolivian chocolate bars in the other. How prophetic were the words of **Henry Thoreau's** protesting masterpiece, *Walden*, that I was so often reminded of: "Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity! Instead of a thousand, count half a dozen and keep your accounts on your thumbnail!"

Spinning stories

Fred's write-up also had me remembering Laurian Rausch's visit to our 1953 Mt. Airy novitiate class – telling us stories of our province's characters – and of my first assignment in the 1960s at St. Michael's in Southfield when Paul Desch and other DSC friars would come over for an evening cookout (hours of storytelling and singing while sipping cognac or creme de menthe); of the evening recreations in the 1970s or '80s at provincial chapters or large gatherings with Leonard Foley spinning tales of our beloved brothers. Back then, those encounters were such a powerful bonding experience for us as brothers in the same province.

That storytelling helped create our province's mythology for those years. I miss all that yarn. But generations do come and go and we are forever adjusting.

– **Justus Wirth, OFM**



FOCUS ON FRIARS

■ An announcement from **Gene Mayer**: “Most of you are aware that when the Provincial Council meets around the Province, one of the features of the meeting is a gathering with the members of the area Cluster. Even though the Cincinnati Cluster functions very differently from most, we want to give area friars the same opportunity to meet with the Council – requesting information – making opinions known, etc. So, on **Wednesday afternoon March 10th**, any friars from the Cincinnati metro area who would like to meet with Council are invited to a gathering at **St. John the Baptist Friary** beginning at 3:30 p.m. No reservations necessary – just show up.” If you’d like to stay for a social and dinner following the meeting, please inform Gene by Friday, March 5.

■ **Bill Ollendick, Marcel Groth and Luke Simon** passed along good news about the Franciscan Outreach Program (formerly the Poverty Program) in a recent bulletin from Transfiguration Parish in Southfield. “Response to our appeal was very supportive. Throughout 2009, we intervened with financial aid to prevent utility shutoffs 20 times. Most of our funds were used in the food pantry program. Our food pantry has grown to serve 300 families monthly. We invited 20 families for Thanksgiving turkey dinner packages, with an additional 50 packages sent to St. Luke Parish in Detroit. We invited 350 families to receive Christmas toys for nearly 1,150 children in those families, provided Christmas dinner packages for those families, and provided an additional 65 packages to St. Luke Parish, making this a very generous and rewarding year.”

■ **John Bok** reports another milestone for Holy Family Parish in Galveston, which celebrated its six-month anniversary on Feb. 15. The leaders of former parish organizations met to recommend a new Men’s Club, Ladies Altar Society, Damas of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Guadalupanos (Spanish Language group), senior group (as yet unnamed), Bereavement Committee and Health Care Ministries Group. The meeting times and logistics are almost as complicated as the 10-Mass weekend schedule on the front page of the parish bulletin. On Feb. 9, the parish school, Galveston Catholic, officially changed its name to Holy Family Catholic School.

■ **Mark Hudak** appreciates your kindness and support following the deaths of two members of his extended family. “Please thank everyone for the prayers and expressions of sympathy. As usual, the friars have been so thoughtful.”

■ **Jim Van Vurst** says this YouTube video could be a life-saver. It’s a simplified version of CPR that apparently works better than mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. Check it out at:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E5huVSebZpM>



PHOTO COURTESY OF HOLY NAME PROVINCE

Fred Link with Michael Harlan, OFM (Provincial Secretary for HNP), at the Church of St. Francisco in Lima, Peru.

Visitation gives Fred a ‘listening opportunity’

Two months into it, **Fred Link** is looking for words to describe his visitation of Holy Name Province. Right off the bat he comes up with “enlightening” and “energizing.”

“But the word that characterizes everything,” he says, “is ‘hospitable.’ The guys have been responsive. Their council has made me feel at home and invited me to participate. Every person has been as gracious as can be,” from the friars at East Coast parishes to those manning missions in Lima, Peru, and the 32-man community of retirees in St. Petersburg, Fla. The experience isn’t so much about questions like, “Are you happy in your ministry?” as it is about the “listening opportunity,” as Fred calls it.

As Provincial Minister of SJB Province, Fred did lots of listening. Before he started this visitation, “I had

a pretty good sense of what would be involved.” The difference here is that “I have no history with the friars of Holy Name Province. I don’t talk about their personal lives and families.” The format varies with the size of the friary. “In larger houses like St. Petersburg I begin with a meeting with the community to talk about what visitation will be, and at the end I meet to give them my take on visitation. I ask what they’re involved in, their thoughts about leadership. One of the things they’re doing is an assessment of their guardians. That becomes part of my visitation as well.”

With 10 months of visitation remaining – and a parish back home in St. Bernard – Fred obviously won’t meet all 362 members of HNP. But two weeks ago, accompanied to Peru by Provincial Secretary **Michael Harlan**, he did visit six friars serving at two parishes south of Lima, one of the poorest cities in South America. “The bulk of the time we stayed at Our Lady of Lourdes Parish, where their mission office is,” Fred says. The poverty in the settlements, where thousands live in makeshift dwellings, “reminded me of the ‘colonias’ in Juarez where **Justus Wirth** worked. One friar has Mass outdoors in an open area where 16,000 people have no running water and no electricity.” Managing parishes, sponsoring clinics, soup kitchens and programs to assist families, “The friars there are doing really good ministry.”

Fred leaves again on Monday, this time for three-plus weeks of visitation. “One of the struggles I’m

facing is guilt from being gone from St. Clement,” he says. “The people here have been very supportive and understanding,” and fortunately, “We have such good leadership I don’t have to worry about it.” Is it hard juggling the roles of pastor and visitor? “When I’m here at the parish I’m not thinking about visitation. And when I’m in New York, I feel at home with what I’m doing.”



PLEASE PRAY FOR

Sr. Mary Frank, OSF, our former assistant in the Communications Office, will undergo major surgery Monday in Cincinnati. Mary celebrated her 85th birthday Feb. 23 in the infirmary at Oldenburg. She appreciates your prayers!



LET US REMEMBER

C. Paul Higdon, a former friar who served as a teacher at Duns Scotus and at parishes in Indiana, Kansas and Michigan, died Feb. 20 at the age of 90 in Port Huron, Mich. According to his obituary in the *Port Huron Times Herald*, “In 1968 he left the Franciscan Order to become a diocesan priest in the Archdiocese of Detroit. He served as assistant pastor at St. Edward’s in Lakeport, St. Joseph in Port Huron, St. Gertrude in St. Clair Shores, and St. William in Walled Lake. In 1984 he accepted the post for which he became most known in the Blue Water Area: hospital chaplain at Mercy and



PHOTO BY SCOTT OBRECHT, OFM

Snowmageddon, the sequel

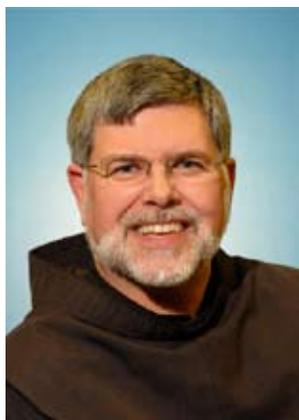
Just when they thought it was safe to go back outside...the friars in Easton, Pa., woke up this morning to another foot of blowing snow that created drifts up to 3 feet high. “We had two groups scheduled for this week but, due to the snow, they both canceled,” Scott Obrecht says. “We had a few staff people come in yesterday. I doubt anyone will show up today unless the roads are cleared.” Ed Skutka is the designated shoveler.

Port Huron hospitals....Though he formally retired in 1991, he continued to serve as a volunteer chaplain long afterwards.” A Mass of Christian Burial was celebrated yesterday in Port Huron.



Reflections on Priesthood

The connections make pastoring a privilege



Jeff Scheeler, OFM

By Jeff Scheeler, OFM

One Sunday morning during Mass, after I had been pastor of St. Monica-St. George Parish in Cincinnati, Ohio, for about a year and half, I found myself looking out at the congregation, and something “clicked” within me. I felt a profound sense of “connection” with the people I saw. I had been

there long enough to get to know a good number of them. I knew many of their stories, their struggles and their joys. I knew that one woman I saw had just suffered a miscarriage and was grieving the loss of her child. Another woman had just told me that she was pregnant. I saw a couple that I was preparing for marriage, and I knew of their hopes and dreams. I saw the family of a man whose funeral I had celebrated the past week. I saw the family of woman who was in the hospital suffering from cancer. I saw a woman whose husband was struggling with alcoholism. There was a woman whose confession I had heard – amidst many tears. There were many, too, that I did not recognize or know their stories. But I knew that each had a unique story. And I knew that each one came to this celebration of the Eucharist with hopes and dreams and prayers in their hearts.

As luck (or grace) would have it, at communion we sang David Haas’ *Song of the Body of Christ* that has the refrain, “We come to share our story; we come to break the bread; we come to know our rising from the dead.” It was perfect.

I had a profound sense of the privileged role I had to serve as priest and pastor for these people. I had a profound sense of connection to the people and their stories. And I knew that we had come to a wonderful place together to experience hope. Though I had the title for a year and half, I think I became a pastor on that day.

(There’s still time to share your reflection, whether you are ordained or lay. Has there been any moment or experience that brought home to you the meaning of priesthood – particularly Franciscan priesthood? Please send responses to Dan Anderson (dja@franciscan.org) or Toni Cashnelli (sjbfco@franciscan.org) for inclusion in a future issue of News Notes.)



Help for Haiti

St. John the Baptist Province is accepting contributions through an online form posted at www.franciscan.org, www.stanthony.org and www.americancatholic.org. The bulk of donations will be distributed to relief agencies on the ground, and a portion will be forwarded to the Minister General to help the friars in Haiti rebuild their community. Those who do not have Internet access are welcome to mail donations to the province’s FriarWorks office at 1615 Vine St., Cincinnati, OH 45202-6492. (Please make checks payable to Province of St. John the Baptist and indicate that the donation is intended for Haiti.) Thanks for your generosity!