

Habitat builds homes, humanity in Peru

By JOHN PETTY

There were 16 of us — four Roman Catholics, four Lutherans, two members of the United Church of Christ and six others a bit difficult to categorize. What brought us together was Peru. We were all part of a Habitat for Humanity Global Village Work Camp trip to the town of Moquegua in Peru. We would spend a week working with the people there, helping them to build their homes.

Habitat's partner families are required to put in a certain number of hours of "sweat equity." Habitat provides the materials and help in construction, but

Starting Point

the people themselves do much of the work. This is in keeping with Habitat's philosophy to be "a hand up, not a hand-out." Each day, the 16 of us would join between 30 and 50 "partners" on the site, and we would work side by side with them.

Our week began with worship. The local priest, Fr. Francisco Fahlman, led the liturgy. (Fr. Francisco, a Canadian, has lived in Moquegua for more than 30 years. The people there call him "Father Pancho.") The worship seemed almost like a scene out of a movie. We were all gathered under a tent on the Habitat

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site. A slight breeze caught the priest's vestments every now and then while we all sang joyful songs in Spanish. Most of us did not know the words except that we knew the songs were about God. ("*El amor de Jesucristo*" is not that difficult to translate.)

Global Village Work Camps are not a vacation. We worked — hard. The houses are made of concrete block and cement. The work is labor-intensive, which meant a lot of heavy lifting. The people had few tools, and the ones they had were simple and not always of good quality. They did have a cement mixer, and when it was running it dominated the site. Seven or eight people would mix the cement. Four or five would take wheelbarrows of cement from the mixer to the houses. Another crew would pour.

Women worked side by side with men. Only the very heaviest lifting would be done by men alone. One afternoon, I worked with Rosa, pouring the *vigas* (the concrete layer on top of the walls). She lifted everything I lifted. I was completely exhausted at the end of the day; I think Rosa went dancing.

Each day at noon, we all stopped for devotions. One of the partner families would read from the Bible in Spanish and we would sing more wonderful Spanish songs. Then we would have lunch together.

The work was hard, but also energizing and joyful. We managed to do what people often say they would like to do on a foreign trip: We made contact with the people. True, there was a language barrier. I think this led us to focus on other things we had in common. We

had common work and a common faith. We also shared a common effort to make contact in spite of the language barrier. We used the few words we each knew and coupled them with smiles and body language. I don't know how this worked, but it did. By the end of the week, we had formed a bond with each other. We

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were a community together.

We closed the week with worship. Fr. Pancho led us again. We spent much of our worship time exchanging mutual blessings. We expressed love for each other. We talked of our oneness in Christ. We exchanged addresses and small gifts.

Before this trip, I somehow had it in my mind that people in the Third World were miserable. I assumed this, I guess, based on the images from our media. Perhaps many Third World people are miserable, but not the good and gracious people of Moquegua. Quite the contrary. They are joyful! They have light in their eyes and hope written on their faces.

Some of this is no doubt because of Habitat. The people we worked with will have their own house someday soon. These houses are about 450 square feet

and will sell for about \$2,000. The average payment will be about \$10 per month — a small amount, it would seem to us, but not to them. (The minimum wage in Peru is about \$70 per month.)

They worked hard but also knew how to play. On Maestro's birthday, a group of our Moquegua friends conspired with us to throw him in the water tank.

On another evening, they invited us to dance. Three of the young men played Peruvian songs on the pan flute and guitars while the rest of us gathered around a bonfire. The women seem to take the lead in social matters, and we were soon dancing a simple but vigorous Peruvian dance around the fire.

Our contribution to them was significant. Our financial contribution was enough to build almost three houses, and we did work equivalent to building two houses. That being said, I think that everyone in our group would say that *their* contribution to *us* was at least as great as ours to them. They taught us about community life and about working together toward common goals. They taught us about joy in serving. Each one of us left Moquegua with great affection for our hosts and teachers.


We did the tourist thing, too. In our second week in Peru, we went to Lake Titicaca and Machu Picchu. We went to markets and ruins and restaurants. All that was not as great as our week with the gracious people of Moquegua. We will remember with great fondness our time together. ■

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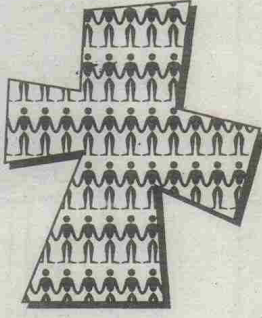
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