

Opening Wide Our Hearts

TO OUR SISTER PARISH

By Carolyn Saucier

Something new is happening at Immaculate Conception Parish and we hope you will want to be an active part of it! We are expanding our boundaries in a partnership adventure with a sister parish, San Francisco de Asis in Pisco, Peru.

Who is our Sister Parish? Knowing their name is just the beginning. San Francisco de Asis lies far south of Lima — about four hours' drive along the desert coast of the Pacific Ocean. This area was devastated by an earthquake and tsunami on August 15, 2007. The quake occurred on a Saturday evening during Mass and many parishioners were killed. Their church, rectory and parish kitchen were destroyed.

In June 2010 five IC parishioners traveled to Pisco to visit our sister parish. It was hard to believe that the earthquake had happened almost three years ago. We saw miles and miles of rubble, buildings with only remnants of walls and people living in tents and huts. There was some reconstruction, but large portions of the city lay still in shambles.

Despite all this, we were greeted at the church of San Francisco de Asis by parishioners who welcomed us with joy. It was such a gift to meet them, to be graced by their spirit and presence. After Mass they treated us to a parish dinner and festival of music, dance and song. Even the pastor, Fr. Jose Sanchez danced the marinera with perfection!

During the next four days we had time to visit and hear the stories of the people. Most parishioners' homes were damaged or completely uninhabitable. Whole neighborhoods along the coast were wiped out by the tsunami. One woman told me she watched her home simply be carried out to sea and broken into hundreds of pieces. She lost everything.

The people have a deep respect for their pastor of twenty five years, Fr. Jose Sanchez. He is both spiritual leader and visionary—a good and faithful servant of the Lord whose smile lights up a room. In countless ways he has empowered and supported his people.

What does it mean to be a sister parish? It means sharing stories and sharing faith; it means giving witness and helping one another grow in Christian discipleship. It means building a relationship that enriches all our lives. In our visit last summer, the people offered us wonderful gifts of hospitality and witness—deeply imprinted on our minds and hearts.

San Francisco is a parish alive with community spirit and outreach. They offer many formation programs by the people and for the people—especially in the real life struggles of everyday. Older married couples mentor the younger ones and lead marriage retreats twice a year. Committed lay people teach all the confirmation classes and challenge the youth to give witness to Christian values – in countercultural ways. The youth are regular lectors and musicians; they even assist in the catechesis of younger children.

In terms of outreach, the people are a remarkable witness. After clearing the earthquake debris from the church property, they put rebuilding on hold and made a fundamental option for the poor.

The 5000 people whose homes were washed away were now living in huts with dirt floors and reed mat walls in a relocation settlement called Los Molinos. —without electricity, clean water and sufficient food. San Francisco de Asis parishioners worked to provide electricity so each dwelling could have at least a

single hanging bulb. Our diocese helped bring water to the area—which meant an outdoor spigot and hose for every dozen families. With our support, the parishioners also built a comedor or feeding center in Los Molinos. Only then did they begin construction of a simple bamboo church —though fundraising singing events by the Pastor and donated labor.

Inevitably, part of Immaculate Conception’s role in this sister parish relationship is financial support. The Pisco economy has not recovered; parishioners continue to live in temporary shelters and search for whatever work they can find even as the parish struggles to maintain the feeding site with its annual cost of \$4200.

In October 2010, IC students raised over \$2600 through their Penny Project to help feed the hundreds of kids who come to the comedor every morning for a breakfast of two hard rolls and chocolate nutritional drink. Immaculata women supplemented the childrens’ great effort with \$2000 –some for immediate use and some to jump start the program for the next year.

But now is a great opportunity for everyone in Immaculate Conception to join in our sister parish adventure. We are sponsoring a ***Bell Tower Barbecue*** on ***Thursday, June 16th*** for the people of San Francisco de Asis.

What’s a Bell Tower Barbecue? One of the priorities expressed by the parish is to restore the church bell salvaged from the rubble when their church was destroyed. The bell is for them a treasured community symbol. For over 100 years it has marked the time of day, called the people to prayer, and warned residents of imminent danger. Restoring the bell is an important sign of the survival and continued presence of the faith community.

Please bring your family and friends to the Bell Tower Barbecue to help build a new home for the cherished bell and stir new hope for the parishioners who long to hear it ring once again—marking the sacred moments of their lives. Please come learn more about our sister parish ---so all of us will open wide our hearts to them as they so generously offer their hearts to us.