

growing awareness of the inhumane conditions of the people was a fear of Communistic takeover. Representing the Holy See, the Right Rev. Agostino Caseroli in 1961 appealed to religious congregations in the United States to pledge ten percent of their membership over a ten-year period to serve not only the religious needs but also the educational, economic, and social needs of the Latin American people.

Rev. Mother Mary Clare Cronly, who had been elected superior general in 1954, gave careful consideration to the plea. The Congregation had been founded as a missionary effort in the New World with the first three sisters coming from France to minister to the religious and social needs of the people of South Texas, but with the exception of their early expansion into Mexico, the sisters had not moved on to other missionary fields. They had chosen rather to concentrate their efforts in these two areas, with the exception of the recently opened high school in Ireland, which could not be considered a missionary endeavor.

Extremely conscientious of her duties as the superior general, Rev. Mother Mary Clare determined that the Congregation should respond to the appeal from Rome and establish a mission in South America. The sisters were already anticipating the celebration of their centennial which would be observed in 1969, and the missionary effort would be undertaken in gratitude to God for the many blessings of the Congregation since its founding almost 100 years ago.

Guided principally by Sister Charles Marie Frank, who was serving as Dean of the College of Nursing at The Catholic University in Washington, D. C., and who had broad experience in working with the ministries of health in Brazil, Colombia, Chile, and Peru, the general administration decided to begin their work in a remote area of Peru, in the city of Chimbote, approximately 250 miles north of Lima.⁴⁰ It was an area of over-population, extreme poverty, and the most primitive living conditions. It was an area that had been defined as ripe for Communism.

Arrangements were made with the ordinary of the Peruvian diocese, Bishop Charles J. Burke, O.P., and in 1963, Mother Calixta wrote to all of the sisters calling for volunteers who would "need to be self-sacrificing, generous, ready to live amid unaccustomed poverty, and most especially, they must love the poor and make themselves one with them as they work to improve their lot."⁴¹

The mission was placed under the direction of Sister Charles Marie, with Sisters María Felicitas Villegas, Rosalina Acosta, Louis Katharine Schuler, Mary Mark Gerken, and Gwendolyn Grothoff assisting her. Following a solemn departure ceremony in the motherhouse

chapel at which Bishop Stephen A. Leven presided, the sisters left San Antonio on April 23, 1964, for Ponce, Puerto Rico. Here they attended the Ponce Institute for Intercultural Communication at the Catholic University of Puerto Rico, participating in a sixteen-week intensive course designed for missionaries going to South America that included conversational Spanish as well as studies on Peru, apostolic methods, theology of the apostolate, spiritual formation, and field work.

When the sisters arrived in Chimbote on December 19, 1964, they found a city that had mushroomed in population over a ten-year period, growing from 5000 to over 120,000 in response to a rise in the fishing industry. People were living in houses made out of straw mats, with no sanitation, contaminated drinking water, little or no electricity, a scarcity of food, and all of the health problems attendant upon such conditions. Most of them had migrated from the Sierra, hoping to find opportunities for employment and a better life. The industry, however, had been exploited and almost destroyed by greedy owners; jobs were scarce; and workers were grossly underpaid. Chimbote was a city where even the atmosphere was completely contaminated by exhaust from the factories operated day and night in burning fish to produce fertilizer and from Peru's only steel mill located in the area. It was a city of displaced people trying to survive under the most inhumane conditions.

The sisters began their work in St. Francis of Assisi Parish, which encompassed over 80,000 people, approximately one-third of the total population of Chimbote. The parish was under the direction of the priests of the Missionary Society of St. James the Apostle, an organization of American clergy serving in Latin America that had been founded in 1958 by Cardinal Cushing of Boston. The pastor, Father Rudolph Masciarelli, directed the team of priests, sisters, and lay persons working to provide liturgical celebrations, religious education, and social services for the people of the parish.

In accepting the appeal to open a mission in Chimbote, the Congregation had agreed to provide not only the services of the sisters and to build a convent for their living accommodations but also to provide the financial resources to construct and support a clinic and medical dispensary until the operation could become self-sustaining. Named Centro Santa Clara in honor of Rev. Mother Mary Clare, the facility was soon serving over 1,000 persons each month, providing medical treatment, immunization programs, instruction, and home visits. Medicines and supplies were shipped to the center from the many hospitals operated by the sisters in the United States, the Catholic Medical Mission Board, and Project HOPE.



Six sisters left San Antonio in 1964 to establish a mission in Chimbote, Perú: Sister Charles Marie Frank, Sister Mary Mark Gerken, Sister María Felicitas Villegas, Sister Rosalina Acosta, Sister Louis Katharine Schuler, and Sister Gwendolyn Grothoff. Wishing them farewell were Rev. Mother Mary Clare Cronly (far right) and Mother Mary Calvary LePage of the general administration.



Sister Emma Hernández cares for two infants brought into the clinic in Chimbote for medical attention.



Sister Rita Prendergast, center, visits with women prisoners at the jail in Hauncané, Perú.

“Hepatitis, tuberculosis, bronchial pneumonia, bronchitis, carbuncles, and infections of every part of the body were common as well as a variety of endemic communicable diseases,” according to Sister Charles Marie. “Little children came in the arms of their mothers. Many of them were suffering from infantile diarrhea and dehydration. Infants were brought in convulsing from tetanus infection. Many of the babies died before the sisters could attend them. . . . The mother’s first words would be, ‘*La fe, Madrecita, la fe.*’ She was asking for Baptism for her child.”⁴² In addition to their ministry to the sick, the sisters became involved in working with youth groups, organizing a lay apostolate, establishing social services for families, and teaching religion.

Starting the mission in Peru demanded courage on the part of the sisters, particularly on the part of Rev. Mother Mary Clare, who spearheaded the effort. Quiet, reserved, and even timid in public appearances, she did not seem to be a person who would undertake such a challenge. She was always prim and proper, quiet and reserved. She had been mistress of novices for many years and also provincial superioress, and during her tenure in these offices had developed a conscientious concern for minute observances of the rule.

In one of her lectures to the sisters offered at the end of the summer retreats she told them, “Trifles make perfection but perfection is no trifle.” She reminded them of many customs and practices which they were failing to observe—use of the appropriate title “Sister” when addressing each other, making the proper inclination to the crucifix upon entering the refectory, keeping their hands covered with the sleeves of the habit upon entering the chapel. All of these practices were important to her and gave evidence of exactitude and fidelity to the rule. “God measures the greatness of our actions by the love with which we perform them,” she insisted, rather than by the importance of the deeds themselves.⁴³

She was so exact in everything she did herself that Mother Mary Calvary LePage, who served in the general administration with her, said it was possible to tell the exact time of the day by what Rev. Mother Mary Clare was doing. “She was monastically oriented,” according to Sister Charles Marie and lived her religious life almost as if she were following the rules of the cloister. Ironically, during her years in administration, she had been thrust into the midst of the controversy over the north expressway, a situation totally opposite to the cloistered way of life she followed. Unable to assume the public role demanded of her during this ordeal, she had usually turned to Mother Calixta or to Dr. S. Thomas Greenburg, president of Incarnate Word College, to be the spokesperson for the Congregation.

Rev. Mother Mary Clare's whole personality seemed to lack the adventurous traits needed to reach out in a missionary endeavor in South America, but Vatican authorities had called for sisters to serve the needs of the poor. Always obedient to the authority of the Church, she responded without hesitation and without question.

Two years after the mission was established in Chimbote, another request came from Archbishop Romolo Carboni, the Apostolic Nuncio to Peru, to expand the work by taking over the direction of nursing service and other departments in Hospital Central de Policía in Lima. "If we could find sisters . . . deeply religious and apostolic, highly competent professionally, generous and cheerful in disposition," he said, "the Church could make a tremendous impression on the Police and their families here, virtually all of whom belong to the lower middle and poorer classes."⁴⁴ Once again Rev. Mother Mary Clare responded to the appeal of the Church, and Sisters María Felícitas Villegas, María del Roble Rodríguez, Manuela Montalvo, Clara María Sepúlveda, and Victor Hennessey began their work at the 500-bed facility in 1966.⁴⁵

With the exception of the years of conflict over the route of the north expressway, the 1950s and the early 1960s had been a quietly progressive period for the Congregation. It had expanded in its traditional works of teaching and health care and had made a bold new venture into the missionary territory of South America. The sisters themselves had advanced educationally and professionally. It had been a period during which Catholics in general had gained a measure of assurance and pride in their status as John F. Kennedy became the first Roman Catholic president of the United States.

It had been a time of great heroes with President Kennedy resisting Communist aggression; the first astronauts flying into space; Martin Luther King giving his inspirational speech, "I Have a Dream"; and Pope John XXIII being elected to head the Catholic Church. It was a time also of idealism in which young people sought to follow strong convictions and to serve others through such organizations as the Peace Corps and VISTA as well as through a lifelong commitment to religious vows.

By the mid 1960s, however, the stability and tranquility were coming to an end. The whole world was shocked with the assassination in 1963 of President Kennedy; civil rights demonstrations were a clarion call to the American people to correct social injustice; Angelo Roncalli was elected Pope John XXIII and challenged the Catholic Church to "open the windows." It was a time of dramatic change.

