

Catholics here supporting Gospel work in Peru, beyond

“Mission continues to be an integral part of who we are as a local church,” said Bishop John R. Gaydos, announcing the funding of eight projects in the Peru missions and a grant to the U.S. bishops’ Church in Latin America effort.

The announcement followed a meeting of the diocesan committee that oversees the use of money collected for the missions.

The diocese will continue its support of parish operations in Peru, a practice begun when priests of the Jefferson City diocese serving in the missions could no longer be replaced. A partnership with the parishes of Nasca and Marcona initiated in 2002 provided the basis for a successful transition of the care of these parishes to the Redemptorists. This year, the diocese will complete its commitment to fund a group of sisters who offer catechesis in the rural valleys of Nasca.

In the southern Andes of Peru, the Diocese of Jefferson City has been serving the parishes of Huatta and Coata for 45 years. Originally part of the sprawling Capachica mission, these parishes were assigned to Father Manuel Caceres when Capachica was handed back to the Puno diocese in 2004.

The annual support for these parishes subsidizes basic parish ministries as well as special programs in legal rights and emergency medical attention. A small salary allows Fr. Caceres to spend more time addressing the needs of the Quechua farmers, including the recent alfalfa project designed to improve the quality and value of their livestock.

In nearby Caracoto, things have changed dramatically in the past year. Once a parish of about 14,000 people, San Felipe suddenly doubled in size earlier this year when four outlying barrios of Juliaca were added to it. A great advocate of lay participation, Father Manuel Vassallo manages the diverse pastoral activities with a paid staff of only three, one of which is a new position to oversee the new urban zone.

El Monton, The Mountain, is in Lima, not the altiplano. It is not really a mountain, but the old garbage dump for the city. Buildings crack and split on its continually settling ground, but it is home to thousands of families who can’t afford to live anywhere else. There, the parish of Virgin Medianera is a symbol of hope and community in a barrio faced with staggering unemployment.

Funding from the Diocese of Jefferson City provides for a full-time parish minister and a social assistant at Virgin Medianera. Pastoral priorities focus on the young and the poor. Formation programs urge the young people to apply the Gospel to their lives and to take responsibility for their neighborhood. A revolving micro-loan project helps the most vulnerable parishioners survive the inevitable financial crisis.

The diocese has also renewed its commitment to the Peru Solidarity Forum (PSF.) An education and advocacy group founded by Monsignor Raphael Keyes in 1990, PSF maintains that whether the issue is hunger or governmental corruption, the only effective way to realize justice and protect human rights is to start with active and informed citizens working together in networks of solidarity.

In Peru and other countries, the government has either failed or abdicated its responsibility for the welfare of all of society, often leaving the Church to pick up the pieces. PSF works with



church groups and other grassroots organizations to change the system so that government benefits the many, not the few. This year, PSF will be producing a monthly radio show and a monthly tabloid to provide social analysis on key issues affecting Peruvians and to build bridges between groups working in those areas.

The mission committee recommended that the diocese take on three new projects. A contribution to PROSAN, the media ministry of the Missionary Society of St. James, will enhance the reach of parishes. A recent study by the Catholic bishops' conference in Peru indicated that the country has one priest for every 11,000 Catholics. The sheer numbers, rugged terrain and long distances makes it difficult for people to have access to the sacraments, catechesis and other pastoral services. PROSAN produces Catholic evangelization and human development programs that are broadcast on 60 radio stations.

With the subject taboo and victims treated as social outcasts, both the spread and the treatment of HIV/AIDS are burgeoning problems in Peru. Father Cathal Gallagher, a Columban missionary in Peru, asked the Jefferson City diocese to partner in a new disease management and prevention program. Based on a program developed at Stanford University, Fr. Gallagher's project addresses the lethal dangers of HIV/AIDS by involving people living with the virus who are taught to care for themselves, then to teach others.



In a related area, the Jefferson City diocese has pledged assistance to a Sisters of Mercy health project. Formerly mission partners with the diocese in Nasca and Marcona, the community operates the Mercy Clinic, a medical outreach in the poorest areas of Lima.

Patients can go to government health centers, but these have limited diagnostic equipment and an average face-to-face time of 3.6 minutes with the doctor. The Mercy Clinic provides more personalized care with an emergency clinic, two intensive care units and eight hospital beds. The clinic is forced to charge a nominal rate, but it also wants to ensure that the most destitute are still served.

The new Medicine Bank project funded by the Diocese of Jefferson City will supply free medicines for 60 of the poorest patients each month, as well as 20 surgeries. Mercy Sister Millie McNamara, the head of the Mercy Clinic, will oversee the project. She has been a missionary nurse in Peru for over 40 years.

Bishop Gaydos announced a contribution of \$50,000 to the Church in Latin America. This missionary outreach of the Catholic Church in the U.S. funds a variety of Catholic education, formation, and service ministries across Latin America and the Caribbean. Funds from the Church in Latin America are currently being used to rebuild some of the 21 parish churches in Peru's Ica diocese that were destroyed in last year's earthquake.

Overall, the Diocese of Jefferson City has pledged over \$425,000 to the missions in Peru and the Church in Latin America over the next year. The money comes from donations specifically designated for the missions.

The single largest source of these funds is the annual diocesan mission collection, which will be taken up in parishes throughout the diocese the weekend of July 19-20.