

With help from mission grant from Jefferson City diocese ...

Peru parish recovering from earthquake devastation

By Mark Saucier

Father José Sanchez remembers exactly what he was doing the evening of Aug. 15, 2007.

He was celebrating Mass for the Solemnity of the Assumption when suddenly the ground rumbled and the walls began to shake.

Within minutes, his church of San Francisco de Asis collapsed into a tomb for some of his parishioners.

After attending to the injured, Fr. Sanchez walked the streets of Pisco Playa. Close to the epicenter of the 7.8-magnitude earthquake, the damage was enormous. Entire neighborhoods had been leveled, leaving thousands of his parishioners without homes, food or water.

Fr. Sanchez could empathize with those people. His own parish house, like the church, had been turned into a pile of rubble. There was nothing left. The parish office, hall and nutrition site were all gone. The poor of Pisco Playa, who had little to start with, had lost all of the little they had.

"If there is anything providential in a disaster, and there wasn't in this earthquake, at least Fr. José was there," said Monsignor Raphael Keyes, pastor at St. Anthony parish in Camdenton and Our Lady of the Snows parish in Climax Springs, and a former diocesan missionary to Peru.

He and Fr. Sanchez first met some 40 years ago when the young college graduate arrived in Marcona to teach at the parish's one-room school in the village of San Nicolas.

"He was a great teacher, always winning awards in the Department of Ica, though he competed with teachers in much wealthier schools," recalled Msgr. Keyes. "He had a lot of creativity, a dynamic personality, and an almost intuitive solidarity with the people. In a crisis, he didn't have to be told what to do."

Those traits apparently followed him through his Priesthood. After the earthquake, Fr. Sanchez was out daily, consoling his parishioners, organizing for food disbursements, arranging for temporary shelters. He also won national at-

tention for his dogged demands that the government respond to the needs of the people.

Msgr. Keyes was not surprised. He had spent many hours talking to his parish teacher about the call to Priesthood. He arranged for his admission to the seminary to study for the Diocese of Ica and later worked with him for nearly two decades as a colleague and brother priest.

"José had this gift of being able to work with everyone, rich and poor, in a unifying but honest way that never betrayed either the Gospel or his principles," Msgr. Keyes said.

A matter of survival

In the immediate aftermath of the earthquake, Fr. Sanchez and the parish leaders set up a food distribution center in the parish. The neighborhood kitchen, which the parish had operated since 1991, was now a barren lot. And, instead of just feeding school-aged children, everyone needed food.

The parish managed to obtain basic food supplies from relief agencies and gave them out to families on a weekly basis. They provided stoves to groups of families and organized them to cook collectively so that no one would go hungry. Once they were assured that everyone was eating, they moved on to other necessities.

The parish opened a similar distribution site for building supplies. Families who had lost their homes could get *estera*, woven reed mats, and poles to construct temporary housing to provide some semblance of privacy and protection from the elements. With limited resources, the parish built some small modular wooden homes for several eld-

erly and single mothers who could not build their own shelter.

The parish also initiated the construction of a water project in the community of Alto el Molino, where all 93 families had lost their homes. In this, one of the poorest areas of Pisco, the lack of water was not only a hardship but a health risk under the post-earthquake conditions.

Had to ask for help

Once the most basic needs of the people were met, Fr. Sanchez



Father José Sanchez takes part in a group activity with children and mothers of his parish, San Francisco de Asis in Pisco Playa, Peru.

turned his attention to the parish complex.

"Our Christian community, with what little we have and the little we received in help from friends, have constructed the parish office, the parish house, and the bakery for the nutrition sites for kids and elderly," Fr. Sanchez reported.

In addition, parishioners pooled their resources and their labor to fashion a temporary chapel for their liturgical celebrations. For months, they were forced to hold all their Masses, baptisms, and weddings on a plot of sand with only a crucifix and a makeshift altar.

It was at this point that Fr. Sanchez and the parish of San Francisco de Asis turned to the Diocese of Jefferson City. The parish desperately needed to restart their feeding programs and build a permanent church where the entire **Please see Recover, next page.**

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community could gather. After almost two years of recovery efforts,



Construction work on the parish grounds of San Francisco de Asis.

they simply ran out of resources.

“The families of my parish community live in huts and two-room wooden houses,” said Fr. Sanchez. “This makes it very difficult for them to contribute to the parish.”

According to Msgr. Keyes, Fr. Sanchez has been making his own sacrifice to keep the parish running.

“He has a very good voice,” Msgr. Keyes said, “and he has been going around giving concerts in movie theaters and clubs to raise money for the parish. He was also using the little money he earned as a part-time school teacher for parish expenses.”

That changed six months ago when Fr. Sanchez underwent a major surgery that demanded months of convalescence. A month ago, Fr. Sanchez admitted to Msgr. Keyes, “I worry about my future. I don’t have the energy I had before.”

Money goes a long way

In June, Bishop John R. Gaydos announced that the Diocese of Jefferson City had awarded a grant of almost \$27,000 for Fr. Sanchez and his parish. The mission funds will be used to construct two parish feeding centers and build a permanent church.

One of the feeding sites will be built on the parish premises. At a material cost of under \$9,000, it will contain a kitchen, dining area, and bathrooms. When completed, the *Comedor San Francisco de Asis* will

provide breakfast to 400 children, Monday through Friday. It will also offer another 100 or so meals to needy elderly and nursing mothers.

The second site is the *Comedor Cristo Salvador*, located in the *pueblo joven* of Alto el Molino. It will serve 200 children and elderly each day. Unlike the building on the parish grounds, this one will be constructed of *material rustico*, primarily poles and bam-

boo, at a cost of about \$1,500. Fr. Sanchez explained that the entire neighborhood is an invasion and that the people do not yet have legal titles to protect their land.

The cost of the church is projected to be under \$17,000. The parishioners will provide most of the labor for the construction.

Fr. Sanchez responded to the announcement of the mission grant with a note of profound gratitude from the people of Pisco Playa.

He also communicated some of that energy and commitment that Msgr. Keyes cited. Reflecting on the earthquake, he said that the last couple of years have given him yet another opportunity to realize the theme of his ordination: “*Si no vives para servir no sirves para vivir.*”

“If you don’t live to serve, then it doesn’t serve to live.”

Invoking Church’s missionary identity, Bishop promotes mission collection

My dear friends in Christ,

Today we hear Mark’s story of the apostles sent on mission. It is a sparse passage, but we learn a lot. Mission is at the core of discipleship: the one called is also sent. Mission demands a trust in God, a belief in the power and possibility of the Word. Mission can radically change, even save, the lives of those we touch in Christ’s name.

It is a great introduction for next weekend’s Diocesan Mission Collection (July 18-19). The ongoing care of our brothers and sisters in Peru and across Latin America is a way in which we, too, are called to mission.

As missionaries, we preach a message of repentance, drive out demons, and cure the sick. We may not do it as the apostles did — carrying a walking stick and anointing with oil, but we too act in Jesus’ name when we feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, defend the innocent and all the other ways we show the loving presence of our God.

After decades of challenge and change, we still have a special relationship with the people of Peru and the greater mission Church in Latin America. We still bring the Good News to those who sometimes have to look hard for it among the demons of poverty, disease, and desperation in their lives.

Through mission we have become, as our Holy Father said here last year, “first friends of the poor.” Please help us continue through your generous support of the Diocesan Mission Collection for Peru and Latin America.



Sincerely Yours in Christ,

Most Reverend John R. Gaydos
Bishop of Jefferson City