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FROM BRAZIL TO BOLIVIA

A Journey of Discovery

Maria Jesús de Souza

Born in Brazil, Maria de Souza discovered the Spiritan Congregation some 15 years ago. She now lives as a lay Spiritan in Bolivia, together with two professed Spiritans, sharing in their community life and in their ministry among the poor on the outskirts of the city of Santa Cruz de la Sierra.

(Trans. T. Hickey, C.S.Sp.)

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Background

In these few words I wish to share with you a little of my personal history, and my life and vocation as a lay missionary, a life given to God over the past 15 years.

I come from a typical Brazilian family, made up of seven members, my father Carloto, my mother Maria Ana, and my four siblings, Terezina, Maria Aparecida, Antonio and José Gregorio. I have a niece, Lorena, and a nephew, Joao Guilherme. My parents were very important in my life and in the lives of my brothers and sisters; this is true especially of my mother who had to take responsibility for all of us in the absence of my father, as he died when we were all very young. My mother brought up our family with firmness and love. She educated us in a life of Christian faith and in our duties to God; she also taught us our responsibilities to ourselves and to others. It was here that my commitment to the Church was born and that I came to know the meaning of a human and Christian vocation.

Discovering the Spiritan Congregation.

My first contact with the Spiritans was in 1991 in the city of Vilhena/Rondonia, in the north of Brazil. At that time I belonged to the religious congregation of the Missionary Servants of the Holy Spirit. I was sent to work in a parish where I met the Spiritans, Fr. Joao Chiuzo and Fr. Gumercindo Pedro de Oliveira. It was my first missionary experience.

As a pastoral team we worked closely together, sharing our different duties in a spirit of fraternity, friendship and co-responsibility. It was here that I really came to know the Spiritan family, its founders, its mission, its charism and spirituality. Their way of being attracted me a lot, the way they lived, the way they did ministry, their relationship with the people and the way they received others. This shared experience was something invaluable for the entire pastoral team, but particularly so for me as it was the beginning of growing friendship with the Congregation.

Caught up in this dynamic parish life, I could never have foreseen the changes that lay ahead of me. In 1993, in my fourth year of temporary vows, after a long period of necessary discernment,

I left religious life and the congregation to which I belonged to live as a layperson. However, I remained on in the same parish and I continued to share the pastoral work of the Spiritans. In 1994 I accepted an invitation to participate in a meeting with the Brazilian Spiritan Provincial Council. Together with another lay Spiritan, Lucia Guimaraes, who is now working in Puerto Rico, we began the initial steps of forming a group of lay Spiritans. After a series of initial meetings the lay Spiritan group began to grow in strength and enthusiasm. Today we form a group involved in a wide variety of ways of living the lay Spiritan vocation.

Toward the end of the 300th anniversary of the founding of the Congregation, the Spiritan Generalate, along with the Province of Brazil, the International Groups of Mexico and Paraguay and the Irish District in Brazil, decided to take on the challenge of opening a new mission in Latin America. Bolivia was chosen for our new commitment and we took on a mission on the periphery of the large city of Santa Cruz de la Sierra. After having shared work for twelve years with the Spiritans in the parish I mentioned above, I was invited by the Spiritan Major Superiors of Latin America to join the team for the new missionary project.

This invitation was like a gift from God and from the Spiritans. I feel that it was a sign of mutual trust, of openness to the present and to the future – both on the part of the Congregation for inviting me to join in this new venture and on my own part for accepting the call to contribute and cooperate in the mission of the Spiritans.

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Living the Spiritan Charism Today

As a lay missionary I feel much joy and contentment sharing the missionary work of my brother Spiritans in this country with all of its cultural diversity, richness and challenges. I live in the same community with two Spiritan priests. Coincidentally, one is Fr. Joao Chiuzo with whom I worked in 1991 and 1992 when I first came to know the Spiritan Congregation. The other priest is Fr. Leonardo de Silva Costa with whom I also worked formerly in Brazil. We all live together in the same house, sharing community life, prayer times, reflection times, recreational activities and pastoral commitments in the parish and in the Archdiocese.

The situation on the outskirts of the city where we live calls out for our Spiritan charism and mission; of this I am certain. It challenges us to welcome the people with patience, openness, compassion and fidelity, but above all with love and devotion.

MARIA JESÚS DE SOUZA

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The most important thing is to be present, which means bringing hope, support, a sense of closeness, friendship and understanding. It also very often entails giving spiritual, social and concrete material help.

After having completed three years in the mission in Bolivia I have renewed my commitment here for three more years. I feel warmly welcomed by the Bolivian people and by my Spiritan confreres. This strengthens me in following Jesus Christ, and in the life and mission that I share with my brothers and sisters.

There is much that I could share about my experiences and my missionary journey but I would like to conclude by simply expressing my gratitude for the invitation to put a little of my personal story in writing. I am certain that there are many who still have to discover the Spiritan family, the richness of our charism and spirituality and the call to share in our mission. I encourage the multiplication of this type of shared missionary experience that brings together the richness of consecrated religious life with that of the lay life.

The challenge is great but God realizes great things when we open ourselves to his call: "Have no fear".