Irish Migration Studies in Latin America
Society for Irish Latin American Studies

From Westmeath to Peru Full Circle: Memoirs of a Westmeath Missionary in Sicuani, Cuzco

By Desmond Kelleher

Heading out of Sicuani to an outlying village up the mountain

Growing up in Kilbeggan, County Westmeath, my only early memory in connection with South America was hearing that a relative of our neighbours had an aunt, a nun, who had gone from Westmeath to a convent in Argentina many years previously. I was also told that there were a number of other people from Westmeath, Longford and Wexford who had migrated to Argentina. It is only in recent times that I have read about a Kilbeggan man named Duffy who also emigrated to Argentina many years ago. But my story relates to the Andean country of Peru.

A chance meeting in Rome

I first heard mention of Peru in Rome in 1962. I was studying theology at the Carmelite International Theologate within a stone's throw of St. Peter's Square. The Vatican II Council convened by Pope John XXIII had brought all the bishops to Rome. Among them was a Carmelite bishop, Nevin Hayes, a native of Chicago and Bishop of the Prelature of Sicuani of the Department of Cuzco in Peru. He spoke to us as a student body and showed us slides of Sicuani. I was impressed, but did not for a moment consider the possibility of going there as a missionary priest. Bishop Hayes belonged to the Chicago Province of Carmelites, whereas I belonged to the Irish Province whose only foreign mission at that time was Rhodesia, present-day Zimbabwe.

I was ordained in July 1963 and returned to Ireland to my first assignment as a secondary school teacher at Terenure College in Dublin. I subsequently discovered that Bishop Hayes had spoken to the Irish Carmelite Provincial requesting help in his mission work in Sicuani. The Provincial then sent out a letter to all the Carmelite houses in Ireland inviting members to volunteer for work in Sicuani, Peru. I jumped at the

chance to work in Peru, together with six other Carmelite priests. For some reason I was more attracted to South America than to Africa. Then one day the Provincial called me aside and told me he would allow me to work in Sicuani. I had assumed that two of us would go, but the Carmelites in Zimbabwe were pleading for more men. The basis on which he allowed me to go was flexible: he said, 'Des, why don't you go for three years and see if you like it?' Little did I realise then that I was to spend thirty years of my life in Peru.

Frank O'Hara, Desmond Kelleher, Ronan Lennon, Paul Graham, Michael Hender and hurlies in Rome, 1962

Lima via New York

I left Ireland for Peru in October 1964 travelling via New York, where I visited my uncle Willie and his family in the Bronx. My father's brother from West Cavan had left his native place for Cobh, County Cork in 1924, without telling his parents or siblings. During the Irish War of Independence (1919-1921), he had been a highly regarded officer. He wrote a letter to his family from Cobh before boarding the ship for the USA, telling them in the letter of his decision, asking their forgiveness for not telling them beforehand as he had feared that it would break their hearts. Several times in the letter he assured them that he would only be away for a time and would return. He never did. Meeting him in the Bronx, I noticed that he had never lost his Cavan accent. I remember meeting other Irish people there on that occasion and hearing them express their anxiety about all the Puerto Ricans who were moving into the Bronx, which had been until then an Irish stronghold!

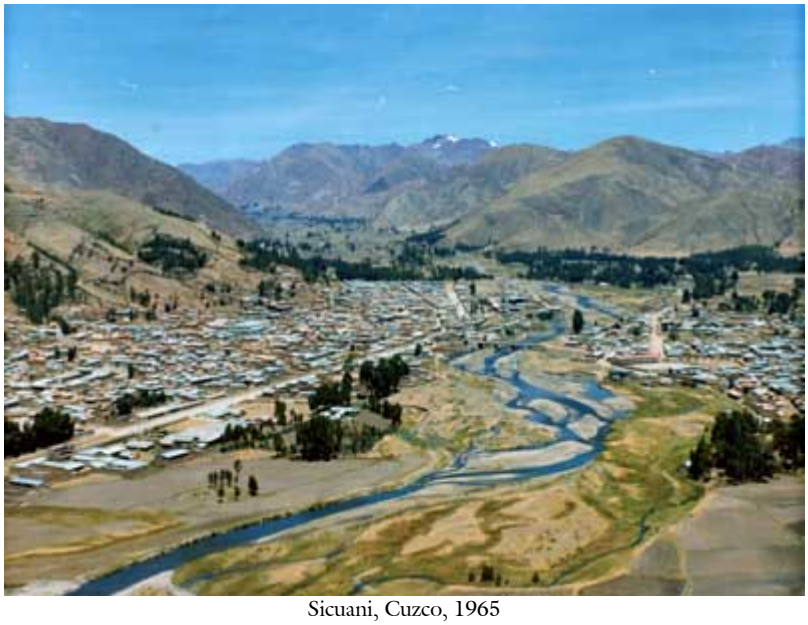
I arrived in Lima on 15 October 1964, the feast day of the Carmelite Saint Teresa of Avila. In Lima, I was received by the American Carmelites who had a parish, and a primary and secondary school in San Antonio, Miraflores, Lima. I immediately commenced an intensive four-month Spanish course in Cieneguilla, twenty kilometres outside Lima. I was in a group of some forty students of Spanish, priests and nuns from various countries, mostly the USA and Canada. We were all in the same boat, grappling with a new language with the frustrations that one experiences early on at not being able to say all that one wants to say. I remember a Peruvian friend saying to me one day early on as I tried to speak to him in my hesitant Spanish, 'Des', he said in Spanish, 'no te preocupes, poco a poco se va lejos' (don't worry, little by little you'll go far).

My destination, Sicuani

Having completed that course, I set out for Sicuani in the Andes, travelling by plane to Cuzco on Saint Patrick's Day 1965. I was now in the 'navel of the world,' as the word 'Cuzco' signifies in Peru's native language Quechua. I downed a few Pisco Sours, Peru's typical drink, in honour of Patrick, and wondered what I was getting myself into as we travelled out the dusty dirt roads towards Sicuani through narrow adobe-lined streets, as darkness fell.

Sicuani, at 3,500 metres above sea level, lies two hours' drive directly south of Cuzco. In those days as a town it had a population of 12,000, but as a parish it had a number of outlying communities called in that area 'parcialidades,' where most of the population was indigenous. These people were referred to as 'campesinos', and were more at home speaking their native language Quechua rather than Spanish. I quickly saw the need for Quechua for myself so within a year I was off to Cochabamba in Bolivia for another four-month intensive course. I found it to be a very different language from Spanish, though not too difficult as regards pronunciation. The structure of the language posed problems however, a language of suffixes that are appended to the root word. With one long word you can say a lot!

I engaged in a marvellous variety of work during my first eight years in Sicuani. I worked in the education of *campesino* leaders; I was chaplain in the local prison and hospital and eventually became more involved in youth work, even helping to start a Boy Scout group. I was always keen on sport and had regularly played football in Ireland and soccer in Rome. I got involved with local soccer teams in Sicuani and played for various teams over the years in spite of the altitude. The manager of our team used to say to me before mass on a Sunday, 'hurry up Father, we have a match after mass!'



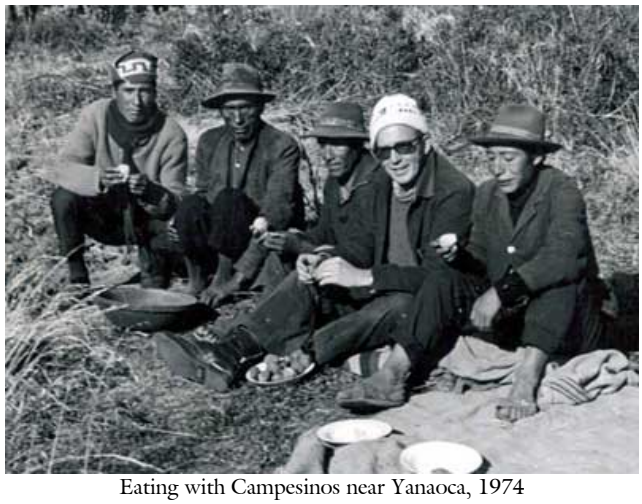
Sicuani, Cuzco, 1965

Church of the South Andes

On a pastoral level I consider myself very fortunate to have worked for seventeen years in that section of the Peruvian church referred to as 'la iglesia del Sur Andino', the Church of the South Andes. Between Dioceses and Prelatures, there were seven jurisdictions where the bishops, pastoral agents, priests, nuns and committed lay people all worked together with great enthusiasm. For years we followed an agreed pastoral plan for that whole region with a view to implementing Vatican II and Medellín. It was a very exciting, challenging, and at times difficult period in the Peruvian church. Because these Bishops were outspoken in defence of the poor, and courageous in denouncing injustices and corruption, they experienced much criticism and constant attacks from both conservative elements of the Church and right-wing politicians. For many it was a prophetic part of the Church, for others who did not want to rock the boat it was looked upon as dangerous, left wing and too involved in what they would call 'politics'.

Then something very tragic happened. Within a few short years, four of the most conspicuous and courageous bishops of that region were all killed in violent accidents. They were the bishops of Cuzco, Ayaviri, Puno and Juli. To this day many people refuse to believe that their deaths were accidental. The truth is that from that point on the vibrant prophetic voice of the Church of the South Andes has been greatly silenced. It is replaced by rigid structures and pastoral guidelines imposed upon the region by bishops installed by Rome, most of them from Opus Dei and Sodalitium Christianae Vitae, the most conservative and reactionary elements in the Catholic Church.

I ministered in various parishes in the Prelature of Sicuani over the seventeen years I spent there. I got more at home with the Quechua language, understood the people more and more, particularly their customs and beliefs, loved their music and dances, their capacity to celebrate life in spite of harsh conditions and their constant struggle against adversity. I admired their willingness to share what little they had. I feel that I grew up there. I did not learn much theology during my four years in Rome. I did learn theology in Peru, in the South Andes.



Eating with Campesinos near Yanaoca, 1974

Life changes

Then my life changed greatly. For a long time I had questioned the whole concept of celibacy in the priesthood. It all came to a head for me in 1981 when I decided to opt out of the ministry. With a heavy heart I left the South Andes and settled in Lima where I commenced work with a Peruvian NGO called Servicios Educativos Rurales (Rural Educational Services), an NGO dedicated to the rural population of Peru, the *campesinos*, the very kind of people I had ministered to previously. Now I would be working with them on a national level, obviously in a different role. This NGO had various areas of work; I began work in the Communications Area where we edited a magazine called '*Andenes*' in order to help the *campesinos* at a national level to be informed on the political, agrarian, social/economic and the cultural and ecclesiastical realities of Peru. I was responsible for a section of the magazine we called Nuestras Costumbres (Our Customs). In that section over the years we published the *campesinos*' own accounts of their customs, their *fiestas*, their agrarian rituals, their poetry, their stories and their legends. We also held annual competitions to invite them to paint and draw the reality in which they were living.

With Eamon de Valera and Fr. Killian Healy in
the Carmelite Theologate, Rome 1961

I remember 1992, the year Spain celebrated what they called the 500th anniversary of the 'discovery' of South America. I think later they changed the wording of 'discovery' to 'el encuentro de dos culturas' (the meeting of two cultures) because of protests from South America against the use of the term 'discovery'. Not that a 'meeting of two cultures' pleased South Americans either, for they saw it more as an invasion or even as a genocide. On that occasion we invited the *campesinos* of Peru to paint or draw what they felt about the arrival of the Spaniards to their country and the consequences for themselves. I could safely say that it was the first time that native Peruvians had been asked to express their opinions on a topic that had such devastating consequences for them over the centuries. And express it they did, portraying graphically

the many forms in which the indigenous population have suffered exploitation and injustices to this very day.

Governments come and go

In the thirty years that I lived in Peru, I saw several governments come and go. When I arrived in Peru in 1964, Fernando Belaúnde Terry was the democratically elected president. Four years later I was back in Ireland on my first holiday back home when one morning after breakfast a fellow Carmelite asked me, 'Des, did you hear, your president had been deported from Peru?' In the early hours of 3 October 1968, a bloodless military coup led by General Juan Velasco Alvarado surrounded the presidential palace. Belaúnde was taken out in his pyjamas and later that day sent on a plane to Buenos Aires. So began twelve years of military dictatorship.

The armed forces have always played a decisive role in Peru's political history. Since 1930 there have been four periods of military rule lasting a total of thirty years. For most of this century the military's political interventions were in support of the right, but during the Velasco government (1968-1975) a new current of reformist nationalism became dominant within the armed forces. The Velasco government implemented a radical programme which marked the first decisive break with the economic model imposed by the Spanish conquest. This involved ending the political domination and economic power of the oligarchy; the modernisation of the Peruvian state and a major expansion of its role in the economy; the search for a more equitable relationship with foreign capital; and major changes in land and property ownership.

Twelve years later, Belaúnde made a comeback when a more moderate General Morales Bermudez moved towards restoring democracy and allowed new elections, permitting Belaúnde to return again to popular acclaim. Belaúnde thus commenced his second term as president in July 1980 in a Peru that differed in fundamental ways from the Peru that he had left abruptly in 1968. The final years of his presidency were marked by the rise of *Sendero Luminoso* (Shining Path) in 1980.

With Carmelite nuns at the
Cieneguilla language institute, 1964

The return to constitutional rule was accompanied by the restoration of formal democratic freedoms but this in itself could not create a democratic society. The government showed no inclination to reform powerful institutions which were suffused with undemocratic practices and a traditional bias towards the rich and powerful. Current affairs programmes on television that were critical of the government had a checkered career, several being removed from the screen by the television companies themselves. During this period the radical subversive group *Sendero Luminoso*, whose ideological roots lay in a fundamentalist version of Maoism, developed their guerrilla war.

By 1984 real income per capita had fallen back to the level of twenty years before. While all but the small elite became poorer, impoverishment was concentrated in the sierra and coastal shanty towns. This has

been a constant reality in Peruvian history. *Sendero Luminoso* believed that the conditions for revolution existed and that the road to communism in Peru lay through 'a prolonged popular war'. Another subversive but less radical group called the Tupac Amaru Movement also initiated their military campaign in this period. The government's initial response to *Sendero* and to the Tupac Amaru Movement was to minimise the guerrilla threat, but their counter-insurgency policy soon hardened as a state of emergency was declared in five provinces, later to be extended to many more, and the infamous island prison El Frontón was reopened to hold *Sendero* suspects. *Sendero* extended their campaign over a much wider area, including the capital Lima. They destroyed pylons causing regular blackouts in the entire city.

We were living in Lima at that time. It was the first time I experienced collective fear in the city in the midst of blackouts, car bombs and selective assassinations. As popular unrest and social upheaval increased, so did government repression. Eventually Belaúnde handed over total responsibility for counter-insurgency to the armed forces chiefs-of-staff. This internal war was to continue until 2000, throughout the governments of Fernando Belaúnde (1980-1985), Alan Garcia (1985-1990) and Alberto Fujimori (1990-2000). More than 69,000 people died or disappeared at the hands of guerrilla groups, paramilitaries and the armed forces during that internal war.

The author with his family in
Bon Aire enroute to Peru, July 2006

A family man

In the midst of all these changes and upheavals my own life continued to change. In 1990 I married a human rights lawyer called Patricia Abozaglo from Lima. We met at my workplace. Our two children Fiona and Patrick were born in Lima, Fiona in 1992 and Patrick in 1994. My work contract was coming to an end in 1995, so we decided to return to Ireland. Initially I was to study for a year in post-graduate development studies in Kimmage Manor, Dublin and at the same time to look around for job options. Fortunately my wife got a job with Tróocaire right away and I got a teaching job in a secondary school in Dublin teaching Spanish, Irish and Religion. We had been in Dublin for four years when we went searching for a house which brought us to our present home in Maynooth, County Kildare, just a forty- minute drive from my birthplace, Kilbeggan, County Westmeath. So indeed I have come full circle. I am back here, from where I set out for Peru some forty years ago. Somewhat wiser I do believe. I am still teaching Spanish which I enjoy greatly. I love introducing people to a new language and opening up to them a whole new world of discovery.

Latin American connections

Since we came back from Peru we have always kept in contact with Peruvians and other Latin Americans who live in Ireland - and there are quite a few. Over the years we have got together for many parties, and now each July we have quite a gathering in Dublin in Terenure College to celebrate Peru's national holiday on 28 July. I suppose it is something like the Westmeath/Longford Association that celebrates their connection with Argentina every year.

Many years ago I visited Argentina and spent a few days in Buenos Aires. I stayed at the Passionist priests' house. I remember at meal time hearing them switch back and forth in their conversation between Spanish and English. There was an elderly priest beside me and when he talked to me in English I could clearly hear his Westmeath accent. He told me that his father - or was it his grandfather - was from Moyvore in Westmeath. Another memory I have with an Argentinean connection is meeting an Argentinean priest in Cuzco years ago. He told me that his parish was in the south of Argentina and that most of his parishioners were of Irish descent. He told me how good they were to him. He invited me to go and visit him and I must say it is one of the regrets I have that I never did get to visit him and meet all those Irish Argentineans and hear their stories. So now you have my story, or at least a good part of it.

Desmond Kelleher