

Celebrating Fifty Years of Joyful, Loving IHM Presence in Peru February 2015

by Sister Mary Elaine Anderson, IHM

Most of us probably have at least one or two vivid memories of celebrating Valentine's Day during our lifetime. As a child I remember the excitement during the week before February 14 when I bought or made valentines for all my classmates and worried about how many valentines I would receive from them. I also recall the feeling of contentment and gratitude on the actual day when I looked at the many valentines that I did receive and saw the smiles of friends as they read my valentine message to them.

Although I am no longer a child, many of those same childhood feelings were present on the most recent Valentine's Day. February 14, 2015, was the day on which we, Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary from Scranton, Pennsylvania, celebrated fifty years of IHM mission in Peru. The planning and the preparations for the actual day began more than eight months ago. It was no easy task for eight Sisters living in five different places in Peru to organize a celebration. One can only imagine the excitement, the concerns and the emotional energy of the Sisters as the time of the celebration drew near.

For those of us living in Peru, the celebration actually began in the first days of February when the three Sisters living in the Andes Mountains arrived in Lima and the eight of us came together to put the finishing touches on the planned activities. The preparations for the celebration were a collaborative effort and a testimony to each Sister's many talents. God has truly blessed our community with artists, dancers, singers, musicians, writers, chefs, organizers and free spirits!

The days preceding the February 14 celebration were joyous ones as we welcomed guests from both the United States and other areas of Peru. Sisters Michael Marie Hartman and Joel Marie Sheehe, who were two of the original four Sisters sent to Peru in 1965, and Sister Mary Martha Gardiner, who was one of the first IHM Sisters to minister to the people in the South Andes, traveled from the US to be present for the festivities. Four members of the current Leadership Team—Sisters Ellen Maroney, Rosemary Goulet, Jean Louise Bachetti, Ellen Carney; two former IHM Presidents—Sisters Anne Munley and Mary Persico, and Susan Denton, a friend of the IHM community, also made the trip from the US to Peru. Five IHM Associates and one pastoral worker from San Felipe Parish, Sicuani, arrived in Lima two days before the celebration and joined us for prayer, meals, music practice and the decoration of the

reception hall. What a wonderful gift to have so many IHM Sisters, Associates and friends fill our convent in Chorrillos with their voices, laughter and loving presence!

In the months prior to the celebration each of us had the opportunity to reflect on the many relationships that we, as well as the Sisters who had gone before us, had formed with the Peruvian people. When we began to create a list of the persons whom we wished to invite to the celebration we were amazed at the large number and the connections that we had sustained throughout the fifty years, especially with certain religious congregations and with people from places where our Sisters had served for long periods of time. It soon became evident that we wanted to not only celebrate our Sisters and their 50 years of joyful, loving service but also thank those who had accompanied us in the mission.

As a symbol of our gratitude we presented a statue of the Immaculate Heart of Mary to the IHMs of Immaculata, Pennsylvania, who have served in Peru for ninety-three years and who graciously welcomed our first Sisters in 1965. Statues also were given to the following: the New York Franciscans who invited us to Lima in 1965 to serve in Holy Name School and with whom we continue to minister in Mateo Pumacahua; the Carmelites from the Pure Heart of Mary Province, Chicago, Illinois, who welcomed us into the Prelature of Sicuani and invited us to serve in their schools in the Lima area; and Monsignor Pedro Bustamante López, bishop of Sicuani, where our Sisters continue the ministry, begun many years ago by some of our first IHMs in Peru, of bringing God's unconditional love to the Andean people.

The IHM charism and the spirit of IHM mission in Peru were beautifully described by Father Miguel Bacigalupo, O. Carm. in his reflection during the Mass. He spoke of our community's joyful loving service, our desire to be among and serve the poor and our willingness to leave behind what is secure and comfortable to go where God is leading us. His words were a confirmation of God's call fifty years ago and a testimony of our IHM response and faithfulness to that call. We Sisters who currently minister in Peru—Jeanne Marie Kearney, Eileen Egan, Ancilla Maloney, Tomasa Fernandez, Dora Vizcarra, Norma Poma, Angela Cerna-Plata and Mary Elaine Anderson—are grateful to our past and present IHM leaders who have continuously supported our Peruvian missions, the Sisters who responded to the call to serve in Peru, and all the Sisters, friends and benefactors who accompany from afar. We pray for God's blessing to continue the good work that was begun by our Sisters, living and deceased, fifty years ago, for the wisdom to recognize God's call in the signs of the time and the courage to respond joyfully and lovingly to that call.

February 14, 2015 has come and gone, but the spirit of the day remains with us. It just may be my favorite memory of all the Valentine Days that I have celebrated so far!