

## Columbus priest has helped Bolivians for more than 50 years

**BY TIM PUET**

*Reporter, Catholic Times*

**A**t a time of life when most pastors have settled into retirement and put the stresses of running a parish behind them, a priest with roots in Columbus leads a community of between 4,000 and 5,000 people in South America and hopes to continue his work there for as long as he can.

Father John Ogurchock, MM, 79, a Maryknoll missionary for 53 years, has spent 45 years in Bolivia, the last 29 as pastor of the Capilla Corazon de Jesus (Spanish for Chapel of the Heart of Jesus) in the city of Santa Cruz.

He has seen his parish, which began as a mission of a larger church, grow from a small congregation to its current size, has expanded the church building and the parish hall, and anticipates more growth as the surrounding city continues to expand.

"Santa Cruz has a million-and-a-half people and grows

by 50,000 every year," said Father Ogurchock's younger brother, Father James Ogurchock, chaplain at Mount Carmel East Hospital in Columbus, who has visited Bolivia 17 times.

"The city has a tropical climate that makes it much different from La Paz, the capital, which is in the western part of the country and is 12,500 feet above sea level. Santa Cruz is in the east and has an elevation of about 1,350 feet. People have been coming down from the mountains to live there in such numbers that it's now the nation's largest city.

"Most of those who leave the mountains are poor and think life has to be better somewhere else, but find that's not the case and end up going to the marketplaces in the city trying to sell items they have handcrafted for whatever they can get.

"They stay in the marketplace all day and live out of town among others who also came from the mountains. These are the people my brother serves in a



**Father John Ogurchock, MM, (center) presents heart monitors from Riverside Methodist Hospital in Columbus to Dr. Juan Carlos Jaradilla of the children's hospital in Santa Cruz, Bolivia. Between the two is Dora Luz Davila, head of a Bolivian organization which buys medicine for the poor**

*Photo courtesy of Father James Ogurchock*

parish that's so big it's not unusual to have 15 or 20 baptisms at a time.

"He is the lifeline for these people, both to the Church and to the health care most of them desperately need because of the conditions in which they live."

In a letter to Catholic Times from Bolivia, Father John Ogurchock said the biggest health problem in that nation is a heart disease

known as chagas, which is transmitted by a small bug called a vinchuca.

The bug lives mostly in roofs made of palm branches, which are common in Bolivia, especially in rural areas. Father Ogurchock said not everyone with chagas has heart problems because the disease can remain dormant in many cases, but in some degree it

*See PRIEST, Page 13*

**PRIEST***continued from Page 11*

affects as many as half the nation's 9 million people.

Most people with chagas can't afford medicine to treat it. A volunteer group known as Davosan raises funds to buy the medicine and distribute it to the poor, who line up before dawn each day to receive it, and to patients in four hospitals, who receive prescriptions from the doctor who attends them, but can't afford to buy the medicine.

"That's the system in Santa Cruz," Father Ogurchock wrote. "The doctor gives the prescription to the patient, not the nurse, and it's up the patient or his family to supply them." His brother said a common saying in Santa Cruz is "It's Davosan or you die."

Both Ogurchocks said particular credit for saving hundreds of lives in Santa Cruz should be given to Dora Luz Davila, the founder of Davosan, and Dr. Arturo Barrientos, a Bolivian native who was a

heart surgeon in Brazil and returned to his native land 10 years ago because of his concern about the spread of chagas.

Barrientos told Davila he would perform surgery for free on poor people who needed it, provided Davosan could obtain funds to pay for the hospital expenses and medications. Through their combined efforts, 345 free surgical procedures have been performed on chagas victims in the past six years.

"I can vouch for his competence," Father John Ogurchock wrote about Barrientos. "Seven years ago, shortly after his arrival in Santa Cruz, he did a quadruple bypass on me." Since then, the doctor has called regularly on the priest, a personal interest Father Ogurchock said Barrientos has in all his patients.

The doctor "could be a multimillionaire in other parts of the world. He's content being a good Samaritan, helping his

neighbor and building up treasures in heaven."

Father Ogurchock, 75, makes the 6,000-mile to visit his brother in Columbus and take a break from his duties each July and August. The two of them have two older sisters, one of them deceased, both of whom

---

*"Credit for saving hundreds of lives in Santa Cruz should be given to Dora Luz Davila and Dr. Arturo Barrientos for their concern about the spread of chagas"*

---

—The Ogurchocks

became members of the Sisters of St. Joseph, based in Cleveland. The family grew up in Akron, but the parents moved to Columbus in 1962.

The brothers work with about 50 people in central Ohio who regularly support the Capilla Corazon de Jesus and Davosan. The Ogurchocks occasionally receive larger gifts, such as the 10 critical-care monitors donated

in 2003 to the children's hospital in Santa Cruz by Riverside Methodist Hospital in Columbus. Doctors at Columbus Mount Carmel East Hospital paid for shipping.

"Gifts like these have an enormous impact in

places like Santa Cruz, where health care is so limited," Father James Ogurchock said.

"I remember one time when I was visiting and a woman brought me a six-month-old child to be baptized. He was suffering from dysentery and diarrhea and dying of dehydration. She said, 'If only we could have antibiotics,' and it broke my heart because providing

antibiotics wouldn't be a question in America."

Bolivia has many untapped natural resources, but is the least-developed nation in South America. "It's a paradox," Father Ogurchock said. "Bolivia is landlocked, can't export things well, but is sitting on one of the world's largest natural gas deposits. To get the gas out of the country, it would have to go through Chile via pipeline, but Bolivia lost its coast to Chile in a war years ago and doesn't want to benefit that nation. So the gas just sits there.

"It also has lots of copper, tin, silver, and oil it could export, but lacks the capital or expertise to get it out."

Father John Ogurchock said he had felt the calling to be a missionary while growing up in Akron.

He was deeply disappointed to learn shortly before his ordination that he had been assigned to stay in the United States and work in fund-raising

and vocations recruitment. But eight years later, he was assigned to Bolivia, where he has lived ever since.

"At 79 years of age, I'll not likely be assigned elsewhere, but I am happy and grateful to God that I can continue my mission work as a priest and serve the needs of the wonderful people of this poorest country in South America," he wrote.

"Also, I am most grateful to the good people of the Diocese of Columbus for their generous support of my mission work and ask God to bless them for their concern for the needs of others while having needs of their own."

Anyone wishing to contribute to Father Ogurchock's mission directly may do so by writing his brother, Father James Ogurchock, 1253 Villa Oaks Court, Gahanna 43230-6795.

Father James Ogurchock also is available to speak about his brother's work. He can be reached by phone at (614) 337-1110.