

MISSION MESSAGE

Scranton IHM Sisters Answer Call to Serve Peru with Courage, Conviction

By Shannon Kowalski
Diocesan Director of Pontifical Mission Societies



When Pope John XXIII called for religious communities to bring their gifts to mission territories, the Scranton IHM Sisters answered with courage and conviction.

What began as a small mission to serve poor children in Lima, Peru, has grown into a decades-long commitment high in the Andes Mountains, where the Sisters continue to walk alongside some of the country's most marginalized communities.

Their work in the remote region of Sicuani has brought education to girls who were once left behind, faith formation to distant parishes, and comfort to the sick and dying.

From 1976 to 1984, two IHM Sisters served in the rural mountain village of Yanoaca in the Diocese of Sicuani.

Sister Joel Marie Sheehy and Sister Mary Martha Gardiner both played a vital pastoral and educational role in an area rarely visited by priests or healthcare professionals. They left in the late 1980s due to widespread terrorism in the country.

In 1992, Bishop Albano Quinn of Sicuani invited the Sisters to return, asking them to serve in a new parish on the city's outskirts, where families were migrating from the Andes in search of better education and job opportunities.

Four Sisters accepted the bishop's invitation - Sister Eileen Egan became Pastoral Administrator of San Felipe Parish and continues to serve in that role today. She was later joined by Sister Ancilla Maloney (2012-2024) and Sister Norma Poma-Arpi (since 2015).

Sicuani, situated 11,500 feet high in the Andes, posed



Children of Sicuani

immediate challenges.

The Sisters noticed that while boys attended high school, girls were largely absent. Mountain communities had no local high schools, and families didn't prioritize girls' education. The Sisters wrote grants and founded the IHM House of Studies, a residence that allowed girls to move to the city to attend school. Many of these students have gone on to earn advanced degrees.

Mass is offered at San Felipe parish by a visiting priest from the Cathedral Parish once a week. That parish also oversees 35 remote mountain communities, often reaching each only once a year.

San Felipe parish is responsible for six mission communities. In one of them, AccoAccoPhalla, the local church had fallen into disrepair. While the Sisters wait for grant approval for reconstruction, locals began making adobe bricks - over 6,000 of them - to prepare for building, hoping to complete the foundation before the October rainy season.

To strengthen Catholic education, Sister Eileen began a Theology Program for religion teachers. Since Peru's agreement with the Vatican allows religion to be taught in schools, Sister Eileen travels across the diocese's four provinces, sometimes 8 hours

away, to lead workshops. These are often conducted in Quechua, the first language of many catechists.

Before volunteering for the IHM mission in Sicuani, Sister Ancilla spent 18 years teaching high school in the Bronx.

In Peru, she took charge of the parish library, which had a collection of books but lacked basic recreational materials like games, coloring books, and puzzles.

Noticing this gap, Sister Ancilla introduced arts and crafts projects, which quickly became a favorite activity among the local children.

Each summer, after visiting home in the U.S., she would return with suitcases full of supplies to bring joy and variety to the children's lives. Holidays became special occasions, marked by visits from St. Nicholas or Santa Claus and Easter egg hunts.

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Every library day started with reading and homework - a lifeline for many children whose homes lacked space or even a table to study. The library became a cherished refuge in the neighborhood.

As two of the few English speakers in the region, Sisters Eileen and Ancilla were often asked to write grants for vital projects.

Besides the new church for AccoAccoPhalla, they helped the Franciscan Sisters launch a residence for elderly individuals who were abandoned, ill, or abused. The local Quechua community donated land, and construction is currently underway.

The IHM Sisters in Sicuani remind us that mission is not a concept, it's a calling lived out through daily acts of love, resilience, and presence.

Whether in a mountain village



Parishioners of San Felipe Parish

without a priest, a dusty library filled with eager children, or a church built brick by handmade brick, their impact is real and enduring.

As we reflect on their ministry, we are invited to ask ourselves: How are we supporting missions today? Whether through prayer, financial support, or simply spreading awareness, we each have a role to play. The mission field may be far away, but our connection to it - and our responsibility toward it - is closer than we think.

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