



In five weeks, Mary Jo and Frank Cuda visited 600 homes in Cochabamba to listen to the people and to make friends.

Text by Morgan J. Vittengl, M.M.
Photos by Eric Wheeler

'Building blocks' in Bolivia

Maryknoll Lay Missioners, a husband and wife team, develop neighborhood associations in Bolivian *barrios*

Late afternoon sunlight cuts dusty amber beams of light through the shadows cast by the peaks of the Andean foothills on the city streets of Cochabamba, Bolivia. Women wearing the white high-crowned hats, shawls and voluminous skirts of the Quechuas, accompanied by their husbands, begin to gather at a home on the outskirts of the city.

"*Imanailla kankichek*," they greet one another as they file into a living room that has been converted into a chair-filled meeting hall. They are a bit nervous and apprehensive as they come together to begin a Marriage Encounter weekend.

This Marriage Encounter is but one phase of a whole series of weekly meetings conducted by Maryknoll Lay Missioners, Frank Cuda and his wife, Mary Jo, that are designed to establish a sense of belonging and mutual concern among people from the various social and economic

groups that make up the population of this third largest city in Bolivia.

According to Frank Cuda, Cochabamba society is "very closed and family-oriented" to the point where one rarely associates with people who are not of the same family, or socio-economic class. The challenge then for Frank and Mary Jo, who joined Maryknoll Father Gordon Fritz at El Cristo Rey parish (35,000 parishioners) three years ago, is to encourage and assist people to exercise their rights and responsibilities regarding the land granted them by the Agrarian Reform of 1953. Before the Reform they had lived as virtual slaves to a handful of wealthy landowners.

As Mary Jo points out, in Cochabamba (which is the heart of the agricultural plain 8000 feet high in the center of Bolivia) the people tend to gather into *barrios* or "neighborhood blocks," the workers in one, the poor in another, the rich in still another. She and Frank canvassed about 600 homes over a five-week period in these *barrios* and eventually 40 couples accepted their invitation to meet to-



One of the problems Mary Jo faces is to bridge the generation gap between Bolivian children and their parents.

A flat tire delays Father Gordon Fritz and the Cudas on their parish visitation.



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gether to discuss mutual problems and explore their possible solutions.

"We asked them to form groups," says Frank, "and this was done according to the neighborhood block from which they came. There are four groups. Overall, our objective is to provide them with a place where they can meet other couples and share some values as well as associate with people not of their own family.

"We give them a chance to talk about the roles of men and women, ways to raise children, attitudes that destroy marriages and attitudes that strengthen them, and how to improve their own lives."

The Cudas are very sanguine and optimistic over their success to date.

They report that one group is promoting a social center and another is seeking ways to improve the lives of youths. A third group of upper class people is engaged in helping the poorer classes to upgrade themselves, to express themselves and their ideas and to feel comfortable. The fourth group is composed of Quechua Indians who already have opened their homes to people who are homeless or in trouble with their own families.

All has not been easy for Mary Jo and Frank. There have been many difficulties to overcome. Yet, despite all, they feel they have been helped the most. "When you first arrive," says Mary Jo, "you are intent on accomplishing something. It is a humbling experience to learn that what is important is not what you accomplish, but what you share." □

There is joy and satisfaction for Frank Cuda in the knowledge that he is helping young Bolivians gain a brighter future.



Father Conneely travels by river to cover his parish which is composed of numerous Bolivian jungle towns.

Text by Dudley P. Conneely, M.M.
Photos by Eric Wheeler

For one. . .and for all

A Maryknoller relates how poverty-stricken people in Bolivia use cooperatives to help one another

It all began one evening while I was sitting on an old burnt log with two Indian rice farmers. A year had passed since my arrival at the small jungle town of Mineros, Bolivia, about 80 kilometers north of the city of Santa Cruz. Most of my time had been spent visiting the 30 small communities of our parish and learning much about life from their impoverished people.

By day we worked quietly side by

side in the fields, clearing land, cutting sugarcane or harvesting rice. By night the people would gather for baptisms, Mass and usually a filmstrip on the life of Christ, or on improving the health, hygiene and agriculture in these jungle communities.

That night as we sat around the fire talking about the work, one farmer asked me if there was any possibility of starting a farm cooperative so that the people of Mineros could unite with the other poor rice farmers of the region and do something to fight against the exploitation with which they lived. All agreed that it was a tremendous