

An unforgettable mission trip to Peru

Father Bernard A. Pfau

(Part 4 of a 5-part series)

The first three articles about the mission trip to Peru described the group of 19 people who traveled to Father Jack Davis' Mission in Chimbote, Peru, in July and August of 2009, the living arrangements while in Chimbote and the extreme poverty we experienced there. This article describes some of the hands-on activities we were involved with while in Chimbote and how that experience affected us.

Each morning after morning prayer and breakfast, we were anxious to see what that day would reveal to us about the people of Peru and how we might be of assistance to Father Jack and his parish. We were fortunate to have a number of interpreters who could accompany us to one of the many different sites in the parish and help us communicate with the people.

Some of us wanted to see the soup kitchens in action, and be there around the noon hour when the local people would come for their food. The cooks reluctantly handed over some of their utensils for distributing the food to us, not quite sure if we should be doing "their" work. I myself got involved in carrying bricks up to the second floor of the Shelter for Battered Women as the bricklayers attempted to expand the facility for additional people. I was not in the best shape, physically, to be doing that type of work, but I know it was deeply appreciated. It amazed me to see how the workers patiently used the primitive tools and equipment available to them for their work. It was a great consolation for me and our mission group to be able to purchase four beds and four mattresses for this shelter, which would provide great relief to some of the battered women and their children seeking shelter from domestic violence.

A number of the women in our group became very involved in visiting some of the homes in the parish and witnessing the poor living conditions of some families we got to know. A number of beds and mattresses were also purchased and delivered to their homes, so they would no longer have to sleep on the ground. At least one house was painted and other furnishings were provided for some of the more needy families.

The parish has a Learning Center, but was in need of tables, chairs and cabinets which were purchased from some of the excess funds from our trip. A number of our group regularly visited the residents at the Parish Center for Alcohol and Drug Addiction, just to visit and talk or play a few in-house games with them.

One of the most exciting events for our group was to be the "booster club" for the parish soccer team. We supplied this team with uniforms they couldn't afford to buy themselves, and we were able to attend one of their games and cheer them on. There are soccer fields all over the city of Chimbote, but only a few of the larger ones have concrete floors and bleachers for the spectators.

In each activity we were able to participate in, we came away feeling blessed to share in some small way our talent and enthusiasm for them. In friendship we had hoped to make their lives a little more bearable, and came away deeply grateful for them sharing their lives with us.

Nicole, one of the college students of the group, was deeply moved by what she experienced in Chimbote and in the poverty she saw with her own eyes. She shared this personal note with us:

“The journey to Chimbote brought about a few changes that I’m still discovering. The extent of the poverty seen in Chimbote stays in your mind and influences what you buy. It makes you ask the questions, ‘Do I really need this? What else could this money buy: shoes, a bed, mattress, breakfast?’ It also makes you feel grateful for what you have and slightly guilty for how much you have. There were also religious changes. I feel that everyone felt closer to God while we were in Peru. Coming back to the States, I felt more attentive at Mass and more content. I think there’s a deeper understanding in all of us because of our mission trip.”

Father Bernard A. Pfau is pastor of St. John the Evangelist Catholic Church in New Rockford. To learn more about Father Jack Davis’ Mission and view pictures of the programs and people in Chimbote, visit the mission’s Web site at www.losamigos-chimbote.org.