



Holy Cross District of Peru

Yancana Huasy Project



THE EYES

A Doctor's Visit to Canto Grande

by Dr. Joseph Paul Dutkowsky, MD

Part One

You always start with the eyes. Are they attentive; do they respond to your face and the movements about the room? Is the brain behind the eyes taking in all that happens about the little person? Then the hands. How do the fingers work? Are they supple and free; are the movements deliberate? Then the feet...and so it goes.

The child's mother sits quietly but attentively. Hoping for a miracle and trying to find some of the joy she remembers awaiting the birth of this child. Her dreams of a perfect baby, who once lived in her womb, dashed by the reality of the handicapped child in front of her. It is only maternal love that keeps her from running out of the room and escaping the truth that's part of those eyes, hands, and feet. This could be in New York or Boston or some small town, but today it is in Canto Grande, in San Juan de Lurigancho, a district of 900,000 people in Lima, Peru.



Dr. Dutkowsky

Canto Grande is made up of small, homemade buildings pressed against each other on the edge of roads without names, pavement, or signs. Traffic laws are suggestions at best. Small cars and motorcycle buggies cut each other off in a motored ballet without rules. The poverty is unlike anything experienced in the developed world. And yet as one goes up the hill the poverty becomes more intense (I know no better word). The homes become sheds at best. Each day finds new sheds made out of anything one can scrounge and support against a cutout in the rock and dirt hillside. In June the sky is never blue and the sun

never shines as the air is filled with a low-lying haze and air pollution. I will not see the stars in a week. But mostly there are dogs and children and dust. Nothing grows without irrigation and rain is not to be expected. A layer of dust covers every sign, roof, and your eyelids when you're outside for more than an hour.

I am a pediatric orthopaedic surgeon specializing in the care of children with disabilities. In this week I will have children on my lap with cerebral palsy, spina bifida, muscular dystrophy, Down Syndrome, and the list goes on. I have come at the invitation of the Holy Cross Fathers to see if I may assist in the care of handicapped children in this barrio that they call home. I am privileged to work beside some incredible people who work at a special place called Yancana Huasy, where people with disabilities are loved and respected as fellow children of God and are given a chance to work and create.

But in this culture, as in our own, there is often a sense of shame in having a handicapped child. So I join some workers of Yancana Huasy making house calls across Canto Grande. I walk the streets across this endless barrio, coating my shoes, shirt, and pants in dust. No one turns us away when we knock on their door. They bring the children out into the main room and I examine them. Through an interpreter I try to find ways to compliment them on the care of their child and try to make suggestions to help. As in my clinic at home, every parent wants to know if their child will walk.

Soon it became clear to me that cerebral palsy, spina bifida, and Down syndrome look almost identical in Peru as in upstate New York. Only here the hair is nearly black, the skin is coffee colored and the eyes are a beautiful dark brown. As I walked the streets dodging dogs, smiling to children, and breathing the dust that is becoming caked on my clothes I suddenly found myself feeling



very much at home. At one point I stopped, looked around and had to remind myself that I really didn't live or work here. It astounded me that in less than four days I felt as though these people, whom I had never met, were my colleagues and coworkers and that I belonged in this place. Given that this was their home and they did this day in and day out, I could only attribute the feeling to the openness and generosity of spirit that these workers freely gave me.

After working several days I took one afternoon and visited downtown Lima. Here the streets are named and lined, and the sidewalks are clean with painted curb cuts for wheelchair travelers. A few blocks from the main basilica was my destination, the monastery of Santo Domingo. Upon entering I was met with the sound of beautiful music as I came upon the main chapel. I continued on past a Spanish style courtyard with a rose garden surrounding a central fountain. The sides of the courtyard were lined with hand made tiles that predated the pilgrims landing at Plymouth. Down one further hallway and I stood before the small chapel. There on the floor was the grave of St. Martin de Porres.

Four decades earlier I had chosen this newest of saints for my Confirmation. This bastard son of a Spanish nobleman and a native slave lived in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, but was only canonized by John XXIII in 1962. He was a humble man who took the vows of a Dominican brother and is always pictured with a broom in his hand. Yet God blessed him with the gift of healing and many people came to this place to receive his care and ministry. His infirmary was this very chapel in which I stood and where he lies to this day.

As I knelt down to touch his grave marker I was overcome by an emotional burst that I did not expect. Never when I chose his name for my Confirmation did this small town boy ever expect to

be a doctor...much less to travel to Lima, Peru. Outside of the chapel were two murals depicting the miracles that led to his canonization. One painting was of a shocked surgeon leaning over a boy who was to have his crushed foot amputated only to see it healed. I could relate to the face of the surgeon all dressed and prepared to operate. I thanked the Holy Spirit that he had graced me with the opportunity to share with my saint in taking care of the children of this place before visiting where

been burned to the ground. In the windy, cool, damp mist that Sunday morning it was standing room only. I noticed that every Mass was well attended with an active music ministry. The lay people were not a superstitious passive audience, but a spiritually and cognitively attentive and involved congregation.

At each church there were side rooms which were designed as a basic health clinic. The Holy Cross Fathers and Sisters got it exactly right. Instead of building a large hospital in the center of Canto Grande, they have focused their energy and resources in church

separate cross for those with Down syndrome or spina bifida, and no separate cross for the poor. When Jesus was lifted on the cross he took upon himself all the sin, pain, anxiety, and tears of all people for all time. It is a mystery I do not understand but know without doubt to be true.

No child comes into this world thinking they're handicapped. It is something we must teach them. Likewise, no child knows that they

YANCANA HUASY



Yancana Huasy, meaning 'House of Work' in the Quechua language of Peru, was founded by Holy Cross in 1981 as one of the first schools among the poor in Lima for children and young adults with severe physical and mental disabilities. Located in one of the most impoverished neighborhoods of the city, the school offers a comprehensive program that includes educational and basic living skills, health services, physical and occupational therapy, and vocational training. Yancana Huasy also promotes the dignity and rights of those who are challenged, and advocates their full integration in all aspects of Peruvian society. The school is a ministry of Holy Cross's Lord of Hope Parish.

he worked, prayed, and lived out his calling.

Every evening I attended Mass. One of the great joys of the liturgy is that even if you don't understand the language you can participate in the sacred rite. I attended Mass in churches with roofs that were permanent, temporary, and one with no roof at all. That day we traveled by bus through sections of the barrio called "the mouth of the devil" to the "hand of God". The church was a brick shell that was being erected in the place where the previous church had

community based healthcare. There will be times that an individual will need extended care in a hospital but clearly the vast majority of the population can be cared for medically within their local area in the shadow of the church that nourishes them spiritually and sacramentally. It brings a tangible reality in the poverty of the barrio to the Holy Cross motto, "The Cross, Our Only Hope."

I'm thankful that I worship in a church where there is no requirement of physical health, intellectual capability, or financial status to receive the sacraments. For there is no separate cross for people with cerebral palsy, no

are poor until we show it to them. They are not born with the hopelessness that comes from crushing poverty or the anger that often emerges from a sense of being trapped. We must teach them about injustice. Yet is it possible that through love and sacrifice and touch that one can unlearn hopelessness, despair, and disability?

I think St. Martin understood this nearly four centuries ago as he walked in the dust among the children and dogs of Lima. I am just

one person who worked for less than one week in this place of deep poverty. But I was there long enough to be a witness to the incredible work of the Holy Cross Fathers, Brothers, and Sisters and the growing number of indigent lay people that are taking their place in church, education, and healthcare leadership.

I found in the people of Canto Grande a sense of disquiet that maybe the despair wasn't so deep or the situation for themselves and their children without hope. It starts as confusion as the rock-wall reality of poverty that they have been taught to accept appears to have a few cracks. It is a dangerous dream of the possibility that their presence and willingness to invest in their community might indeed make a difference in their lives. It's a candle that flickers but now it's lit. You won't hear it in their conversations or find it written on their walls.

But you can see it in their eyes.

Dr. Joseph Dutkowsky is a pediatric surgeon from Cooperstown, New York. He first visited Peru after learning of Holy Cross' work in Canto Grande through a Mission Appeal visit to his parish by Fr. John Phalen, C.S.C. Dr. Dutkowsky spent his time in Peru attending to the medical needs of the physically and mentally challenged children of the parish.



The Yancana Huasy School



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