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After spending the summer of 2008 in Cusco, Peru, I was eager to return to the Andes. The distinct cultures and languages I encountered there had piqued my interest, not to mention I had developed a nostalgic longing for the sights, smells, and tastes of that region. But my desire to return went beyond wistful reminiscence. Ever since I started learning Quechua, I wanted to deepen my knowledge of the Andean indigenous experience. Not only is Bolivia identified as the “most indigenous” South American country; it also plays a firecracker role among the Latin American Left and has a fascinating history of revolutionary activity and social movements. Additionally, I had been studying CEBs (base ecclesial communities) in a theology class and was intrigued by their tradition of community building and action in Latin America. With the object of studying these, I applied for an “Experiencing the World” fellowship. Meanwhile, a friend recommended to me the Maryknoll Lay Missioners working in Cochabamba, and I was accepted as a short-term volunteer.

When I arrived, I encountered many good things: a strong community of both Bolivians and Maryknollers, a neighborhood well suited to my interests, and of course the golden mountains that I had been missing. Yet there were challenges that affected the nature of my research. To my disappointment, I found that base ecclesial community activity in Cochabamba is not as strong as it once was. The Maryknoll priests I stayed with did not work frequently with CEBs, so getting exposed to their activity was sometimes difficult. I was finally able to connect with some local base communities, but only through a rather distant reference. This meant that I didn’t know the members whose

meeting I attended, and couldn't enrich my research through a familiarity with their personal and social lives.

Fortunately, there was plenty of other material to make up for the loss. I soon became familiar with the ubiquitous OTBs (*organizaciones territoriales de base*.) These are neighborhood groups funded by the Bolivian government to carry out projects according to what they deem necessary at their weekly meetings. They are a vital part of Bolivian political and social life; in fact, a *barrio* must have an OTB in order to be recognized by the government. Since these associations serve a purpose similar to CEBs, albeit on a secular scale, much of my time went toward studying them as well. I got the chance to attend a meeting of our *barrio's* OTB directors and observe as they discussed issues such as potable water and paving the roads. I held an interview with Vicente Cañas, the social outreach branch of our local parish, and learned how the Church accompanies the OTBs by offering everything from research and legal advice to youth groups and low-cost health services. Under the current administration, the Latin American Church's contributions to the sociopolitical realm are restricted, due to its frequent association with corruption and staunch loyalty to the wealthy. Faith-based organizations like Maryknoll and Vicente Cañas are working to prove these stereotypes wrong through their commitment to the community.

Related to my research was my curiosity in what political and cultural dynamics would be like in a country where the majority is an ethnic group that's been marginalized for centuries. I wanted to observe what progress had been made and what problems remained. So, my placement in the Maryknoll program, in a predominantly indigenous area of the city, was well chosen. The opportunity to share a glass of *chicha* with my

neighbors, attend Mass in Quechua and Spanish, and attend community meetings all contributed to an increased understanding of the cultures I encountered. Meanwhile the bonds of respect between the Maryknollers and their neighbors demonstrated the program's great regard for the "host" culture rather than a paternalistic attitude toward service. I was living in a barrio of migrants who had recently moved to Cochabamba from the campo. This meant that all our work in the area was still on a very grassroots, formative level. While this could be frustrating, it was also exciting, in a sense, to be witnessing the beginning of change. One of my favorite memories is attending the very first meeting of our neighborhood's women's group. The women of our barrio wanted to establish solidarity and fellowship among themselves, which can counter the culture of machismo and abuse they often face. Observing this small movement at its beginning left me with a great feeling of hope for its future.

My six weeks in Bolivia were, without a doubt, a transformative experience. It went beyond a greater cognitive understanding of the politics and culture, reaching as far as the personal level. I remember the initial feeling of being overwhelmed by the poverty and sense of desolation around our dusty barrio the first day I arrived, even though I had thought I'd be prepared. As I got more accustomed to life in the barrio, this dramatic feeling changed to a calmer attitude, as I tried to observe my surroundings without demonizing or glorifying them. But the most lasting experience for me was a certain "opening of the heart" that I experienced in my everyday encounters and relationships. I learned that I could feel very deeply the raw emotional response to suffering that one sometimes fears is lost to desensitization. Gradually I learned to be more open with those around me, not to be afraid to get my emotions involved, even though it might cause me

pain later. I came back with a greater appreciation of community, after having seen it lived by my Bolivian neighbors in a way I rarely see in the U.S. These things have stayed with me, and I hope I'll be able to integrate them into my life in the U.S. as well as wherever I am in the future.