

**October 26 - 30th Sunday in Ordinary Time**  
*Prepared by Fr. Tom Henehan, MM, Cochabamba, Bolivia*

Exodus 22:20-26 • Psalms 18:2-3, 3-4, 47, 51 • 1st Thessalonians 1:5-10 • Matthew 22:34-40

Bolivia is one of the world's richest countries in terms of natural resources with vast reserves of minerals including tin, silver and gold. In recent decades extensive fields of oil and natural gas have been discovered. And yet Bolivia is listed as the poorest country in South America, despite having more than sufficient resources to respond to the needs of the millions who have been excluded from the income generated by these resources.

The history of Bolivia has been marked by decades of uncontrolled exploitation by world powers, both economic and political. But when there is a clamor from the poor that leads them to struggle to change the current system, it has often been met with resistance by those few who benefit from the system. Unfortunately those few often find allies among the world economic and political powers.

In the last century the U.S. played a major role in Bolivia. Aymara Indians of my community tell me that they see the U.S. government as being a "patron" (the image of a large patronizing, powerful land owner) as opposed to being a "partner" in their struggle for a decent life. The image many have of the U.S. government is reinforced by the U.S.'s harboring of Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada, Bolivia's former president who resigned and fled in 2003 after a clash between protesters and the military left dozens dead and hundreds wounded. Victims' lawyers "have argued that then-president Lozada controlled the military, and ordered troops to quell the protesters, so he bears liability for their actions." (ABC News) According to local newspapers, after fleeing to the United States, Sanchez de Lozada sold his interests in one of his mining ventures for \$200 million.

When church folks begin to denounce the injustice in the country we are accused as meddling in politics. We are told that we should go back to the sacristy where we belong. Yet the very God in whom we believe teaches two fundamental dimensions of our faith: to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind; and to love our neighbor as ourselves.

Unless we understand these two fundamental dimensions of our faith, we cannot understand the first reading. If we want to keep only one of these dimensions then we lose both. People who seek God without any concern for their neighbor's interests will not find the God of the Scriptures. The God of the Scriptures is a God who hears the cry of the poor and responds out of compassion. The second reading tells us that believing in the "living and true God" leads us to be compassionate. Feeling the suffering of the poor leads us to an encounter with God.

The flight of the poor to foreign lands is a world reality which does not escape the people of Bolivia. The only alternative many of the poor majority see to escape the violence of poverty is to leave the country and migrate to Brazil, Spain, or the U.S. It is within this context that we are challenged by the words of Exodus in the first reading. "You shall not molest or oppress an alien, for you were once aliens yourselves in the land of Egypt. You shall not wrong any widow or orphan." The aliens, widows and the orphans are among those who are isolated from the community. By being isolated they lose their collective identity, their culture. Those who fail to incorporate them into the community will in turn be isolated and return to the state of being aliens, widows and orphans. "My wrath will flare up... then your own wives will be widows, and your children orphans."

The Hebrew way of speaking establishes an equation between “yourself” and “your family.” Loving our neighbors as ourselves means loving them as if they were members of our family – as if they were our own. Scripture calls nationalistic people to welcome aliens as if they belonged to our own household. As theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez remarks in *Sharing the Word through the Liturgical Year*, those who have no place to sleep must be loved as if they were members of our family.

Here in Bolivia within the Andean culture the sharing of drink and food (*ajtapi*) and the communal sharing in the work load (*min'ka*) are mechanisms of socializing and integration. Through the very act of sharing with one's neighbor, one comes into communion with the other and is integrated into the wider community. On the contrary, selfishness leads to isolation that in turn excludes one from the collective identity of the wider community. This experience helps us to better understand the profound meaning of today's readings and of the Eucharist that we celebrate. By sharing with us His body and blood Jesus not only enters into our personal reality but also unites us with all of humanity. We take on a collective identity that we refer to as the “Mystical Body” or “People of God” and we make ours the message of the collective mission that Jesus calls the “Reign of God.” The latter is simply described as a way of life that reflects the two fundamental dimensions of our faith: to love God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind and to love your neighbor as yourself.

The struggle of humanity is not only to satisfy the basic needs but also to generate and form a conscience that demands the just distribution of the world's resources. This in turn brings humanity to discover and celebrate the spiritual wealth within. It urges humanity to share that wealth by means of its struggle for solidarity and justice developing social projects that serve as alternatives to the self-satisfying current world economic system.

This Sunday's readings invite us to be active agents of communion and solidarity in the midst of a world reality that generates aliens, widows and orphans – people isolated from the world community and from the wealth of humanity, rather than creating partners to overcome isolation. It is in this quest for communion with others, and in sharing our spiritual and material wealth, that we enter into communion with God. It is the basis to rethink our moral and ethical commitment within the world order.

In this election year the world's aliens, widows and orphans look to the new president of the United States as a partner in their struggle for a better life, one marked with inclusion, hope and dignity. The challenge is indeed serious and is ours to meet.

**For more information:** Read more about the global impact of U.S. political and economic decisions in “Loving our neighbor in a shrinking world.” Through this resource, Maryknoll missionaries encourage voters in the 2008 elections to scrutinize candidates' policy proposals through the lens of those who, both in the U.S. and overseas, lack basic necessities, endure the scourge of racism, live with gender-based discrimination or feel the immediate impact of climate change. [Email](mailto:ogc@maryknoll.org) (ogc@maryknoll.org) for a copy, or find the election guide here: [www.maryknollogc.org/2008elections/index.htm](http://www.maryknollogc.org/2008elections/index.htm)

Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns: *Peace, Social Justice & Integrity of Creation*  
P.O. Box 29132 Washington, D.C. 20017  
phone: (202)832-1780 fax: (202)832-5195  
[ogc@maryknoll.org](mailto:ogc@maryknoll.org) [www.maryknollogc.org](http://www.maryknollogc.org)