



Each Sunday, there are nearly twenty Masses in The Virgin of Nazareth Parish, founded by the Jesuits more than 30 years ago in El Agustino, a downtrodden former squatters' settlement in Lima, Peru.

A Parish for the People

In 1968, Jesuits founded Parroquia La Virgen de Nazaret, Virgin of Nazareth Parish, in El Agustino, a poverty-stricken squatters' settlement on the east side of Lima. This is the story of that parish. But it's not just the story of a parish. It's a story of people. People like Fr. Frank Chamberlain, SJ, a Chicago native and Loyola Academy graduate, who's spent nearly thirty years serving at the parish. And it's a story of the people in the parish. Each of the 130,000 folks living in the parish—the poorest of the poor—has his or her own story. This is the story of a parish bringing those people together and helping them make their lives better.

story by George Kearney : photos by Raul Mendez

WEBSTER'S New College Dictionary defines a parish as "An administrative part of a diocese that has its own church, as in the Anglican, Roman Catholic, and some other Churches."

Webster's effort is a woefully inadequate description of the Virgin of Nazareth, a sprawling parish founded by the Jesuits more than three decades ago in El Agustino, a downtrodden district of Lima. "This parish is different," says Fr. Frank Chamberlain, SJ, who was first assigned to Peru in 1963. "The relationship between the parish and the people here is unique. The parish is always in extremely close contact with the daily lives and problems of the people."

Fr. Chamberlain suspects the dynamic relation-

ship between parish and people began as little more than an accident of history. Sixty years ago, in the mid 1940s, squatters first began to filter into the dusty, hilly district on the east side of Lima known as El Agustino. They built small homes on the hillsides ringing a verdant farmland. No one told them to leave and they were eventually joined by more squatters. Over time, the land on the hillsides filled up and the squatters began to move into the farmland. By the mid 60s, all the farmland had been chewed up by the ever expanding mass of hand-built hovels and homes. The result was a modern-day slum. There was no water, no electricity, no sewers, and no land to farm. There weren't streets, just dark alleys. There was hunger, disease, and despair.

People had come to El Agustino in search of places, however small, they could call home. Many of them had found those places. They'd also found that life there was virtually intolerable. Cries soon went up for urban renewal. The government of General Juan Velazquez responded to the demands of the city's poor and instituted a sweeping renewal program.

The cries coming from El Agustino also attracted the attention of the Jesuits in Peru, many of whom had come to the country from the Chicago Province in the early 60s. The Jesuits, since they were founded in 1540, have sought to go where the need is greatest. The need in El Agustino was obviously great, so, in 1968, just as General Velazquez's renewal process was getting underway, the Jesuits opened the parish.

The urban renewal ultimately produced positive results, but the process was tumultuous for El Agustino's residents. To make room for streets, sewers, sidewalks, and electrical infrastructure, 30 to 35% of the population had to leave. The government wanted to relocate those folks to the southern end of the city, far from the schools their children attended and the jobs many of the adults worked in a large local market. Those who couldn't stay in the neighborhood were faced with the prospect of losing both their homes and their livelihoods.

The Jesuit priests who founded the parish became intimately involved in the relocation process. Jesuit priests helped negotiate many of the arrangements that led to the implementation of the renewal process. They accompanied residents of El Agustino to meetings with government representatives and occasionally protested government decisions with residents of the neighborhood.

The thoughtful and consistent service offered by the Jesuits earned the trust of the people and earned the new parish a place in the hearts of most of El Agustino's residents. In addition to Fr. Chamberlain,

Chicago Province Jesuits have played a central role in helping to build the parish. Fr. John Ross Sima, SJ, served there for more than 15 years, and Fr. Daniel Hartnett, SJ, spent ten years of his life serving in the parish. The work of these two Jesuits and their colleagues laid the foundation for the parish as it exists today; a dynamic partnership between parish and people.

A cooperative model

Years ago, Fr. Chamberlain says, the Jesuits realized they alone would never be able to solve all the problems facing the people in El Agustino. They knew they'd never be able to serve every person in the community. Together they had just a few hands. Yet they faced a mountain of problems.

Since the parish's earliest days, the Jesuits have used it not just as a means to serve people, not just as a location for liturgies, but as a tool to empower the people of El Agustino to make their lives better. The Jesuits know they cannot do this work alone. They can succeed only by partnering with the people in parishes.

There are countless examples of such empowerment. One particularly moving example started in the 1970s when a group of women came to the parish and said they were having a hard time feeding their families. "They weren't coming to the parish to ask for money," Fr. Chamberlain says. "They were coming to us with an idea. See, at that time—and still today—probably 50% of the population here is either unemployed or underemployed. There are not a lot of genuine work opportunities here. So you have people doing whatever they can to get by. En-

Life for children in El Agustino is hard. Many leave school to work and support their families. The parish has recently created a number of initiatives designed to help kids finish school and to prepare them to be community leaders.



Fr. Chamberlain (obscured by the cross), participating in the Way of the Cross on Good Friday, has served in the parish for more than 30 years.



tire families sometimes end up having to work. This destroys family life. And here the job of cooking usually falls to women, but the women were working. So a number of them came to us and said they were thinking of banding together. They would buy food together; that would cut costs. They would also share the cooking duties; that would allow them to continue to work, but would afford them the opportunities to continue be with their families.”

“It was a great idea,” Fr. Chamberlain says. The Jesuits listened to the women and supported their efforts. In 1979, the women opened two communal kitchens. They split the cost of food and took turns cooking. The idea worked. Today there are 4,500 communal kitchens in Lima, 45 of them in the parish. Most kitchens feed not only those who have contributed food and energy, but also the sick and elderly who cannot feed themselves. The Jesuits have long since handed over control of the kitchens to the Lima Federation of Kitchens. But Jesuits in the parish have always maintained close ties with the kitchens. In fact, two of the presidents of the Federation have come from the parish.

Building on the success of the kitchens, the Jesuits teamed with a group of women to start a communal bank. This program provides small amounts of capital to individuals hoping to start small businesses or income generating activities. The loan, plus a bit of interest, must be repaid in four months. Half of the interest is returned to the person who originally took out the loan to start a savings account. Today there

are 80 communal banks. More than 1,800 women participate in the program.

The parish also helped start an organization aimed at reducing and eventually eliminating domestic violence. The first step, Fr. Chamberlain says, is getting women to talk about the abuse. The parish helped start a number of shelters before handing the entire initiative over to a group of lay leaders.

The parish today

Today, The Virgin of Nazareth Parish is thriving. Money is never abundant. Problems always are. The people of the parish still face many of the economic and social ills that have plagued them for decades. 130,000 people live in the parish, many of them in extreme poverty. There are only four priests working full-time at the parish. But the parish is thriving.

How?

The answer is simple. Success at the parish isn't defined by the size of the burse or the Sunday collection. It's defined by how many people living in the parish are able to live dignified lives. It's defined by the freedom that comes from an awareness of God's presence in one's life. And it's defined by a thirst for social justice, by a desire to help others improve the quality of their lives.

The parish is thriving because it continues to inspire its members to believe that they are loved by God, that life can be better. It's thriving because people are working and praying to make those beliefs a reality. In recent years, having handed off the com-



A mother and child adorn a shrine in one of El Agustino's alleyways.

munal kitchens and banks, the parish began to reach out not just to adults but also to young people. Such a move, Fr. Chamberlain says, was a no-brainer. The goal of all the parish's work is to improve life in El Agustino, and more specifically to equip people in the neighborhood to make their lives better. The only way to improve things over the long term is to empower the young to bring about the changes.

Fr. Chamberlain says it's critical that young people know they have the power to chart the course of their lives and to bring about change, even in difficult social and economic situations. In an effort to form its young people to be leaders, the parish has created a variety of youth formation programs designed to prepare them for just such weighty tasks.

There are two *Casas del Nino*, or Houses for Children. On the surface, the purpose of these houses seems fairly straightforward: to help grammar school children keep up with their school work. But there's more to it than that, according to Fr. Chamberlain. "We've also developed programs that help these kids relate to one another in a healthy, non-violent way. There's a lot of violence around here. Teaching kids early on about healthy relationships seems like the best possible preventive solution." 600 students currently participate in the program. Hundreds more participate in a program called *Exploradores de Cristo*, which was designed for students between the ages of 11 and 16 who have already made their first communion.

Another new initiative, the Martin Luther King

Association, has helped young people, mostly young men, transition out of street gangs. In recent years, violent street gangs have become increasingly prevalent in El Agustino. The Jesuits sensed a need amongst the young men in the city and responded. Already more than 100 members have begun the transition out of gangs, away from violence, and away from substance abuse.

Fr. Chamberlain served as pastor of the parish from 2000 to April, 2005. In that time, the parish initiated a formation program for people between the ages of 17 and 25. So far, Fr. Chamberlain says, it's been successful. "There are a good number of people who have been bitten by the bug to act in the public and civic area of life in El Agustino." Fr. Chamberlain believes the significance of such work cannot be overstated. "If we are ever going to build a solid democratic life in this country," he says, "the people of Peru are going to have to become involved in civic life."

Parish priests don't usually talk about fostering civic involvement and democracy. That's usually the province of government leaders and would-be politicians. A democracy, however, is a government exercised directly by the people or through elected representatives. Frank Chamberlain and his Jesuit counterparts at El Agustino have, over the last 37 years, listened to the needs of the people they serve. And they've responded. Though they've never been elected, the Jesuits at The Virgin of Nazareth have created something like a democratic parish.

A parish for the people. ■

Contributions

to any of The Virgin of Nazareth's many social initiatives are welcome. Fr. Chamberlain reports that the newer youth initiatives are particularly in need of funds. If you're interested in helping the youth of El Agustino create a better, more just, and more humane Peru, please visit our website, www.jesuits-chi.org or use the enclosed envelope.