



Fe y Alegria Educates Children Who Live  
**Where the Streets  
Have No Name** *by Annie DiMattina*

Fe y Alegria is a network of schools—started in 1955 by a Jesuit priest—dedicated to providing quality education to students in poor rural areas and slums across South America and several other Spanish-speaking countries. Fe y Alegria schools are currently operating in 16 countries with continued expansion plans underway.

**INTERNATIONAL NETWORK OF SCHOOLS FOUNDED BY A JESUIT BRINGS “FAITH AND JOY” TO CHILDREN AT THE MARGINS**

**I**TALO QUISPE never took his studies at Fe y Alegria seriously. Why should he? He comes from an extremely poor farming family, in the off-season he works as an itinerant carpenter, and he knew his family could never afford to send him to college. He was destined to become a poor farmer like his father and grandfather before him. Fortunately, the teachers and administrators at Fe y Alegria believed in Italo, as they do with all their students. They were able to get him interested and involved in a local science fair. He spent weeks preparing his entry and

his hard work paid off. Not only did he take home first place at the local science fair, he also went on to win first place at the regional science fair and moved on to the national science fair. The national science fair in Peru is a very intense competition, with a majority of schools in Peru participating and many schools dedicating a lot of resources to projects. Often, teachers do much of the work along with students. Italo, standing alone behind his own work, won the national science fair, and became the embodiment of the name Fe y Alegria, which means “faith and joy.”

## From the Beginning

"Italo is only one of thousands of students who attend a Fe y Alegria school in a vast network of such schools," comments Fr. Jim O'Leary, SJ, the director of Italo's school in Jaen, Peru, as well as the coordinator of the jungle area network that includes five schools. The Fe y Alegria network reaches across 16 countries in Central and South America and into other Spanish-speaking countries such as Spain and the Dominican Republic. Fe y Alegria began in 1955 as the vision of Fr. Jose Maria Velaz, SJ, who wanted to create a school that could educate the children living in the slums of Caracas, Venezuela. The first school was born when a house was donated by a man named Abraham Reyes who had heard about Fr. Velaz's vision. Abraham and his wife had built the house with their bare hands. Donating their home was an act of great generosity that helped stimulate Fe y Alegria and launch a tradition of generosity towards the initiative.

In 1964, Fe y Alegria expanded to Ecuador; new schools followed quickly in Peru and Bolivia in 1966. The Fe y Alegria network grew rapidly and often sprouted up in unlikely places: under a tree, in shacks, in garbage dumps, or in any neglected space. Fe y Alegria has come full circle with the most recent school opening in Chile, Fr. Velaz's country of birth, in 2005.

The network concentrates its schools in poor city slums and rural areas. There's a famous saying about the schools that accurately describes the demographic that the network aims to educate: "Fe y Alegria begins where the asphalt ends, where there is no piped water, where the city loses its name." Fr. Velaz strongly believed that it shouldn't be "a poor education for the poor" but that it must be "the best education for the poor," an education that caters to the complete person.

**A**lthough the actual school is the main focus of Fe y Alegria, it serves as much more in most communities. Formal pre-school through high school programs are offered, as well as technical education programs with a focus on agriculture, commercial, and industrial specializations. Radio education is another way Fe y Alegria reaches out to the community; the broadcasts include literacy training, adult education programs, and technical training. Alternative education has also become part of the network, with education programs for the handicapped and for students who don't respond in regular classrooms. Fe y Alegria also does its best to attend to the needs of the community beyond education; it runs community centers, cooperatives, associations

for the development of poor communities, and programs devoted to health and nutrition.

Fe y Alegria operates in each country as a private nonprofit organization; on an international level, however, the network is supported by its governing body, the International Federation of Fe y Alegria. The federation's board of directors handles regular decision-making duties. The board is made up of the general coordinator and three others who are elected. Each year the federation holds a general assembly which determines objectives for the year and activities of the federation. The general assembly is made up of national directors, the board of directors, and delegates from each country. The general assembly is the highest authority in the federation.

Fr. John P. Foley, SJ, president of the Cristo Rey Network, credits Fe y Alegria for inspiring the creation of Cristo Rey in the United States. "No doubt about the fact that Cristo Rey is an imitation of Fe y Alegria. When we thought of the possibility of Fe y Alegria in this country [the United States] we always thought that it was impossible." Fr. Foley continues, "Frankly, when we started Cristo Rey and started replicating it, we sort of backed into it. We realized that we had created a network of schools for the center

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Fr. Jim, director of Fe y Alegria San Luis Gonzaga, SJ, and coordinator of the jungle area network, visits with a student and her family. The student's siblings and her single mother live in a typical Jaen house with no doors, windows, or roof.



Fe y Alegria San Luis Gonzaga, SJ, in Jaen, Peru, has such a large student body that it holds two separate sessions each day. Half the students attend classes from 7:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. while the other half goes to school from 1:15 p.m. to 7:15 p.m.

city kids and that's exactly what Fe y Alegria is. We realized we were making Fe y Alegria work in the US much to our surprise."

### **Fe y Alegria San Luis Gonzaga, SJ**

As Fr. Jim looks out his window at the metal bars and chicken-wire mesh, he focuses on the blue sky beyond. He grew up in a very Catholic Chicago neighborhood in the fifties and, after many years of discernment, joined the Jesuits in 1981. Upon entering the Society, he had little desire to teach or be involved in the field of education. During his time in the novitiate, however, he was assigned to teach for a semester at Nativity Mission School, the first Nativity-model school, in New York City, where he quickly fell in love with his students and teaching: "I discovered that when these tough little kids received a bit of moral support, some help with their studies, a listening ear, occasional advice, a smile—within a friendly but demanding atmosphere—they thrived. They came to believe in themselves," he says, "and become aware of their talents."

O'Leary went on to teach at Holy Family School in Chicago

before being assigned to teach at Fe y Alegria San Luis Gonzaga, SJ, (most schools are named Fe y Alegria along with another name), the 22nd school in the network. In 1991, a freshly ordained O'Leary arrived in Peru to begin his teaching commitment. After a successful first year of teaching English, he was asked to serve as principal of the school, a position he still holds today along with serving as the coordinator of the Fe y Alegria network of the jungle area which includes five schools.

Fe y Alegria San Luis Gonzaga, SJ, which has an enrollment of 1,235 students ranging from kindergarten to high school, is located in Jaen, a city in the northern region of Peru. According to Fr. O'Leary, the region has changed dramatically since he arrived in 1991. In the early nineties, Jaen was a slow-moving town with very traditional values and few luxuries. The residents didn't have running water and only received a few hours of electricity a day. Many people often left their families behind in Jaen while they went to look for work in other areas. Now many people come to Jaen looking for work. Peruvians looking for work in Jaen have also brought with them the drug trade. The use of cocaine and heroin are growing rapidly and drug trafficking has become big business. Fe y Alegria provides safety from the drug lords and criminals. It also offers the students a better life and a chance to succeed.

The parents of the coed student body are typically small farmers, street vendors, or work in small stores. Many of the parents are single mothers who make a living washing other people's clothes in the nearby



A student works at his after-school job repairing engines. Many students help support their families by taking jobs that vary from selling merchandise on the street to doing laundry to fixing moto-taxis.



Fr. Jim visits with former student Italo Quispe outside his home. After struggling in classes, Italo worked hard and graduated from Fe y Alegria. He is now studying at a Jesuit university in Lima on a full scholarship.

river. It's also common for students to live with their grandparents as the mothers often leave Jaen to find work. Housing for the students could be anything from outdoor shacks to an adobe construction with a tin roof. The fortunate live in a brick structure. For the typical family of a Fe y Alegria student a major purchase would be a refrigerator. Owning a refrigerator, besides allowing them to avoid shopping every day, would also let the family supplement their income by making jello or fruit juice to sell in the street.

The students and their families are also often affected by diseases rarely seen in the US, including dengue, malaria, and tuberculosis. Tuberculosis has become a particularly troubling problem because to cure it you need to take time off so you can rest and nourish. On top of all the diseases, another problem in the area is the lack of medication; medicine is stolen from hospitals regularly and resold to pharmacies. Students also frequently face intestinal infections because of the unclean water.

Fe y Alegria San Luis Gonzaga, SJ, has a very large student body which requires it to operate on two shifts. Half the students attend school from 7:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. and the other half attend from 1:15 p.m. to 7:15 p.m. When the students are not in school many of them work to supplement their family's income. The students earn money in a variety of jobs, including selling popsicles, washing taxis, selling newspapers, working in construction, and washing clothes. When they return home after working or

school they are usually unsupervised while they do homework and household chores, because most parents work 12 or more hours a day.

As Fr. Jim's school continues to educate students and influence the community around it, so do many other Fe y Alegria schools in Latin America. The future looks bright for the Fe y Alegria network as it continues to expand and experiment with schools in non-Spanish speaking countries. "There are many more parents who want their kids to study in a Fe y Alegria school than there are vacancies," notes Fr. Jim. Fe y Alegria will soon begin to operate in Haiti, and it is also looking to expand to Africa." In the meantime the existing schools continue to provide superior education and community support.

Italo Quispe received a full scholarship to a Jesuit university in Lima with O'Leary's help. Italo chose philosophy as his major, he says, because at Fe y Alegria he learned to become a critical thinker: he was taught to think, analyze, and seek out solutions. He also was taught why education is important and how knowledge can be used not just for his own development and future but for the good of others and for his country. "I know Italo will continue to succeed in life," says Fr. Jim, "and I'm proud to say that Fe y Alegria started him on the path to success." ■