Cornageeha to Chile

Marguerite working with the children of Santiago

In June 2002, Marguerite McManus from Cornageeha left Ireland to spend three years as a lay missionary with the Columban mission in Chile. Here she talks to Cissie Bohan about what motivated her and describes life in South America.

What made you decide to volunteer for this kind of work?

I felt that I had gifts that I could share with others less fortunate and I wanted to reach out in some way to others. My parents, especially my late mother, influenced me in this as they always had time for other people. I did various jobs after leaving school but none of them gave me a sense of satisfaction. I did some research and when I read about the work of the Columbans in South America I knew that this was what I wanted to do. The Columbans are well known for their work with underprivileged people throughout the world especially in Latin America. I had a number of interviews with the Columbans before being accepted to train as a lay missionary.

Did you have to have any special skills or training?

I had to spend six months in London undergoing intensive training under the supervision of a Columban Father and a Columban Sister who had worked in South America. I studied Catholic theology and learned about the work of the Columbans in Latin America. During my training I also worked with homeless people in London which was a good experience and good preparation for my work here in South America. From there I went to Bolivia where I spent six months learning Spanish, which is the language spoken in Chile, and working in an orphanage.

What type of work are the Columbans engaged in in Chile?

Well, a lot of the work centres on the fight for social justice and helping people to help themselves. There is a lot of poverty in Chile and, unlike Ireland, there is no help available from the Government. We facilitate people to come together to work to better their own community. We devote considerable effort to raising funds for facilities such as schools and churches. Here in my parish in Santiago we are presently engaged in building a church. I myself run an arts and crafts workshop. As well as learning new skills the women have an opportunity to get together and discuss issues of concern to them.

What is a typical day for you in Santiago?

My day begins around eight and the morning is spent visiting the local people in their homes, talking with them and getting to know them and understand the difficulties they face. Most of these people would be unemployed and need help in providing food for the families and with the upkeep of their homes. In the afternoon I have my workshop. About fifteen women come regularly to the workshop and they learn crafts such as knitting and crochet. These skills help them in their daily life. In the evening local women often call to where I live just to talk and sometimes to ask for advice. The emphasis here is very much on living among the people and sharing in their daily lives.

What are the main differences between life in Santiago and life in Leitrim?

Well for a start it is much more densely populated. Chile has a population of about fifteen million people and it is highly urbanised with about 80% of the population living in the cities. Santiago, where I am, has about five million people. Unemployment is very high and living conditions are often poor. The overcrowding was one of the things I found hardest to get used to. Our local church is a tiny shed which holds about twenty to thirty people. The Columbans are presently building a new church which will hold about two to three hundred people. Money for this is coming from funds which have been raised over the last three years in places like Ireland and Korea. Children go to school for five hours a day. When they are preparing for the sacraments they meet once a week with the Columbans and local laity to learn the faith. It takes about two years to prepare for the sacraments.
The language of course is different– learning Spanish was probably the biggest challenge I faced here. The food also is very different and takes a bit of getting used to. I missed simple things like tea. The weather is extremely hot in summer and the winters would be similar to our summer.

Do you miss home?

Well of course I miss my family and friends and I miss the kind of social life that we have at home but for the moment Chile is home for me. I get great satisfaction from my work here, the people appreciate the help we can give them and the children are very attached to us. They call us 'aunty' and greet us every day with a smile and a kiss. There is so much work to do that time passes very quickly.

What are your plans for the future?

I am committed to staying here for another two years, after that I guess I have to wait and see what God has in store for me. Whatever I do I have learned a great deal during my time here that will benefit me wherever I go or whatever I find myself doing. Even though the people here have very little in the way of material things they have a very rich culture, one that we, in materially better off countries, can learn a lot from.

Finally Marguerite, how can people at home help the work of the Columbans in Latin America?

By remembering us in their prayers, at times our work here can be lonely and frustrating and we depend on the prayers of people at home to sustain us through the hard times. People can also help financially by buying the Columban magazine, 'The Far East, or by contributing directly to the Columban Fathers at Dalgan Park, Navan, Co Meath.