

SAINT HELEN'S PARISH IN ALTO CAYMA – AREQUIPA, PERU

The parish of St. Helen is found under the “Chachani” volcano on the northern outskirts of the city of Arequipa in Peru. It is presently made of 18 new settlements with an estimated population of 15,000 people. The furthest settlement is at an altitude of nearly 10,000 feet above sea level. The area is arid and mountainous and most roads are rocky and simply dirt. There is only one paved road in the entire settlement.

The population consists of people coming from the mountains to the nearest area in the city searching to improve their living conditions. Others come out of populated areas of the city where there is no available land for new building opportunities. It is a mix of very poor people together with middle class people and wealthier ones. We have un-educated people (due lack of opportunity on the mountains), along with professionals who have finished their university education. People live in tiny shanty houses and others in two story well-constructed buildings. There are no schools or health centres and no proper means of transportation. Some people have access to water from public faucets for approximately two hours daily from which they are allowed an average of five gallons, while others have no access to water at all. This water is not potable and must serve the needs of hygiene, cooking, laundry, and cleaning. Regarding electricity or energy needs, some use gas stoves for cooking while others burn wood, and some have access to three light bulbs in the house while others have none. The area can be quite cold and for three months a year in autumn we experience three hours of very strong winds between 5.00 am and 8.00 am. Most homes consist of one room made of local stone called sillar, a stone cut from volcanic ash quarries by hand, usually some nine feet by fifteen feet, with corrugated metal sheets as a roof. The toilet facilities are generally a hole in the ground. A common kitchen is a corner outside the main room. Given the size of the houses, rooms actually, there is no possibility of furniture or any number of beds. The homes may have a bed or two and the beds are shared; otherwise they sleep on the dirt or concrete floor. The average family consists of five people, but at times there is extended family such as parents, or grandparents living with the main family.

Since many of these people are not skilled workers they end up doing very hard labour for little pay. They work on average ten hours a day for about fifteen U.S. dollars. The jobs are primarily in construction, field work, carrying goods at markets, the loading and unloading trucks of merchandise, and whatever opportunity comes along. In most cases, all family members work including small children as young as ten. The children clean or look after cars, sell sweets or simply beg. Women usually work in fields, clean houses, or do laundry. The majority of the people are daily workers and at times do not earn a day's pay each day due to lack of work and return home empty handed. Since they are not regular formal workers, they do not contribute to health or pension plans which means that they do not qualify for any free health service or pension plan as they age. There is a very limited health care plan for the poor but it covers only basic needs.

As for the pastoral care of the people there is much to be done. Almost everyone considers himself to be Catholic since they come from a Catholic background. There is a large number of people that are not even baptised. They are slowly starting to attend church as we are still at the stage of first evangelisation. At times, even the start of mass and doing the sign of the

cross is too much, they look at each other trying to see how it is done and what is being said. On the other hand, there is much respect towards God, all that is holy or spiritual, and a great sense of unity. Devotions to their patron saints from their villages of origin are celebrated with great reverence and care along with a big colourful festivity.

We are in great need of catechists in order to prepare all people for the sacramental life, but it takes time to form catechists and leaders.

That being said, the parish itself is still being formed. We are working hard in having a presence and strategic points in the parish so the people have access to whatever we organise. Unfortunately, the parish jurisdiction has three large ravines that separate each settlement. Currently some Masses are celebrated on the road, and in the cold and dark, because of lack of infrastructure. To date we have managed to build a main church, and two multi-purpose halls, but are still in need of at least another two halls. The church and halls are used for all necessary activities, both directly spiritual, educational and social as well as looking after the daily needs of the people. The Church is the main focus that brings the people together and the only formal institution in the entire area.

We are presently running a small pre-school in the morning for children ages three to five years. In the afternoon, the school becomes a child-care program until the children are picked up by their parents after work. This program supports eighty children. Additionally, we have a church kitchen serving over two hundred meals Monday through Friday year-round. We have managed to get a mobile unit to take some health care to the different settlements on regular basis. Others come to us for help with different needs. There is a large number of single mothers and elderly people who need all types of support. We do our best to give a helping hand however possible and within our limited resources.

One very positive thing to underscore is that the people are very good and very thankful for all that we do with them. As previously mentioned, they have a strong sense of God in their life and are always ready to help those less fortunate than themselves. This makes every sacrifice worth the efforts that we do daily. Perhaps they do not have much of the Catholic doctrine knowledge, but they truly have God in their lives.