



A friar with a Franciscan-style ministry

Father Anthony Wilson, OFM, came to Peru determined to be a missionary. He was inspired by the nuns who shared stories from Maryknoll Magazine at his grade school in Needham, Massachusetts, outside Boston.

He came as a missionary but, after 20 years as pastor of Santa Ana Parish on the outskirts of Lima, and 34 years in Peru, Fr. Anthony Wilson, OFM, says he is the one still being evangelized.

It is a parish of 25,000 people, with three chapels, and, as vocations decline, the 58-year presence of the Holy Name Franciscans in Peru means that Fr. Tony has a lot

of work to do. There's the daily celebration of Mass, three Masses on Sundays, and responsibility for a school intended to make life better for the hard-pressed people in what is a relatively new community. He frequently dons his brown Franciscan habit, but sometimes the hilly terrain makes a basic clerical outfit a more practical choice.

He came to Peru determined to be a missionary, inspired by the nuns who shared stories from Maryknoll Magazine at his grade school in Needham, Massachusetts, outside Boston. A year as a child living in Puerto Rico – his father started a business there – sparked interest in Latino culture. "I always wanted to go to the missions," he says, noting that soon



after entering the Franciscans he asked to go to Bolivia. Instead, he was assigned to the Bronx, where he learned upfront about the role of the church in a poor American urban parish. After being assigned to Peru, he expected to serve six years, but hasn't left. Looking back on his life at 70 years old, what he thought about as mission has changed.

He's found that while Peru needs priests – there is a lack of both foreign mission vocations and local clergy – Peru is imbued with a deep Catholic culture.

"I don't think of it as a mission," says the pastor. "People are really Catholic here."

That faith is exhibited through the ample ministries of the parish, including Cursillo, the Neo-Catechumenate, two large charismatic prayer groups, the Legion of Mary, Franciscan Youth

and the Secular Franciscans. All of it is experienced through the prism of the long traditions of Peruvian Catholicism.

There is the Latino focus on processions, the largest of which is the Lord of the Miracles, held every October. That tradition has its origins in the faith of African slaves, who called upon Jesus to protect them from earthquakes. It's now a multi-ethnic, massive celebration.

As in much Latino Catholicism, there are scores of devotions to Mary, seen as a champion of the poor, invoked frequently by the people of the parish. Many invoke her as life is often a struggle in Santa Ana Parish.

"If you go into their homes, they

don't have much in there," he says.

The community of Santa Ana grew, about an hour's commute to Lima, as indigenous people fled the mountains during the country's insurrection and violence, which included the Sendero Luminoso guerrilla group fighting the government in the 1980s and 90s. The rebel group was notorious for atrocities, and the government responded at times in kind. The people who fled the mountains have stayed, most eking out a subsistence living as nannies for wealthier families in Lima and, for the men, in construction work which is often low-paid and inconsistent. Peruvian society has long been marked by great

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disparities of wealth between the rural indigenous peoples and the descendants of African slave versus more prosperous descendants of European colonizers. Governments routinely rise and fall, as the country has experienced five presidential administrations in the past seven years. Corruption is a chronic issue.

The more prosperous sections of Lima are like "Miami South," says Fr. Tony, noting that the city has a vibrant night life and an urban feel much like you would find in North America or European cities. But the outer regions struggle with massive poverty.

Migrations towards the more prosperous cities is a regular feature of Peruvian life for those who find it impossible to make a living in the largely impoverished countryside. At Santa Ana Parish, says Fr. Tony, "the people came

and put up shacks. And they just started to live here." The original settlers are now aging.

For Fr. Wilson, who grew up the son of a lawyer and businessman in Massachusetts, the lesson in evangelization he's learned is how the faith transforms people who are often desperately poor.

The parish has responded to the social conditions with education, from primary school through a technical institute. "The graduates seem to be getting decent jobs," he says, noting in particular an altar server who has emerged with a degree in environmental

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engineering. Tuition assistance is provided through a sharing program with St. Francis of Assisi Parish in Triangle, Virginia. Santa Ana Parish also provides immediate assistance through an active food pantry.

"We have provided through the years legal services, a microloan program, and medical services, but I think education is the most effective way to reach the most people for both evangelization and empowerment, thus real liberation," says Fr. Tony.

This year the high school graduated its class. Out of 22 students, 10 have entered



universities. One was accepted at San Marcos, the most prestigious university in Peru. Nine others are in institutes pursuing technical careers, administration or nursing.

"This is an impressive accomplishment by our teachers," says Father Tony. "A medical report presented to me showed that 36 percent of our sixth-graders are anemic and so are 45 percent of our third-graders. St. Francis Parish helped us with this problem by delivering quantities of children's vitamins for years, but with the pandemic this had to be curtailed."

These small triumphs continued even through Covid, which hit Peru especially hard. In the early stages





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of the pandemic, the nation led the word in the most excess deaths attributed to the disease. The neighborhood around the church is filled with families who have grieved loved ones. Most have access to cellphones, so the parish responded by putting Mass online. Now the country has one of the highest vaccination rates in the world and life has begun towards more of a normal feel, although most people still wear masks as they go about their daily chores and shopping. The infection rate has declined dramatically.

Covid aggravated some of the disparities suffered by the people of Santa Ana Parish. Some perished while waiting for impossible to find hospital beds. A lack of basic care, such as access to oxygen, increased the death rate. "It was really bad during the first wave," says Fr. Tony. The parish provided food baskets and bought nine

oxygen tanks to lend out to people in need during the pandemic.

Well established in the parish, and while Fr. Tony says he is happy in ministry, the job has its downsides. One is the Latin American church emphasis on synodality, invoked for the world church by Pope Francis. In practice, that means a lot of meetings, particularly of priests and pastors. It builds community, but Fr. Tony says sometimes it's too much. He is assisted in listening sessions by the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary who work in the parish.

But on the whole, life in the parish- in a nation more rooted in Catholicism than North America – has been good to him, says Fr. Tony. He's learned much from spending most of his adult life in Peru. His Franciscan vocation fits well into the lives of the poor people of Santa Ana Parish south of Lima.

He's seen the poorest of the people in his parish set money aside to pay for Catholic school tuitions or to help a neighbor in even greater need. Their generosity means that they live a lot simpler than they would otherwise. Living among the poor has helped his Franciscan vocation, he says, noting he also gets support from a fellow Franciscan, Bro. Carlos Sarmiento, OFM.

"I am profoundly grateful to the friars, Holy Name Province, our benefactors and the Peruvian people who make it possible for me to live and work here," says Fr. Tony.

"A lot of the people here are better Christians than me. I learn so much from them. As a Franciscan I feel I am in the right place for me. I think there is a deep Franciscan spirit in the Peruvian people. I'm sure St. Francis would feel at home here," he says.





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WALK IN MY SHOES PILGRIMAGE
ST. FRANCIS AND ST. CLARE

Date: November 6th - 16th , 2023
All inclusive: flights, hotels, ground transportation, most meals
Visit: Greccio, Assisi, Bagnoregio, and Rome
Single supplement: \$3800
Double occupancy: \$3600
For more details or to sign up contact:
Bro. Paul O'Keeffe, OFM
pokeeffe@thefranciscans.org
240-393-0532





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YOUNG ADULT HOLY LAND PILGRIMAGE

Date: June 13th - 23rd, 2023
All Inclusive: Flights, ground transportation, all meals and all tours!
Cost: \$4,000
Scholarship: \$1000 off the total cost for all participants between the ages of 18-40
For more details or to sign up contact:
Bro. Paul O'Keeffe, OFM
pokeeffe@thefranciscans.org
240-393-0532