

## Mission Of Inner-earth, Colombia "Our Land"

*Jorge Luis Rodriquez, c.m.*

Talking about Inner-earth means talking about one of the most beloved and significant missions of the Vincentian Missionaries in Colombia. Entering this territory for this first time generates the sensation of entering the deepest part of the earth. This is how it derives its name. The majestic mountains, which emerge side by side along the Paez River, are like giants guarding a treasure filled with culture, history, and legend.

It is a region where materialistic poverty is contrasted by human richness, where the past is marked by a people's suffering and efforts to achieve a prosperous future. A region where the influence of the modern world brought by the colonists was blended together with the autonomous cultures of the various ethnicities (the indigenous people, the slaves, and those who came from other parts of the country in search of fortune) that inhabited the region.

Its inhabitants have suffered from a forgotten history, abandonment, violence, and destruction. The colonization of the "white man" destroyed everything in its path later nature exhibited its force against the people. In 1994 an earthquake and a subsequent avalanche of mud and rock from the Paez River. An inhabitant described the event in this manner, *"For us the avalanche was not a natural phenomenon in which water and debris descended on an inclined topography. No, for us the avalanche was an intelligent being, maybe a serpent with a crest as its head or maybe a dragon who at its whim unleashed some of its destructive force, in all cases an animal."*

Inspite of the pain left behind by the avalanche, the Inner-earth community is reborn with the hope of recovering what was lost. The grave cultural and environmental consequences have made the reconstruction difficult. Most of the indigenous population was relocated to other areas outside the region.

For 77 years, the presence of the Vincentian Missionaries in the region has responded to this complex reality through embracing and learning about the life, culture, and problems of the inhabitants. This effort is centered on the following five aspects: working with the laicos, the vocational pastoral, education and culture, the indigenous pastoral, and the social and means of communication pastoral.

The lay ministers are a force within the Church. Inner-earth is no exception. The great distances between one community and another make frequent visits difficult especially on Sundays for the mass celebrations. This is why each community together with the parish names a representative called the "Animator of the Word" who is in charge of the Word of God in the absence of mass. The Animators of the Word and the Catechists are also responsible for spiritually animating the community. Both the Catechists and the Animators of the Word receive periodic instructions from the Center of Catechists. The Center of Catechists is composed of a Vincentian Missionary, the Daughters of Charity, and some lay ministers. The goals of the Center are to assist Catechists in their understanding of the Bible, liturgy, and Christian development, to assess parishes, and to help the lay people with their responsibilities within the community. The Center of Catechists is divided into 12 parishes: Calderas, Togoima, Vitonco, Caloto, Belalcazar, Ricaurte, Pedregal, San Luis, Inza, Turmina, Itaibe, and Rio Chiquito.

For many, a local church such as the one in Inner-earth is the final stops on the road to the priesthood. Two seminaries that respond to diverse realities are the Menor Juan Gabriel Seminary and the Indigena Paez Seminary.

The Indigena Paez Seminary, in addition to vocational responsibilities, teaches indigenous young men to become leaders within their communities. This is reinforced by working with families and the community. The seminary teaches principles of the Christian faith, cultural values, and the preservation of the indigenous language. It is staffed by Vincentian Missionaries and professors.

There are 11 students studying philosophy and religion in the Inner-earth region. Although the numbers may be nothing more than statistics, they signify hope that the church is growing day by day within the region. The region has six priests, two of them from the indigenous population.

Most indigenous communities tend to disappear with the influence of "white culture," especially with the loss of the native language, customs, and traditions. This is why a bilingual radio station, Radio Eucha, was established eleven years ago to preserve the native culture. "Eucha" is the traditional greeting of the indigenous people. During its years of service, the radio station has given the poor a place to voice their feelings, concerns, and complaints. Radio Eucha is for the people, of the poor, and by the poor. The poor usually have something to communicate but often lacks the resources to do so.

The station's focus is on analyzing and examining current events within the community and the world. It offers daily programming that is interactive, evangelical, informational, recreational, and educational. The station promotes cultural events,

community projects, and the activities of various local organizations. It stays abreast of what is going on in the region.

Social aspects within the community are addressed through the DIT Desarrollo Integral de Tierradentro (The Integral Development of Inner-earth). It seeks to provide guidance on health problems, daily life, society, and promotes women's rights. These issues were magnified with the tragedy of 1994. As a result, the Department of Social Pastoral was created to better deal with these issues. Through the efforts of a Vincentian priest, three sisters, three lay ministers, and various families, emergency housing was constructed. Furthermore, several houses that were partially destroyed were reconstructed. They have also helped families within the community establish agricultural and industrial businesses. DIT has also helped women in the community setup and run businesses that feature crafts by local artists. Additionally, the group emphasizes the role of lay people in promoting human rights and economic solidarity.

DIT has also played an important educational role within the community.

The Daughters of Charity assist in the education effort by instructing professors at the National Teachers College. An essential part of pastoral work is to recognize the need to reflect, investigate, and to integrate and permeate further into the community each day. This is necessary in order to understand the needs of the people we intend to evangelize.

All of these evangelical efforts seek to increase the Word of God in the community not just as a sign of hope, but as a force that guides the progress of a community that has always kept God in the lives of its people.