

# The Evangelist

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## MISSION REPORT

### Peru effort aims at lifting poor out of misery

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From downtown Cusco, Peru, the clusters of tiny adobe homes on the hillsides high above look quaint and cozy. But Juana Quispe probably wouldn't describe her living quarters that way. She and her five-year-old son, Marco, stand in scraps of leather that can hardly be called shoes, with the muddy floor staining their feet red-brown.

Their "apartment," an unroofed space about eight-by-ten feet, is attached to all the surrounding ones. A tiny door presumably hides the room where the family sleeps; a filthy piece of cloth curtains off what might be a bathroom space -- but there's no running water.

Mrs. Quispe and her husband, Sylvestre, have three other children, one of whom has special needs. Mrs. Quispe used to sell ice cream in the city -- an hour and a half's walk down the mountain and back again each day -- but then she got sick. Now, the family depends on Mr. Quispe's income from construction, whenever he can find work.

#### Help and hope

Hope would seem like a rare commodity in this Alto (High) Cusco neighborhood. But, thanks to a program partly funded by Catholic Relief Services, the overseas aid agency of U.S. Catholics, the eldest of the Quispes' children may be able to lead a better life.

Every day, Wilfredo Quispe travels down the mountain to Runakunaq Inti Wasin, "The House of the People of the Sun." Begun eight years ago by a group of local professionals and volunteers, the program takes children from extremely poor families and helps them to learn a trade.

Organizers go up to Alto Cusco and into marketplaces to seek out these children and invite them to participate in the program. About 60 children, many of whom work on the streets in some capacity -- selling cigarettes or trinkets, working in a cemetery or even carrying burdens

weighing up to 180 kilos (nearly 400 pounds) in local markets -- now attend the program for half the day and go to school for the other.

### **Basic needs**

Managing director Luz Marina Figueroa Arias noted that when the program was created, it was not intended to include meals.

"We always said, 'We are not a feeding program; we are an educational program,'" she noted. "So, for the first six years, we were giving just a simple snack. But it was sad for us to see them go to school" still hungry.

Now, the children get "something solid in the morning, and, in the afternoon, something sweet."

Program organizers also had to recognize other basic needs. These children of extreme poverty were routinely going to school unwashed and in dirty clothes. On the day The Evangelist visited, one girl washed her hair in a trough of water; Mrs. Figueroa said that many of the children shower at the house as well.

### **Education**

The youngsters also get help with schoolwork. Teachers who give piles of homework each night, said the director, often don't realize that children like Wilfredo don't have a place to sit down and work on it. And their parents, most of whom are uneducated, can't help them with the work.

Students then get poor grades, become frustrated and end up dropping out of school.

At The House of the People of the Sun, volunteers help the children with homework in between the program's own "classes." The children are taught leather work, sewing, jewelry making and cooking.

### **Special needs**

In different rooms, groups of children study textbooks, add rivets to leather wallets, string beads on wire to make earrings and work on huge, intricate pieces of embroidery.

One girl ducks her head in embarrassment at being watched, while a boy named Guillermo, whose face shows the features of Down syndrome, gleefully displays some leather work he made.

He is part of a group of children in the program who have special needs, which the directors refer to as "special abilities." They're taught the same crafts as the rest, and many create beautiful leather purses, necklaces and other items.

### **Graduation**

The handiwork is sold at the house, but Mrs. Figueroa said that isn't the ultimate goal for these children.

"Last year, we developed the idea that it's good to implement microenterprises with the children," she explained. "This has changed our vision: We want to improve the quality of our products. We don't want people to buy them because, 'Oh, the poor children, the handicapped;' we want people to buy our products because they're good."

With whatever craft Wilfredo shows the most aptitude for, therefore, he may become part of a new project in which teenagers "graduating" from the program can get "microcredit" to start their own small businesses.

Mrs. Figueroa hopes that, with work on marketing the crafts, this first group can eventually create family businesses, lifting more than just themselves out of poverty.

**(Kate Blain recently traveled to mission sites in Peru as a result of winning a national award for an article she wrote in 2006 on the missions.)**

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