

My Life on the Dump

My life on the dump is turning around. While I never came here for the “good life”, I think life is great here. For more than two years I never liked anything about this place. Yet I have found happiness throughout the process, as contradictory as that might seem. I came here believing firmly that God would sustain me through it all; and I knew God would have Her challenges in doing that. But I have been surprisingly happy here. To be closer to the truth I ought to say, “I have been made miraculously happy”.

K’ara K’ara is the name given to the area 8 miles south of Cochabamba which serves as the garbage dump for the city. When my predecessor was thrown out of this area by the political honchos more than 3 years ago, I assumed the pastoral responsibilities for these 13 barrios.

25 years ago only a handful of collectors and sorters of garbage lived here. The more recent arrivals flocked to this desert-like area of the dump like flies to a feast. “Why come here?” you might ask. The answer is simple. In the interior of the country these people’s lives were immeasurably worse. Here, near the dump, they have hopes of a greater quality of life: education for their children; some basic human services; and work for both mother and father, while the grandmother stays home with the kids.

Let me give you an example of that greater quality of life some people have found here. The family with whom I lived for almost 4 years – just 140 yds. from the dump – recently celebrated the high-school graduation of their eldest daughter. And they celebrated regally! The graduation seemed more like a wedding party. The family hired the dusty patio of the community center. They cleaned it, decorated it, hired tables and chairs, and made it look like a banquet hall. They brought in the food and *chicha* (the corn liquor of the countryside). But the most celebrative element was the pride of the parents. Perhaps because they themselves can hardly read or write, their pride overflowed more abundantly than the *chicha*. For these parents their daughter’s graduation was a milestone. She was able to get a High School education! That put her in the big time. Her parents felt they were better off on the dump than they ever had been in the countryside.

Let me just name a few of the more significant elements that have changed in our lives over the last 3 years.

- The fines, which the mayor once paid for dumping garbage on us, were eliminated.

- Many of the leaders who condemned me have been replaced by others, who are more accepting of my presence.
- Recycling has come a long way. Now the new mayor contemplates an industrial waste management plant to be built over the old dump. The new plant will employ the old recyclers, who previous eked out a meager living by collecting bottles and old scraps. Such new work will free the scrap collectors from the methane gas fumes that left its dizzying effect on them daily.
- Volunteers are attracted to the K'ara K'ara apostolate. Perhaps they are drawn by the publicity-making manifestations that kept the garbage trucks out of the dump. Those manifestations made us infamous among the people of Cochabamba when, because of our blockade, their garbage bins overflowed everywhere into the streets of the city leaving a wretched stench and sickening situation all over the city. So, many *Cochabambinos* are attracted to our area simply out of curiosity. The old business adage sums up the popularity of our place: *location, location, location.*

The Pinch of Politics

Never were the odors from the dump as innocuous as were the local politicians. I grant that they were duly elected by the people of our 13 communities. I also grant that they fulfill many other democratic functions. But they rule with almost autocratic power, as one of the leaders himself suggested to me. “The respect the people have for me,” said this 28 yr.old leader, “is sometimes frightening.”

The previous priest had been thrown out of this barrio because the political honchos discovered he was working for the parish's Justice and Peace organization. That Church organization had attempted to close the dump because of environmental issues. The local politicians, on the other hand, were attempting to keep the dump open for political leverage. They use it as a tool to get money for their community projects. One of honchos said to me, “Do you see that dump, Padre? That's a gold mine.” Another had called it “a milk cow.” (God knows who else might be receiving that money! But God has not told me as yet.)

A Pentecostal political honcho, abusing his autocratic power, turned against me and the church and condemned me in his community a few months after I arrived. Then he engaged the other political honchos, who did not know he had been a Pentecostal, and turned them against me as well. So, shortly after taking on the pastoral responsibilities, I became the object of suspicion. I was considered to be a sort of “secret agent” of the

parish's Justice and Peace Center that had as its mission to close the dump. The political honchos blackballed me. They suspended masses. They no longer allowed me to make announcements in their monthly reunions. Yet, in spite of the condemnations, I always had the reasonable expectation that I would not only survive in K'ara K'arabut live with the fullness of life. So I stayed on in spite of it all. Now I have survived that condemnation and am thriving more than ever before.

What is behind the conflict between the parish's Justice and Peace Center and our barrio's political honchos? On the one hand, the people in the Justice and Peace Center did not pick their battle carefully; nor did they present it well to our people. They demanded of the mayor that he establish a new garbage dump. That would be a humongous task. Then they told our people that the whole sector in which they lived ought to be declared "a disaster area". That would demand that the government demolish all the houses, which horrified and infuriated the people. I believe it was poor judgment to demand such sacrifices of a very poor country.

Most of these 13 political honchos, on the other hand, wanted to keep the dump for various reasons, as I indicated above. They were making good money for their people by allowing the mayor to dump the city's garbage in *our* neighborhood for \$87,000 a year. That's the "official price" that does not include any "under-the-table" payments. That sum might not seem like much to us, but these political leaders see it as a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.

The new mayor, a member of President Evo Morales's party, stepped in. He suspended the fines he was supposed to pay by law for dumping on us. Praise God for little favors! However, it is rumored that he is still paying off the political honchos "under the table" to help him keep the dump open and keeping the people (and the priest) quiet.

Attitudes begin to shift.

After the old leaders were voted out of office, the attitudes of the newly elected officials slowly began to turn around. Perhaps the most significant sign of my new destiny on the dump came in the form of an invitation from Efraim. Now, Ephraim was the Vice president of the first community meeting I ever attended in K'ara K'ara. That the head political honcho, who turned out to be a Pentacostal, condemned all the priests of the parish because, he said, they were opposed to the dump. Just after that ringing condemnation, Ephraim declared the parish "Justice and Peace Center" to be "the #1 enemy of the people". I went to that meeting to introduce myself to the community. Thank God no one yet knew that I was one of the priests of that parish. After I heard

those condemnations, I tucked my head into my collar, turned around and looked for the fastest way out. For me it was a shock to discover that I too might be considered an enemy of the people. Not that I was afraid they would lynch me, as was the custom in such places. I just quietly snuck away. As I did, I remembered the words of Bishop James E. Walsh, one of our first missionaries to China, ***“You are to go where you are not wanted but needed, and stay till you are wanted but not needed.”*** Walsh’s faith kept me in K’ara K’ara and continues to motivate me. |

That leader I mentioned, Ephraim, the one who gave a tirade against the Justice and Peace Center, a year later invited me to his house during Carnival to do the “c’oa” (a sacred rite for the Qwishwa people). Imagine my surprise! It was unusual enough for a priest to be invited to do a c’oa, much less a gringo priest. Then, to be asked to lead the c’oa blew my mind. That invitation helped me feel a part of the community, even though these feelings slightly deceived me.

Another political honcho, Genaro, gave me another insight into my changing destiny. The day he requested a Mass for a *compadre*, I thanked him, “Genaro, you are the first person to come to me with a petition from your sector (Phalto Orqo) since I was condemned there 3 years ago.” Genaro laughed. I guess my frankness caught him by surprise. “Oh, that was just politics, Padre”, he said. “Phalto Orqo now has other leaders. Our idea about you has changed.” That day I learned a lesson about Bolivian politics. I felt relieved that things were finally tuning around for me. Finally, the political winds were shifting like the winds off the dump. Those winds carried away with them the putrid stench of the political honchos of the past. For my first 2 ½ years I found nothing to my liking in this whole area. Now, on the contrary, I would declare that things are looking up.

The Apostolate around the Dump

Considering my reputation as an outlaw, all I could do at first was offer sacramental preparation and look ***“holy”*** (which is rather hard for me). Now, what I consider my most valuable work is to convoke local Bolivians to do mission here. Fortunately I am in the right place to attract others. That last statement might surprise you, considering everything else I have said about K’ara K’ara. But there is one indubitable fact about our community: it is infamous all over Cochabamba. When our leaders stopped the garbage trucks from entering the dump, K’ara K’ara’s infamy grew rapidly. Imagine the surplus of garbage strewn through the city within only a week of such garbage-truck stoppages. Every Cochabambino knew that it was all because of K’ara K’ara. We are infamous all around town.

Because of our “*location, location, location*”, many curiosity seekers have come to see what we are all about. Some actually stayed to do some work. I am amazed at the talent of the people presently working here. Volunteers have organized the Good Friday processions over the last 3 years. Others have taught catechetics. Some have come to give gifts to the children for Christmas. Two young adults took charge of the youth work and organized a very successful talent contest. A small group of Bolivian lay volunteers, who speak Qwishwa, are about to organize liturgies among the older folk who do not understand Spanish. One woman taught some of the ladies how to make beautiful greeting cards out of flower petals that they could sell for a profit. A group of Qwishwa-speaking women from the Charismatic Center now visit homes every Monday and invite people to an afternoon prayer service. Artisans who create beautiful pieces of apparel will be coming to the barrio next month to teach our women their craft of crocheting and knitting. A University student has begun offering help to students in an after-school program of tutoring; for the vacation, a guitar teacher will give them lessons

I might be an outlaw in K’ara K’ara and a misfit in Bolivia. Like so many other missionaries around the world, we will never totally “fit in” with our people and their culture. I am working within these limitations. By inviting others who can respond to the needs of their own people’s, some good things seem to be happening.