

the forgotten people of canchirao

It started off as just another mission trip. No one knew the team was about to walk into a situation like none other they had ever experienced.

By Gregory J. Rummo



To the people of Canchirao, the unexpected gifts of food they received from the visiting mission team seemed a modern day miracle.



Two men examine the stores of food amassed after the mission team gave all their remaining food to feed the people. Like the biblical story of the loaves and fishes, they needed this food to last until the team could arrange for more food to be sent to Canchirao.

Canchirao is a place you've probably never heard of. You'll not find it on any map of Peru. It's a tiny Quechua village located 11,500 feet above sea level in the Cordillera Negra in the Andes Mountains. Several years ago, I spent a day and a night there with a group of Christians from the States and our Quechua guides, who also serve as itinerant evangelists.

Our mission was to assist these evangelists in their work of spreading the Gospel. This is largely accomplished in this area of the world by distributing portions of the New Testament translated into Quechua and Spanish along with a nightly showing of *The Jesus Film*, a popular movie about the life of Christ.

This was my fifth such trek through the Andes. But on this day we were about to walk into a situation like none other I had ever experienced before on any of my previous treks.

Our day started around 8:30 a.m. when we left a small village where we had spent the night. We knew we had a long, arduous journey ahead of us. Our guide, Adelid, explained we had to hike up and over a mountain pass close to 13,000 feet in order to get into the next valley. The hot, midday sun burned through the thin air, reminding us that this area of Peru is a desert. Each of us carried several liters of water. For most, that would only be a half-day's supply.

We walked for several hours, climbing slowly until stopping for lunch at a small community building that offered some shade. One of the locals offered us some

water, and we pumped several gallons through our portable water filters, filling our empty bottles. Then, we set off for the steeper ascent up to the pass, which took almost another two hours. Finally, arriving at the top, we rested, knowing the walk was now downhill for the rest of the day.

The trail down was steep and very dusty. Several of us lost our footing, slipping and sliding on the loose gravel and the fine, red-brown powdery soil. We quickly became covered in dust. It filled our noses and stung our eyes. You could taste it.

An hour later—hot, filthy, and sweaty—we arrived at the small school in the village of Canchirao. We had walked for days to get to this village, passing and stopping in other villages where fields of wheat and corn were cultivated on the steep hillsides. Although the ground was generally dry in these parts of the Andes at this time of year, there was still some water in the rivers and streams that was used for irrigation—but not here.

Some of the teens in our group immediately set out to find a small stream in which they could get cleaned up. All they were able to find was one three-inch pipe that delivered a trickle of water. We would soon learn that this was all the water this village had for a population of almost 200 people.

Our Quechua leaders spoke to some of the older people in the village who had assembled at the school to watch us. What they learned was shocking.



The people gather to listen as the teachers thank the mission team for bringing much-needed help to this forgotten village.

Canchirao was in the middle of a horrible drought. The stream had all but dried up. The crops had failed. The people were sick and starving.

It quickly became apparent to all of us that we were faced with a different mission than we thought.

With only one day remaining in the trek, everyone went through his remaining food, which consisted largely of snacks like granola bars, packages of lunch meats, and dehydrated meals. We quickly assembled a huge pile of food in the middle of the schoolhouse room. It would be enough to sustain these people for several days until we could arrange for more supplies to arrive.

That night, during the showing of *The Jesus Film*, our Quechua leaders announced to the assembled villagers that, in the morning, we would distribute the remaining food we had in our duffel bags to the 120 students in the school.

The next morning the entire village assembled in front of the school. One of the professors, Julio Avelina Garcia, addressed the large crowd. "Our people are sick and starving. When we brought our case to the local government, no one offered to help. Then, all of a sudden, the visitors appeared." We were given a

round of applause as we passed through the crowds, distributing the food to the grateful schoolchildren.

We walked out of Canchirao later that morning, hiking 13 miles down the steep trail to the larger village of Yuatan, where we left money and made arrangements with the sister of one of our guides who lives there to purchase flour, wheat, sugar, rice, and other food supplies that would be picked up by some of the men from the village later that same week and brought back on burros.

But just before we left Canchirao, something else happened. It was something I will never forget. One of the older children from the village brought us an offering—a bag of small, gnarled potatoes—to show the people's appreciation for our sacrifice. It was they who had made the real sacrifice, giving us a gift from out of their poverty. It served as a reminder to us of the words of Jesus, "It is more blessed to give than to receive."

Gregory J. Rummo is a businessman and a syndicated columnist. Every year he takes a group to Peru to minister to the people living in the small, hidden villages of the Andes.



Write for us!

We would like you to tell us how God is using you to serve and minister. (You do not have to be a professional writer to be published on this page.) If your submission is chosen, we will pay you \$150 upon publication. Send your submission via e-mail to: Pshort@tlh.com