

# OUR JOURNEY ALONGSIDE IGNATIUS

Benito Baranda  
Lorena Cornejo

## *Short Biography*

We were born in 1959—Lorena in Ecuador and Benito in Chile—and we enjoyed the gift of being born into Christian families with numerous siblings (Lorena 4, Benito 9), as well as the gift of being educated according to the principles and traditions of the Society of Jesus (Lorena at The Handmaids of the Sacred Heart of Jesus Primary School and Benito at Saint Ignatius Primary School, both in Chile).

We have participated actively in Christian Life Communities (CLC), beginning with our college days (1977) and at the Catholic University, where we were studying psychology and where we met and fell in love. It was then and there that we learned, through the practice of the Spiritual Exercises, to inextricably link our faith in Jesus with the search for justice and love, and to apply this tradition to our daily life.

We followed a career path that would allow us to be fully prepared to serve to the most excluded communities: we married and adapted our lifestyle to one more like the lifestyle of those who lived in marginalized conditions. We worked side by side with them in the streets and within their very communities, as well as at the charitable youth boardinghouse called “Hogar de Cristo” (The Lord’s Home).

We now live in a municipality on the outskirts of Santiago—La Pintana—where we enjoy life with our six adopted children. Yet we still remain active in the “Hogar de Cristo” and in CLC.

*Social Exclusion and the "Hogar de Cristo"*

We have maintained close links with the Society of Jesus thanks to a simple system that orders and enriches our life and sustains both, our participation in the CLC, and our interventions in the work of the Hogar de Cristo in the areas of social justice and charity. We felt an early calling by Our Lord to serve in the cause for justice on behalf of the oppressed and marginalized in our society, and this early vocation led us to the "Hogar de Cristo", working with boys and girls whose rights had been violated in their own homes and by members of their own families. From the time we got married we have been working at a boardinghouse for street children here in Santiago.

We are fortunate to have the constant support of the CLC in these endeavours, and have found that our practice of the Spiritual Exercises has strengthened us in our efforts, enabling us to balance the requirements of faith and life, faith and justice, and contemplation and action, and allowing us to fully accept and carry out the mission that Christ has called us to.

Our lives have been forever changed through our work with these children, all of whom are poor and marginalized and many of whom have been abused and exploited. Our faith has been strengthened under these conditions and our outlook on reality dramatically transformed.

Through our work in the "Hogar de Cristo", we desire to build a more just society in Chile and ultimately we hope to improve the level of solidarity among the poor and marginalized, and also between them and the population at large. It is our goal to increase the awareness of the need to build bridges between individuals, families and community organizations to counter abuse and exploitation as well as isolation and loneliness.

Though society at large too often seems indifferent to such conditions, it is also our mission to raise the level of awareness and encourage the participation of the more fortunate members of our society in the lives of the poor and marginalized. These have been our objectives at the boardinghouse for street children and they have also been our objectives in our communal life in the neighborhood of El Castillo at La Pintana.

Inspired by the example of St. Ignatius, it has also been a priority with us to sometimes step outside the circle of the Jesuit Order in order to spread the word, seek support and recruit for our Gospel-based mission. Along these lines, Lorena has dedicated many hours to training university students so that they may learn how to associate as equals with those who

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live in poor and marginalized neighbourhoods for mutual benefit and spiritual growth.

For Benito, the importance of establishing ties and pursuing our objectives at the political level has been a special priority, and he has been involved in the creation of foundations and social action projects sponsored by the national government with an aim at establishing greater justice for the poorest of the poor. An additional objective is to raise national awareness of the urgency of greater justice for those who are most in need. It has been of particular interest to Benito to get the Chilean youth excited about these issues and bring as many young people as possible into the effort.

This section would not be complete unless we mention the importance of adoption in our lives. Not being able to have biological children ourselves, we turned to adoption, through which we have had the chance to experience the joys and wonders of family life, and found new ways to explore the Ignatian mission of charity on a daily basis as we watch our children grow and assist them in issues of personal development and faith.

Curiously, the matter of child rearing has proved to be the ultimate challenge to us in our mission to link up faith and love in a concerted effort at forming comprehensive Christian communities. It has been essential for us to practice discernment, as outlined by St. Ignatius, thereby developing the skills that are necessary for a married couple to place themselves humbly before the Lord and beg His assistance as we struggle to raise our children responsibly and to increase the unity and solidarity within our family.

The arrival of our first child, Manuel, opened our minds to new dimensions in the call to service: and then came Constanza, Ignacio, Antonia, Santiago, and finally Magdalena, who has brought special challenges into our life due to the fact that she suffers from multiple handicaps. The support of the CLC has been indispensable to us in meeting the challenges we have faced in the realm of family and child rearing. Through this apostolic movement we practice community discernment and provide mutual assistance, all of us learning humbly as we go along in the footsteps of St. Ignatius.

Of course we have included our children in our missionary efforts, and they often accompany us enthusiastically in our work at the “Hogar de Cristo”. Our family maintains close relations with this organization – founded and under the inspiration of Father Alberto Hurtado whose spiritual presence we welcome in our home. We believe that our missionary commitment is

not a threat to our familial commitments; rather, it serves as a complementary and totally integrated source of Christian living and inspiration.

***Some Experiences Related to our Missionary Commitment***

When we married in 1982, we carried out an exercise of discernment together in order to “listen and see” what the Lord wanted from us; and what we definitively concluded was that we should move from the affluent neighborhood where we were raised and educated under our parents’ roofs to a small house in a humbler neighborhood where our neighbors would be the poor and disenfranchised.

As the years passed we were confirmed in our initial sense of our mission to the poor, and we soon came to the conclusion that we should deepen our commitment and take it to the next level; that is when we decided to join up with the recently founded “Hogar de Cristo” (1984) in the neighbourhood. We moved to a place nearby and dedicated ourselves wholly to caring for the street children who were housed there under the direct support of the CLC.

The paths of the Lord were being shown to us with wonderful clarity: first He led us to that neighborhood and then He provided us with the marvellous gift of being able to live with and directly assist the children coming in off the streets.

Our faith materialized fully in our relationship with these children, in the endless struggle to help them overcome their situation of abandonment and the violence of the street. We found ourselves building friendships with them, and with their cooperation, we were involved in building communities where they could feel safe and secure. Through this process we came to modify drastically our own perceptions of reality, of social justice, of Christian living, and of the role of prayer and the contemplative aspects of the faith.

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Years later, after having studied for a while outside Chile, we returned to live and work in a municipality on the outskirts of Santiago, with a poor marginalized community marked by injustice and plagued by social ills. It is called La Pintana. Thanks to assistance from the “Hogar de Cristo”, we settled in a township known as El Castillo, having some 40,000 inhabitants.

It was founded by displaced people, folks who had been evicted from very poor areas in other municipalities of Santiago. It is from this place that the most helpless and needy children at the “Hogar de Cristo” used to come. The fruit of our exercises of discernment was that we should have come to live in this special place, and we are grateful for the opportunity we have had to participate in a CCL here, enjoy the satisfaction of communal living and labour, allowing us to sustain ourselves in this marginalized zone.

We have experienced the greatest consolations and desolations in our time here. Many in our association have been able to start new lives away from the drugs and violence that plagued them on the streets; and yet, we have had to deal with many tragedies as well, the suicides of several young people who were our dear friends, the maltreatment of children within their own homes, and the abuses of the civil and military authorities against the people. In addition, the exploitation of the local labour force was shown by their miserable wages and working conditions.

It has been a fierce and fast-paced life for us here, but we have also learned some profound lessons. Our children have been raised alongside the children of many friendly families in the neighbourhood, and we have been through a lot together. There have been times in which God’s presence was undeniably palpable and others when it seemed that He was absent, although deep in our hearts we knew better.

Since 1998, we have been associated with certain individuals and families outside Chile, namely, in Haiti. Our role there is to collaborate with young Chilean professionals on missionary work in that country, especially projects involved in social justice. This is all part of what we call Latin-American Solidarity.

It is important to acknowledge that alongside our experiences of joy, friendship and community we have also witnessed violence, poverty and abandonment, and we cannot help but ask ourselves sometimes, “My God, what is going on here? What does it all mean? What will come of all this?”

Nevertheless, while the rich nations of the world were declaring Haiti economically unviable, it was important to us to maintain our commitment there, even to intensify it. Our practice of the Spiritual Exercises and our experience in the CLC had taught us to appreciate a situation in which an entire nation was relegated to forgotten status because it had no great sources of wealth such as oil, gold or gas, and served no significant strategic purpose with respect to the interests of international conglomerates.

The abandoned status of this nation represents an opportunity and a calling for us, as missionaries, to be present wherever there is greatest need, wherever Christ leads us, even if it means transcending our national borders—the objective being to demonstrate that life can and will thrive, even in situations of apparent failure, exclusion and abandonment.

To exercise discernment, to practice a communal lifestyle (CLC), to remain faithful to the Spiritual Exercises while at the same time cultivating our formal relationship to the Church and the sacraments—these are the measures that allow us to develop and grow each day as we pursue our agenda of social justice.

Moreover, it is the very people whom we are here to serve who end up transforming us in return, who in turn help us to become better persons, better husbands and wives, better parents and better families.