

## The Cross of My Childhood

**M**ountains lush with trees through which the sun breaks at dawn surround a green field. Swallows and other birds trill and the pigeons fly in flocks around a small cabin with a thatched hay roof and walls of thin, round eucalyptus. Oak posts are spaced so that rays of sun pass through, as does the cold.

It was in such a nook that I was born in the month of May in the 1950s in a little place called Tacamache, in the district of Chugur, province of Hualgayoc, state of Cajamarca in Peru. My parents, Marcial Zamora and Griselida Fernández, were very nervous in my first days on earth because only days after I was born, I became very ill. Obviously, I won that battle and infirmity and death did not accomplish their objectives. Thanks to the natural herbs of the country that God provided, my condition stabilized and my body was healed. With God's help, I was victorious for the first time over illness.

My parents were a couple of young, poor country kids, with little formal learning or culture. They had very little money, clothing or furniture in the house. My mother had suffered for several years with a chronic illness. My father worried and seemed always to be searching for some medicine to cure her. He resorted to witch-doctors, healers, charmers, doctors, surgeons and naturalists. They finally took her to the Medical Center of Bambamarca, an almost 12-hour horseback ride. The doctors didn't hold out any hope of her survival.

When they arrived home again, we all thought she would die soon. In desperation, my father visited the Roman Catholic Church to pray. As he entered, he rushed toward a statue and fell to his knees to plead for my mother's recovery.

During this time, for several years in a row, my parents visited the Virgin of Remedies in a place called Liscan. My older sister,

Gumercinda, my brother Rocel and I would stay at home for an entire week while my parents were gone to ask the Virgin to cure my mother.

They began to lose hope as Mother's health remained unchanged. As a last resort, we gathered herbs from the countryside. My sister ground them on a very large rock and mixed them with boiled water and coarse brown sugar. We gave this to my mother every morning and afternoon. After being on this regimen for a while, thank God, she began to improve and continued to take the herbs until she was cured.



When I was seven years old I started elementary school – it was the 1960s. We didn't wear uniforms because it was a country school and the children were too poor. Despite our daily hardships, I always tried to arrive early to my classes. My brother Rocel and I took off running every morning from our house toward the school. It was a 20-minute barefoot walk. In the afternoon, when school let out, I liked to play soccer.

Later, we worked in the fields with my father. On Sundays, my father would sell potatoes, beans, dried peas and other produce in the city. He would mount up 80 kilos of produce on his mule and travel to the city of Lajas or Yauyucan. With the money he made he bought kerosene, detergent, salt, matches and some cookies. He would always arrive home drunk.

When he went out to a party or festival, he might stay out all night. Often he took my mother with him and, faithful companion that she was, she never left him passed out in the road. She was always at his side.

Sometimes my father would get drunk when we went out as a family, and then about midnight we would head out toward home. It didn't matter if we were a two-hour walk from home, we had to walk in the pitch black on rocky roads that were also often muddy. My recollection of those nights was of being scared to death, cold and crying as I walked behind my drunken father – who wasn't

feeling a thing.



Peru is as relatively undeveloped today as it was in my youth. However, even by standards of an underdeveloped country my family was poor. We had no luxuries and lacked even some of the basics of an average Peruvian household of the time. For instance, I never tasted white sugar or coffee until I was about 12 years old. We never had white sugar at home because it was so expensive. And instead of the morning coffee that is a custom in Spanish-speaking countries, my parents would give us warm soup (which may be more nutritious but was an indicator of our poverty).

We wore plain cotton pants and tank tops and ran around without shoes. In winter months, there was frost on the ground and our feet would crack open and bleed. What an excruciating pain – sometimes I just couldn't take it. When we had to travel to Perlamayo to work, we walked in the frosted fields. When the farmers would make a cow get up to go and be milked, Rocel and I would run over to stand in the spot where the cow had been lying because that spot would be warm. I never knew what a jacket or a sweater was but my mother made wool ponchos for us to use against the cold. Our toys were corn cobs, though we hardly ever had time to play with them because we always seemed to be working in the fields or taking care of our sheep.

When school was out for vacation, we spent our time farming vegetables – greens, potatoes, corn. (All this we had planted for our own food. We sold only a little of it.) While still a child, I learned to use a hoe, spade and machete. We didn't do much else on vacation – just three months of work, work, work.

I always used to wonder why there are so many people who suffered. I wondered why people had to spend their whole lives working and still they didn't have enough to eat at times. And then they died.

The better part of my life's story has poverty as a theme. Since knowing Jesus, I have taken hope in his words recorded in Luke

4:18, “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.” I believe it’s the will of God that we serve him despite our poverty – and not let that be an obstacle for serving Jesus.

### **God’s Care for Me**

I thank God that long before I began to serve him, the Lord Jesus was taking care of me. When I was 13 years old, I had an accident. I fell from a horse onto some rocks. I broke my left ankle and my pelvic bone. After a few minutes I got up, and though I could hardly walk, I took the horse by its bridle and limped from Pampa Grande to Uncle Fortunato Zamora’s house. I was dragging my injured foot and walking in the pouring rain besides. My father had taken some other horses loaded with hay to build our kitchen roof and I was left alone with no one to help me.

Taking it slowly and crying in pain all the way, I finally arrived at about 7:00 p.m. All night long I groaned from the pain in my foot which had swollen considerably. The next day my father put me on a mule and took me to a country bone fixer to have the bone set to heal. As I was getting down off the mule, I thought, Please let this not hurt!

A tall man with a dark red poncho had me sit down on a tree trunk; he took my foot and started sliding his hand over it. I started to scream. He softly placed the bone and then bandaged the ankle with a piece of cloth. Only one week later, my ankle was better – it had healed.



When I finished junior high school, my parents decided that I should continue in school despite the precarious conditions in which we lived, that is, in poverty. We didn’t have enough money to buy salt but they wanted me to continue my education. It was a very risky decision as they had seven more sons! My older sister was the only one who stayed at home after elementary school so

that she could help my parents working in the home.

My first year of secondary school marked the first time in my life that I wore shoes – made of plastic. My parents sold their only cow to pay for my uniform, books and supplies.

In 1970 and 1971, I studied at El Señor de los Milagros (The Lord of Miracles) in Ninabamba, a school out in the country. My mother would wake up at 4:30 a.m. to prepare a hot vegetable broth for our breakfast and cook potatoes for me to take to school for lunch. Sometimes my sister Gumer woke up early to help Mother.

Rocel and I sat next to Mother as she served us the very hot soup. While we ate, Mother put the potatoes in a plate and covered them with another plate and wrapped them up in a white cloth. We put the lunch in our pack and we were ready to go.

We left for school at 6:30 a.m. because it took us one hour on foot to make the journey to school. There was a stream near the school where we would stop and wash our faces and feet, which were muddy by the time we arrived. Very near the school was a room for which we had paid a fee to use to keep our school uniforms. We would change into them just before we went to school.

The school had 500 students. At noon, we would get out of class to eat, and we didn't resume classes until 2:00 p.m., taking the long break for the customary siesta. At 5:00 p.m., we headed back home and would arrive at 6:30 or 7:00 p.m. My mother always had our dinner piping hot, ready and waiting in a big, three-legged clay pot that sat on top of an open fire. After we ate, we lit a kerosene lantern so we could do all our chores and homework. We stayed up studying until 11:00 each night.

For four years my mother sacrificed to get up early every morning to make our lunch.

### **My First Adventure**

In 1973 when I was in my late teens, I ran away from home. It was the month of April, a rainy month. I was leaving home for the first time – without telling my parents – I just could not fathom a life of back-breaking labor and drunken weekends. After walking for

about five hours and having climbed all the way up Mt. Coyunde, I stopped and looked at the house where I was born and I cried for a moment. I started walking again and by the afternoon, I arrived in Lajas where I waited for a bus that passed by at night from Chota on the way to Chiclayo. I didn't know how to get the bus to stop so I asked a young man if he would do it for me. I felt silly when I realized how simple it was – just raising my hand as the bus approached.

I got on the bus and took a window seat in the middle. At that moment my anguish began – the trip was making me ill – motion sick – and I arrived in Chiclayo quite sick. As we got off the bus, a man who had also been a passenger offered to pay for a hotel room for me, which was very generous of him considering that I was a stranger. I slept peacefully that night and the next day I went out looking for work.

I went to a bus station called Noreste and a tall, dark man came up and offered me work. It was a con, though. As we spoke, he was actually robbing me of what little money I had.

That night I slept in the doorway of the bus station.

The next day, I went walking down a particular street and a young man came up to me and said, “Do you want to work? We need boys to sell pastries.”

I didn't know anything about that city and I didn't have any skills. I didn't even know how to use a broom – but that very day I started to work selling pastries. I made enough to eat and to get a place to sleep, thank God.

I sold pastries in the major market of Chiclayo, a city that was full of delinquents and thieves. I didn't do very well because I was always being robbed of my money or the pastries. It seemed all I ever met were juvenile delinquents, so I decided to leave that city and head for the Peruvian jungle.

I traveled for a day and a half in a truck and finally arrived in Bagua, and from there I went on to Chachapoyas with my bag in hand. I walked through the city of Chachapoyas and that afternoon I met a gentleman sitting on a park bench and he offered me work.

I was desperate. The words were hardly out of his mouth before

I was eagerly accepting. He invited me to travel with him and work in a community called Quispe. I said I would, so that night he took me to dine and spend the night with one of his relatives in Chachapoyas.

The next day we traveled six hours in a small bus to Luya, a very small, quaint town. We spent that night in the house of the postmaster, who was the niece of the man I was traveling with, and she made humitas (a sweet cornbread) for us and gave us a good bed to sleep in.

The next morning we headed out to Quispe. My boss, so to speak, rode a horse and I had to walk what was to be a 25-hour hike. I met a young man on the road and we started talking. I told him what I was doing and where I was going.

He stopped, looked at me and said, "You're crazy! How can you go to that place? It's very dangerous and very far away. You'll never come back!"

I thought for a moment and then slipped quietly into an irrigation ditch. The irrigation canal was under construction, so I hid there all day. My boss probably thought I had fallen a little behind since he was on horse and I was walking. He didn't come back looking for me.

When I got up out of the ditch, I started to run until I arrived back at Luya. From there I went to Lamud, a very small town about four kilometers away. There I quickly got another job selling pastries, this time at the entrance to a high school.

Each night I would help make the pastries and then sell them the next day. One night, I worked all night without stopping – making the jellies and mixing the pastry dough. I was so tired when the morning came but I still had to be at the high school at 9:00 a.m. to sell the pastries. That morning I fell asleep and stayed that way as the students came out for recess. They saw me sleeping and ate all the pastries. I had to go home with no pastries and no money. The boss made me work that off, which took two months.

One Monday afternoon, the boss left to go purchase fruit and supplies to make jelly and I knew he wouldn't be back for a while. I took advantage of that time to break into the room where he kept

the money and I took enough money for a bus ticket and to hold me over for a few days. That same day I headed out on a bus to Chachapoyas.

I arrived there in the afternoon and just started walking the streets looking for a job. A man who was leaning up against a truck called me over and said, "Do you want to work?"

"Yes!" I answered.

He said he had a job for me, he took me home with him, gave me a cup of coffee and then showed me the work – it was making mattresses out of rice straw. I had to sleep in the straw.

Lacking enthusiasm for that task, as well, early the next morning I slowly opened the door and crept out into the street with my bag in hand. I caught a truck to a town called Pedro Ruiz Gallo which was about two hours away.

In that place, I met a woman who sold fruit in a kiosk. She gave me food and a place to stay for three days. Then a man who sold wood employed me for three weeks to go out into the orchards and fields and plant fruits and vegetables. In the afternoons, I could eat all the fruit I wanted.

After that job, I went back to Chiclayo, courtesy of two men who were hauling machines for the army and needed someone to show them the way to Chiclayo. I helped out the army in exchange for a hot lunch that day – I ate with the captain and other officers! That was a very delicious meal.

It took us two days to get to Chiclayo. Since I didn't have any money when I arrived, I joined up with three other young men who slept in a school. That didn't last long before I was off again – this time to the big city. I decided to go to Lima, the capital, to try my luck. And there I met some serious juvenile delinquents and became one of them. I lived by thievery.

One Wednesday morning, I happened to meet my uncle Aníbal in Union Square. He took me straight to the police for my mischief and then he took me home with him.

Near the end of 1975, I returned home for a while but I was still restless. My parents were glad to have me home but worried about me, naturally.

I asked my father for a ride one day to another town called Santa Cruz and on that trip he asked me, “Where are you going, son? I want to know.”

I replied, “I really don’t know where I’m going. I’m just wandering.”



I spent some time in a very picturesque town called Pomacochas, situated next to a lake with thatched-topped homes. The lake was stocked full of fish for the taking. There were many legends about that lake. People told stories of sirens that lived in an ancient, evil city that had been flooded, forming the lake. The sirens were always blamed for any missing people or animals.

From Pomacochas, I joined up with two guys and we went to San Martín, crossing the jungle. It took us 15 days on foot to make that trip. One night we slept along the Serranoyacu River, the river that divides the mountains from the jungle, in a house made of wood that had been built by and for travelers.

We continued our trip crossing the mountains with a three-hour hike up the mountain. Then we descended into the jungle. We arrived at a place called Aguas Verdes and slept in a camping cabin there. From that place, we caught a shortcut to the main road into the jungle. We snuck under some empty oil and gas drums in a truck and caught a ride avoiding all the military check points, making our way to Moyobamba.

In Moyobamba, we didn’t have anywhere to live. One guy found an abandoned house to stay in, so we lived there with him. We didn’t have food. We would go out during the day and steal corn, yucca, squash, bananas and chickens.

We liked living off other people’s farms. One time we went out to a farm we knew wasn’t being watched at night. We staked out the place and waited until the owner left for the day, then broke in and stole a pig.

Another time, we were going into a peanut farm and fell into a booby trap rigged with a shotgun. It could have killed us, but a dog

tripped it before we got to it. The owner was nearby, however, and he came after us. He hollered after us to be careful because there were the same traps at every entrance to the farm.

The flying bullets of that afternoon started me thinking about leaving that life and looking for a job. We were aimless youth lacking identification or any formal registration with any government or community – like animals without owners. Transients.

### **Looking for Work**

I decided to leave by way of the river and look for work; it was a done deal; I was ready for change. My friend was sad and upset. I walked to the port at Tahuishco where I took a boat down-river to Alto Mayo, and I never saw my partner in crime again. The boat left the port at eight in the morning and we traveled all day by river. The other travelers had brought their food for lunch on the river. Though I went hungry, for me it was a marvelous day. I had not previously appreciated God's creation – all the trees and animals and the birds' songs – as much as I did on that day.

In the afternoon we arrived at Puerto Ciego, after an eight-hour trip. Since I hadn't eaten breakfast or lunch, I got off quickly, grabbed a stalk of sugar cane and began cutting it up and chewing on it to keep my hunger away. Then I walked an hour into the forest, going along talking with some other men. It was interesting to see such huge trees.

I was feeling quite good when I arrived at the home of Jose Tiburcio Coronel – he and his wife Emelina Alarcón received me, a stranger, into their home. Later, their two sons, Segundo and Agustín, arrived and welcomed me saying, "Here you have a bed, food and work."

The work consisted of farming vegetables, planting rice, peanuts, bananas, yucca and corn. I tried hard to learn to work cutting trees to make posts but the bloodsucking mosquitoes were a plague that I could not bear. Day and night thousands of the little buggers stung me all over my body.

I was facing the reality of life: work to live.