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Living Reminders of a Heroic Age

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The mass on the feast of St. Ignatius is celebrated by the Bishop of Trinidad, Julio Maria Elias, OFM, in the recently renovated church.

Living Reminders of a Heroic Age

**Photos by Don Doll, S.J.
Text by John Thiede, S.J.**

In the 17th century, the Society of Jesus began a new work for evangelization in the Americas. The Jesuits likely read and adapted their mission plan from *The Only Way*, a blueprint for evangelizing the native peoples by Bartolomé de las Casas, a Spanish Dominican who began his ministry in Hispaniola (today's Haiti and the Dominican Republic), moved to Chiapas, and finally served as a bishop in Peru. Las Casas was famous for his defense of indigenous peoples; he had witnessed the annihilation and enslavement of large numbers of them in Peru, where they were either killed or forced to



Left: Bishop Adolfo Bittschi Mayer, Auxiliary Bishop of Sucre, the Bishop of Trinidad, Julio Maria Elias, OFM, Bishop Hubert Bucher and Bishop Emeritus of Bethlehem, Free State, South Africa, lead the statue of St. Ignatius through the streets of San Ignacio.

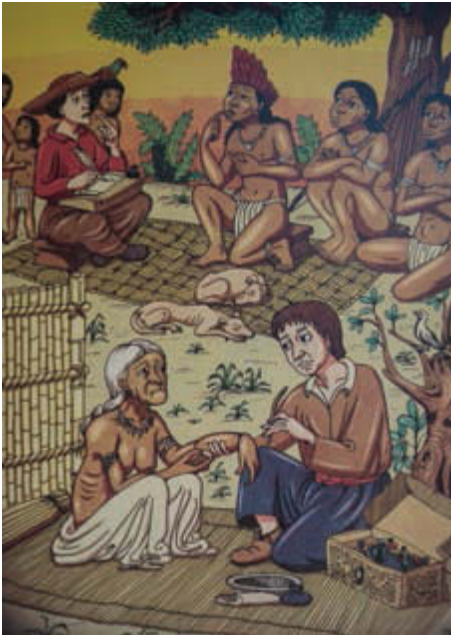
Below: The various tribal bands of Macheteros lead an afternoon procession around the town to celebrate the feast of St. Ignatius.



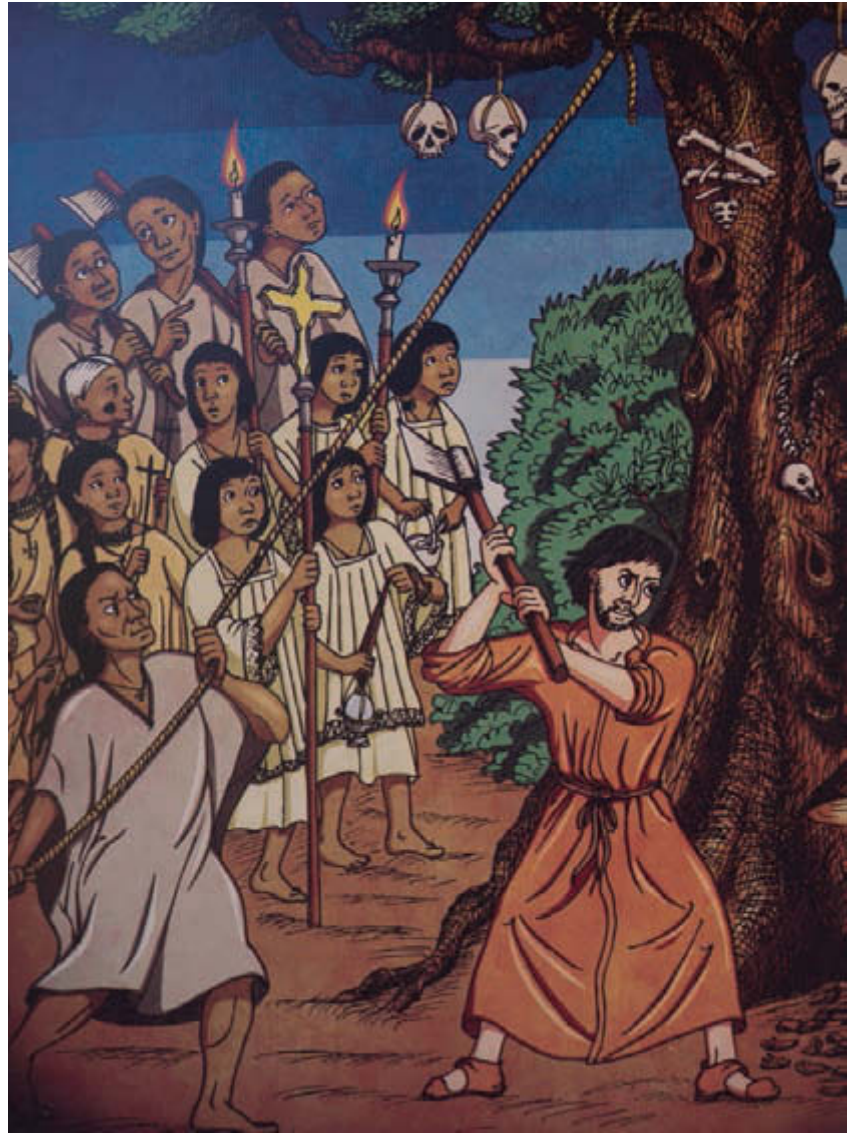
During the mass of St. Ignatius, the Ensemble Moxos, the choir from the local conservatory of music, sang the traditional 17th-century "Ignaciano" compositions they learned from the Jesuits.



The Tintiririnti, the "herald of the feast," is a young man chosen for his virtue, who leads the procession around the village toward the church.



Above: The Jesuits learned the local languages quickly and a brother infirmarian's medicines proved more effective in healing illness than the local shamans, leading the people to trust the Jesuits.



Right: The people themselves, overcoming their initial fear of revenge from their gods, took part collectively in removing all traces of ancestral cults. As new epidemics occurred, the missionaries as physicians and surgeons made strong efforts to care for those affected. Their remedies proved more effective than those of their shamans, increasing even more their prestige and making their message more convincing. The new religious system kept alive the deep religiosity of the native peoples.

harvest natural resources in what was once the Incan empire. The Jesuits thus started a new model, which would later be called *reductions*.

Many who are familiar with Jesuit history have seen the movie "The Mission," which depicts early Jesuit work with the Guarani and related tribes in today's Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay. One can still visit these reductions, most of which have been restored but are now uninhabitable. Less well known is that this missionary plan was also instituted in the Viceroyalty of Peru and that a network of reductions extended across most of today's northern Bolivia.

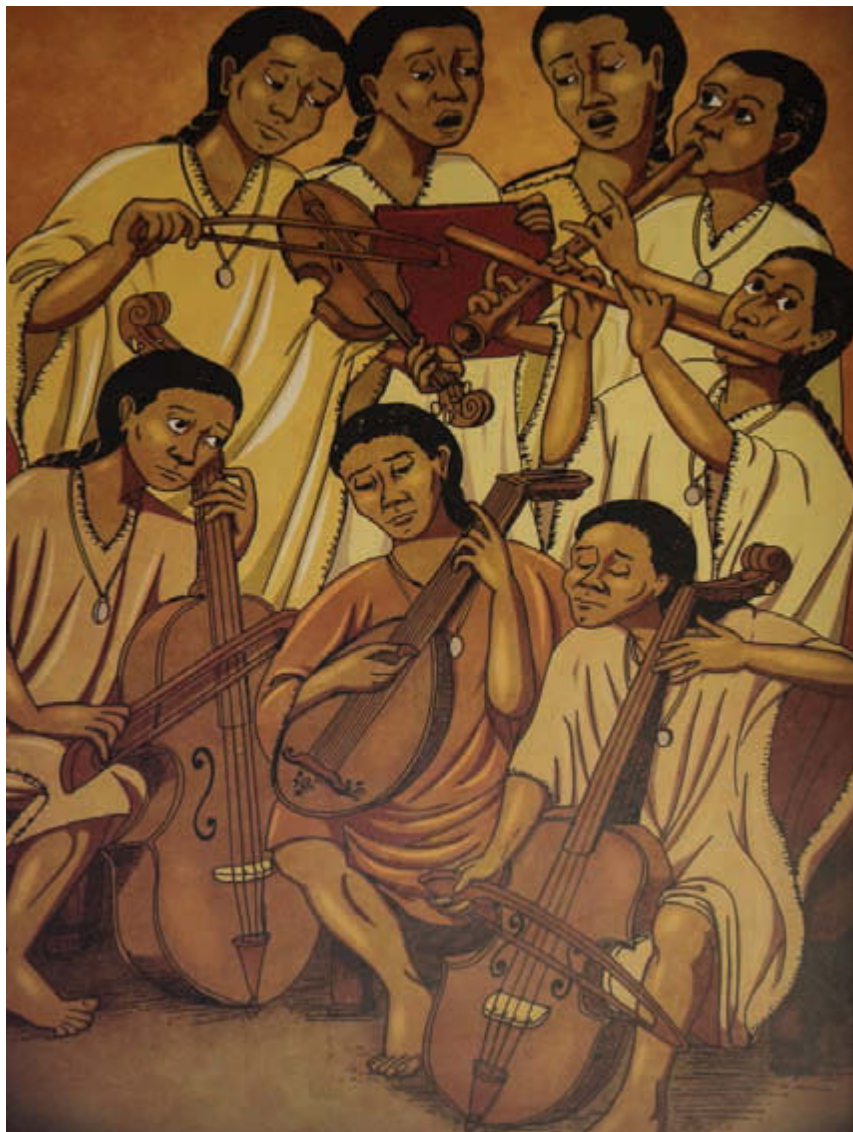
There were two unrelated tribes in these Jesuit reductions. The Chiquitos tribe lived in an area now called the

Chiquitania, which spanned a large area to the north and west of Santa Cruz. The Moxos, a separate cultural and linguistic group, lived in a large area of inhospitable climate that stretched north and west from modern-day Trinidad, near the start of the Amazon rain forest. These Moxos people formed a fierce interconnection of tribes which never accepted defeat at the hands of the Spanish or Portuguese armies.

The first Jesuits in this area suffered greatly from the rough climate. A large variety of diseases like malaria and cholera and predators such as the panther, the anaconda, and a wide variety of venomous snakes and spiders complicated movement during the rainy season. Jesuits had difficulty traversing the land and were forced to travel by

river, especially dangerous when encountering the more unknown and violent tribes, not to mention the piranhas and crocodiles that infested the rivers. Eventually they founded several reductions, the first headquartered in Trinidad. Most of these reductions took on the names of Jesuit saints such as San Ignacio or San Francisco Javier.

The Jesuits who came into contact with the Moxos people quickly learned to evangelize through art and music, even while they attempted to learn a language that was unrelated to that of any tribe they had previously encountered. Jesuit artists were sent to narrate the gospel stories through paintings and sketches. Musicians were sent with instruments, and they wrote compositions to incorporate indigenous instruments



Left: In each of the Moxos churches the choir was located at the entrance, where the church orchestra performed, using instruments brought by the missionaries, as well as native-made instruments. In the school the students best gifted for music were selected and in the workshop various instruments were made: violins, base violins, organs, "monochords", psalters, clarinet-like "chirimías", oboes, and a few others. Music was heard every day in all the places of the mission.

Below left: With the growth of the population, Fr. Ciprinao de Barac, in 1688 introduced 86 head of cattle. Cowboys, specially trained in cattle and horse raising, were able to multiply this herd and distribute them among all the missions, creating new jobs working with meat and leather.

Below center: The Jesuit fathers and brothers gradually introduced new technologies and skills: carpentry, blacksmithing, jewelry making, leather work, etc. Every reduction had a mill for the elaboration and refining of cane sugar. The apprentices acquired skills to a high degree of dexterity, passing on their knowledge to new generations.

Below right: On February 27, 1767 King Carlos III issued a despotic royal decree ordering the immediate expulsion of the members of the Society of Jesus from all his territories. It was to Colonel Antonio de Aimerich y Villajuana, commander of the forces sent against the Portuguese, that fell the thankless mission of expelling the 24 Jesuits fathers and brothers from the territory of the Moxos.





with baroque instruments like the viola, flute, and violin. Botanists recorded the wide variety of flora and fauna, documenting specimens and sending them to Lima for further categorization and study. Linguists developed the first dictionary, divided into three dialects based upon the locations of the various reductions; thus Trinitario was spoken in the east near Trinidad, Ignaciano in the center and south near San Ignacio, and Javeriano near San Javier in the north and west. In San Ignacio there is still a pictorial representation of the day a number of chiefs brought representations of the gods they had worshiped – the fish god, the panther god, the snake god, and others – and had them burned in front of the cross of Jesus Christ.

Through music, art, dance, language, liturgical processions, and basic catechism the Jesuits were able to evangelize





Far left and left: On the day before the feast of St. Ignatius, on July 30th, the procession through Ignacio Los Moxos begins at 4 AM and ends at the church at 6 AM when the sun's first light can be seen in the sky.



Below: An Achus, or "elder," represents the ancestors. Their leather wide-brimmed hats protect them from the fireworks.

Below: Many groups of dancers had a young woman leading them in the procession.





Often couples choose to celebrate their wedding during the octave of the feast of St. Ignatius.

a large area of what had previously been a fiercely hostile grouping of tribes. The Moxos reductions flourished and quickly became the envy of neighboring Spanish and Portuguese settlements. The Moxos people quickly learned how to harvest crops through cooperative farming. They raised a breed of cattle that flourished and was so plentiful they sold the surplus in Spanish and Portuguese towns. They also were known for their beautiful tapestries and wool work. In addition, they formed one of the largest orchestras in that part of the world and played music by the Jesuit composer Domenico Zipoli, fusing baroque instruments with their indigenous music. Many of these compositions survive today and warrant further musicological study.

The age of the reductions came to an end with the suppression of the Society of Jesus. In 1778, 24 of the remaining Jesuits were led off in chains to Lima, but only 14 arrived safely. Of these, only six would arrive in Europe alive, so rough was their treatment and so rampant the disease on the ships they sailed on. Soon the Spanish and Portuguese settlers, armed for war, forced the Moxos people either to submit to their will or to flee into the Amazon rain forest.

Somewhat amazingly, many descendants from these Moxos tribes preserved their Catholic faith and traditions over the centuries. Each year 12 “caciques,” or chiefs, were chosen to lead the solemn processions at the major holidays – Christmas, Easter, the reduction’s feast day, St. Ignatius, St. Francis Xavier, Trinity Sunday, etc. Not only did they guard

the religious artifacts made during the time of the Jesuits and their reduction churches, but they also kept the traditions instilled by the Jesuits. Even the system of governance of the tribe, tribal council, shared goods, and materials were maintained by most tribes. Shockingly, in 1973 one group, the Moxos who spoke Ignaciano, were “rediscovered.” The first thing they asked for was the return of the Jesuits. In 1982, the Jesuits returned and found treasure troves of baroque instruments, music, religious artwork, tapestries and religious artifacts, dictionaries and botany books from pre-Suppression times. The basic structure of the church in San Ignacio still remained, with its almost perfect acoustics due to the design of the Swiss Jesuit brothers who had built it. The Jesuits quickly went to work, starting a grade school for the rural poor and a boarding high school for those in more remote areas who did not have access to a high school education. A health clinic was also started to serve the region. In the 1990s, money was raised to restore the original mission church. While this and the restoration of artwork are still works in process, one cannot help but be impressed by the original architecture, beautiful murals, and altar pieces. More recently Jesuits and their lay collaborators helped to found a music conservatory, which specializes in baroque renaissance music and in performing the old fusion between the baroque style and native compositions. The baroque music group of the conservatory, Ensemble Moxos, has earned international acclaim.



Photos of the new Fe Y Alegria school with (bottom photo) director Br. Juan Calle González, S.J.

But perhaps most impressive are the liturgical dances and processions, which date back to the pre-Suppression period. Don Doll, S.J., and I had the privilege of attending the celebrations in San Ignacio de Moxos for the octave of the feast of St. Ignatius. From the announcement procession of St. James the Apostle to the sunrise procession to welcome the town patron, Saint Ignatius, to the closing masses and bull fights, the pageantry and bright tropical colors evident in the native costumes prove inspiring. Some of the dance groups date back to the pre-Suppression Society, including the Macheteros, who represent the guardians of Ignatius, and the Achas, who dance like whirling dervishes with fireworks on their heads, heralding the celebrations and providing comic relief as the “tricksters” of the procession. Both men and women join in the procession and dance, each year continuing a tradition more than 300 years old.

Now the Jesuits have also been reincorporated into the processions, and in the final procession to close the feast of St. Ignatius they walk near his statue, reminding everyone of the Ignatian heart of the town. Having participated in the celebrations for the 324th anniversary last July, I can only imagine the “fiesta” that will take place next year for the 325th. Proud traditions have been maintained, and new ones express the fusions of Bolivian, Spanish, and native cultures, as the Society of Jesus walks once again with a proud Moxos people. ■

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