

Carnival!

CARNIVAL IS A JOYOUS TIME FOR THE INDIGENOUS PEOPLES OF ECUADOR
—A TIME FOR THANKSGIVING AND RECONCILIATION

By Anne Quesnelle

Carnival is celebrated in many different ways in Ecuador, depending on where you find yourself during the festivities. In many city and town streets, the people engage in intense water-throwing activities using buckets, balloons, and whatever else will hold water. For three days up to and including Ash Wednesday there are parades, dancing, and all-night musical gatherings.

However, for the indigenous living in the remote communities of the Andes mountains, the celebrations do not end on Ash Wednesday; they only begin. The reason is that carnival coincides with the traditional harvest festival, also considered the most important religious celebration for the Kichwa-speaking culture. It would be our equivalent to Easter.

Through many offerings (songs, food, processions, and rites) the indigenous worship God for the gift of the *Pachamama* (Mother Earth). This is also a time of reconciliation when the young ask the old for forgiveness for the shortcomings and social sins in the community during the past year.

I was privileged to attend such a celebration this year. My friend Segundo Cuji with whom I have been working for the past two years invited me to his community of La Pradera. All 40 families in the community gather annually for the carnival celebration. On Thursday morning after Ash Wednesday, they celebrate mass



"They got me!" The people of La Pradera community welcome Scarboro missionary Anne Quesnelle to their carnival celebrations. 'Playing' carnival includes getting doused with eggs and flour.

followed by a communal meal which always includes a few guests from neighboring communities and elsewhere.

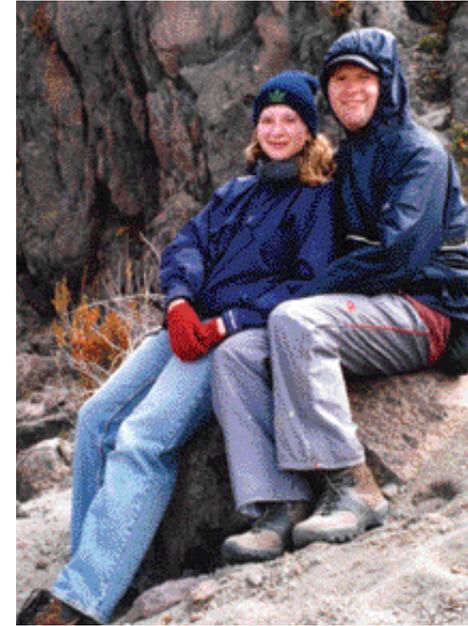
I decided to help the women cooking in the communal hut. The menu of the day included soup and lots of potatoes, all prepared over an open fire. Smoke from the fire filled the tiny hut. The entire meal took about three hours to serve as the hundred or so people took turns using the plates and cutlery available.

The afternoon was filled with games and activities. The *ollas encantadas* (magical pots) game is a children's favorite in which a

person is blindfolded and with a stick tries to break open a clay pot filled with candies and treats.

Another game involves trying to catch a live rooster that is tied to a rope and continually lowered and raised just out of reach of the catcher. The winner must bring two more roosters to next year's festivities. The day ended with a large community dance that involves the services of a local disc jockey or musicians.

Before my departure the community leaders did not lose the opportunity to 'play' carnival, covering me with eggs and flour, and offering me a glass of the



Marc Chartrand and Anne Quesnelle went to Ecuador as Scarboro missionaries in 2001. This August they celebrated their fifth wedding anniversary while participating in a month-long experience living among the people of Cajabamba, one of the poorest indigenous communities in the country.

local *chicha*, a fermented corn drink made locally for special occasions.

When I left I felt grateful for having had the opportunity to share such a joyous day with those whose daily struggle for survival leaves little room for laughter and play. Celebrating God's gifts and creation with the Kichwa young and old showed me that the poor are truly blessed. Their blessedness is not because they are among the penniless in this world, but mostly because they are among those whose hearts are truly free and grateful.∞

A humbling experience

By Marc Chartrand

Before joining Scarboro Missions, I first came to Latin America in 1997 to work and live in a poor neighbourhood of Lima, Peru. I was there with a group of students from my university (University of Sudbury) and from the University of Ottawa. Every year Sr. Lise Leriche of the Daughters of Wisdom takes university students to live and work for a month in Latin America so that they can experience third world poverty.

Students who made the trip in previous years had given us gifts to take to people who had touched their lives during their visits. The task of delivering the gifts had been assigned to me. So, accompanied by my friend who knew where to find these people, I set out one day with the gifts.

When we arrived at one house, a young girl answered the door and invited us in. She told us that the woman we were looking for was in the bedroom. Entering the room, I noticed that there was nothing there except a bed, a purse hanging on the wall, and a bare light bulb to illuminate the room.

The woman greeted us warmly and asked the young girl to get us something to eat. As I looked back into the

kitchen where the girl had gone, I noticed that there was only a single piece of bread, which she brought to the woman. The woman then broke the bread and gave it to us.

I hesitated, unsure of what to do. I did not want to eat their last bit of food. I looked at my friend and his firm expression said: "Take it. You can't refuse something someone offers you."

The woman apologized that she did not have anything else to offer us. She had been having trouble with her legs, she said, and was not able to go to the market to purchase food. We thanked her for her generosity and then I told her the reason for our visit.

I presented her with the gift and she began telling us about her relationship with the young Canadian student who had sent it. She asked me to get her purse, which she then opened. The purse was empty but for a single piece of paper with the student's name and address.

At that moment I realized how precious relationships are to the poor because that is all they have. The woman thanked us for coming and we thanked her in return for her gracious hospitality.∞