

# Meeting Saints in South America

by Mr. Thomas Simisky, SJ

Being a Jesuit has allowed me to see God's active presence in our world and to meet some of his saints who currently walk among us or have left their footprints as faithful testimony.

Over three years ago, Father Provincial asked me if I would be interested in spending this post-novitiate time of formation in Santiago, Chile. My first response was one of uncertainty. I had been a high school Spanish teacher before entering the Society, but the thought of studying philosophy in another language seemed daunting. At the same time, I have always felt something of a missionary vocation, so I very excitedly agreed, really having no idea of what would follow. This would be one more example of the Society placing more confidence in me than I myself originally had, surpassing self-imposed limitations through God's grace.

I landed in a Chile immersed in "Hurtado-mania." Padre Alberto Hurtado, SJ, had just been canonized two months prior and the country was still exuberantly expressing a mixture of popular religiosity typical of Latin America, along with patriotic pride in the Church's recognition of their second saint. His name, image, and legacy seemed to be everywhere: I studied at the Universidad Alberto Hurtado, worked in the pastoral ministry office of the *Hogar de Cristo* (a national social service network that he founded in 1944), prayed at the retreat house that he built, read the magazine (*Mensaje*) he began and books that he had written, and visited San Ignacio high school where he taught and lived. The vast quantity and diversity of works didn't seem to correspond to a man who lived to be only 51.

However, the most powerful experience came from the people who lived in the *Hogar de Cristo* (Home of Christ) shelters. The shrine dedicated to Padre Hurtado is constructed next to the original homeless shelter. Along with his tomb, it contains the green truck he used to rescue boys living along the river and bring them to the Hogar. On



Cristóbal Madero, SJ, Tom Simisky, SJ, and friends in front of an Hogar de Cristo.

one occasion, I had the privilege of meeting Juanito, one of the few surviving boys who had met Padre Hurtado.

Juanito, in spite of being very weak, began preaching strongly about the great man that San Alberto was. I listened to his emotional statement, thinking, "I am really listening to a prophet right now." We all left very animated from that visit and continued to the other houses. When I learned that Juanito had died a couple of days after speaking to us, I thanked the Lord for having given me that connection to Padre Hurtado. Certainly Christ's love for us extended through Alberto Hurtado to Juanito, calling us all to be members of the great communion. San Alberto Hurtado is as present now as ever, with his spirit guiding his works in Chile. And even though his name appears often, he firmly insisted that the shelters he built would be called the *Hogar de Cristo*. For that is whom it houses and of whom the saints speak.



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