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FIRST REPORT FROM LA PAZ, BOLIVIA

Dear Linda:

By the second week of May, we had been introduced to the Vice Minister of Culture, Lic. Pablo Cesar Groux, and had several meetings with our team of division heads - Lic. Lupe Meneses, Chief of Cataloging, Arc. Freddy Riveros, Chief Architect, and Sr. Carlos Rua, Chief of Restoration. The Vice Minister welcomed us and the help we are bringing to Bolivia. The team had completed risk analyses for over 50 places and "prepared the ground" by contacting many community leaders with preliminary plans for improving the physical security of the churches, museums and other cultural sites in their areas.

Together, we developed a preliminary list of 39 locations. In subsequent meetings, we narrowed it to 20 sites, based on cultural importance of the collection and level of risk. With this list, we made a preliminary calendar for site visits.

National laws declare art the property of all Bolivians, but it resides mostly in churches and convents founded in the 1500's through early 1800's by the religious orders who came to South America from Europe. Some of the villages are located on trade routes - overnight stops for the horse, mule, and llama caravans that hauled silver, gold, and other materials dug from the mines - from the interior to the Pacific coast. This tangible art, including the buildings, is the national heritage of Bolivia.

The communities where these churches are located feel a deep sense of ownership and stewardship. The team at the Vice Ministry has cultivated this as an integral part of the implementation and maintenance of the security of the collections.

Our first project is Iglesia Guaqui (waa-key) in the altiplano of Bolivia, about 20 kilometers from the Peru border. Since Inca times, there has been a Tambo here, an inn where people came to buy and sell. In 1784, the Spanish conquistadors built a stone church in this market and fishing village on the shores of Lake Titicaca. Four oil paintings, each measuring approximately 3 meters by 5 meters and completed in 1625, were installed on either side of the nave. Over the next 50 years, anonymous craftsmen carved the three story high retabolo, covered it with gold leaf and formed hundreds of high relief panels of nearly pure silver for the altar. The sanctuary walls hold 82 large oil paintings, many by anonymous artists. This church, declared a national monument in 1962, has one of the few intact collections in Bolivia - nearly

all other churches have suffered one or more thefts of paintings, sculpture and carvings over the years.

On May 23, Padre Justin Limachi, pastor of Iglesia Apostol Santiago in Guaqui, came down to La Paz to meet us. Padre Justin had already enlisted two craftsmen - members of Bolivia's Navy, currently stationed at Lake Titicaca and working on improving port facilities. Both men are willing to donate their expertise in carpentry and metal fabrication. Freddy Riveros and Carlos Rua have designed improvements to doors and windows; ASIS funds will purchase materials.

We set a date for inspecting the church. The night before our trip, Padre Justin called - the road to Guaqui was blocked by school teachers, protesting their low wages and petitioning the national government for a raise in pay. We postponed the trip to Wednesday, May 30.

We spent most of the day in Guaqui. Padre Justin and Don Ricardo, caretaker for the past 25 years, showed us the entire complex - church, rectory, courtyards, radio station and community buildings. During lunch, Padre Justin told us, "I remember when you came here in 2002. I knew you would come back - I just didn't know when." Nodding his head toward the opposite end of the table where the two navy engineers were sitting, he said, "I found help for you."

The church needs bars for twelve windows, major repairs to a wooden door on one side of the sanctuary, and a new exterior door leading to the choir loft. The craftsmen took measurements, made drawings, and promised to deliver a report on materials needed and time required. We should receive their report next week. We will buy materials in La Paz. Padre Justin will pick them up and deliver them to his craftsmen.

In addition to this project, we have met several times with Valerie O'Brien, Cultural Affairs Officer, and Fabiola Ibarnegaray, Coordinator for Cultural Programs, at the U.S. Embassy. Ms. O'Brien was thrilled that the ASIS Foundation is directly supporting efforts to reduce thefts of art and archaeological artifacts here in Bolivia. The embassy has proposed some cost-sharing efforts for certain projects. We're waiting on final approval of a small grant of \$2,000 that would be used to strengthen the efforts of the ASIS Foundation here in Bolivia.

This June, we travel to Potosi to begin work on four churches - three in the city, the fourth in the village of Tomave, about 70 kilometers southwest from Potosi.

We'll keep you posted and will send photos of this remarkable work that the ASIS Foundation is making possible.

Cordially,

Art Kingsbury, Ph.D., CPP  
FISM

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