

Elaine Schmidt

**Graduation Year:** Senior

**College:** Arts & Letters

**Major(s):** Program of Liberal Studies

**Minors(s):** Latino Studies

**Scholar Group Membership:** Sorin Scholars

**Did you received other funding for this project?:** ISLA

**Could you have completed this project without CUSE funding?** No

**More details on CUSE funding assistance?**

**Project Title:** Finding God and Beauty in the Catholicism of the Peruvian Andes

**Project Location:** Chucuito, Peru

**ND Faculty Mentor:** Peter Casarella, Jenny Martin, Victor Maque

**Project Type:** Research

**Why did you undertake this project/experience?** Deepen your knowledge of a topic or issue, Research/experience necessary for senior thesis or capstone project, Internationalize your Notre Dame experience

**Did your funded experience help you:**

**[Deepen your understanding of your coursework or field of study]:** Very Much

**[Discern your interests and post-bac goals]:** Yes

**[Become confident in your ability to set and achieve your goals]:** Very Much

**[Gain a more nuanced view of local, national, or global communities]:** Very Much

**[Improve your written and verbal communications skills]:**Yes

**Tell us about your experience.**

I spent ten days listening to “campesinos” or rural, Peruvian subsistence farmers explain how the Virgin Mary, specific Saints, and Andean spiritual beliefs and practices influence Catholicism in the Peruvian Andes. I hoped to learn more about how “campesinos” experience faith and how their culture and daily reality affects the way they pray, what they pray for, the manner in which they devote themselves to God, and how they personally express God’s activity in the world and his relationship to human beings. Slow to open up upon first encounter, Peruvian campesinos oftentimes take a while to warm-up to individuals before they will speak freely about personal beliefs. Luckily, by living locally at the house of my professor—who lives in Chucuito— I was perceived as more of an insider than someone who bused in every day. With a few names of individuals whom I should contact, I hit the ground running, waking up anywhere from 4:45am-7am to catch early-risers before they were off to the fields to begin the day’s work. Walking house to house, I dropped in on various hillside residents who were farming, tending to their animals, or taking care of children. Making introductions, I informed locals about my project and asked to meet with them at a later date for an interview. A few took me up that minute for an interview, others told me to come back the next day, some fed me vague answers and would duck

into their houses as I walked by throughout the week, and some told me to come back sometime when they were around.

With the goal of two to three interviews daily, I was lucky enough to complete a total of seventeen interviews with locals and two interviews with priests despite losing my first day to altitude sickness and another day due to traveler's sickness. Through my conversations, I was able to hear and see firsthand the peoples' deep faith in God's goodness and their trust that God cares for even the "small" things in their lives. Some noteworthy findings include the emphasis on performing "obras" or ritual works such as "paga la tierra" on the "apu" or paying the Earth on a mountain and "hacer presencia" or to be present at local celebrations of Virgins and saints. Moreover, although Liberation Theology originated in Peru, only one local knew of Liberation Theology. This is interesting because rather than attempt to provoke change through the political system, locals manifest their desires through prayer, trusting that God's providence will protect them in their "camino" or their life's path. One woman said, "just as we take care of the pets in our houses, God takes care of us." When asked "What do Mary, the saints, and God do for you," almost everyone emphasized God's goodness and emphasized God's role in making their crops grow, in bringing prosperity to their family, and in healing the sick. While in the United States, people often feel resentment towards God for the things that go wrong in life, every individual I spoke to expressed an extremely positive view of God as purely good, generous, and loving. While people expressed various views on human nature, almost everyone believed that God gives mankind an opportunity to be better every day.

I am thankful to have been exposed to the perspectives of individuals who have "bastante fe" or tremendous amounts of faith; the Peruvian disposition towards giving thanks and their emphasis on God's goodness, while divergent from most United States Catholics, serves as a beautiful reminder of God's working in our daily life. Whereas Americans are insulated from God's providence, the campesinos recognize how God works in all things. To Americans, things as seemingly insignificant and ordinary as the cultivation of crops and the falling of rain are the working of a loving, benevolent God in our daily lives. By integrating local Andean spiritual beliefs about the power of the "Apu" or mountains and the importance of paying the Earth, Peruvian Catholics practice a beautifully inculturated faith. Allowing gospel values to shine through local beliefs, Peruvian Catholics have found a harmonization in what could be seen as diverging belief systems. As a result, we can see how the working of the Holy Spirit—prior to the arrival of Christianity—is evident within Andean cultural and spiritual practices. Moreover, exposing oneself to the unique, valuable perspectives of Peruvian Catholics cause one to reflect on one's own beliefs and values. Because God reveals himself in a particular way to the poor, we see how the poor have an exceptional, invaluable understanding of God—a perspective that all people should look to in order to better understand God. As a result, Peruvian Catholicism is one of myriad distinctive, irreplaceable stones in a mosaic that portrays God; a mosaic that provokes a feeling of awe and reverence for God's unexpected, creative self-revelation through unexpected mediums.

**Describe the impact this project had, both on you as a student-scholar and on the people you worked with.**

This project helped me grow academically, personally, and spiritually. Going door to door in a rural area, I was forced out of my comfort zone not only in that I was essentially "cold-calling"

individuals, but moreover, I was performing every interview in Spanish, my second language. By the end of the trip, though, I felt confident enough to approach any individual and was able to comfortably start conversation with whomever I encountered. Moreover, during my interviews, I was privy to information that I could never imagine sharing with a stranger; women told me about their abusive husbands, their tragic stories of losing family members to illness and moving away based on necessity, and various other stories that were extremely personal and intimate. Humbled by their honesty, I felt compelled to retell their stories and carry the memory of them in my heart; I believe that once you choose to love someone, you will carry them with you for the rest of your life. This experience taught me how easy it is to love and care for someone when both individuals are vulnerable and open to sincere conversation. Finally, I saw God in the face of all those I met and was surprised by their joy and faith despite the difficulty of their circumstances. Albeit short conversations, my interviews gave me an opportunity to peer into the most cherished memories, beliefs, and stories of those with whom I spoke. I feel humbled to have encountered so many amazing individuals who were willing to trust a “gringa.”

In regards to the impact of my project on those who I worked with, I believe I was able to give the gift of attentive listening. I woke up every day so excited to receive the stories of so many beautiful individuals, and I cherished every conversation. I was constantly in awe of their profound faith and the way in which they saw God’s working in their daily lives. If nothing else, I think I am likely one of the only people in their lives who asked them to say, in their own words, what they believe about God, Mary, and the Saints. I think people saw my asking questions and listening as a unique gift that they did not usually receive. I hope my interviewees came away knowing that their stories and their lives matter, and that they have a unique, beautiful perspective to offer. If nothing else, I hope I showed them that not all “gringos” are bad people and that we care enough about what they think to travel to Peru and spend a week and a half trekking through the Peruvian countryside in the pouring rain just to sit down and have ask them questions.

Moreover, my dad came with me for the first five days, and as someone who has never traveled out of the country, he was able to learn so much as a result of seeing my interviews and experiencing Peru with me. This was invaluable to his personal growth because he was challenged to evaluate his own limited worldview. Unable to communicate, immersed in a new culture, eating unusual food, and living in extremely simple conditions was like a mini-ISSLP, and I think he will grow tremendously as a result. This could not have happened if not for CUSE’s grant. Thank you from the bottom of my heart for making it possible to have a Kansas kid learn all about Peruvian culture!

**Describe how this experience is connected to your plans as a student or future professional.**

This research will serve as the basis for my senior thesis. Although I am still discerning graduate school, this experience showed me that I do not want to do extensive fieldwork for the rest of my life. I would, however, gladly perform fieldwork for a couple of years, especially if it involves conversations about faith. This research helped me realize that while travel is wonderful, I am truly passionate about having conversations about faith and the intimate details of peoples’ lives. This helped confirm that perusing a two-year full-time volunteer position working with High School

students as a college counselor will align well with my interests and my desired areas of growth, which include learning more about urban education and exposing myself to new people, ideas, and experiences.

**What advice would you give other students who are planning to pursue similar projects?**

I would advise students intending to interview campesinos to make sure they connect with as many people as they can during the first few days. People will ask to reschedule or meet at a later date, and as a result, you will need to make plans early enough so that you can end up interviewing them eventually. By my last two days there, people did not want to meet with me because they did not want to talk that day or the next day. Front-loading interviews and initiating a conversation about meeting on a future day is advisable.

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