

Violation of Copa's Dark Virgin

07.05.13

On April 22 just as the sun climbed over the eastern mountains, the Copacabana Cathedral bells rang frantically for nearly an hour, signaling a major crisis and summoning the entire town.



Overnight, thieves had broken into the 430-year-old cathedral's Chapel of the Dark Virgin of the Lake, Copa's patron saint. They stole the Virgin's golden crown and a gold crescent moon, each weighing over 3 kilos (about 6.6 pounds). They took her velvet gown, adorned with sacred ornaments and precious jewels, along with gold-crowned Baby Jesus. Initial



estimates pegged the loss at over \$1 million USD, then over \$2 million; the latest: over \$20 million.



Cathedral congregants are holding round-the-clock vigils to pray for the return of the stolen items, and forgiveness of the thieves. Townspeople often cry when they talk of the sacrilege. Many have closed their businesses in mourning. Last week Copa's ten *zona* (zone) presidents called for mandatory overnight vigils inside the cathedral – every household had to muster at least one adult, or pay a 200 Boliviano fine (about \$30, or roughly a week's average income). At 7:30 p.m.



last Thursday, carrying lanterns and candles and led by our *zona's* green and yellow banner and the Virgin's burgundy and gold standard, we and about 250 of our neighbors formally marched to the town's central plaza. We circled the plaza singing *Ave Maria*, stopping at each corner to chant Hail Marys, the Lord's Prayer, and the Apostle's Creed.



On the cathedral's front steps, we prayed the rosary aloud. At about 9:30, lugging bundles of blankets, we walked across the cathedral's vast courtyard ... and found the massive, carved oak doors locked.

We hunkered down on the stones outside, the Southern Cross and the Milky Way glowing overhead. Propped against a stone parapet, I saw two shooting stars and the occasional butter cream under wing of nighthawks wheeling over the bell tower. Light napping was tolerated, but full sleep was technically disallowed. At about midnight, the temperature now in the low 40's, tempers flared. Half the group ran, shouting, across the

plaza to the police station and demanded they open the cathedral. Police escorted them back, and a heated shouting match erupted. "It's *our* cathedral. Clearly, you cannot protect it, so we must! Unlock it. Now!"



The police refused and disbursed among us, fingering their mace cans and guns.



Thankfully at 1:30 a.m., while we shivered in the cold breeze rolling off the lake, our president handed out fresh coca leaves (chewing coca fends off pain and enhances stamina), while two neighborhood matrons served syrup-sweet coffee. Blessedly, it was scalding hot. As the hours crawled by, some of our neighbors wandered home. Finally, at 4:30 our *zona* president issued the last of three *fichas*, stamped, dated chits, proving attendance throughout the night: we were free to go home.

In keeping with a ritual response to an event such as this, the Catholic faithful have placed two human heads at the door of the Virgin's Chapel meant to "smoke out" the evil-doers and induce them to surrender and confess. For their part, the police have brought in Aymará *yatiris* (witch doctors) to read coca leaves to try to locate the stolen items.



An Aymaran Yitiri



La Paz paper proclaiming, "They Turn to Coca and Yitiris"

In the first days after the heist, local folks suspected people from Tito Yupanqui, a nearby village that had hoped a new, \$600 million, triple-span bridge would land in their tiny village, tying them to tourist dollars flowing from the only road between La Paz and Copa. (Our April 15 newsletter focused on two back-to-back blockades that virtually strangled Copa for nearly three weeks. The first was a public demand for a new bridge to be built in Tiquina; the other was staged by Tito Yupanqui residents, angry because everyone else on the peninsula voted for a single, \$200 million bridge in Tiquina.)

Last Saturday's La Paz *Extra* announced that police had detained two priests, a porter, a police officer, a lay person and a sacristan, because of contradicting stories. Other news articles said that in recent years, silver, gold and gems have been stolen from cathedrals throughout Bolivia. So another theory blames an organized gang. In this most recent incident, police say the thieves used a long ladder then broke through a high window in the upper story of the virgin's chapel. They repelled down, swiped the goods, and likely reversed their route to exit.

How is it that no one saw anything suspicious? The heist occurred in the early morning, when virtually all of Copa's 8,000 residents were sleeping. Also, the cathedral's security cameras and motion sensors weren't working (some say that was because the Franciscans who oversee the cathedral hadn't paid their bills). Whether it was just bad luck or negligence, the non-functional security system has prompted some to demand removal of the Franciscans. One Catholic friend suggested the Methodist Church ought to take over!

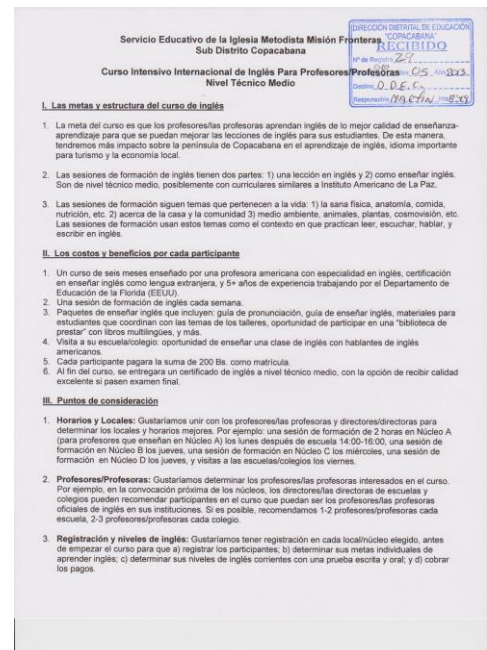
Teach the Teachers Program Gears Up



Katie Yaun, 33, arrived two weeks ago. She's a certified English-as-a-second-language instructor with an illustrious career teaching teachers in the Florida State Department of Education. She's already designing the mission's new Teach the Teachers (English Language) Program. Last week we met with the regional District Superintendent of Education, who will formally present the new program to the peninsula's 33 school directors. Starting May 13, we'll assess teachers' skill levels, and we'll launch the six-month intensive course on May 20.



The T-t-T Program springs from a 2012 initiative in which the mission hosted Ryan Kolegas, who taught English in a rural school. Word got out, and soon school directors and even Copa's mayor wanted us to provide an English teacher for every school on the peninsula. In the new program, one or two teachers from every grade- and high school will meet weekly at four or five selected hub locations, where Katie will teach English and coach on best teaching techniques. The program will include a mobile lending library of books in Spanish, English, Aymará and/or Quechua. The collection now includes more than 220 items.



Above: Teach the Teachers planning sessions with Sub District Coordinator Felipe and Pastors Juan and Dionisio. Immediately Above Left: Copacabana Minister of Education, Maximo Quispe has endorsed the program. Immediately Above Right: The one-page summary of the program presented to Maximo.

Katie and we have raised approximately 75% percent of the \$11,000 needed for materials, transportation and Katie’s cost of living (she’s unsalaried). If you’d like to help support the Teach the Teachers Program, please consider making a gift. To make an electronic donation, please go to: <http://www.umcmmission.org/Give-to-Mission/Search-for-Projects/Projects/Peru-Bolivia-Lake-Titicaca-Border-Mission> and follow the prompts. Specify **Advance site # 3021288**

If you prefer to send a check, please make it payable to **Advance GCFA**, in the memo line be sure to write **Site # 3021288** and mail to:
Advance GCFA
P.O. Box 9068
New York, NY 10087-9068.

At right are some ways your gift will help the mission’s “Teach the Teachers” program:

Sponsor one, or more, of six 4-week “Teach The Teachers Course” sessions for 30 students. Includes all materials, printing, refreshments, certificates & Katie’s travel.....**\$375 per session**

Sponsor one, or more, of 33 classroom teaching kits. Includes teaching aids, posters, flashcards & games...**\$25 per kit**

Kids’ Books Bolivia
 We would like to purchase a minimum of four sets for the mission’s school lending library. Set of 10 (if purchased by us in Bolivia).....**180 Bs. (\$27) per set**

Or make a donation of any amount ...?

Healing and Recovery

Now, a little over two weeks after the Cathedral heist, Copa is just beginning to recover her footing. Last weekend, Copa hosted the *Festividad del Señor de la Santa Cruz de Colquepata*. The celebration draws thousands of visitors from all over Bolivia: parades of competitive dance groups, marching bands and hundreds of vendors selling everything from blankets to jewelry and dance shoes, to the service of French braiding dancers’ hair, and of course, all sorts of snack food and cases of beer stacked five feet high. Three days of partying brought some welcome income to Copa’s resident vendors, and it seemed as though all the music and dancing lifted local folks’ spirits.



Montage of Copacabana Peninsula School Students

Last week and this week, we've been visiting a lot of the rural schools on the peninsula to introduce Katie Yaun, show her around, and promote the soon-to-launch Teach the Teachers Program, which will benefit teachers as well as students.

Here are a few of the students who will be learning English as a result of this program. They say "Jallalla!" and "Yospagada!" (Hooray and thank you) for your support. Jeff and Debbie

