

Asked the following questions, **Sister Erika Stanulla Grabis** responded with the beautiful autobiographical essay that follows.

Sister Erika,

1. What is your background: birthplace, family, education; how you came to know the Ursulines?
2. When did you first arrive in Peru and how come? Did you receive a call to come, or what?
3. What was your first ministry when you arrived in Peru?
4. How did your ministry evolve over the years?
5. What were the reasons cited by the German government for awarding you this honor?
6. Please describe the honor. I have heard that it is one of the highest honors that the government awards to one of its citizens. And please do not be modest!
7. What is your own vision of Ursuline life and religious life as it is evolving? How do you see the effectiveness of Ursuline ministries in proclaiming the Kingdom of God?

Sister Erika responds:

I was born in 1940 in Germany, in Silesia, which is now Poland. We had to leave in 1946 and were placed in East Germany, from where we fled in 1949 from Communism, and then I grew up in the northern part of West Germany. I am the youngest of 6 children of a Catholic family, five of whom are still living. I did 5 years of primary school, 9 years of secondary and high school, finishing with a bachelor's degree in modern languages in 1961. Then I began my medical studies at the University of Münster, Germany, where I remained for two and a half years, finishing with the examen before entering the semesters in Clinics.

Then, in 1964, I went to Peru to enter Ursuline life in Lima. On this past February 11, I observed the 46th anniversary of my arrival in Peru. After my novitiate, I continued my medical studies, interrupted by one year for studies in theology. In March, 1973 I graduated as Medical Doctor. So I am a physician.

I felt the call to religious life when I was about 12. The announcement of a sister's funeral that said Sr. so and so, "SPOUSE OF CHRIST", (isn't this our charism?) made a great impression on me. From that time on there was a kind of desire and call to belong entirely to the Lord. I used to help my mother distribute missionary reviews of the Missionaries of the Divine Word. I always read the whole review! Contemplatives as well as missionaries were a great attraction for me. When I was 14 my mother said to me: "I guess you want to be a religious and missionary." Well, a mother knows what goes on in her children's minds! The problem for me was that I never studied with religious and had no direct contact with them. Once I was at the university there were many different religious congregations in the residence where I was living. I got to know the Ursulines of Germany. I loved them because of their prayer life and family spirit, but the missions were missing. Then I met an Ursuline of the Roman Union from Lima. And I began to write to the sisters in Lima. I found that this was it: A long time for personal prayer, Christ my only love, and love in community, a spirit of family, and missionary work. However I was half-way through my studies! It was meditating on the gospel of the young rich man where I definitely felt the Lord was looking at me with love and saying: Erika, leave all, sell all..Come and follow me. So I said 'Yes' to the Lord and interrupted my studies. In January 1964 I sailed

from Germany to Peru – it took one entire month – and I entered the Ursulines of the Roman Union on February 27 1964. All my religious formation has been in Peru. During that month on the boat, I studied Spanish.

After I finished my studies I first worked in Lima, in a small hospital in a poor area in pediatrics and at the same time in a small dispensary in our community in Miramar, also at the service of the poor. Then with Sr. Gladys I asked to go further, outside the capital to serve in a poor area. We were sent to the south of Peru in the jungle, Shintuya, where we worked among native people, tribes that become known to the outside world only in the 1950. Another reality! People did not know Spanish. There were about three different tribes, each one with its own language. I had to work with someone who could translate. I worked there as medical doctor, too.

In 1976/77 I made my Tertianship with the Dutch-speaking group.

In 1977 we made a new foundation in the Andes mountains at 3600 meters above sea level in a very poor area. I worked there in a health center, a small hospital I built with the peasants. The center was multi-purpose: medical care, health education, training of health leaders for the different villages, pastoral work, etc....

Besides the work I also was local prioress, in charge of a novice, and later on a junior, and a postulant, and in 1981, I became group superior of Peru. We are a small province so that many times I had to be ready for different services at the same time. From there, in 1983, I was elected a general Councilor. From 1990 to 1996, I was group superior in Lima, and novice mistress. Then I began a new community in the Andes mountains in 1997 near Huancayo, in Sapallanga. I entered then into pastoral work, as this area had been abandoned. There were many villages where a priest came only once a year, and there was poor religious education. Besides this I always was ready to help in medical emergencies. From 2000-2002 I was in Canada in the IFHIM.

Afterwards I was again Provincial 2002 - 2005 and in charge of candidates and postulants in Lima. There I also did pastoral work twice a week in a very poor area in Lima. In 2008 and 2009, I was again in Sapallanga doing pastoral work and social work for the poor. In November 2009 I had to leave the mountains because of heart problems: I could no longer live at 3200 meters above sea level. I am living at Saint Ursula's now and my health is just fine now.

The reason why the German government gave me this award was specifically for my commitment to the poor as a medical doctor, and for promoting the poor and Peruvian people. The ambassador mentioned my whole life referring to me as "an excellent Ursuline;" he mentioned my studies, the step I took to come to Peru and to commit my life to the people in direct medical service, in promoting their education, in building with them their small hospital, and in helping the poor in social work. This is all very difficult to say. It is just my life as such given each day, to love, to serve wherever I can.

As I have said before in other contexts, all I am and all I did I owe to many people, I have contact with several German families and each visit I make is with the purpose of finding financial help for our Peruvian people, but above all to build a bridge between so different

realities: to make people aware of the problems that exist in our world. For me it is just living the OUR FATHER. I realize that we all are sons and daughters of the same father and so we are all brothers and sisters. We just believe this and try to live it out.