



**Wisconsin Conference  
United Church of Christ**

## **Reflections on Ministry among the Desperately Poor**

*by Rev. Barbara DeSouza*

I write as a Pastor, a graduate of United Theological Seminary, ordained in the United Church of Christ in 1985 with long time standing in the Northwest Association of the Conference, now retired. Some of you may remember that most of my ministry was spent among the poor, but spiritually rich, in the cities of Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, Brasil. It was there I had the privilege of working with women who were living in impoverished conditions in city shanty towns and rural areas. Together we empowered one another to speak truth to power. We were often overwhelmed but our faith gave us the courage to remain strong and unashamed.

I observe so many of you seeking to live out your faith in the midst of so much that contradicts the Gospel you have been called to preach and teach. I admire the faith and courage you bring to our varied ministries. It is tough going; demanding work. I confess that I feel frustrated and even angry at times by what I see happening in so many places; close to home, and far away, in this vast country that we love and in its political life. I have been asked by friends to share with you something of my experience while living in Brasil for almost 50 years; a country where I saw the church's reaction to injustice; a church that attempted to speak out and be present truthfully in the midst of travesty and a massive denial of so much of what we have been called to proclaim and to be.

I went to Brasil in 1967 and I witnessed "liberation theology" in action. I marched in the streets in protests lead by Catholic Priests and Nuns against the inequality of the poor, police brutality and political corruption that bowed down to upper-class power. With many others, I put my body on line and laid down in the streets with Nuns and Priests in front of a hospital where the poor were treated. The Government had decided that the hospital was to be

torn down. I was there with the protesting Catholics and clergy in Sao Paulo when the police stormed protesters who dared to speak up, and also later when the dictatorship was overturned and Brasil once again became a Republic. Of course, corruption and pervasive inequality were able to return, but we did not give up; the Catholic Church continued to speak out.

Leonardo Boff was a figure to be heard as we marched in the streets of the suburbs of Sao Paulo calling out for social justice. We marched for equal rights for women. We marched with Catholic clergy, for domestic help workers to be recognized as legal professionals with health care, rights to paid vacations, home leave and an 8-hour work day. From the pulpits of Churches there was no holding back; corruption was named for what it was: a denial of basic human rights. The church demanded social justice.

It was unforgettable to see and hear the Catholic Church leaders speaking out. At the time there were few Protestant or evangelical communities and they were more prevalent in the rural, economically-deprived and underdeveloped areas of the country. There was no ecumenism as Protestant communities struggled to find their place in a largely Roman Catholic country.

Then as the Catholic Church became more outspoken and more political, the leaders of Church, perhaps in fear of censorship, suggested the Church was becoming too political and this was not the role of the Church. I cannot say, nor do I recall, if it was church of Brasil or of Rome, Cardinal Ratzinger, or the corrupt Brazilian government that put a damper on "liberation theology," but it slowly disappeared. However, among the poor the ideals remained. Dom Helder Camera, the Archbishop of Recife, was censored and jailed in home as were other Priests. I remember one of my rich acquaintances, a devout Catholic, said he was disappointed in the church. Why? Because it had become the church of the poor only. "What about me and my family?" he said to me.

I had the privilege of meeting Dom Helder, the archbishop of Recife. I was humbled by this tiny, dynamic man of God. I shall forever remember his words that left such a deep impression on me: "As long as one child goes to bed hungry, there will be no peace in the world." When I met him in the USA, he told me that when I returned to Brasil I should continue my work among the "Least of these," the shanty town communities. He represented to me what we, as followers of Jesus, are to do and to be.

In 1992, I left Sao Paulo and was called to Rio de Janeiro where I had worked on arriving in Brasil in 1967. I was to work as a health teacher, empowering women in the shanty towns as I had done before in Sao Paulo. As time went on, much had changed in Brasil. Poverty and social injustice remained embedded. Yet the poor, housed in crowded shanty towns, became more educated; more and more young people were finishing high school and the Catholic Church, along with the increasingly more active Protestant mission churches from the United States, joined to form an organization of volunteer teachers who then augmented the low income high school student's preparation for further education. Night classes were held since most shanty town high school students had day jobs. The challenge was to prepare students for the college exams which they would have been unable to pass except for this special preparation. These students, for example, in the shanty town where I was, had their entrance fees paid for by this ecumenical support group.

I remember when television arrived in many shanty town homes. The world was opening up. Priests began to speak out using this media to reach more people. With television in their homes, the life of the well to-do became much more visible. The visual reality of the day to day life of the upper classes became known. Many of the students came to know more because their parents were the servants in these homes. Now their children could actually see the enormous gap between themselves and the affluent rich. (Do we know how the lives of low income families really are here in the richest country of the world?)

Young people then wanted to have the things that they never dreamed possible. These young students listened to the Priests encouraging them. In the shanty town where I was, the Priest gave a part of their humble church building to computer training. Volunteers came in to help young people learn how to use the computers and helped raise money so young students could have their own computers. Shanty town youth began to graduate from college. Their ceremonies were applauded by the Priests and Nuns, some of whom had entered into politics in the name of their faith. I should add that the status of women began to change as well. They were assuming leadership in their communities as well as their roles at home. They were being encouraged to continue their education. Many of my students were going to college, becoming nurses and teachers as well as other jobs in the health field.

I then count myself as a witness to the dedication of the church to justice in words and action; the sacrifice many clergy made with jail sentences and, as history records, death. Like you, I am honored and moved to this day by these words from Scripture: "Love your neighbor as yourself," a question followed by the old, but ever new question, "Who is my neighbor?". Thus, I have believed, as you do, that the church's role includes the duty we have to "lift up our voice" and to speak out in the face of governmental policies when they are corrupt and when they present a danger to society. I see this not only as appropriate, but as a biblical imperative; a commandment entrusted to us.

Looking back over the years, I have come to honor and understand that those of us who are ordained to service are wonderfully privileged to "equip the saints" and to offer spiritual guidance and encouragement in our faith communities. Like members of our congregations, we, like each of them, are disciples called to follow the path set out by Jesus. We share among them the joy of our calling which is to serve as pastors and teachers within our respective churches as well as the communities where we find ourselves. I learned in the shanty towns of Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro that this requires risks, especially in the dangerous and fragile moments like the ones we face now in our country. The vocation we share is a humble, yet honorable one. But there are pitfalls, dangers and temptations, especially at this fateful hour. My prayer is that all of us may summon the courage to lift up our hearts, to speak up and act, as we embrace Christ's teachings in the here and now; that is, as they pertain to this sacramental moment in time. Where the Gospel is "rightly preached" and the sacramental purposes of God are "rightly served," there has always been risk of losing members and the probability of facing financial difficulties. I pray that you may be able to speak to the crucifixions that confront the churches "with the troubles of the world."

Like those in Brasil, pastors can look to Mark 6: 20-26, the Beatitudes. Especially 22-23. As you preach you may not be popular; in fact you may be criticized as Mark writes, "Blessed are you when people hate you...." But you have been "called" to preach the Gospel of Jesus, the Christ.

"Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to false prophets."

I believe the time has come to step up and speak out: yes, from the Pulpit, in the name of your faith in Jesus, the Christ. I pray that you who are entrusted with proclaiming the Gospel, in words and deeds, will have the courage to speak out from the pulpit and in public. As you do, you will meet the living Christ at every turn.

Rev. Barbara DeSouza



Barb DeSouza and her husband, Gus, in Brazil