

An Experience of our Life, our Mission, and our Charism with our Sisters, Associates, and Partners in Ministry in Brazil (Part 1)

By: Margaret Magee OSF

I am grateful for the recent opportunity to spend some time with our Sisters, Associates, and Partners in Ministry in Brazil. I traveled to Brazil with the other members of Congregational Leadership, our General Treasurer, Chris Treichel, and Congregational Secretary, Kristen Luther, for the week-long Board of Directors meeting at our central house, Convento Mãe Admirável, in Anápolis. Also participating in this meeting were Marinêz Arantes da Silva, Regional Minister of Brazil, and the Sisters on the Regional Council along with the Leadership from Jamaica, Teresita DeSouza and Administrator Trinita Solnek. Pat Tyre served as the translator for our meetings which is a graced presence of attentive and deep listening to bridge our conversations in both English and Portuguese. Pat is providing a vital and integral ministry for our Congregation. These days of our meetings were full with details of business, budgets, and finances yet profound in our sharing of prayer, faith, and our vision and hope for the future.

After the close of the Board of Directors meeting Pat Klemm, Pat Tyre, and I, along with our Brazilian Sisters, bid farewell to those returning to the United States and Jamaica. We were joined by Erin Baird of Allegany Franciscan Ministries (AFM) in Tampa, FL. Erin is the Director of Grants, managing the grantmaking system and its procedures. Additionally, Erin serves as program officer for the ACOR grants (Allegany Community Out Reach) which provides funding for many of the FSA-affiliated ministries and projects in Brazil, Bolivia, Jamaica, and in the United States.

**The next 10 days** were planned to give us an experience and a deeper understanding of the life and the mission lived by our Sisters, Associates, and Partners in Ministry in Anápolis, Palmas, Araguacema, Cristalândia, and in Ceres. As I personally prepared for this experience I was conscious of two things. First, that these experiences and visits would take place within the time of Palm Sunday and the Easter Triduum. So, how could I hold these days in a very sacred way and bring the events, the people, and the conversations into the reality of Christ's Paschal Mystery breaking through in our world today? The second awareness was to be open to the experience of interculturality, that is, to be attentive, humbled, and open to enter into and welcome the cultural experiences and richness of our Sisters and people in Brazil. This meant suspending my own judgments from my North American mentality which so often is the dominant culture. For the past three years I have been studying and learning Brazilian Portuguese using a program called Duolingo. This has been a commitment I made and have been faithful to daily lessons as a way of entering into conversation, halting at best on my part, but with a desire to truly be present and communicate with our sisters and the Brazilian people. We, as a Congregation, are just beginning to explore the meaning and experience of interculturality and hopefully it will open us to new and broader ways of thinking, being, and interacting with one another and others.

Our first mission encounter was at Mãe Admirável as we visited with people from various parts of the city of Anápolis and beyond who come to the Mãe for social services and assistance. These services were begun by Sr. Celestine Fruscione in her quiet outreach to the poor and to persons in need. Staff members and sisters at the Mãe continue the ministry by providing counseling, social and spiritual assistance, as well as fresh vegetables and food. It was clear to see the gratitude and the connection the people feel with the sisters and staff. Celestine's presence and memory lives on through this ministry.

Our travel began with a brief one-hour flight from Goiânia to Palmas where we spent an overnight with our sisters at Convento Santa Clara. We would return to Palmas and spend more time touring the school and visiting with the sisters after a few days. From Palmas we began a four-hour drive to the city of Araguacema where our sisters, Julieta, Edir, and Edith serve with the friars in pastoral and catechetical ministry. Julieta is also engaged in nursing at a hospital some distance away. The parish of Our Lady of Divine Providence in Araguacema, Tocantins, has a main church, friary, convent and social center on the banks of the beautiful Araguaia river. The parish though extends far beyond into the rural countryside with at least eight chapels and community settlements. In these rural areas the drive along dirt roads with deep ruts and gullies can be a challenge to the best drivers. In Araguacema we drove out to two of the chapels. On Saturday evening of Palm Sunday weekend we visited the community of Bonfim (Good End). The chapel was located on the town square and the people gathered for a communion service led by Julieta.

The following morning we drove to one of the newer communities some distance away where the people are in the process of building up their community with a new chapel. The small, simple, earthen-brick structure with half cement and half dirt flooring and wooden benches was filled with families, teenagers, and young children. Our liturgy began outside the chapel by a large wooden cross where we raised palm branches and sang Hosannas celebrating Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. This small community was so engaged in the Eucharistic celebration with readings proclaimed by the teenagers and everyone, young and old, singing the hymns by heart. After the Mass the people stayed to talk and make plans for the training of catechetical and parish leaders. It was clear that there was the enthusiasm and the hope for good leadership within this small community. Their welcome and hospitality truly made us feel a part of their celebration of faith. In the afternoon we enjoyed a boat ride on the Araguaia river followed later with the friars joining us for a festive evening meal.

***Continued reflections to come - Travels to Cristalândia, Palmas, Ceres and the experience of Holy Week***