

Participants in annual inter Assumption meeting of young religious (Oblates, AAs. Little Sisters of the Assumption, and Religious of the Assumption)

On the occasion of fifty years in Brazil, one of the four sisters who founded this mission recounts the major milestones of this adventure, from the beginnings to our day: a continuous presence in a country that suffered under a brutal dictatorship before stabilizing as an emerging power. This mission was a commitment on the part of the Oblates to the marginalized at a time when the post-conciliar Church was calling for a preferential option for the poor.

By Sr. Marie de la Compassion Le Féron d'Eterpigny

(The Oblates of the Assumption were founded by Fr. d'Alzon in 1865 as missionaries to assist in the recently founded missions of the Near East – Bulgaria and Turkey. Next year they will be celebrating the 150th anniversary of their founding.)

This adventure of the Oblates of the Assumption in Brazil began in 1964 at a time when the Second Vatican Council was renewing a call in the Church for a missionary effort. An Assumptionist, Most Rev. Artur Horsthuis, bishop of the diocese of Jalès, in the state of São Paulo, in the southeast part of the country, invited us Oblates to work side by side with his priests, many of who were Assumptionists as well. So it was that three Dutch sisters, Srs. Lidwine, Virginia, and Adelbertha, and I, a Frenchwoman, took a boat from Antwerp, Belgium, on March 24, 1964 to cross the Atlantic on a trip that lasted fifteen days. Our arrival at beautiful port of Rio de Janeiro at sunrise offered us a spectacle to behold. After a period of adaptation, we settled into the town of Santa Fé do Sul, warmly received by those who would become “our people.” We began visiting families, helping catechists, and caring for the sick in our dispensary, especially children.

During the dictatorship and the Choice to work with the poor

There soon began a merciless dictatorship. When we would go to visit farmers driven the lands they were working, the police would follow us; a lawyer friend was imprisoned; our local pastor was forbidden from speaking on the radio; even our dispensary was shut down for several months. In spite of this pressure, we could not turn our backs on those being tortured and eliminated --- so many of our friends, even our brothers, here and in many other Latin American countries.

At this time the Conference of Religious in Brazil (CRB) and the episcopal conference of Latin American bishops (CELAM) were to play a major role in implementing the decisions of the Council: evangelization, the importance of the Word of God and small Christian communities, the preferential option for the young and the poor --- this is what gave birth to Christian base communities (CEBs). We were happy to welcome fresh troops in the person of Dutch and Italian Oblates. One of note was Sr. Luisa Drago who had an extraordinary gift of working with the young. Much of our work focused on visiting the CEBs in the area, in the countryside or on the peripheries of towns.

Sisters who baptize

We were also able to launch a vocation ministry and slowly young people came to share our life. A novitiate saw the light of day in 1977 in Andradas in the state of Minas Gerais. Maria

Aparecida became the first Brazilian Oblate in 1983, soon joined by others. In 1982 another community was opened in the poor, blue-collar neighborhood known as “Paradise” in Jalès and was given responsibility for the parish of St. Joseph the Worker, not an unusual practice at the time, given the scarcity of priests. The bishop had received permission from Rome for sisters to celebrate marriages and baptisms in local parishes, and even the cathedral. So it was that any number of us had the joy of baptizing hundreds of babies and children.



Young Oblates in formation

Amazonia and Paraguay

In 1993, pushed by young Brazilian Oblates, the community decided to accept a plea from the bishop of Lábrea in the southwestern part of the State of Amazonia, a diocese half the size of France with only four parishes! Priest visit isolated groups of their flock once a year. The needs

are huge. The community's first mission was established at Tapaúa, a three-day boat ride (there are no roads) from the diocesan see in Lábrea. We work I this small town and in surrounding villages spread out along the river. Once in a village the sisters usually stay several weeks in order to work with catechists and other members of the Christian community in positions of responsibility. Last year our sisters also opened a center for children entrusted to them by the courts.

In 2002 we also decided to open a house in suburbs of Manaus, the capital of Amazonia and its largest city (2 million inhabitants). There we work with youth, with mothers and Indians. We have also opened a health center using traditional medicine.



Leadership training session in Manaus

Finally, in 2007, Italian Oblates opened a new community in San Lorenzo, Paraguay, near Asunción, the capital. Not soon thereafter the mission was entrusted to the Province of Brazil. Although this country is quite different and profoundly marked by the Guarani culture and less developed than its neighbor, the Church is well organized and very alive. The sisters work in

the parish of Our Lady of Fatima and its many outstations and small Christian base communities.

Today the province numbers 11 Brazilians, one Chilean, three Congolese, one Dutchwoman, one Frenchwoman, three Paraguayans, and several Mexican candidates. There are also 13 lay associates with promises and 150 lay missionaries who work side by side with them.

Looking down on this sight, Fr. d'Alzon, our founder, must be enjoying himself for he was the one who said to his beloved Oblates, "My daughters, you are destined to cross the seas!"