

I am a Little Sister of the Assumption from Cork, Ireland and have been living in the semi-desert region of the State of Bahia, North East Brazil for the past 15 years. I am visiting Boston because this region of MA has the highest consentration of Brazilians in the USA. I am staying with the American sisters of our congregation in Dorchester, where they have been involved with Project Hope for many years. The charism of our Congregation is that the Kingdom of God may come among the families of the poor. We do not have institutions such as hospitals or schools, but work with the family in their own setting, in their homes and neighbourhoods.

We share the motto 'Thy Kingdom Come' with the other religious congregations who, along with the Little Sisters of the Assumption, form the Assumption Family.



In 1995 I went as a missionary to Brazil, where I lived in a town called Capim Grosso, in an international community with Medical Mary Sisters and a lay volunteer from the Columbans. After 5 years, our Congregation entered into a partnership with an Association of Lay Missionaries in our region and together we formed the Missionary Community of Umburanas and assumed a new mission there. At that time there were no priests or sisters or lay

missionaries there. For the next 10 years our community in Umburanas had a total of 11 lay missionaries who shared life and mission with us. We had single lay people, both Brazilian and Irish, as well as a Brazilian married couple and their child who was just aged 3 when he came to us. Some spent 2 or 3 years with us, and the married couple spent 7 years in the Missionary Community. While our congregation in Ireland supported us, I was the only Sister available to this mission.

Let me tell you the story of Maria. When I met Maria she lived in a rural village called Barriguda da Brasilia. She and her family lived in what we would call a hut, which had just a dirt floor. The furniture in that house on my first visit was just one kitchen chair, nothing more. She had 4 children under 6 years of age. They had no running water, and no bathroom. Her husband is a hunter, who goês out each day into the wilds, to try to kill some animal for the family to eat. Their family income is the Bolsa Familia which is $ 60 per month. Maria's family live a long way away. One of the twins aged 1.5 years could not walk, and the little girl aged 3 could not talk. I noted that day that there was no sign of food anywhere, and she said she had no milk for the babies. I know many Marias and there are many more whom I don't know. She lived about 12 kilometros from Umburanas.

The town of Umburanas is situated in the epi-centre of the semi-desert. This was a very isolated region at that time and access was by a dirt road for over 1 hour. There was just one phone in the town, and a public water system had been put in, for the first time, just before we arrived. This water system was quickly privatized by members of the Town Mayor's family, even though installed by public state funds. It became very problematic because it was expensive and the poorer people could not afford it, so many had their water disconnected. Thus began our first concrete action with the people, which was a campaign against the privatization of public water. People were fearful to participate as they were very oppressed politically, and did not want to 'rock the boat'. It took 5 years before the State water company took over, and we finally had good quality water at reasonable cost and accessible to everyone.

The rural villages at that time had no water whatsoever, so we began to help the people to develop Village Group Water Schemes, where groups of families built concrete water cisterns beside their homes. They worked voluntarily with materials we provided, so that helped to develop a community spirit. Many families also built bathrooms in this way also.

Over time we helped to set up two local non-governmental organizations. One was an Association and the other is called the Citizens' Forum. The Association provides family-oriented services on a community basis, mainly focused on children, such as Childrens' Centres which offer preschools, homework clubs, summer playschmes, capoeira, arts and

crafts for adolescents etc. The Citizens' Forum focuses on social justice work, and offers courses on citizens rights, Brazilian law, computers, and income generation projects. All of these activities are run by the people themselves, whom we have helped to get trained over the years in the skills needed.

We also participated in the development of the 'pastorais' of the Catholic Church, such as the pastoral service for malnourished children, the training of catechists, liturgy groups, and the pastoral service for the elderly. We try to help the people to integrate faith and life, so that the various ways in which we develop community responses to the needs of families are, for us, concrete ways to help people develop the kind of community which Jesus spoke of. …one of sharing, solidarity, compassion, justice etc. This for us, is the beginning of the coming of the Kingdom of God, here and now, in the daily living conditions of families. We are very inspired by 'I have come so that they may have life, and havei t in abundance'. The conditions of living which we found in Umburanas when we went there, were certainly not the kind of conditions which God wants for God's people. Many lacked the very basics of a human dignified life.



My visit to Boston is because our projects have been badly hit financially, by the International Financial Crisis which hit Ireland particularly badly in 2009. The grants we had been getting from Ireland over the years, began to diminish and it became necessary for us to look for new investors, and new individual donors. So I was freed for a few months to come to the richest country in the world, to try to interest people in the peopel of the semi-desert of Bahia.

It is true that Brazil is now one of the 8 richest countries in the world. But sadly, in a listing of 130 countries it rates second last in terms of distribution of income. This is why we have the problems of the semi-desert, because there is a great lack of public policies to help the people of this region. Most Government investment is centerd in Salvador, the capital, and in tourism there. The semi-desert is not a bad place to live if it hás proper infra-structure. Without this, many families are forced to flee to the large cities like São Paulo and Rio, and live in favelas

where the living conditions are much worse. Much of the work we do with the local people is around helping them to develop the organizational structures whereby they can struggle for a more just society, trying to create sustainable local communities so that people can have a dignified human life even in the semi-desert. We believe that just as God' Spirit was with the People of God of Old testament times, God's spirit continues today to draw people together into the family of God. We have had many experiences of this presence of God in the midst of God's people, working in them a work of human and spiritual liberation. Yes, it is true, 'Another world is possible.'

For further information in Portuguese see www.parkear.com Metropolitan News, edição 18/19 de Maio, 2011

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